

SPIRITUAL UNITY

Serious Considerations before Marriage

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Introduction

Modern western culture tends to treat religious belief similar to way a dating couple might treat the choice of a restaurant. Religious belief is seen as a matter of preference – something that may affect your experience *on occasion*, but not really a matter of ultimate importance or something that should impact your major decisions. All of us are affected by this attitude to some degree.

Even many Christians feel this way. One of the places I have seen this demonstrated is in the area of relationships – particularly marriage. Young men and women, even those who are serious in their faith, are often tempted to ignore or minimize the differences that they will have to face if they are coming from different denominational or Christian traditions. We tend to think that if we love each other, we will be able to work these things out as we go along – and that they won't create any serious roadblocks in our relationship.

This is a serious mistake. For one thing, it doesn't take into consideration the impact of extended family. If Bob's family is Baptist and Mary's family is Presbyterian, the grandparents will have very different ideas about whether Bob and Mary should baptize their children. On the other hand, if Bob's family is Presbyterian and Mary's family is Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox, the differences will be even greater. And the reality is, Bob and Mary's families have a point. What we believe about things like baptism really is important.

Quite apart from family considerations, what we need to understand is that this attitude – that my religious belief should have minimal impact on the big decisions or the big relationships in my life – is contrary to the teaching of the Bible. Here are just a few verses that show this to be the case:¹

For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. (Romans 14.7-9)

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.
(1 Corinthians 10.31)

... and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (2 Corinthians 5.15)

In what follows, I want to take a few minutes to demonstrate how what we believe *even about the basics of Christianity* can have a dramatic impact on the health of our relationships – particularly marriage, which is the closest human relationship possible in this life. To do this, I'm going to walk us through the membership vows of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, which express (from a Protestant perspective, in summary form) the five most basic areas of historic Christian faith.

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Philosophy: What is the Meaning of Life?

Question 2: Do you believe in one living and true God, in whom eternally there are three distinct persons – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit – who are the same in being and equal in power and glory, and that Jesus Christ is God the Son, come in the flesh?

The most basic question any thoughtful person asks is, “What is the meaning of life?” For Christians of all denominational traditions, the answer is clear. There is one living and true God. This one God is three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This God made all things, sustains all things, and everything that exists belongs to him. Because of this, all things owe him praise. The purpose of human life is “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”²

If one spouse believes these things and the other does not – if they are divided on the answer to this most basic human question – how could they ever expect to enjoy lifelong harmony together?

Authority: Where Does God Speak?

Question 1: Do you believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?

For serious Christians, the most foundational question is, “How do I hear, where do I find, the voice of God?” According to St. Paul, the answer is that we hear God’s voice in the Bible itself: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work,” (2 Timothy 3.16-17). In another place, he writes to new believers that they need to learn “not to go beyond what is written,” (1 Corinthians 4.6).

Because of passages such as this, Protestants understand that the Bible is to be “is the only rule to direct us” in faith and life.³ We may make use of the historic creeds and catechisms, and we may even write our own statements of faith – but all such statements and historical traditions must conform to the teaching of the Bible.

However, the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions see things differently. Though there are some differences between the two, for both of these communions the Bible must be set alongside other traditions of the church – *traditions which carry equal authority to the Bible*. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states this clearly:

The Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, “does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.”⁴

Serious Christians on all sides of the Catholic/Orthodox/Protestant divide recognize this to be a significant difference with substantial implications. Christianity is a matter of eternity. Therefore it is literally a matter of life and death that we be certain about where God speaks. And on this foundational matter, Protestants and non-Protestants disagree significantly. If a husband and wife do not agree on this point, how can they enjoy spiritual harmony? What will they teach their kids?

Of course, if one spouse is a Christian and the other is not – the differences are even more profound.

² *Westminster Shorter Catechism #1.*

³ *Westminster Shorter Catechism #2.*

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church #82* (http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_PL.HTM).

Identity: What Makes Me 'Right'?

Question 3: Do you confess that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God, that you repent of your sin, and that you trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone?

Whether a person is religious or not, every human life has something at the center, something that is most important – something that *functions* like God. And it might not be obvious. A career can function like our God – as can a relationship. Money, power, pleasure – all of these things can be functional gods. We laugh at ancient people for making idols out of silver and gold. But in some ways, they were more honest than we are – at least they admitted that they worshiped their money!

