

Marriage No. 1

“Marriage: Creation Ordinance”

Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15-25

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I taught a Sunday School class on marriage years ago, but have never preached a series on the subject and it seemed to me high time that I did so. We live in a culture that is in open rebellion against not only the biblical definition of marriage but against marriage as it has been historically understood in virtually all human cultures. We are, for the first time in the history of western civilization, intentionally attempting to build a society on the foundation of concubinage, or something quite like it, or perhaps even less than the ordered relationship between men and women than concubinage was in the ancient world. Early returns are not promising. Marriage has lost its sanctity in western thought and life. It is no longer thought indispensable to human flourishing by those who wield the greatest influence in our culture. Very recent developments, that is, within this past generation, have undone the understanding of the relationship between society and marriage that the peoples of the western world shared for centuries. And this has happened with astonishing rapidity. Gay marriage most recently; but the widespread acceptance of co-habitation, the skyrocketing number of adults who remain single (in Seattle and other American cities the number of households that include but one individual is approaching 50%), and the mainstreaming of the culture of no-fault divorce -- by which I mean that people nowadays virtually cannot conceive of marriage as it was not so long ago, when divorces were comparatively rare and much harder to get -- I say, all of these developments and others have profoundly changed the moral and social landscape of the western world. The expectations of young people growing up in our land are profoundly different than they would have been just twenty or thirty years ago. All of this represents a fundamental revolution in the institution of marriage in both thought and practice.

Perhaps none of this would be important if marriage were a cultural convention, easily replaced by other arrangements for the consummation of romantic and sexual partnership between men and women and for the birth and nurture of children, social arrangements that are equally suited to human flourishing. *But marriage is not a cultural convention.* It is woven into the warp and woof of human life; it has existed always and everywhere in human society, and every indication is that it is fundamental to human happiness and goodness in a great many ways. Christians should be able to explain this. No one else really can. But can *we* explain it? Can *we* account for the place of marriage in human society? Can *we* explain why marriage is so essential to human life and welfare? And can *we* explain why these modern attacks on the institution of marriage and upon the calling of most human beings to marry are bound to wreak havoc rather than increase happiness, undermine rather than foster human welfare, and cripple rather than strengthen a society?

Don't expect to hear an intelligent debate on this subject in the American media. We have stopped thinking carefully as a people, stopped asking serious questions, and stopped demanding convincing arguments. We get only slogans nowadays; character assassination rather than the intelligent weighing of arguments. It has stopped amazing me -- I am now so used to it -- that ordinary people in our culture do not think, not really, about issues like these. If you stopped a person on the street almost anywhere in America and put to them some serious questions about marriage and about society, they would not know what to say. They would have imbibed the cultural zeitgeist but they would not appreciate that and they couldn't really have explained how or why the changes have come as they have or what they are likely to mean, nor could they defend them against an intelligent critic. They just follow the crowd, which, in turn is following the conventional wisdom of the American media and academy. In respect to homosexuality, in a period of fifteen years, the blink of an eye in social history, we have experienced an almost total reversal of ethical norms: from the sin that dare not speak its name, to the conviction that homosexual behavior needs constant approval from the larger society, to the demonization and bullying of anyone who dares to suggest that there is something wrong with that way of life. The convictions of many centuries have been swept away with minimal resistance. Is this because we know something that our ancestors didn't? No. We don't know anything our ancestors didn't know. Is it because we have carefully reviewed their reasons for regarding homosexuality as a disordered existence and now realize those reasons were unconvincing? No, it's not because of that either. It is because the sexual revolution that has transformed American life, that has created the so-called "porn culture," has made the acceptance of homosexuality inevitable, so inevitable that one hardly needs to think about it. And it is because those who control the American conversation for the vast majority of people are ardent advocates of that revolution. As the poet William Butler Yeats put it in respect to something else, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." [James Hitchcock, "The New Martyrs," *Touchstone* (Jan/Feb 2014) 3.

Many of these modern issues concern the *ethics of marriage*. But it is a point of fundamental importance in the Bible that ethics proceed from theology as fruit from the tree. Change the theology, one invariably changes the ethics. And what is perfectly clear in the contemporary situation is that the changing *ethics* of marriage have stemmed from and are the inevitable result of a change in the *theology* of marriage. The biblical ethics of marriage are the inevitable implication of the biblical nature of marriage. When that biblical understanding of marriage was abandoned, the ethics were bound to change, and change they have. So we begin where we must begin: with the theology of marriage. Where did marriage come from? What is it? What is it for?

