



Oneness

Experiencing God's Design
for Marriage

BOB CHEESMAN

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This book is dedicated to Mary who has been my partner for fifty-six years and who I dearly love more today than ever. Thank you, Mary.

Love as distinct from 'being in love' is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit; reinforced by the grace which both partners ask, and receive, from God.

They can have this love for each other even at those moments when they do not like each other; as you love yourself even when you do not like yourself.

— C. S. LEWIS

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Introduction

It is 1956; I am sixteen years old and about to leave boarding school and go into a world of which I know little. Since the age of four or five, I have been in the care of Shaftesbury Homes, England, only making the occasional visit home during holidays. I have little or no memory of living at home with my father and stepmother, and as for my birth mother, her identity and whereabouts are unknown to me—it will be another two years before I meet her. I have no idea about money, have never cooked my own meals nor done my own laundry, and using a telephone is a mystery to me. In short, my upbringing has left me ill-equipped for the world I am being sent into.

For the first three or four years after leaving school I will live in hostels, and eventually, a bedsit, while working with a film company as a messenger boy. In time, they will train me to be a rostrum cameraman. But I am largely isolated and alone, with little or no experience of what it means to belong to a family. I have had no demonstration—good or bad—of being married, and absolutely no idea about children and parenting. I also have no idea about girls. My school was an all-boys one, full of gutter-talk but little reality. Yet marriage and parenting will become the very things I will develop a passion for.



My first memory of meeting my wife, Mary, who was my sister's best friend, was on a church day trip to the coast to which I had been invited. She was actually there with another boy, but I was attracted to her and she obviously to me, because we later started dating. There was, however, a big problem in that Mary was a Christian, and I was not. Furthermore,

I had no intention of getting involved with God or church. It was not that I was resolutely set against either; it was just that at boarding school we'd had to go to church five, sometimes even six, days a week. We had no choice in the matter. Attending services was compulsory for all students, and consequently, I did not wish to ever return to church.

Mary and I have different stories as to how our brief relationship ended. She says she gave me up because I was not a Christian, and I say that it was me who gave her up because she was a religious maniac! However, on the day we stopped going out, I had a rather strange experience while I was waiting at the bus stop to go home. It was late evening, and the bus stop was located in the middle of a council housing estate with large blocks of flats. That night, it was completely deserted. Then suddenly, I heard a man's voice say very loudly, "You will marry that girl!"

To say I was shocked would be an understatement. I looked around, but there was no other person in sight. Being me, I just shrugged and got on the bus when it came a few minutes later. Mary was sixteen, and I was nineteen or twenty.

Even though Mary and I were no longer an 'item' as they say, I still kept in touch with her family, and some five years later, when I was twenty-four, her parents asked me to take Mary to a Christian camp reunion because they did not want her to go on the train on her own. I said I would not go on the train, but offered to take her on my motorcycle. Somehow, they agreed to this arrangement—I think principally because they knew I would be exposed to the gospel if they could get me to that reunion. Well, they were right. That event did expose me to the gospel, and eventually I did become a Christian—but not before an epic mental battle and some considerable rebellion on my part.

It was during this time that Mary's mum sent me a letter telling me that I was breaking Mary's heart, and I should either get in, or get out. With this ultimatum, I decided to give church a go for a while, believing that within a few weeks I would prove it all nonsense and be free to go back to my usual life. How wrong I was! I soon accepted Christ, was baptised and

filled with the Holy Spirit, and within seven years was made the pastor of Bermondsey Elim church. (This is not as grand as it sounds—the church had twelve people, only two of whom were under sixty, and I was still working full-time in the film industry!)

Now that I was an active Christian, Mary and I started dating again, and eventually, in March 1966, we married. As I write this, we have been married for fifty-five years. Whenever we tell people we have been together all those years, there are exclamations of, “Wow, that’s great!” Yet for the first ten years or so it was not great, to say the least, and were it not for our faith, we might never have made it this far.

Why was it so bad? The short answer is this: We were both—especially me—ignorant of how to relate as husband and wife. Somebody once told me that my problem was that I was looking for Mary to be my mother, rather than my wife. That insight spoke to me more than anything else, and I realised it was true. Because I never had a mother, I was subconsciously longing for a mother-figure in my life. This had a profound effect on how I viewed and related to Mary. Mary, on the other hand, had been brought up in a good Christian home with two parents who loved her immensely. However, there was little, if any, physical affection on display either between her mum and dad, or toward or among the three children. In addition to this, they had strict rules about many things relating to the outworking of their faith, including Sunday observance.