Whatever is most important to us becomes the thing that we must have. And to the degree that we succeed in getting it, we will feel that things are 'right' in our life. This question of being 'right' tells us, at the deepest level, who we really are. It reveals our *identity*. And our identity always has a profound impact on our *activity* – because it will control how we make life-changing decisions (*see the next section below on 'sacrifice'*).

For Christians, the question of being 'right' becomes the question, "How can I be made right with God?" And the answer is *confession, faith, and repentance*. We admit to God that we are sinful and deserve his wrath (*confession*). We trust for salvation not in ourselves, but in Jesus Christ alone (*faith*). We acknowledge Jesus as the Lord of our lives, and our whole lives become a process of turning from serving ourselves to serving God (*repentance*).

If one spouse is a Christian and the other is not, they will have different spiritual identities. Their lives will be centered on different things – like planets orbiting different stars. What will this do to the health of their marriage? What message will it send to their children?

Yet even among Christians, denominational differences can have a profound impact. The definition of Christian faith as trusting for salvation *not in ourselves*, but in Jesus Christ *alone* is the Protestant position. From a Roman Catholic perspective, things are different:

Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life. Even temporal goods like health and friendship can be merited in accordance with God's wisdom.⁵

Protestants believe we contribute nothing to our right standing – our 'justification' – with God. "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast," (Ephesians 2.8-9). For Roman Catholics, we "can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed... for the attainment of eternal life."

These are incompatible perspectives. One says we can earn nothing. The other says we can earn something. And given the eternal ramifications of the question, these different answers become a matter of life and death. If husband and wife do not agree on the answer, what will they teach their children? And what will they do as they age, watching one another get closer and closer to entering eternity... if they believe that their spouse is trying to relate to God in the wrong way?

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #2010 (http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P70.HTM).

Sacrifice: What Am I Willing to Lose?

Question 4: Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord, and do you promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will serve him with all that is in you, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?

Depending on what we believe makes us right, we will make different sacrifices in life. A person who worships their career will neglect family and/or health in order to succeed. A person who worships money or power will compromise in their ethics and relationships to get more money or power. In fact, the best way to identify our true God is to ask ourselves: *for what am I willing to sacrifice the most?*

A Christian is a person who lives and dies for Jesus Christ, because he lived and died for them: "...and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised," (2 Corinthians 5.15). A non-Christian is a person who lives and dies for various things that he or she identifies as most important. This is just another way of saying that a non-Christian lives or dies for themselves.

Marriage involves tremendous sacrifice. If one spouse is a Christian and the other is not, they will disagree on what sacrifices are worth making. And if a husband and wife cannot agree on what is worth sacrificing, how will they enjoy a healthy and happy (or holy) marriage?

How does a shared Christian understanding empower us to make the sacrifices necessary for a successful marriage? "The Christian gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued and that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time. It undermines both swaggering and sniveling. I cannot feel superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone. I do not think more of myself nor less of myself. Instead, I think of myself less."⁶

Service: Where Do I Serve?

Question 5: Do you promise to participate faithfully in this church's worship and service, to submit in the Lord to its government, and to heed its discipline, even in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life?

For Christians who take their faith seriously, faithful participation in Christian worship and service is non-negotiable. One's church community – the place where we worship and serve – becomes the axis of one's weekly life. Every other activity – whether work or recreation – becomes secondary and must accommodate itself to our commitment to be in worship and service with other Christians. This is true whatever one's denominational tradition.

Yet it is because this is true that it is essential that husband and wife have a shared denominational tradition. A Christian marriage without a shared center of worship and service is – to borrow a previous analogy – like a planet trying to orbit two different stars. It divides the spiritual energy of the home, and creates confusion as to the spiritual identity of the children. If a man and woman cannot agree on a shared spiritual home, they are not ready to create a shared physical home.

Conclusion

Marriage is the most profound relationship possible between two human beings. The Bible uses marriage as an analogy to explain our relationship with God (Ephesians 5.22-33). Because it is so deeply connected to our spirituality, it is vitally important that there be spiritual unity between those contemplating marriage. Please do not minimize or ignore these matters of eternity.

⁶ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 181.