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Five Rings & A Wedding: Marriage & The Concentric Communities That Surround It

By Allan Carlson

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As one Massachusetts advocate of a pluralistic bent has phrased it, “The right to love and to celebrate our relationships in whatever form they take, is a fundamental human right that should be protected.” As a Coloradoan of a more libertarian persuasion puts it, “To be licensed by a bunch of bureaucrats for the most private and sacred act of marriage—that’s demeaning. It’s simply none of the government’s business whom I marry.”

“The Marriage Resolution” put into effect in San Francisco last year reads: “Because marriage is a *basic human right* and an *individual choice*, Resolved, the State should not interfere with same-gender couples who choose to marry and share fully and equally in the rights, responsibilities, and commitment of civil marriage.”

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Such challenges to the institution of marriage are nothing new. The Soviet Bolsheviks waged war on marriage and home for the first two decades of the Russian Revolution. A century and a quarter earlier, the Jacobins of the French Revolution also sought to tear down marriage laws resting on traditional principles. The proposed French Civil Code of 1801, for example, promised “freedom to marry” and easy divorce.

Ignoring both Christian thought and the evidence of all history, the radical authors of this measure argued that “what marriage itself is was previously unknown, and it is only in recent times that men have acquired precise ideas on marriage.” Building on the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, they urged that marriage be made “natural,” by which they meant animalistic, subject to the ebb and flow of the passions. Marriage, as such, should be easy to enter and easy to leave.

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Private Marriage?

Such is the idea of the freedom to marry. In this view, the government's role is simply to register those couples freely entering civil marriage, so they might qualify for the benefits and public blessing involved.

This appeal to freedom is false and misleading. It is no expression of true liberty but an effectively libertine invitation to social disorder. The "freedom to marry" presupposes that marriage is a private event, an arrangement by and for the couple that exists only to recognize their love and promise of devotion to each other and to bless their companionship. The one promised public benefit, in this otherwise privatized and minimalist view of marriage, is the sexual and romantic pair's reduced promiscuity.

And yet the very nature of the average wedding event belies such a narrow view of marriage. The gathering of kith and kin, of friends and neighbors, of former teachers and co-workers, the boisterous celebration, the feast spread out for them, all testify that the wedding is more than an end to promiscuity or the public recognition of a love affair. The wedding is a *communal event*, where various levels of community find their own renewal and hope. Focusing only on the desires of the couple ignores the communitarian nature of true marriage and the claims others have on each marriage.

In the traditional Christian wedding, the minister asks the congregation: "Does anyone here know a reason why this man and this woman should not be joined together? If so, speak now or forever hold your peace." This acknowledges the community's interest in the wedding, letting others assert themselves to prevent a marriage that threatens broader relationships. It also reminds the marrying couple that their vows are made not only between themselves, but with *concentric rings of others*, all of whom have a vested interest in the making and preservation of their marriage.

What are these concentric rings of others, of community? Why do they also have a claim on each true marriage? There are five: the communities of (1) potential parents with their unborn children; (2) kin or extended family; (3) the neighborhood; (4) the community of faith; and (5) the nation as community. They have their claims for reasons we shall examine.

Parents & Their Unborn

Louis de Bonald, a statesman and a founder of modern social science, rose in defense of traditional marriage and in particular of the community of the parents and their as yet unborn children. His extraordinary 1801 book, titled in English translation *On Divorce*, remains a most valuable resource in helping sort out issues regarding marriage. It defends traditional marriage through an appeal to reason and the natural order. Bonald's first task was to clarify "that marriage, in itself and at bottom, has always been a *civil, religious, and physical act* at once." He then set out

to rescue the label "natural" from the disciples of Rousseau. Marriage was, in fact, both divine and human, he said:

It derives from the constitution of our being, of our nature, and is a natural act: for the true nature of man and the real constitution of his being consist in natural relationships with his being's author [i.e., God], and in natural relationships, both moral and physical, with his fellows.

Marriage attracted attention of civil legislators because it was "the founding act of domestic society, whose interests should be guaranteed by civil authority." But this domestic society did not really rest on the needs or desires of the spouses: "The end of marriage is ...*not* the happiness of the spouses, if by happiness one understands an idyllic pleasure of the heart and senses."