So, take a man who had no example, teaching, or experience of how to relate to the opposite sex, and a woman who had been brought up with little physical affection and a fair degree of legalism but plenty of love, put them together with no help, and because they are Christians, expect them to be able to relate well and form a good marriage partnership, and you have a recipe for trouble. We were, for several years, deeply unhappy. We had different priorities. We also had different ideas about physical affection, about how we should manage our money, and about parenting. We had no idea how to put things right and thought we were simply incompatible. The truth is that we were ignorant; we simply had no idea

how to relate to each other.

What changed? As church leaders, Mary and I were faced with married couples coming to us wanting help with marriage problems, as well as those getting married wanting some pre-marriage preparation. The question for us was, *How were we going to do that when we were not exactly doing well in our own marriage?* We had to learn and learn fast as we were not prepared to be hypocrites. We studied what the Bible had to say and read books on the subject. The more we learned the more our relationship improved, until one day, we found ourselves in a sound, loving, and fulfilled marriage. Not to say that we never had any problems ever again—we did, but the difference was we now knew how to bring ourselves out of those problems and back into that loving, committed relationship.

During our years of ministry we have had the privilege of taking engaged couples through marriage preparation classes. The material we used has evolved over the years, and the thought occurred that I should write down this teaching so that it might continue to help people in the future. We have also used similar material to help couples who found themselves in difficulty—and although not every marriage was able to be salvaged, many were.

This book is the result of a journey of discovery that took place over the course of many years, which we now want to pass on to everyone willing to read it. It is designed to help prepare those who are engaged for marriage, and to enable those who are already married to refresh their marriages and straighten out paths that are hindering rather than helping. We hope that these things will become embedded into your lives so that relating well to your partner becomes natural and instinctive for you. It is, above all, the story of God's design for a successful joining of a man and woman in marriage. Go God's way and not the way of the world and you will find life as God intended it to be.

—Bob Cheesman

PART ONE

God's Design for Marriage

1

What is Godly Marriage?

A Sunday School teacher once asked her students if there were any prayer needs. A little girl asked if they could pray for her, because as of Saturday, she was going to have a new father. It turned out her mother and her mother's boyfriend (let's call them Jane and Henry), who were Christians and members of our church, had decided to move in together. This very innocent prayer request presented a problem for both Henry and Jane, and for the church. The dilemma was this: *Was it okay for two of God's people to just move in together, and what constitutes marriage for those who profess to follow God's ways and precepts?*

This situation resulted in conflict between the couple and the church of which I was a leader at the time. And so, I and another leader went to talk with Henry about what we considered a godly way to approach the next step in their relationship. Unfortunately, Jane was ill so we were unable to include her in the conversation, but we put the question to him: *Was moving in together the correct way forward for them before God?*

Being a new Christian, Henry was angry with what he saw as our interference in their private affairs. He had no concept of what marriage from a biblical perspective was, nor, apparently, of what it meant to be a church member. He simply saw what his friends and acquaintances were doing and decided the same approach would work in his relationship with Jane. As far as he was concerned, this had nothing to do with anyone else—not the church, or the church leaders. His anger was such that he

and Jane left the church and moved in together.

From the church's perspective, we were left trying to find the balance between our responsibility as leaders to guide our people in the ways of God according to what we saw the Bible as teaching, with our belief in (and value for) personal responsibility. We couldn't dictate how church members should live. But of course, the question then arises, *Do we accept that 'anything goes' within church life?* The answer must be no—which brings us to the choice Henry and Jane faced: to remain accountable within the fellowship of believers, or to leave and go their own way.

But there were further questions that arose out of this situation, questions that are still relevant today, like:

What is marriage?

Is marriage necessary?

Why should Christian couples like Henry and Jane not choose to just move in and live together?

As Christians, we work out our choices before God, seeking to live according to his will as revealed through the Bible, God's Word, which we believe to be authoritative. This applies to every aspect of our lives, and therefore we cannot leave our relationships out. To answer these questions well, we need to explore what it means to live together in the context of following God.