To answer those questions we naturally turn to the account of the creation of mankind and the creation of the institution of marriage as we find it in the first few chapters of the Bible.

Genesis 1:26-28

v.26 In the ancient near east the “image” was thought to have the life of a god in it. Also the image represented the presence of God in that particular place. Hence the very great importance attached to idols or images in ancient near eastern religion. Every one of those religions had its idols. However, according to Genesis 1:26 we are the image of God, not idols made of wood, metal or stone, but human beings themselves. of images in ancient near eastern religion. In the context of ancient near eastern thought, then, we, not idols made of wood, metal, or stone, are God’s images!

The statement that man is made *in God’s image* is hugely important to the entire teaching of the Bible and to the Christian understanding of human life. Other creatures are created according to their kinds (v. 25), but man alone was made in the image of God. This sets man apart from and above the rest of the created order. It is no surprise that in our time people are actually coming to doubt that human beings do stand above all the rest of creation, however obviously they do. Change the theology of man and you inevitably change the ethics of man’s life. In the Bible men and women are “theomorphic,” that is, they are like God in some ways, and this fact enables us to understand who and what God is. In the ancient near east only the king was in the image of God; but in the Bible every human being bears the likeness to God. [Waltke, 66] He is certainly not God; but in some ways he is like God. To say that men and women are made *in God’s image* or *after his likeness* is to say that they resemble God in certain important ways: in their powers of thought, in their capacity to speak, to rule, to invent or create, and so on, and especially in their capacity to relate in love to other creatures.

I read these verses from Genesis 1 primarily to draw our attention to the obvious fact that God made two types of human beings, or, to put it another way, men and women, *male and female are two divine orders of being*. It is not an accident of nature, it is certainly not some minor detail; God made the human race in the form of male and female, both alike in his image, to be sure, but each as well distinct from the other. As one commentator puts it, “By God’s will, man was not created alone but designated for the “you” of the other sex.” [Von Rad, 60] This is more fundamental to the nature of human existence than we often realize. It is one of the grand mysteries of life and the foundation of so much of our experience of life that men and women are, at one and the same time, the same and not the same. Everyone realizes that men and women are equally human beings and everyone realizes that they are profoundly different *as human beings*.

If there is a perfect demonstration of both the superficiality and the revolutionary character of our modern age it is that the distinction between men and women -- so fundamental to human life and experience -- is no longer thought about carefully, seriously, or sympathetically. Now it is discussed almost entirely in political terms and ordinarily to minimize, if not deny, the difference between the two sexes. It was always before thought to be a matter both of great significance and worthy of celebration, and not just by Christians.

Here is Aristophanes, the Greek poet and playwright of the 5th and 4th century B.C., as cited in Plato's *Symposium*.

“As a measure of safety, Zeus split [human nature] longitudinally down the middle... Since then man is only half a complete creature. The longing for reunion for the lost half of one's self is what we call 'love'...” [Cited from A.E. Taylor in *William Barclay: A Spiritual Autobiography*, 121]

When have you read anything like that from a modern author? Or, consider Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (*Hiawatha* X, li).

As unto the bow the cord is,
So unto the man is woman;
Though she bends him she obeys him,
Though she draws him, yet she follows,
Useless each without the other!

We are not reading such celebratory reflections on the two sexes in our time! Most revolutionary movements are terribly hard on happiness, love, and celebration. In other words, what God intended humanity to be and to do required not only men but women, and not only men and women, but men and women together in such a relationship as would enable them to be fruitful and multiply. So far Genesis 1. By the way, I realize that the Bible recognizes that not all people marry. I will address the calling of the single life later in this series. But if you are single, even if you feel it your calling to remain single, as a Christian reading the Bible you will not doubt the vast importance the Bible attaches to marriage or that most people in this world are married or expect to marry.

Genesis 2:15-25

This paragraph we are about to read literally bristles with the profoundest truth about human life. But I will confine my remarks on the text to those that are necessary to appreciate what all of this has to do with marriage.

v.18 The “*not good*” is the more significant in light of the repeated refrain in chapter one that after creating this dimension of nature or that and that God would survey his work and see “that it was good.” The *not good* is thus a jarring and emphatic interruption in an account of one good thing after another. It is a startling reminder that man needs the woman, that he is essential to his life as God intended it. The divine plan for human life could not be fulfilled by two men, even if there were some other way to reproduce the race.

