

## What Constitutes “Being Married”?

Because it is such an integral part of our society, we assume that everyone knows what marriage is. When a man and a woman agree before witnesses to accept each other as spouses and sign the license before witnesses, they are married. How could there be questions about that?

In an e-mail note a reader poses several questions. What constitutes “being married.” Is not a private commitment a marriage? Is a ceremony needed? Is sexual relationship marriage, as some claim? Does the Bible teach us how to become married?

Each of you has probably pondered these questions as you recognize the lack of definition in the Scriptures. I do not claim to know all the answers, but that has not deterred me from writing on other subjects that I am ignorant about! So here I go!

The Scriptures offer no precedent or instruction of any sort of formal ceremony in which a man and woman are “pronounced husband and wife.” Among the Hebrews and Semitic people, and in a greater part of the world (still common today), marriage was a family affair with strong societal implications. It included negotiations between the families involved through their family head (patriarch) which would include payment to the bride’s father. In our transient culture we have lost most of that sense of family, tribe, and societal relationship.

Acceptance of the terms of contract before witnesses amounted to a betrothal which was perhaps the nearest thing to a modern licensing, though the consummation of the marriage might be months or years in the future. This commitment was taken much more seriously than the present-day “engagement.”

At the time for the wedding male friends of the groom, carrying lamps or torches, escorted him in procession to the wedding feast. After the supper the finalizing of the wedding was the entrance of the groom into the “tent,” or chamber of the bride. Whether all these traditions were followed or not in each case, it seems that when a man would go into the tent or room of his intended wife in view of others, the marriage was recognized.

None of those customs are specified or bound by Christian writers. There is no indication that the wedding is a “religious service” though spiritual principles should influence it (as well as all aspects of our lives). Our concept of a “church wedding” came from the Catholic Church who defined “holy matrimony” as a sacrament administered by the Church only, that is, the priesthood. Thus, a “church wedding” was one “blessed” by the Church. A civil ceremony of marriage lacked that “official” blessing.

Although non-Catholics do not accept that theology, they have adapted the “church wedding” idea into a tradition of a formal wedding ceremony in a “church building” with a preacher officiating with no thought of meeting “church approval.” For many it has become a purely social tradition for ceremonial display of a pretentious “church wedding” even by those not spiritually inclined. The white wedding gown symbolizing virginal purity is now worn with impunity by pregnant brides and by those who were “live-in partners” up until the wedding. So for the most part, the “church wedding” is for the pageantry and a status symbol. The holiness and spirituality are determined by the hearts of the groom and bride rather than by the building or ceremony or whether it was officiated by a minister or a civil authority.

“A piece of paper cannot make a marriage,” is heard from some who wish to live together without a license of marriage. That claim has validity. I became a driver of a car before Texas required that we have a license. Later, when I got my license, the piece of paper did not make me a driver or affect my driving, but I would have become a violator without it. I became a law-abiding driver with less culpability in future problems that might be anticipated. The same principle applies to having a marriage license.

If a couple agrees to live together without a wedding, are they married? How long would they have to live together to distinguish it from fornication? Would the relationship begin as fornication and develop into a holy relationship? If a couple pledge their love to each other and privately commit themselves to each other for life, would that not be a marriage? Though it would involve the most basic element of marriage, it still would not fill all the requirements.

The followers of Jesus are taught to obey the laws of the land and to live honorably in accordance with society. Our law specifies that spouses be a male and a female who have signed a witnessed contract to live as husband and wife. Why would any couple balk at signing such a contract?

It is because they want temporary companionship and sexual license without commitment to each other. They refuse the most basic expression of love and marriage – commitment. They want companionship of a person as long as it satisfies the selfish desires. Without commitment each partner, like a commissioned salesman, is on trial for pleasing performance every day of life. Think of living with someone who does not love and trust you enough to make a commitment to continue to love you after the heat of passion has cooled and real-life problems begin to develop. The shadow of rejection and loneliness always looms ahead. Those taught in the Word will also be living with guilty conscience knowing that their sexual immorality condemns them.

No, a piece of paper cannot create love but signing one may express unqualified love. Where that kind of love exists, there is no hesitancy in signing a legal attestation of it. In true commitment each partner is signing a blank check knowing not what demands will be injected in the blank in the years ahead – whether it be sickness, sorrow, or poverty – the contract is “until death do us part.” Is that scary? That assuring love contract has been confirming, satisfying, and comforting for more than 53 years for Lea and me.

A social crusade in our generation has had a devastating effect on this basic social institution of our culture. Living together has replaced marriage by a great segment. Women boast unashamedly of having children out of wedlock thus undermining the family and home which is the foundation of civilized society. In their conceit and rebellion, they think they have greater wisdom than God who created and upholds the family and they seek to prove the wisdom of all previous civilizations outdated.

It is true that neither the laws of our land nor the Scriptures prescribe a ritual or ceremony of marriage. The judge, Justice of the Peace, priest, or preacher acts as one authorized by the State to witness the contract of marriage. In some states additional witnesses are required. Thus it becomes a legal contract.

Previous to the legal contract, each party has already agreed to the contract, and in that sense, they are married except for the legality of it. A contract involves a meeting of minds. Questions of the binding nature of the witnessed contract arise when it may be

revealed later that one partner deceived the other in the contract or that there was some legal violation such as lying about age. There is no true meeting of minds where there is deliberate deception. If a person pledges love where there is none, promises lifelong commitment without intention, or promises to be a true husband without revealing his sexual impotence, there is serious question as to whether a valid contract has been formed. When such deception has been revealed later, it may be reason for annulment of an invalid contract rather than “grounds for divorce.”

This is no claim to answer all the questions about “being married.” Maybe some thought has helped to clarify your ideas.

(Some points in this piece were gained from *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3, pages 1996-1999. Some related references: Gen. 24:8; 26:34; 29:20; 34:3; Exo. 2:21; Dt. 22:23; Judges 14:1-20; 1Sam. 18:19f; Jer. 7:34; Matt. 1:19; 9:15; 22; John 2; 3:29; Rev. 18:23) []