Rather, "the end of marriage is the *reproduction* and, above all, the *conservation* of man, since this conservation cannot, in general, take place outside of marriage, or without marriage." By "conservation," Bonald meant the care, rearing, education, and protection of children, which he believed could occur successfully only in the married-couple home.

If pleasure or happiness were the goal of marriage, then the civil authority had no business being involved. Instead: "Political power *only* intervenes in the spouses' contract of union because it represents the unborn child, *which is the sole object of marriage*, and because it accepts the commitment made by the spouses in its presence and under its guarantee *to bring that child into being.*"

In effect, a marriage "is truly a contract between three persons, two of whom are present, one of whom (the child) is absent, but is represented by public power, guarantor of the commitment made by the two spouses to form a society."

This also explains why civil marriage was restricted to heterosexual pairs: "Political power cannot guarantee the stability of the domestic persons without knowing them; hence, the necessity of the civil act, which makes known the commitment of the man and woman, and of the birth certificate, which makes known the father, mother, and child." Bonald understood that public policy on marriage must be built on this *ideal* family structure, and not on some lowest common denominator "of the heart and the senses."

Bonald also explained why the marriage of a man and a woman who proved infertile or unable to create a child remained valid. Many of the French Revolution's philosophers worried about the size of the French population and called for easy divorce in cases of infertility so that new pairings of men and women might be tried to produce the needed children for war. Bonald replied: "Whatever importance may be attached to population by these great depopulators of the universe;

they would doubtless not dare to maintain that in human marriages one should, as on stud farms, proceed by trial.”

In short, government should not be in the business of fertility tests. Rather, it should understand the potential fertility of all male-female bonds (perhaps even modern ones via the petri dish) and the powerful positive effects on children of the complementarity of man and woman. The state then holds together the potential or actual parents for the sake of good “conservation” of the potential or actual child.¹

The Extended Family

The second community with a vested interest in the making and preservation of a marriage is the couple’s extended family. Each marriage is a covenant between the couple and their kin. In marriage, two families merge in a manner that perpetuates and invigorates both.

It is true that issues of property are not nearly as important in a wedding today as they were, say, 500 years ago. But the great chain of being, binding the living to ancestors and to posterity, remains as important as ever. Every wedding of young people forges a new link in that chain, for the family’s future still rests in their potential fertility. Even today, family members will travel great distances to attend the wedding of a cousin, nephew, or niece, still acknowledging the importance of both the promise and the event itself to their own identity and continuity.

As President Theodore Roosevelt once wrote, a people existed only as its “sons and daughters thought of life not as something concerned only with the selfish evanescence of the individual, but as a link in the great chain of creation and causation [forged by] the vital duties and the high happiness of family life.”² Indeed: “The great chain of creation and causation” over the generations appeared, link by link, through new marriage.

Marriage also serves as the natural solution to human society’s dependency problem. Just as marriage brings forth and cares for new life, it creates bonds and obligations that provide care for the very old, the weak, and the infirm. In a society with a culture of true marriage, kin networks care for the aged or disabled and ensure that no family member falls through the extended family’s safety net. It is the chain of fertility—child, parent, grandparent, blood kin—that brings to fruition these natural sentiments of intergenerational care.

Where a culture of marriage fails, these tasks pass to the public purse, to government, at huge expense. Indeed, a common goal of the contemporary women’s movement and modern socialism has been to replace the bonds of marriage and kin with a universal dependence on the welfare state.

The feminist analyst Carol Pateman argues that women’s growing dependence on the state is a logical corollary to feminist goals, and a stimulus to state entitlements as a

substitute for family-centered care. Frances Piven stresses the “large and important relationship” of women to the welfare state as direct employees of its program, noting that nearly three-quarters of government welfare jobs are held by women. Put another way: less true marriage means more government.³

The Neighborhood

Neighbors and friends also have a deep interest in nurturing and preserving true marriage. For some reason, this attribute of marriage seems best captured by fiction and poetry. The Kentucky poet Wendell Berry, in his *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems*, underscores how each couple on their wedding day renew their place on earth, their community:

Again, hope dreams itself
Awake. The year’s first lambs
Cry in the morning dark.
And, after all, we have
A garden in our minds.

We living know the worth
Of all the dead have done
Or hoped to do. We know
That hearts, against their doom
Must plight an ancient troth.

The two being married

...must begin again
The work divine and human
By which we live on earth.

