

# OpenTheo

## #96 Qs on Marriage - Help...I've become a Christian but my partner isn't interested in getting married

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Does the church idolise marriage? I've become a Christian but my partner isn't interested in marriage - what should I do? What if I no longer respect my husband's views? Tom takes listener questions on marriage.

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## Transcript

[Music] The Ask NTY Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello and welcome to this week's edition of the show, it's Justin Bralley, once again sitting down with NTY Senior Research Fellow at Wickliffe Hall Oxford, a renowned New Testament scholar and always willing to answer your questions. The show brought you in partnership with NTY Online and SBCK, along with Premier, I'm the Theology and Apologetics Editor there.

And today we're taking your questions on marriage, including questions like, does the church make an idol of marriage? A question from someone who's come to Christ recently, but their partner hasn't, they're unmarried with kids, what should they do? And two Christians in a marriage, but where they've gone in very different directions in terms of faith and politics. So, some interesting stuff coming up. Thanks to the listener in Indonesia, who got in touch to say, "I'm a new Christian," was born and raised in a Christian cult for decades.

Just recently left that cult, having so many questions regarding the Bible and how I could trust it as a source of authority. This podcast has helped me a lot in digesting and discerning issues regarding Christianity. It's been tremendously helpful in reshaping my worldview.

God bless you, Tom and Justin. I'm going to keep up the good works. So good to hear about the way the show has been helpful in that way for you.

And if you enjoy the podcast, it has been helpful for you. Do rate and review us in your podcast app. It helps others to discover the show.

And if you want to support us with an end of year gift and help others discover more of Tom's thought and theology, you can also do that from the links with today's show as well. Right now, time to get into your questions. Well, we're returning today to a topic we've tackled at least once or twice on the show before, but inevitably, people do come with all kinds of pastoral questions that relate to the way the Bible talks about relationships and so on, marriage being a key one.

And we're going to look at some of the specific pastoral questions people have around marriage today, Tom. Just remind us, how long have you been married to Tom? 50 years and I guess two months and a bit August, September, October, yes, at the time of recording, 50 years, two months and about 20 days. There you go.

You're one of those good husbands who can remember down to the date. I know you had a special celebration, didn't you? Yes. We commemorated the occasion by taking almost all our families.

Sadly, there was one whose sick and couldn't travel. And she and her husband stayed at home, but her son came with us. But we were all on the Isle of Harris in our favourite place.

And we had some wonderful celebrations. We were there for a fortnight and we were in and out of the sea and going for walks and some celebratory meals. And to have the whole family there was amazing.

Well, it's a lovely thing to celebrate. But the first question we have is, do we possibly idolise marriage? This is from Emma in Australia who asks many modern churches along with societies intentionally or unintentionally idolise marriage and family as the pinnacles of mature adulthood. Now while they may say they support Paul's high view of singleness, they don't demonstrate it in action by excluding single people, for instance, from leadership roles or avoiding conversations with single people of the opposite sex, a fear of misrepresentation and constantly labelling and dividing singles into separate categories.

So how do you envision churches better embracing all believers, especially churches that

are rather embedded in this form of idolatry? Now, would you use that language of idolatry, idolising marriage yourself, Tom? I'm not sure I would want to say idolatry because actually what's happened in Western society over the last generation or two is that marriage as a whole has been absolutely rubbish. I mean, there was a television programme which I remember but maybe you don't but it was horrible. I didn't often see it but it was called Till Death to Us Part which was about a somewhat elderly couple who were locked together in a day when divorce was much harder and they basically hated each other and they were constantly slagging each other off and this was done in a dark, humorous way, supposedly.

