

I loved reading this book. Personal, warm and accessible it exudes Christian maturity and the wisdom and common sense that come from a faithful life lived for Jesus. Steve Donald is passionate about Jesus and his plan and purpose for your life. He is an advocate for the marriage relationship as God intends it. I think this is an especially good book for young couples setting out on their married life together. Well worth having a few copies to give to others.

**Andrea Minichiello Williams, Christian
Concern and Christian Legal Centre**

This is the story of Steve's life-long loves and loyalties. There are well chosen quotations from John Newton and John Stott, with a variety of contemporary voices, pastoral sensitivity and practical wisdom alongside careful theological reflection, attention to detail without losing touch with larger biblical horizons. Steve writes with warmth, realism and clarity, as he encourages fresh recognition of God's sovereignty and human freedom, as essential for surviving and thriving both in marriage and singleness.

Johnny Jukes, President of Oak Hill

Steve sets out the Bible's teaching on courtship, marriage, singleness and many related questions with clarity and warmth, helpfully sharing his own and others' experiences along the way. Worth a read just to discover what SIMPLE stands for, Steve treads some fine lines very carefully, and helps us to engage with biblical wisdom on such tricky topics with an endearing warmth.

**Rev. Andrew Towner, Vicar, Houghton & Kingmoor,
Carlisle and Chair, Church Society Council**

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Acknowledgements

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I have also been helped by many authors and I have tried to give them credit.

Several friends have been consistent encouragers, including Andrew Towner, a Carlisle vicar who I work closely with and other members of our local North West Gospel Partnership group in Carlisle. Robin Ham, another member of the group has written the Foreword. I would also like to thank Marylynn Rouse, Director of the John

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Foreword

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife ...”

Times have changed dramatically since Jane Austen penned those priceless words to begin what is often heralded as one of the best works of romantic fiction ever written, *Pride & Prejudice*. And yet despite its accolades, Austen’s subtle genius as a commentator for our times is perhaps not as acknowledged as it should be. She wryly observed the first impacts of social currents that we continue to swim in today: the rise of the individual, the place of personal choice, and the fragmenting of cultural norms.

Of course, those currents have totally re-shaped our social landscape in the two hundred years that have passed since Austen’s day—and we perhaps glimpse that nowhere more starkly than when it comes to marriage. Undoubtedly some of this change has been helpful, as we’ve disposed of

cultural baggage that had been mistakenly taken as biblical principle. But it's also meant, when it comes to marriage, that we now find ourselves torn as a culture. On one hand we idolise the Netflix image of the couple, who seem both fully loved and fully known. And yet on the other hand we also idolise our so-called freedoms—including ultimately the right to self-determine our identities. As such we baulk or get edgy about the life-long commitment of marriage. This is our culture's paradox, as we try to figure out if and how these two ideals can co-exist.

And this brings us from *Pride & Prejudice* to the book in your hands, *Marriages are Made in Heaven*. Now, Steve Donald is not claiming to be Jane Austen, but it is his own cultural observations that have led to this particular choice of subject matter. Anyone who dares think they may have something to add to the already overcrowded canon of Christian marriage literature is a brave author. But actually, the significance of God's sovereignty and human responsibility in approaching marriage is a refreshing focus for our times.

It's often said that those of us currently under forty are "optioned-out," distracted-to-death, and commitment-phobic. Some of us might point to the misguided priorities of our forebears and argue we find ourselves here as a result of others' decisions. But regardless, it is still here that we find ourselves—and we need to acknowledge this place. What is this like as a lived-experience? Well, I find the words disorientating, overwhelming and flimsy crop up often enough in conversation. Throw into the mix

the idea of committing ourselves to one person for life and you start to see it's no wonder that people are uneasy about marriage.

But it's here that Steve shows us seeing our lives and marriages against the backdrop of God's sovereign goodness brings real assurance and true freedom. In particular, Steve's way of unpacking the Bible's teaching on "destined perfection" throws us a lifebuoy of hope amidst these unsettling currents. Whether we are married (happily/unhappily/bit of both) or single (happily/unhappily/bit of both), knowing this God brings rest for our restlessness.

