

A black and white photograph of two pears. One pear is in the foreground, slightly to the left, and the other is behind it, to the right. Both pears have long, thin stems. The background is a plain, light color.

MARRIED FOR GOD

MAKING YOUR MARRIAGE
THE BEST IT CAN BE

CHRISTOPHER ASH

“Ash’s book is one I use for premarital counseling. Concise, thoughtful, intelligent, biblical, and full of that increasingly rare commodity—common sense. I heartily recommend it as a book to read and also as a basis for framing and informing pastoral discussions with Christian couples who are looking toward marriage and want a realistic but encouraging picture of what to expect. A great book.”

Carl R. Trueman, Paul Woolley Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary; author, *The Creedal Imperative* and *Luther on the Christian Life*

“In a world debating the value and purpose of marriage comes this little book called *Married for God*. It is a wonderful introduction to the purpose and function of marriage and intimacy. This book is perfect for couples contemplating marriage, and it is a good reminder to those already committed to marriage of why God designed it for our flourishing.”

Darrell L. Bock, Executive Director of Cultural Engagement, Howard G. Hendricks Center, and Senior Research Professor of New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

“Engaged couples would benefit from carefully reading this book. The way Ash applies the Bible is pithy, practical, and wise.”

Andrew David Naselli, Assistant Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology, Bethlehem College and Seminary, Minneapolis

“When I first married, I wanted to read all the ‘how-to’ books on marriage. And there are plenty out there. If you’re thinking about getting married, just married, or need to remember the ‘why’ of marriage, pick up this excellent resource.”

Christina Fox, counselor; speaker; author, *A Heart Set Free*

“In *Married for God*, Christopher Ash provides a biblical foundation for a God-centered understanding of marriage that will help to correct weak and idolatrous perspectives and lead to honoring God and edifying his people. He offers biblical commentary and theological conclusions with real-life vignettes for seamless application. Among the many books on marriage, this one gets to the point with clarity and robust theological insight.”

Erik and Donna Thoennes, Professor of Theology, Biola University; Pastor at Grace Evangelical Free Church, La Mirada, California; and his wife, Adjunct Professor, Biola University

“These days, stated goals concerning the essence of marriage are endless—and endlessly contradictory. Where to begin? With God, says Christopher Ash. Without this focus, things like good communication skills and agreement over finances—however important they may be—are not strong enough goods in themselves to overcome the void of not having God at the center. Just as we exist for him individually, so too do our marriages. I’m very thankful for this little book. I have consumed it deeply and will disseminate it widely.”

Rob Lister, Associate Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies,
Talbot School of Theology

“Christopher Ash elevates marriage to a level far beyond what a husband and a wife bring to and receive from each other. Above all, marriage is a partnership in the service of the Lord. Such a Christward focus causes husbands and wives to soar together for God’s glory and for their own enormous satisfaction. *Married for God* is a profound and practical book, an important read for everyone whose life is blessed to be touched by marriage.”

Tim Savage, Senior Pastor, Camelback Bible Church; author, *No Ordinary Marriage*

“Christopher Ash’s *Married for God* commends an inviting, practical, and pastoral vision of biblical marriage. His clarity on the beauty and purpose of God’s design for marriage is both crucial for our day and deeply refreshing. He offers inspiration for newly married couples and a recalibration for those who have been married longer. His sensitivity to those who are single and long to be married and to those struggling with infertility makes the breadth of this book a resource of kindhearted care for most Christian adults. We gladly recommend this wise and winsome book and pray that many will be helped in catching the vision God has designed marriage to be.”

Bruce and Jodi Ware, Professor of Christian Theology; and his wife,
Instructor in the Seminary Wives Institute, The Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

Married for God

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Making Your Marriage the Best It Can Be

Christopher Ash

Married for God: Making Your Marriage the Best It Can Be

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Preface

Is This Book for You?

Sex shouts at us in every movie, from every bus and billboard, and from every shelf of the newsstand. Well, not every one—but enough to make a strong impression on us. The combination of this pressure with our own natural desires is explosive. My guess is that Christians who say they never struggle in this area are dishonest on this point. We need help. This book is a straightforward account of what the Bible teaches about marriage.

If you are engaged, I hope this book will help you prepare for marriage. I hope you will find here Bible teaching to consider together as a couple that will shape your hopes and expectations in a healthy way.

If you are in the first few years of marriage (or even later), I hope this book will help you lay foundations for a good marriage. Whether you received good marriage preparation or none, I hope this presentation of the Bible's teaching will challenge and refresh you both.

If you are single and wondering whether to get married, I hope you will find here clear Bible teaching about what marriage is, and—more important—what is the point and purpose of marriage.

If you are single and disappointed, because the opportunity for marriage has not (or not yet) come your way, I hope that you too will find here some comfort and encouragement to live your present unmarried life wholeheartedly and joyfully for Christ.

And, for that matter, if you have no intention of being married, this book may help you understand and encourage those who are.