And this was part of an entire movement in Western culture and British culture to say, "Our marriage is for the birds, it's all you're just yoked to the same person all this time and it's boring and tedious and we all hate it and so on." And people used to say things like marriages like the Middle East, there's no solution, you just have to keep your head down and carry on. And of course, in almost any marriage, there are moments which feel like that but the loyalty and the love and the mutual affirmation and the trustworthiness and the faithfulness, etc. Are something to cherish and to celebrate so that it doesn't surprise me that many churches have honoured and valued and built up or tried to build up marriages, precisely because our culture is constantly saying, "Oh, that's for the birds, who cares, never mind, doesn't matter, etc." I mean, I remember years ago there was, I think it was either a brand of rum or brandy or something which had a regular advertisement which was on huge great posters which had a young man with a ponytail, with a knot in the ponytail and this bottle, whatever it was, and he was with a girlfriend and the bottle and the strap line was, "This drink, whatever it was," says, "You don't have to tie the knot if you don't want to." And when I saw that, I was then a college chaplain and I could see what happened in relationships, very close up and personal, when a couple had been sharing their lives and sexing it in every other way for a few months and then one partner had gone off with somebody else leaving the first one bereft and but in the same college with all kinds of extraordinary trauma going on and I could see how this a moral who cares about marriage attitude was actually destroying people and I could also see how students that I was working with, mum and dad back home would say, "Oh, now the kids are off at college, we can separate, it doesn't matter, they're old enough to take it," completely destroying the 18 and 19 and 20-year-olds who were in my pastoral care.

So I feel strongly about this as you detect, however, I am very well aware through not least having some much valued single people in my own family, both male and female, mostly in the generation and me immediately above me but some in my own generation as well and the next generation down where it's really important that they are folded into the church family and folded into ordinary families because it's easier then, and this is the Bridget Jones language isn't it, to talk about the smug marrods, the couples who only associate with other couples who are basically all alike one another and then the

odd singleton feels a bit of an, oh dear, what's this about and who is he who is she, either that or oh we're really trying to match make because we invite this single person and that single person and you know these are social issues which need to be addressed wisely and we need to lighten up about it and say of course you know these are perfectly ordinary human beings, Jesus himself was single, Paul was single, one of the great glories of the early church was the fact that you didn't have to get married, in the ancient Roman world a woman who wasn't married was conceived of as a social danger so everyone had to get married off and if you were widowed or divorced you had to get married again and Paul says no actually you're free not to marry in the Lord, 1 Corinthians 7 is really important as a validation of singleness so all of that's going on and then socio-culturally in the church we have to figure out how to do that better so I hear what this person says very much so if that's a problem then let's address it let's deal with it rather than sort of parking singletons off somewhere else as though we don't really want to know having said that that little flicker in that question was really quite important where people are anxious about being seen with a single person of the opposite sex, assuming in a heterosexual context because sometimes bad things do happen and people are tempted but we have to learn to be wise transparent and pastorally aware in all such situations and our society doesn't make that any easier for us. I mean on a practical level any thoughts of how churches could do a better job if they have been guilty of sort of prioritising let's say I have never met that and I've been working in and around church life or all my other life I know many churches where there are single people who are lay leaders who are clerical etc etc who are firmly accepted as such there is but it's interesting because in the Greek Orthodox church if you're going to be clergy ordinary parish clergy you must be married so clergy have to be married but the bishops are chosen from among the monks who by definition are unmarried so if you're ordinary clergy the only way you get to be a bishop is if you're widowed which is and I know one such so different churches have had different rules and different ways of honouring different states but at a time of enormous social turbulence the church has to be on its guard against misunderstanding in all directions. Well here's a person who for understandable reasons has asked to be kept anonymous but they're from the UK and it's very much a pastoral question this one Tom this person says I have recently come to Christ or I'm certainly trying to they say but my partner and father of my children is a non-believer we're unmarried and this has become a great burden as my partner does not want to get married but is happy to continue new living together as we are.

I'm faced with either breaking up my family or remain quote-unquote living in sin. Well-meaning friends and family think I'm taking this too seriously and an urgent need to put the children first and remain as I am and my partner having witnessed a messy divorce between his own parents as a child seems to be set against marriage. I've been praying that he changes his mind and asking God for guidance but I can't find any literature or advice specific to my situation.