In *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, Berry explains that the bride and groom “say their vows to the community as much as to one another, and the community gathers around them to hear and to wish them well, on their behalf and on its own.” In his wonderful short story, “A Jonquil for Mary Penn” (which appears in *Fidelity: Five Stories*), he uses a rural Kentucky setting to explain how a young marriage merges into a neighborhood:

On rises of ground or tucked into folds were the grey, paintless buildings of the farmsteads, connected to one another by lanes and paths. Now [Mary Penn] thought of herself as belonging there, not just because of her marriage to Elton but also because of the economy that the two of them had made around themselves *and* their neighbors. She had learned to think of herself as living and working at the center of a wonderful provisioning...the little commerce of giving and taking that spoked along paths *connecting her household to the others*.

And in a poem addressed to his wife, Tanya, on their thirty-first anniversary, the poet illuminates how their marriage encompasses “many others”—neighbors, friends, kin, and posterity:

Another year has returned us
to the day of our marriage
thirty-one years ago. Many times
we have known, and again forgot
in our cruel separateness,
that making touch that feelingly
persuades us what we are:
one another's and many others....

How strange to think of children
yet to come, into whose making we
will be made, who will not know us
even so little as we know
ourselves, who have already gone
so far beyond our own recall.

Marriage and its fruit, children, bind us to neighborhood,
space, and time, giving substance to our loyalties toward
“a place on earth.” Berry writes in *Entries: Poems*:

Come into the dance of the community, joined
in a circle, hand in hand, the dance of the eternal
love of women and men for one another
and of neighbors and friends for one another.

The Community of Faith

The community of faith is the fourth community with a vested interest in the making and preservation of a marriage. In Western Europe before the Reformation, governments were not usually engaged in the registration and regulation of marriage. This was left to the Church, centered in Rome. Church marriage courts handled disputes and considered cases for potential annulment. With marriage deemed a sacrament, grounded in divine mystery, divorce was an impossibility. In a civilization with only one recognized church, this structure worked reasonably well.

The Protestant movement of the sixteenth century shook the system to its core. On the one hand, the Reformers argued that there was no biblical warrant for considering marriage a Christian sacrament and—where they held sway—commonly abolished church marriage courts. They also reasoned that the Gospel text allowed for divorce in cases of adultery, with remarriage possible for the offended spouse.

On the other hand, they said that marriage was a *spiritual* bond superior to all other natural arrangements, including the celibacy practiced by the Catholic priesthood and religious. In Martin Luther's words, marriage was the highest of estates, “the real religious order on earth,” divinely ordained, “pleasing to God and precious in his sight,” and designed to fulfill God's ordinance to “be fruitful and multiply.” The Reformers called on rulers to govern marriage through biblical principles and to punish those who offended Christian morality.

And for three or four centuries, one could conclude that their system also worked reasonably well. Still, as one

Catholic writer, R. V. Young, has summarized, Protestantism enhanced marriage in social status and “as a means of personal companionship and individual, earthly happiness, but in desacramentalizing it, lowered its resistance to the pressures of the secular world.”⁴

Indeed, strains and disorders were evident by the middle decades of the nineteenth century. In Britain and America, for example, divorce had remained rare until then. A special act of Parliament, or of a state legislature in America, had been required for divorce, underscoring the *grave* and *rare* nature of the act. Yet a great loosening of divorce laws began around 1850, as the process was transferred to civil courts.

In the twentieth century, this disorder fed into the “no-fault” divorce revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite changes during the prior century, until then the notion of “fault-based” divorce had still underscored the public nature of marriage. Adultery, desertion, or cruelty had to be proved. This institution was still something larger than the will and emotions of the spouses; the public interest dictated that “fault” be determined before society would relinquish its claims on the couple's vow.

Indeed, divorce still had something of the quality of a crime against the social order. But as the American states embraced “no fault,” they unwittingly destroyed the last remnants of the Protestant scheme: that is, the expectation that rulers and judges would govern marriage by Christian principles, broadly defined.

Living Issue

All the same, the issue has not yet died. The “covenant marriage” movement of the last half-decade has sought, with some success, to restore to law elements of both the public interest in marital stability and Christian covenantal thinking. More directly, some individuals have begun to challenge the “no fault” divorce regime as a violation of religious liberty, or, put another way, as a violation of the implicit agreement reached between church and state back in the sixteenth century.