I think it's worth saying that the subject of marriage is inevitably going to be intensely personal. Going back to Austen, her varied examples in *Pride & Prejudice* comically illustrate for us that "one size doesn't fit all." Sometimes we can take this too far and be resistant to any input into our own marriages. And yet in my experience, most of us still want to lean in to other people's experiences and stories—especially when it's one generation to another. Maybe in part that comes from a humble recognition that every marriage is a work in progress.

So, whatever your situation, full marks for picking this book up and seeking encouragement. I think you'll find Steve a trusty guide, as he balances sharing honestly from his own story, without treating it as a roadmap for everyone else. And thank you to Steve, for lifting our eyes from off our spouse (whether the spouse of our dreams, our expectations or our reality) and instead fixing them on

our everlasting God, helping us to rediscover that “those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength ... they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:31, NIV).

Robin Ham, Pastor, Grace Church Barrow
Blogger, thathappycertainty.com

Introduction

“Marriages are made in heaven”

She was travelling up for an interview from London to Lancaster. She had recently returned from Africa after a very painful experience and was seeking to start a new life. On the train she felt strongly that not only would the interview go well in Lancaster but that she would meet her future husband in that city. And it happened just like that. Well, maybe not exactly. She didn't know the details and of course she didn't know his name yet! She just had a very strong impression that this was going to happen. And it did! I am the man she met and married.

Not everything went smoothly, of course, although looking back we can trace the working of God. Joan, the host of the home group where we met in Lancaster, told

Gloria that she thought I was “married to the church,” but in fact I was beginning to feel I would like to be married if I could find the right woman. This impression was boosted by an amazing prayer meeting. Working in Lancaster for a schools ministry connected to Capernwray Bible School I began meeting the Christian head of Religious Education in my local school each Friday to pray for the work. We had three prayer requests for the Lord on one occasion. John (the RE teacher) needed to visit his dad in Australia who was seriously ill, I needed a replacement car for visiting schools and John said he felt we needed to pray for a wife for me! As I recall, all three prayers were answered positively within a few weeks. In fact, the very next week a Christian called Reg who didn’t know about my need of transport rang me and asked, “Steve, do you know of anyone who needs a car? I’ve bought a new one and I have my old one going spare.” John was able to go to Australia through an unexpected gift and shortly after the prayer meeting Gloria joined the home group I led.

There were still hurdles! I remember my marriage proposal, which did not go to plan. Since Gloria and I spent much of our time together in the nearby seaside town of Morecambe I thought I would do the traditional thing and book a posh restaurant there and get down on one knee and ask Gloria to marry me. Sounds straightforward and simple? Not at all. The evening arrived and the moment drew close. The violinist was doing his magic and I felt the pressure building to make the proposal. I was just about to begin when a couple on the next table started a very noisy row. I thought, “Is this a sign from God?” Anyone who has

experienced the extreme pressure of this situation will understand how I felt. So, I suggested we go outside and get some fresh air, thinking that maybe my courage might be invigorated by the sea breeze. We walked along the sea front arm in arm as it began to rain so we sat in one of the shelters. I felt the tension rising again as I knew I just had to go for it. Literally as I was about to speak, there was thunder and lightning! Once again, I thought “Is this a sign from God?” Casting all care literally to the wind, I spluttered out the words, “Gloria ... will you marry me?” No more thunder or lightning followed, only a silence which seemed to last forever. Then a delicious small sweet voice filled the silence, “Yes, I would like to very much.” Our courtship had lasted just over a year, but we were married within three months on the 25th February 1984 at St Thomas’ Church in Lancaster and honeymooned in Anglesey, North Wales.

Even in a story like my own a number of questions arise, not the least of which is how the sovereignty of God in all things is to be understood where human choice is involved. Our first chapter will raise questions that will be worked out in the course of this book.