Are the Christians I've asked to be cautious of advising me one way or the other? Do you have any advice you can give me? Wow wow wow that's an extraordinary and difficult and painful situation and my heart goes out to this person and obviously as we always say please please find a wise pastor where you are. Sounds as though this person has already tried to find some wise pastoral guidance and is still floundering a bit and I very much understand that when somebody is in a situation and then one partner comes to faith and not the other that is a classic difficult situation which has to be navigated with great sensitivity. I remember curiously John Stott who was of course one of the great conservative evangelicals of the 50s and 60s and 70s in Britain actually addressing a question very much like this in a student mission because he'd become aware that a great many of the students, this was I think in the 70s, who would be listening to his evangelistic addresses would already be in cohabiting relationships and some of them well on their way to having children if they weren't already and he basically said you mustn't say if you become a Christian oh I must immediately leave because that is actually denying something which is very important both for you and this other person and you must live with that and work it out and if that means long term that you actually can't stay together well Paul allows for that in 1st Corinthians 7 that is one of the very few permissions for divorce in case of that case in case of a marriage if one partner becomes a Christian and the other doesn't want to stick with that.

In this particular case I think I would say there is this strange notion strange to us at least of a common law marriage that when two people live together and are committed to each other and are bringing up children particularly then they are as it were de facto married even though they haven't actually signed any papers or whatever. This is a tricky gray area I am not an expert in it so I wouldn't want to be implied that I know all the details of that but in that situation it seems to me there is a reality which is part of God's creation where two people have come together they are parents of the same children who they love and they want to bring up those children. I would say at that moment then yes this may be difficult and may not always be understood by other family members or church members or whatever but there is something which is God given in this relationship even if it is misshapen if you like and goodness knows we all have in our lives things which are God given but probably misshapen for whatever reason and that the primary imperative not least for the children would be to stay together if things changed if the marriage became violent for instance then sometimes there might be a case for breaking up but simply on the basis that the other person for understandable reasons if they've seen a message of course in their own family my goodness that will do it oh no marriage that's not good so then maybe one has to stay in that relationship and to offer love and wisdom and prayer and to ask for prayer for one's partner that there's a very difficult situation but that's how I would read it at the moment and with great sympathy and I hope humility and that I haven't faced that situation myself but that is I think my instinctive reaction.

Yeah and we really do pray for you as you navigate that and I suppose I could only say that God sees your heart and the place where you are at and God is a God of grace and so we pray that there may be you know what you're looking for which is you know if you're a partner to come to faith and to see the value of committing in this way anyway but but know that God is with you as you as you navigate that. Okay one more and this is interesting because it's this sort of in contrast to that last question is someone who also wants to remain anonymous but who is actually in a marriage to a Christian they're both Christians but they're they're views they seem to diverging as to the way they think about and understand faith. So here's here's the way it's put here I have a pastoral question hope you won't dismiss it due to its length.

I'm beginning to walk back towards an honest intellectually credible and meaningful faith that I had in my childhood after roughly six years foray into a much more rigid American fundamentalist form of evangelicalism. Now this foray coincided with my marriage to my husband who introduced me to many of these views and whose faith has been profoundly dare I say irrevocably formed in this tradition. Now there's a tremendous amount of hurt pain and confusion as over the last few years I've almost lost myself and the vitality I once had by trying to adopt beliefs I could never quite subscribe to but felt I should for fear of gods and my husband's disapproval.

He's a very kind and loving man but his views cause him to support things or make choices that in my opinion haven't led him or me further towards the full this of life that Jesus came to bring. We now have a little baby girl who's the focus of our shared life but we have so many intellectual differences that it's becoming harder and harder to relate to each other and build a life together that either of us can live with real conviction. I feel I'm living in a strange nightmare and I don't want to be in it.

When I try to explain to him why I disagree with his views don't like their outworkings he suggests that I don't respect him. Furthermore he remains entrenched in his views even when his rational basis for them seems extremely weak. Very often I feel I didn't marry my intellectual equal and I regret marrying him but if I were to say this to him it would hurt him immensely so now I find myself hiding from him as much as I can.

So my question is how to continue in my marriage with someone I no longer feel I have a shared worldview with. I want to keep my vows but very often feel the only way back to wholeness and away from being trapped in a life I don't want to live is to walk away. Okay well again same caveats as before this we cannot answer all these pastoral questions in the way that someone who is walking with you through this can but let's give a go of what we can say in this conversation.