Specifically, in September 2000, I testified as an expert witness in Harris County, Texas, Family Court in the case of *Waite v. Waite*. Here, the wife, Margaret Waite, had filed unilaterally for divorce, claiming under the 1970 Texas “no fault” statute that she had “irreconcilable differences” with her husband that destroyed “the legitimate ends of the marital relationship.” However, her husband objected to the divorce, arguing that the 1970 law had abrogated the Christian principle of covenant marriage and so had violated *his* religious liberty.

Eighty-seven percent of persons marry in churches, he argued. In assuming authority to govern marriages, the state of Texas also took on the duty to protect the covenantal religious nature of the bond. “No fault” divorce violated that obligation.

Despite my own best efforts on the witness stand, the family court judge denied Mr. Waite's claims. He took the case to an appeals court, where he again lost. This time, though, the vote of the three-judge panel was 2 to 1. That is, one justice—Kem Thompson Frost—agreed with Mr. Waite's contention that the state had an obligation to protect the religious covenant in marriage and that "no fault" divorce violated the religious-liberty provision of the Texas Constitution. This was, in a way, a legal breakthrough. More should be heard from this argument in the future.

Some now argue that marriage should be completely privatized; that government should get out of the matrimony business and return the process to religion. This could work if the United States had one church—as in medieval Europe—and granted that church the police powers needed to enforce its rulings in the inevitable disputes.

"Privatization" could also work if the government agreed to enforce the disparate marital rules of each religious faith on its members: "indissoluble marriage" for Roman Catholics; up to "four wives" for Muslims; temple marriages for all eternity for Mormons; divorce only for the victims of adultery for Lutherans (Martin Luther recommended executing the former spouse who had committed the adultery); and creative divorce for Unitarians. Or "privatization" could work if marriage was stripped of all legal, economic and social status, existing merely as a symbolic act of friendship.

But the first two possibilities are, quite frankly, impossible in the current American context. And the third possibility would undo the very essence of marriage, making the whole exercise moot. This "privatization" idea, I believe, can safely be cast aside.

The Nation as Community

The nation also has a claim on the marital pair. It is the fifth community with a vested interest in the making and preservation of a marriage. Simply put, the future of every people comes through the cradles found in married-couple homes. The case of the European peoples is instructive here, where a dramatic decline in fertility since 1970 has been accompanied by—even led by—a fall in the marriage rate. Consider, for example, the case of Ireland, where a 43-percent decline in the "total first marriage rate" brought on a 50-percent decline in fertility; or look to Spain, where a 42-percent fall in the marriage rate preceded a 59-percent decline in fertility.

These numbers suggest that as traditional marriage fades, there will be a paucity of children and a diminished nation. The retreat from true marriage and the retreat from children go together. Also, if the children that are born appear outside of traditional marriage, their prospects for productive lives sharply diminish, just as the odds that they will become public charges—as welfare recipients or as prisoners—grow. These facts of household life are now

indisputable, and they give support to a preferential option for traditional marriage by the nation-state, be it evidenced through marriage-sensitive tax provisions, welfare policy, or simple marriage law.

This was, of course, once understood in this land. As the US Supreme Court put the matter back in 1888, in its famed *Maynard* decision, marriage is "something more than a mere contract. It is an institution, in the maintenance of which in its purity the public is deeply interested, for it is the foundation of society." Eighty-four years later, though, the Court grew strangely blind to this deep national interest, arguing instead in *Eisenstadt v. Baird* that "the marital couple is not an independent entity with a heart and mind of its own, but an association of two individuals, each with a separate intellectual and emotional make-up."

This view proved consistent, too, with the logic of no-fault divorce, which also denied the public's interest in wedlock. It seems useful to note here that "no fault" divorce is actually neither a new idea, nor some inevitable result of social evolution or modernity. Rather, it seems to be a standing temptation for any society or era. For men, at least, "no fault" was the rule in Old Testament times.

Divorce's Costs

Indeed, it is through an analysis of divorce that we can better understand the public nature of marriage. After all, divorce is merely the backside of marriage. Legally, the marital covenant is only as strong as the provisions that govern an exit from its terms. It is possible to calculate, using hard numbers, the nation's profound interest in marriage if we use the negative calculus of divorce.