The ESV's "a helper fit for him," the NIV's "a helper suitable for him," and one commentator's "a helper matching him" (Wenham, 68) are all translations of a Hebrew prepositional phrase that literally means "like opposite him." It doesn't say simply a "helper like him," but "like opposite him." That is, it suggests not identity but complementarity. Here is found the most basic reason why the world has always forbidden marriage to homosexuals and why until comparatively recently nobody in the world ever clamored for homosexuals to marry. Men and women have obviously been made to be fit partners for what everyone understands marriage to be. They have been made for each other and for the sort of psycho-sexual union that is only possible between members of the opposite sex. That is what marriage requires: this profound complementarity. How much of the experience of life is captured in that single prepositional phrase! It is precisely the nature of revolutions to rewrite the dictionary; to use old words in radically different and new ways. Whatever so-called homosexual marriage is, it isn't marriage as the Bible defines marriage and it isn't marriage as virtually the entirety of human culture throughout its history has understood marriage to be. Marriage is a union of two people who have been created for this unique relationship, for a relationship of profound intimacy and for purposes for which their natures have fit them, an intimacy and such purposes that are beyond two homosexuals of whatever sex. They are *not* like-opposite one another as only man and woman can be.

But now follows not the immediate creation of the woman, as we might have expected, but an assignment for the man.

- v.20 Now we understand. The assignment given to Adam to name the creatures that God had made had a purpose perhaps at the time disguised from Adam himself. As he surveyed the kingdom of living creatures he realized that none of them was fit or suitable to be his partner. None could think as he thought; none could speak as he could speak; none could enter into a relationship on such a level as human beings are capable of; and none could relate to God together with him. What is more, as Adam would certainly have noticed, the higher animal kingdom was designed in two dimensions, male and female. It was by this means that the next generation was produced. But that means of creating new life had not been given to Adam.

God didn't give Adam the great gift that he was preparing for him and which we have already read that Adam needed, until Adam was prepared to appreciate the gift when given. Now he was prepared and the "at last" of v. 23 is the evidence that Adam had come to understand how alone he was and had come to feel keenly his need of a partner.

- v.21 The observation of the medieval theologian Peter Lombard has been often repeated. "But although woman was made from man for these reasons, nevertheless she was formed not

from just any part of his body, but from his side, so that it should be shown that she was created for the partnership of love, lest, if perhaps she had been made from his head, she should be perceived as set over man in domination; or if from his feet, as if subject to him in servitude. Therefore, since she was made neither to dominate, nor to serve the man, but as his partner, she had to be produced...from his side, so that he would know that she was to be placed beside himself..." [*Sentences*, Book II, Dist. xviii, ch. 2] That is lovely; *and so important!*

- v.22 You'll notice the accent on God the matchmaker here. *He* brought her to the man. Later the Lord will comment on this history when he said, "Whom *God has joined together* let not man separate."
- v.23 We will return to this statement in v. 23 later in the series because it is fundamental to the Bible's *ethics* of marriage, but shortly we will notice how equally fundamental it is to the Bible's *theology* of marriage.

However, there is something else to note here. Naming, which Adam did in naming his wife, is an act of sovereignty. The fact that Adam gave names to all the animals subtly but powerfully indicated his superiority to the animal kingdom and his right to rule over it. Man subdues and controls nature by language. We still control by naming. Names indicate that we understand the properties and characteristics of a thing. We can describe them to someone else. We can use those names to bring things under our control. In every discipline we are constantly naming and by naming we are bringing an object or a subject under our control. Universities, for example, are name factories. Here Adam gives his new wife her name, "woman," a variant of his own name, "man." The English "woman" is derived from "wife of man." In Hebrew as well the two names are at last phonetically related to one another. [Waltke, 89] The fact that the man named his wife also indicates his headship or authority in the relationship. We'll get to that later in this series, but simply take note here of the obvious point.

- v.24 Now we are given to understand that what transpired in the first marriage is not simply history, but meta-history. The marriage of Adam and Eve is an archetype; it establishes the paradigm for all marriages that would follow. Here's the explanation of why marriage is universal as an institution in human culture. After all, we don't yet have fathers, mothers, and children, but the narrator is looking ahead to human life as it will develop. And as with Adam and Eve so with every husband and wife, marriage is to be an exclusive, intimate, and permanent relationship.