The questions at the end of each chapter can be used for private study and/or group discussion. They could be used in a number of ways, including:

Individual Use: Whether you are married or not, you could use this book for a private study about marriage. If you do this, allow yourself time not only to think about the questions but also to respond quietly in prayer.

Marriage Preparation: An engaged couple can use the book together, with or without a church leader to help them. I suggest you read a chapter at a time and jot down your answers to the questions separately, on your own, before coming together to talk about what you have written and to discuss how you might respond.

Marriage Refreshment: A married couple can also use the book to provide an informal marriage refresher. Again, I suggest reading a chapter at a time and writing down your responses individually before coming together to talk it over and agree how you will respond.

Church Course: A church may find it helpful to use the book as the basis for a course of either marriage preparation or marriage refreshment for couples. In this case I strongly suggest the leaders do background study from my book *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* as part of their preparation. You will probably wish to guide the members of the course as to which questions to tackle together and which to ponder privately. You may wish to supplement the questions with some of your own, suited to your own church context and needs.

I want to say a special thank-you to those who read and commented on the manuscript, including Stuart Allen, Carolyn Bickersteth, Andy Bleach, Sandra Byatt, Mary Davis, Andrew Leonard, Steve Midgley, Mark O'Donoghue, and Phil and Christine Mulryne. I am of course responsible for the final version, but it is all the better for their help and advice. My warm thanks are also due to all my colleagues at the Proclamation Trust for their encouragement. And I am grateful to my editor, Eleanor Trotter at IVP, for her wise advice and steady encouragement.

Above all I want to thank my dear wife, Carolyn, for showing me so much of the joy and purpose of marriage in practice as well as in theory. Thank you for your patience with an imperfect husband who writes about marriage while he ought to be getting on and living it.

Christopher Ash, Cambridge

Introduction

God at the Center

In the beginning, God . . . (Gen. 1:1)

Jane and Dave were on the way to their first premarital counseling appointment. They had recently become engaged, and the minister had asked to see them. Neither admitted it to the other, but they were pretty nervous.

To break the tension Dave asked Jane, “What are you hoping to get out of these meetings?” and it led to a useful discussion. They agreed that they wanted help with good *communication*, so that Dave would learn to communicate (rare, in a man, as Jane said) and that Jane could communicate a bit less mysteriously (“So that I can understand what you really mean,” as Dave put it). They looked forward to hearing how to relate to both sets of *parents* (not always the easiest people, they both agreed). They were beginning to think through the issue of handling *money*, and thought they might pick up some useful wisdom on that score. They were a bit shy about admitting it, but each hoped secretly that they might pick up tips on helping *sex* to go well. And, having just had

a painful disagreement (why does this have to happen just before marriage preparation?), they wondered if the meeting with the minister might help with patching up and moving on.

So they were a bit disappointed when the minister said they ought to begin by talking about God.

.....

The Bible begins with God. From page 1, God is at the center. I want that to be true of this book. I make no apology for that.

What do you expect in a marriage book? John Gray's best seller *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* is subtitled *A Practical Guide to Getting What You Want in Your Relationships*. Maybe that is what you expect: a guide to getting what *you* want.

You will find this sort of guide not only in secular bookshops but also on church book tables. One Christian book is subtitled *Achieve a Happy and More Fulfilling Relationship*. A Christian marriage course offers "a blueprint for happiness with your partner."

This book won't help you with that sort of thing, because it is about God more than it is about you and me. In some ways it would be easier to write a book of common-sense wisdom and practical advice about sex and marriage, glossing it with a Christian veneer. Instead, I want to start, continue, and finish the book with God firmly at the center. He is our Maker and he will be our Judge. We need to listen to him.

What is the point of marriage? Or, to be more basic, what is the point of sex? We in the West are obsessed with sex. It used to be said that the Victorians were embarrassed about sex but obsessed with death. For us it is the opposite: we are embarrassed about death but obsessed with sex. And yet relationships are breaking down all around us. "People change their marriage partner faster than they change their brand of washing machine," claims an ad-

vertiser. A newspaper reports on an American entrepreneur who offers wedding rings to rent to save wasting money on buying one for a marriage that may not last long. Outside marriage, relationships break down even faster; indeed, a lot faster. We live in a world marked by what has been called “the churning of partners.”

We are bound to be worried by this. If you are thinking of getting married, at the back of your mind this anxiety will lurk. If you are married, you will be unsettled every time a friend’s marriage breaks down. Somehow the draft of someone else’s breakdown seems to blow through—and threaten—our own marriages.

Why do relationships break down? There are all sorts of reasons. But one of the biggest is disappointment. We wouldn’t start unless we had hopes, whether or not we spell them out. When our goals are frustrated, we are tempted to cut and run. So I want to begin with the question, *What ought our purpose to be?* What are proper hopes and aims for marriage?