To begin with, we know that one measurable cost of "no fault" divorce has been more divorce. Advocates of this change during the 1960s and 1970s always claimed that their goal was simply to remove acrimony from the divorce process, for the good of all concerned. Divorce rates were already climbing, and in the words of one prominent sociologist, "the adoption of no-fault divorce was a late and largely redundant step in the lowering of moral, social, and legal barriers to divorce."

However, more careful research analyzing divorce trends in 34 states for the 10 years before and after the introduction of "no fault," found that this legal innovation "contributed directly to more divorce or sooner divorces than would have happened otherwise." The researchers even calculated that "57,000 extra divorces" occur each year in the United States due directly to the no-fault revolution.⁵

Second, we can also count the effects of divorce on children, Bonald's "third party" in the marriage, whom the states no longer really protect. Specifically:

- The children of divorce have significantly more health problems than children in intact homes.⁶

- The children of divorce have much higher incidences of depression, fear of abandonment, and delinquency.⁷
- The children of divorce are more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to graduate from college than are children in intact homes, even when compared to families losing a father through death.⁸
- And the children of divorce are more likely to engage in pre-marital sex at a young age, to become parents before marriage, and to need psychological help.⁹

Of course, the costs imposed by divorce on young lives can never adequately be added up. Who can put a value on the diminished hopes of even one child's life?

But it turns out that we can put a dollar figure on the costs of divorce that accrue to the public at large. David Schramm, a family economist at Utah State University, shows in a 2003 study that divorce imposes a heavy financial burden on all taxpayers. Direct costs to the state include increased Medicaid expense, child support enforcement, funds for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, and public housing assistance. Indirect costs include increased incarceration in prisons, more elderly persons without spousal support, and greater illegal drug use.

Using careful (and probably low) assumptions, Schramm calculates that "the 'average' divorce costs state and federal governments \$30,000." In a given year, the total is \$33.3 billion for the nation as a whole, or \$312 for each American household. In crude, materialistic terms, this public cost of divorce underscores the profound social interest in marriage.¹⁰

Communal Marriage

In sum, marriage is a social and communal, rather than a private, event. Alongside the marital couple, it engages at least five levels of community: the unborn or potential children; extended family or kin; the neighborhood; the religious communion; and the nation. This civil institution exists for the propagation of children and for their "conservation" through nurture, education and protection.

Only the union of man and woman can properly fulfill both of these tasks. Public policy toward marriage must assume and build on this ideal structure, rather than on some lowest common denominator of the passions. All five levels of community have a deep and compelling interest in the formation and preservation of true marriages. The wise government lifts up obstacles and checks on divorce, for its real costs will fall on vulnerable children and the community at large.

So-called same-sex marriages trivialize the true institution, for these unions are unable to meet the two ends of marriage: the *propagation* and *conservation* of children. Concerning propagation, these pairings are sterile by definition. When they do claim children, it is usually through either the trauma of divorce or the unnatural and sometimes dangerous manipulation of the laboratory. Moreover, these pairings cannot effect proper *conservation* of children, for again by definition they exclude either man or woman, so denying the complementarity of the sexes on which the good, nurturing home rests.

And so, on that day when, perhaps, an Episcopalian priest in a Massachusetts church intones, "If anyone present knows a reason why this man and man should not be joined together, speak now or forever hold your peace," the proper response is: "I do."

Notes

1. *On Divorce*, ed. By Nicholas Davidson (Transaction, 1992), pp. 36-37, 63-64, 175.
2. Theodore Roosevelt, *The Words of Theodore Roosevelt: Memorial Edition*, vol. XXI (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 263.
3. Carol Pateman in *Democracy in the Welfare State* (Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 231-260; and Frances Fox Piven in *Women, the State and Welfare* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 251-264.
4. In *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study* (Herder & Herder, 2001), p. 274.
5. Joseph Lee Rodgers, et al., "The Effect of No-Fault Legislation on Divorce," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 59 (1997), pp. 1026-1030.
6. Jane Mauldon, "The Effect of Marital Disruption on Children's Health," *Demography* 27 (August 1990), pp. 431-446.
7. Judith Wallerstein and Joan B. Kelly, *Surviving the Breakup* (Basic Books, 1996), pp. 46-50, 211; and Ronald L. Simons, et al., "Explaining the Higher Incidence of Adjustment Problems Among Children of Divorce Compared with Those in Two-Parent Families," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (Nov. 1999), pp. 1020-1033.
8. Timothy J. Biblarz and Greg Gottainer, "Family Structure and Children's Success," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62 (May 2000), pp. 533-548.
9. K. E. Kiesnan and J. Habcraft, "Parental Divorce During Childhood," *Population Studies* 51 (1997), pp. 41-55; and Teresa M. Cooney and Jane Kurz, "Mental Health Outcomes Following Recent Parental Divorce," *Journal of Family Issues* 17 (July 1996), pp. 495-513.
10. David Schramm, "What Could Divorce Be Costing Your State?" June 25, 2003, Publication in Process, Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development, Utah State University at Logan.