"Leaving" father and mother in ancient days in Israel did not mean literally moving away to live somewhere else as it does in our time. Families tended to remain together with several generations living, if not in the same home, at least in close proximity to each

other. So the sense of “leave” here is “forsake” in the sense that when a man (or a woman) marries his deepest loyalties and priorities change. His wife now holds the uppermost position in his life.

This idea is further emphasized with the word the ESV translates “hold fast,” the KJV’s famous “cleave.” A cruder but more literal translation would be that the man *sticks to* his wife. Later in Genesis “Shechem’s love for Dinah is described in the same way: “his soul stuck to Dinah” (Gen. 34:3).” [Wenham, 71]

v.25 This final statement prepares the way for the narrative of the fall in the next chapter. So far the Word of God.

Now it has long been observed that in these opening chapters of the Bible we are given an account of the origin of the most fundamental institutions of human life or patterns of human life, what are typically referred to in Christian theology as *creation ordinances*. Adam was given work to do. Man is a worker by nature. He was made to work. He will work in heaven. But the Sabbath was likewise appointed to be observed. When in 2:3 we read that God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, we learn that the seventh day *was to be observed* as a day of rest. To sanctify something in the language of the Bible is, in effect, to order that it be sanctified. [Junius, *Theses Sabbaticae*, 158] Work and rest in rhythm are creation ordinances; they define the nature of obligations of human life. And, not surprisingly, woven in the fabric of human life from the beginning, we find them everywhere we look in every single human culture. All human beings work and all have holidays.

In the same way we have the creation of marriage and family at the headwaters of human life. These ordinances as well define human life and have shaped it throughout its existence. Stop and think about this. It is not obvious that human beings would organize their lives in terms of marriage -- an exclusive and permanent relationship between one man and one woman -- or that marriage would be the context in which children are born and raised. One finds any number of mating relationships in the animal kingdom. And yet, the “leave and hold fast” of Genesis 2 has been, to one degree or another, the fundamental expectation of human beings from the beginning to the present day. And, we would argue, and not without an overwhelming amount of evidence, efforts to replace that institution with something else invariably end badly.

What is emphasized here at the outset is that *God* made marriage and he made men and women *for marriage*. This point is made a matter of emphasis in the narrative of the creation of the woman *in order to be a fit, like opposite, helper for man*, her being brought to the man *as his wife*, and her taking a place in his life greater than that of the man’s parents. But it is especially emphasized with the words Adam speaks to and about Eve in v. 23:

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”

We might miss the significance of this identification for two reasons. *First*, in the case of Adam, Eve actually was created from his bone and it might seem that this fact is what he is primarily referring to. *Second*, we are not familiar with the phrase, “bone of bones and flesh of flesh.” But Adam and the writer of Genesis meant more, much more, than that, as it happened, *in this particular case*, Eve was created from his rib, from one of his bones.

“Bone and flesh” was the Hebrew way of saying what we mean when we describe someone as our own “flesh and blood.” When, for example, Jacob, fleeing Esau, traveled to Paddan Aram to live for some time with his mother’s relatives, his Uncle Laban greeted him by saying, “You are my bone and flesh.” [29:14] The NIV, with its principle of dynamic equivalence, has Laban saying, “You are my flesh and blood,” but the Hebrew actually reads “bone and flesh.” (The odd thing about the NIV is that in Genesis 2 it says “bone and flesh” but here in Genesis 29 it says “flesh and blood.”) In other words, Laban was acknowledging that Jacob was a blood relative, a member of his extended family. He had obligations to him as his nephew. This nomenclature of “bone and flesh” appears regularly in the OT to indicate family relationships (Judg. 9:2; 2 Sam. 5:1; 19:13-14).

In other words, in Gen. 2:23 Adam is effectively pronouncing Eve a member of his family. He is declaring her, in effect, a blood relative. Now, to be sure, Eve was Adam’s blood relative, having been created out of his rib. Were it possible then to do a DNA test on the two of them, it would no doubt betray kinship. But, as the narrator goes on to say, what was true of Adam and Eve is to be true of every husband and wife. And to emphasize that point, he repeats the thought by saying that the two of them “shall become one flesh,” simply a short way of saying what was said with “bone and flesh” earlier.