DEFINING MARRIAGE

Historically, marriages were primarily about alliances between families. Protection, safety, procreation, the continuance of the family name and wellbeing, and the strengthening of future trade were the main considerations when parents were considering a marriage. The selection of a life partner had little to do with the couple themselves. But over time, as global economies developed, all this became less important, and the subsequent changes in society allowed a greater awareness of the feelings of the people getting married. Eventually, it became almost entirely about

personal choice. The concepts of initial attraction, followed by love, were placed at the forefront of the decision of who to spend your life with—so much so that these have now become the driving force of marriage, at least in the ‘western world’.

Over my own lifetime, much about marriage has continued to change. When Mary and I got married, there was little difference between our approach as Christians to dating, getting engaged, planning the wedding, and going on a honeymoon, and any other marriage taking place between non-Christians in the local registrar office or in a church building. This is because at that time, marriage within the wider culture was based on Christian values and biblical concepts. A necessary precursor to a lifelong partnership, marriage was seen as being between a man and a woman who joined together to form a new relationship by the making of covenantal promises to one another before witnesses in a public ceremony. After this, a marriage certificate was issued; it was a legal document that registered the marriage in the law of the country.

Today, the order of events has largely been reversed. People generally date, then move in together, have children, and get married later—or they may never get married. Cohabitation without the legal commitment of marriage—both between men and women, or those of the same sex—has become the norm. These developments have resulted in a marked contrast between the way the non-Christian world and faith communities go about establishing new relationships. They have also influenced how many Christians approach their life partnerships.

In discussing these things with a church leader, I was told that in some churches cohabitation has become so widespread that leaders are no longer addressing the issue, and living together outside of the marriage covenant is in danger of becoming acceptable, even within the church, regardless of what the Bible teaches.

It is easy, and sometimes convenient, to just flow with what is happening in wider society. Yet, as Christians, we need to seek out God’s will for marriage and have the conviction to carry through on our conclusions.

This leads us to the important question regarding the nature of ‘cohabitation.’ *Is it marriage or not?* The term and the concept, which although considered a fairly recent phenomenon, have been used since the 1500s to refer to a couple living together without being married. One dictionary defines it as, ‘To live together as if married, usually without legal or religious sanction; to live together in an intimate relationship; to live together as husband and wife especially without being married.’

While couples who live together without a ceremony are not considered legally married because they lack a signed marriage certificate as proof of their union, in New Zealand a cohabitating couple is now considered to be in a common-law marriage, or, in legal terms, a de-facto relationship, after they have been together for three years or when they have a child together. When couples in these types of relationships separate, children, property and other assets are treated in the same way as if the couple were lawfully married and in possession of a marriage certificate.

These changes mean that ‘marriage’ is no longer solely defined by the State as being in possession of a piece of paper, but also by the length of time a couple have been cohabiting, and whether or not they have children. Given this situation, do we, as Christians, still need a legal marriage certificate to be considered married in God’s eyes? If not, what are the implications?

Answering these questions compels us to define the parameters of Christian marriage. To do so, we must base our concepts and actions on Scripture, rather than personal opinion or what is convenient. Just because something is the norm in the non-Christian world does not mean it is right for God’s people.

MARRIAGE VERSUS COHABITATION

The first mention of a topic in Scripture is always a good place to start if we want to discover what God has to say about something. In this case, the first reference to marriage is found right at the beginning of

the Bible, in Genesis, where God created what is termed ‘man’ (Genesis 1:27). It’s important that we understand that this reference to ‘man’ is not exclusively male; it is a generic term that encompasses both male and female. In other words, mankind is not made up of two essentially different species, but rather one human species, represented through both male and female.

What we see in the first two chapters of Genesis is the bringing together of Adam and Eve, male and female, in a permanent partnership, thus establishing the principle of marriage. The male was created first and the female was created from him, and the way that God brought about the joining (or ‘oneness’) between them was to establish a deep magnetic attraction in the male toward his female counterpart. When the male first met her, it was a ‘wow’ moment, a moment when time stopped for him.

Before the other half of humanity was revealed to Adam, every animal had passed by and had no such effect upon him—there was no allure, no fundamental connection. He named each species, yet was drawn toward none of them. But when he saw Eve, the female of his own species and the counterpart of him, his response was, “This is it, this is the one!” In that instant, a deep-seated attraction was born in the male toward the female. That attraction has never changed; it is still there. This was not lust, but a pull toward her that resulted in devotion and the desire to be together, to work together, live together, and to form a partnership. Adam’s words reflect this idea of being part of one another: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman’, for she was taken out of man” (Genesis 2:23, NIV). What he means is, “Wow, she is mine, part of me, and I cannot live without her. I will leave everything I know to be with her!”