A Sermon: The Holy Bond of Marriage

Preached by John T. Mabray

Scripture Text: Genesis 2:18-25

This week¹ the United States Senate is scheduled to vote on an amendment known as the Federal Marriage Amendment, which, if passed and ratified, would legally define marriage in the United States as the union of one man and one woman. As citizens of the United States of America, we have the right to communicate our individual convictions to our elected representatives on such issues. The fact that, in God's providence, we Christians in the United States have the Constitutional right to participate in the political process of civil government makes it all the more incumbent upon us to do so according to the dictates of individual conscience under Scripture. At the same time, we must always realize that we, evangelical Christians, are facing not merely political opposition in this nation but spiritual opposition which ultimately will not be overcome by political means but only through the power of the gospel. We must be biblically realistic and spiritually wise about the real state of affairs in our culture today. It's time to wake up, spiritually.

It is, at least for me, a little bit disorienting to stop and think about the fact that the United States Senate is prepared to debate and to decide how marriage will be legally defined in this nation. It seems incredible, on the one hand, and soberingly sad on the other. But, remember, whatever happens with the Federal Marriage Amendment, *pass* or *fail*, we and our children are now living, and will live, in a culture of sexual confusion, sexual anarchy, sexual immorality, and political hostility to the Law of God. Imagine—no, don't imagine; get a grip! —the children of this congregation are growing up in a nation in which homosexual behavior is on the fast-track to "normal." Our children are growing up in a society right on the verge of saying that there is no qualitative difference between homosexual union and heterosexual union. Our children are growing up in a society which is right on the verge of saying that it makes no difference, and it is no big deal, whether a child grows up with a mother and a father, two mothers, or two fathers.

That ought to be a wake-up call for us all. We'd better have some good answers for our covenant children, because they're already asking some hard questions. What do we really believe about what it means to be human,

created in the image of God, male and female? What do we really believe about sexuality, and why? What will we teach our children? More importantly, what will we model for them? What does it mean to be "a family"? What is marriage, and why is it so important? And how shall we now live—really live—in a way that shows what we believe and why?

Yes, it is true that we have big problems, big moral and spiritual and societal problems, in America today. But before we get all worked-up, and hot under the collar, and before we start blaming "them," (whoever *they* are—the liberals, secularists, and gay activists), we need to take a deep breath. The political power of homosexual activism is an expression of God's judgment upon this nation due to the unfaithfulness of His Church in this nation. We need to look at ourselves and repent of our own sins. Repentance is not a matter of condemning other people's sins; repentance is a matter of condemning and putting to death our own sins, and then living in a new and different way by the power of the Holy Spirit in obedience to Jesus Christ, the Lord of all. And repentance means much more than just a mumbling acknowledgement that we are not perfect. Repentance means more than simply regret for what we have done in the past. Repentance, really, means "*turning around*," changing direction, that is, changing behavior; putting a *stop* to something, and starting to do something *new*. Repentance means asking and answering the question, "How should we *now* live?"

So before we go throwing stones in the "culture war," we need to take a look at ourselves, and repent of our own sins, and change our behavior with regard to our own marriages, our family life, our corporate life as the church, and our personal lives. Because if our lives aren't any different from the world, if the quality of our marriages and the quality of our family life isn't any different from that of the pagan society around us, our children will see right through our hypocrisies, plain as day. And that is exactly what the homosexual community is banking on; that the conservative evangelical Christian community can't walk its talk.