This is the fabulously unique and important thing about marriage: *it creates a family*. This is the fundamental importance of a wedding. The beautiful gown, the solemn service -- I hope it retains some solemnity (nowadays one can’t always be sure of this) --, the joyful celebration of the reception, all of that exists, whether or not anyone remembers this, because a wedding creates a family. That’s why a wedding is so consequential. A couple enters the church each a member of a separate family, but they leave the church a new family. Putting it in terms of our modern technology, they enter the church with two different DNAs, but they leave with one. And the amazing and wonderful fact is that, men and women, created for marriage as they have been, find this is the ordinary psychological experience of men and women. It is not very long into a marriage and sometimes it is even before the marriage that the man and the woman realize that they have become more a family, that their relationship with one another is more fundamental and profound than even that relationship that binds them to their parents or to their brothers and sisters. Indeed, as time passes, that relationship so defines them that it is even more constitutive of their persons than the relationship that they have with their children when they are born, children who *literally* are their own bone and flesh. This is what everyone understands marriage

to be, or, at least, what marriage *ought* to be. And everyone, or nowadays almost everyone, realizes that men and women have been made for this: a relationship so profound that it transcends the obvious fact that these two people are not the same bone and flesh. Marriage has made them bone and flesh. Marriage has made them a family. It is from this reality that comes the love that is “strong as death,” as we read in the Song of Songs (8:6).

This is, by the way, also the explanation for laws found in Leviticus 18 and 20 forbidding sexual relationships within certain degrees of consanguinity and affinity, that is, within degrees of both actual blood relation and family relation by marriage. Because marriage creates a family, it establishes family relationships between the spouses and the relatives of the spouses. Because husband and wife have become relatives they have become the relatives of many others. Since a woman by marrying becomes a sister to her husband’s brothers, a daughter to her father-in-law, and so on, she can’t marry any of them should her first husband die or divorce her. That would constitute incest, a violation of the family bond. [Wenham, 71]

And when you consider what families are and what they become, you realize how significant marriage is. In the study this afternoon I found myself looking at two pictures. One of them was of my father when he was two years of age and one of them was of myself when I was one. Children will know who they are, and grandchildren, and great grandchildren *because they belong to a particular family*. I would not be; I would not exist in the first place; and I would not be who I am and what I am except for the fact that my father and mother married and became a family, into which family I was eventually born. By the way, just to let everybody know, this is one reason I will not marry a couple that intends to retain separate names; by that I mean if the wife intended to retain her maiden name. Such a practice is an affront to the very nature of marriage as creating a family, a single flesh and blood. How do you know that people belong to the same family? They have the same name! To be sure, as the family is extended the names change, but they change precisely for the sake of that same principle: to identify the primary family.

Our public policy for long years accepted this definition of marriage with its implications. The reason divorce was hard to get was that marriage created a family. The society understood that divorce was an affront to the nature of a family. You can’t change your family. Families are by their very nature characterized by permanence. Their effects are immutable. You can’t give the children back and rebirth them to different parents. So, in previous generations, a man might divorce his wife, but he remained responsible for her in certain legal and financial respects because she remained, at least naturally, if not legally *part of his family*. You can’t change your relatives!

But today our public policy has reduced marriage to something closer to what the ancients called concubinage. A woman who was a concubine had a certain legal relationship to a man, she had certain rights, *but she was not his wife and was not a member of his family*. She had a certain

status, but she was not a wife; more like an official mistress. These sorts of marital relationships are much more disposable, less permanent, and, therefore, the relationship between marriage and family is also weakened. The result, of course, has been, predictably, a huge increase in the number of divorces, of children born out of wedlock (now upwards of 80% of African American children and 40% of all children born in the United States), and, predictably, a dramatic increase in the instability of children's lives. The fact is a village cannot raise a child. *That* takes a family!

We will stop here tonight with this most fundamental definition of marriage, a definition from which so many important implications proceed: marriage creates a family, a relationship equal to that of flesh and blood. God made marriage to be that and made men and women to suit such a relationship. It is one of the grand and beautiful features of human life as God made it. And the only plausible explanation for the universality of marriage in human culture is precisely that: God made marriage and us for marriage because he intended to make the family the fundamental unit of human society.