We know that you cannot base a relationship solely on attraction. Although that is often the starting point, it will never be enough to sustain a relationship; at some point, chemistry must give way to commitment. And of course, not all relationships start with physical attraction. Some are looking for the will of God and praying for a godly partner in life,

somebody God has chosen for them. If that, is you, watch out because God surprises us when we seek his will, and we do not always get what we expect! This was certainly the case for a friend of ours. He was a pastor, and whenever he saw us, he posed the question, “When is God going to give me a wife?” Eventually we asked what he was looking for, and when he described his ideal woman—very attractive, slim, black silky dress, high heels, a good hairstyle, very trendy—we had a good chuckle and told him we were not surprised that God had left him single!

One day, a member of our friend’s congregation, who was very needy, turned up at our church. We met with her and subsequently got in touch with our friend, suggesting he meet with her and try to help her. We also suggested he find a mature woman who he could trust to join him for these meetings. As it turns out, there was a lady in his church who was very well thought of. The matron of a care home, she was the opposite to the description of his ideal woman, but she had a beautiful personality and was well-liked by everybody. After the two of them met with the young woman they were trying to help, they would go for a coffee together to discuss how they were getting on. Over time, they discovered a growing attraction to one another. Then God spoke to our friend, “This is the one you have been asking for.” And the rest is history!

From the moment Adam saw Eve, it signalled a future where men would experience such a strong attraction that they would want to leave home to be joined with a female. This, then, is the underpinning principle of godly, and therefore, Christian, marriage: A man will leave his childhood home, his father and mother, his brothers and sisters, all he has known to be united to his wife and they will become one flesh (Genesis 2:24). The attraction is strong, mutual, never one-sided, and as it grows, it creates a desire in them both to be together permanently. This leads them to commit to becoming husband and wife in a binding marriage covenant made before God, family, and friends. Their physical and sexual union is the ultimate fulfilment of this covenant, the result of a deep mutual commitment to each other whereby ‘two become one’.

Before I was married, I remember listening to a man describe this phenomenon. He had met a girl and had completely fallen for her. He hated to be apart from her and used to travel 140 miles on his motorcycle every weekend to be with her and then travel back ready to start work on Monday. He married her and remained completely devoted to her all her life. I remember being slightly baffled by his attraction to one girl. I liked girls and was attracted to the female form but had not experienced this attraction to one singular female—until I met Mary. Then I understood. Even after being together for fifty-five years, I still love her and continue to be attracted and devoted to her.

I saw this vividly again around three years ago. A friend rang me and asked if we could have coffee as he wanted to chat. What he really wanted was to share with me that he had met a girl on a blind date. He was smitten. They had talked and talked, shared about themselves, and found an instant attraction toward each other. This was so much more than a physical or sexual attraction; it was a deeply emotional magnetic attraction that drew these two people together. My friend wanted advice on how to go forward and explore this potential relationship. This couple have now been married for two years, and recently I asked his wife, “How’s married life?” Her face lit up as she replied, “Wonderful! Best thing I ever did.” Later I asked her husband the same question; when he looked over at her, you could see the answer in the way he looked at his wife, and then he expressed the same feelings toward her. They dated, got married, set up a home together, and now they have a delightful baby boy.



We have established attraction as the catalyst for marital relationships, yet the question remains: *At what point, in God’s eyes, are a couple finally considered married?* The straightforward answer is: when they become ‘one flesh’. In other words, when they have sex for the first time. When Isaac married Rebekah, we are simply told that he took her into his mother’s tent (Genesis 24:67). His mother had died, so he was not taking

her in to introduce her to his mother! Rather, the implication is that this is when they became 'one' and were considered married. This is the straightforward understanding of 'leaving and cleaving' (Genesis 2:24). Rebekah had been chosen by God to be Isaac's wife. Little else is said about the initiation and conventions of their marriage. It's a bare-bones story, but from the moment Isaac took his wife into his tent and they were physically united, they were considered 'one'.

I have recently been reading about the history of the Native American Sioux people. A man would court a woman he was attracted to. Interestingly, if she responded, she would eventually take him into her tepee, have sex with him, and the whole tribe then considered them married.