Again my heart goes out to this person and indeed to the man involved because he may well be more confused than it appears on the surface because quite often a rigid defensive view such as has been described in this message does go in fact with a lot of

inner turmoil and the rigid shell is a way of protecting against that and if suddenly the shell were to break that could be a major disruption and disturbance. It is very very difficult I think one of the things which we've learned I think over the last generation or two is that we today put far more weight on emotional intellectual compatibility within a marriage than almost any previous generation. In the ancient world very few people assumed that a husband and a wife would be emotionally and intellectually compatible all the way up and down the line.

They would learn to respect and love one another they would do what they had to do but they would have other friendships which would meet their intellectual and other needs elsewhere but they would certainly for Christians remain physically, sexually faithful to one another but the expectation that one's spouse will be one's best friend and that one's spouse will be one's intellectual equal. This is simply a very very modern and very restricted in western culture view which most people that I know at wouldn't be the case I know somewhere there are remarkable compatibilities but many many others where the spouses are quite different in terms of intellectual ability capability whatever. It's just as well because otherwise somebody who was say a brilliant artist it's highly unlikely that they would marry another brilliant artist and that the spouse would want to respect that but the artist ought not to expect the spouse to understand what was going on in that world.

Somebody's a brilliant nuclear physicist it's highly unlikely that they would marry another brilliant nuclear physicist and so on and so forth so I think we have put higher expectations on what spousal compatibility should be and then the answer should be can one find things which we can do together can one find things where we can share common interests common projects and so on which will then maybe take us into different areas where neither of us are naturally in our comfort zone but where we can learn something together and sometimes that can be very fruitful if you can find novels that you can read together or indeed read to one another. I know a couple who when one is doing the cooking the other one will read the next chapter of the novel that they're reading together and then take turn and turn about and in that way staying within one another's with it with insight of one another. When it's a matter of theological views and particularly the views that have just been described in this rather heart-rending situation I well understand there may be especially in America all sorts of other things going on there socio-politically that a very rigid fundamentalist view which has been described carries all sorts of meanings in today's America I'm well aware of that and if the person who's writing doesn't share those particular viewpoints then that is a real problem and I know some families which have been divided by some of the current issues in the states which would go with this sort of position.

I think the only way forward is relentless honesty but gentleness honesty with gentleness and if the husband says that's because you don't respect me I think the answer would be yes I do respect you it's because I want to respect you that I want to share with you and

put openly on the table how I am feeling about this and particularly how I have come to the position to which I have now come theologically let's read some biblical texts together let's look at what some of the key issues are let's look at some of the the books which I've read which which have helped me to come to the position I have these are the ways that I would want to explore it but I would think at the moment anything other than walking away please find ways of walking together even if they're quite fresh creative different ways to things that you've done before but above all pray and pray if you can with one another and for one another in humility and hope and find fresh pastoral help to get you through. Yeah yeah we do appreciate that this is only a very short response to what is obviously a very big issue in in this person's life but we hope that that's been of some help and and again that that same caveat to do seek wise spiritual counsel people who can help you as you walk through this. Marriage yeah marriage is you know and I suppose just to add to all this you know people change in the course of marriage and and that's perhaps no surprise that you know you aren't the same person probably exactly who married Maggie 50 years ago yourself Tom but part of marriage is that that whole idea of learning to love each other even often you know when when you're both of you know absolutely yeah yeah well look thank you very much for being with me on today's episode of the show Tom and if you're listening I hope that some of the answers that Tom has shared have been helpful for you too and we look forward to seeing you again next time thank you thank you for listening today and next time a Christmas edition of the show yes it's nearly Christmas day we'll be asking Tom apart from one or two Christmas questions questions about himself you quite often write in with questions about Tom himself such as what does exactly a senior research fellow at Whitcliffe Hall do how does he manage to write so many books create all this content what what is he what are the tips to his productivity and we'll be talking about Tom's love of classical music and more besides so tune in next time for a special Christmas edition of the show if you want to support us with an end of year gift and help others to discover more of Tom's thought and theology there are links to do that from today's show we value everyone who's able to support us in that way and if you want more from the show go to ask nt write dot com but for now thanks for being with us and see you next time

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