Some marriage books focus on the *how* questions. How can we communicate better? How can we have better sex? How can we resolve conflict? And so on. These questions have their place, but for the most part I am not going to focus on them.

Other books (more theoretical ones) focus on the *what* questions, issues of definition. What is marriage? Does it have boundaries? Is living together the same as marriage? And so on. These too are important questions, but again I am not going to major on them.

It is good to start with the *why* questions. If we get our aims clear, then we shall see *why* marriage has to be *what* it is, and we will be well placed to see *how* to build a strong marriage.

I want to begin with a fundamental statement:

We ought to want what God wants in marriage.

Or, to put it another way, God’s *why* matters more than my *why*. To put God at the center like this will turn our thinking

upside down. Sometimes in churches we get the impression that God exists to help me do better in life. I come to God because he can help me with my marriage. He is my lifestyle coach, and with a bit of luck and a favorable wind, and if I “pay” him enough with prayer and a bit of well-chosen religious activity, then he will line up his energies behind my goals. He will help me achieve what I want. In marriage he will help me to be happy and satisfied.

The truth is the exact opposite. You and I need to ask God what he wants and then line up our goals behind his, rather than expecting him to line up his goals behind ours. There are at least two reasons for this.

The first has to do with right and wrong. God has given us all we have. Every good and perfect gift comes from him (James 1:17); therefore the most basic thing human beings ought to do is to honor him and give thanks (Rom. 1:21) and to love him with all our hearts and minds (Matt. 22:37–38). As a matter of simple morality we ought to ask what he wants and not expect him to want what we want. And this includes sex.

The second reason is practical: what God wants is (by definition) in line with how the world actually is and how we are made. Because he is the Creator, living in line with his purposes is for our best. This is very hard for us to grasp. For example, the writer Will Self puts it well when he says that in our culture right and wrong are not part of “the very structure of the cosmos” but “a matter of personal taste akin to a designer label, sewn into the inside lining of conscience.”¹ You choose your own right and wrong; it is a personal lifestyle choice. Against this, the Christian holds that right and wrong are to the universe what an animal’s skin is to an animal. Just as an animal cannot change its coat, so we cannot choose our personal right and wrong as we might pick a coat from the wardrobe. God has made the world with structure and order—not just physical order (which science explores) but also

moral order. This is the biblical concept of *wisdom*, which is the blueprint or architecture according to which the world is built: “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth” (Prov. 3:19).

So, when we ask what God wants, we are asking what is best for us. What is best for us is not what we want, but what he wants. When I ask what God wants for marriage, I am saying that I want my marriage to cut with the grain of the universe.

So I need to begin our study with a call to repentance. That sounds old-fashioned. But it is just what we need: to change our minds, consciously to turn from what we want—from our hopes for marriage—and to seek his will and goals for marriage. If you are a couple preparing for marriage, will you line up your goals with God’s purposes? If you are married, will you realign your hopes with what God wants? Will you want what God wants for your marriage? If you are unmarried, will you too resolve to serve God wholeheartedly with the opportunities that your singleness offers?

But what does God want for marriage? Why did God choose to create humankind male and female? Presumably he did not need to do it this way. A friend of mine used to point out that God could have made all human beings like an amoeba which, when it wants to multiply, simply divides. But he chose to make us men and women, with all the wonderful and mysterious chemistry of sexual desire and delight. Why did he do this? What is his aim? Most of this book explores the answer to that question. You will find here not lifestyle tips but a serious engagement with Christian belief about God. And yet, surprisingly, you will make a better marriage if you focus on God and not on marriage. Put God at the center, and strive to want what he wants.

For Study or Discussion

1. Why is it important to ask about the *why* of marriage before we tackle the *what* and the *how*?

2. For what reasons ought we to put God at the center?
3. Take time for some quiet prayer at the start of these studies. Consciously and deliberately ask God to help you put him and his purposes at the center.

A GOOD MARRIAGE BEGINS WITH *GOD*.

It is our natural tendency to seek personal happiness and satisfaction in marriage. We often give our own needs, wants, and goals first priority. But what is God's design for our marriages?

With clarity and conviction, Christopher Ash turns us away from marriage for ourselves and toward marriage in the service of God. With practical applications for everyday life, Ash shows us God's purposes and patterns for every part of the marriage relationship. By realigning our hopes, expectations, and goals for marriage according to the Bible, we will discover the deep joy and lasting fulfillment that comes from a God-centered marriage.

"Concise, thoughtful, intelligent, biblical, and full of that increasingly rare commodity—common sense. I heartily recommend it as a book to read and also as a basis for framing and informing pastoral discussions with Christian couples who are looking toward marriage and want a realistic but encouraging picture of what to expect."

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No Ordinary Marriage

"If you're thinking about getting married, just married, or need to remember the 'why' of marriage, pick up this excellent resource."

CHRISTINA FOX, counselor; speaker; author, *A Heart Set Free*

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MARRIAGE