In the United Kingdom, before the marriage act of 1753, 'banns' (old English for a 'proclamation') had to be published and displayed publicly, then a marriage ceremony performed by a Church of England minister. Every marriage had to be consummated by sexual intercourse, and without this, a marriage could be declared invalid and annulled. There was no centralised record of marriages, yet once you had gone through this process you were considered married and needed to divorce in a court of law if you wished to separate. The point I make is that the cultural conventions of the society in which we live dictate the principles that hold marriages together and make them legally binding.

According to the conventions of the United Kingdom where we were married, and New Zealand where we now live, you are considered married if you have been through a marriage ceremony before family and friends and have signed the marriage register and are therefore in possession of a marriage certificate. The fundamental difference between the Christian and non-Christian, is that the non-Christian sees nothing wrong with cohabitation and having children together prior to that marriage ceremony, whereas the Christian belief is that the public declaration of vows at the wedding ceremony marks the start of married life together, and that the period leading up to that point is preparation for this lifetime commitment. Until that moment, cohabitation is not an option for the believer.

The reason for this difference is the Bible's teaching that sex is solely intended within the confines of marriage, and is a sacred, covenantal act of commitment. Numerous times in Scripture we are told to avoid even a hint of sexual immorality, because this is "improper for God's holy people" (Ephesians 5:3-4, NIV). Of course, we need to know what the Bible means by 'sexual immorality.' From Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, we see that it refers to sexual activity, in all of its various forms, outside of a marriage relationship. The Corinthians had written to Paul with some questions on which they wanted clarification, and while we don't have the specific questions, only the answers that Paul gave them, what is evident is that they were having issues with sexual activity in the church.

Paul begins his answer by stating his personal opinion that it is good for people to stay unmarried. However, he goes on to say that because there was so much sexual immorality among them, they ought to marry (1 Corinthians 7:8-9). It seems clear that these believers were choosing not to marry—possibly because of Paul's previous teaching that it was better not to—but still having sex. In response, Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that rather than having 'casual sex', they should get married so that each person could satisfy the sexual needs they were experiencing without engaging in immoral practices. He reaffirms this position in his letter to the Thessalonians, where he states, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God" (1 Thessalonians 4:3-6, NIV).

Why is it wrong to have sex if you are not married? I will attempt to give an answer, but bear in mind that it is enough that we trust God and obey what he says, even if we do not fully understand why. Personal conviction is important, and each of us need to conduct ourselves according to our own consciences in the light of biblical revelation. But even if we do not understand why God says sex should be exclusive to marriage, we still have to ask ourselves who we are following—God, or the world? When

Peter reacted to Jesus telling the disciples that he was going to be killed, he said, “That will never happen to you!” In reply, Jesus said, “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns” (Matthew 16:23, NIV). As believers, we must set out hearts on doing things God’s way. How we conduct our relationships is important to God, and he wants us to understand the value of the covenant of marriage where two become one spiritually, mentally, and physically through the joining of their bodies.

Sexual union for God’s people is covenantal. This is the reason that sexual union with somebody outside of marriage is such a big ‘no-no’; it breaks the intimate covenantal commitment, and is why Jesus taught that divorce is permissible (Matthew 5:32). In Malachi 2, a passage of Scripture we will return to many times, God reminds his people that *he is the witness between them and the wife of their youth, the wife of their marriage covenant* (vv.13-14). A godly marriage, therefore, is when two people commit themselves to form a partnership together through making life-long, public promises of commitment to each other before God. They then become one flesh through sex after that ceremonial joining, so fulfilling God’s design for intimacy.

It could be deduced that, if having sex together is the point where God considers the two to have become one, it is alright to move in together as Henry and Jane did, and skip the wedding ceremony altogether. The problem with this view, however, is that, for God’s people, there has always been a definite moment of commitment when promises are made to one another. What is more, those promises, made publicly before God himself, and before family and friends, and are a covenant for life. This is not something to be taken lightly, but seriously, and with the intention of a lifelong commitment toward one another.



What happened to Henry and Jane? Two years after they left the church, we received a phone call asking if they could return, as they had now gotten married. Because there had been a significant and difficult rift

WHAT IS GODLY MARRIAGE?

between us, we knew that there first needed to be reconciliation between them and us as a leadership, so we arranged for a meeting. They told us they had missed our church because in the end it was their home, and they wanted to return. When we asked about the conflict surrounding their decision to move in together, Henry shared with us that a deep conviction had come over him that he had got it badly wrong and that what they did was not right before God. It was with great pleasure that we were able to welcome them back into fellowship and celebrate their new marriage.