Are you willing to repent, today, of the sin of neglect of time and attention and nurture and care and discipline devoted to your marriage and family? Are you willing to stop the destructive behaviors in your marriage and family relationships: behaviors of laziness, apathy, selfishness, harshness, sarcasm, fault-finding, blaming, abdication of responsibilities, overbearing control or passive neglect and

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abuse? Are you willing to repent of the sin of chasing trivialities, busy-ness, endless distractions, and spend time building a family that will last for generations? Husbands, are you willing to follow Jesus Christ and lay down your life for your wife, in self-sacrificial love? Wives, are you willing to honor God's ordering of the marriage covenant, and respect your husbands? Fathers (this applies also to mothers, but it applies especially to fathers in relation to the issue of homosexuality): fathers, do you understand how much your little boys need you—your infant sons (*you'd better be changing their diapers!*), your toddlers, your little grade-school boys? They need to *feel* you: your hugs, your kisses on their lips, your strength, and your tenderness. They need to smell your skin. They need to gaze in wonder at their own reflection in your adoring eyes. They need to feel your love. They don't need your money and the toys you can buy for them. They don't need another video game; they need you. And your daughters need you too, and your daughters need to feel that your presence, your power, and your covenant headship is a presence and power and headship of love and devotion and tenderness and humble self-sacrifice. Are you willing to be there for them before it's too late? Men of the Church of Jesus Christ: are we ready to repent, change, and walk the talk? If not, the Federal Marriage Amendment won't help us at all. So, let's start walking.

We learn from the Scriptures that the marriage of man and woman is at the very foundation of the Creator's purpose for this world. Genesis 2 tells us of the marvelous creation of the woman, and of the first wedding. But what we learn first and foremost from the Scriptures is that marriage is God's idea; or, it is better to say, marriage was "instituted by God," "ordained by God." The point is that marriage is not merely a human social construct, a human idea, a human arrangement to be defined or re-defined as we like.

It is clear from Genesis 1 and 2, and it is clear from Jesus' teachings, that the Divine intention and the Divine definition of marriage is the lifelong union of one man and one woman. Therefore the redefinition of marriage to include "homosexual marriage" is an attempt to defy divine *fiat*, an attempt to redefine what only the Creator has the authority to define. This is not the first time that this has happened in our nation. There was a time when courts declared people of African descent to be less than fully human, in defiance of the Creator. Today, an unborn child does not enjoy the "unalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The legality of abortion defies the Creator. So, likewise, the very idea of "homosexual marriage" is itself another expression of fallen humanity's rebellion against and defiance of the Creator, an attempt to usurp the heavenly throne—to make marriage "me" centered instead of God-centered. But, of course, "me-centeredness" in marriage, instead of God-centeredness, is nothing new, even among professing Christians. But "me-centeredness" in marriage is always a prescription for a miserable marriage or the end of a marriage.

One of the first points which I make in pre-marital counseling is that marriage—the marriage of the bride and groom to-be—is first of all for the glory of God. Your marriage is not just about "you," and your individual happiness or your happiness together as a couple. Your marriage is about God; it is rooted in His plan and His purpose for His glory. So, to the degree that your marriage is "about you," it is "about you" only in terms of living together, working together, growing together in a way that brings praise and honor and glory to the Creator who brought you together.

Although Genesis 2 does give us the historic account of the creation of Adam and Eve, it is filled also with spiritual truth which teaches us about the true meaning of marriage. Although the LORD God had personally formed the man out of the dust of the earth, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and although the LORD had placed the man in the garden of Eden and given him good work to do, and although the world was a good place filled with good things, nevertheless, the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone."

Now, why was it "not good that the man should be alone?" Do you think that it was just for Adam's sake that God said that? No. It's much deeper than that. Adam was created in the image of God. But God does not exist alone. God is not a lonely, solitary Being. From all eternity, God has existed in a relationship of mutual love, a communion of love, between the Father and the Son. And the love between the Father and the Son is a love so real, that it has its existence as a living, divine Person, the Holy Spirit. And so we sang this morning: "God in three Persons, blessed Trinity—a *tri-unity*, a *fellowship of divine love*. Don't worry if this blows your mind: it ought to. No one *really* understands it. But you can understand this: God has revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God exists as a fellowship of love within Himself. God is, by His own divine nature, a Being of relational love, *interpersonal love*. He is not a lonely, isolated, solitary Being. Therefore, human beings were created in His image to reflect this character of relational love and communion. The union of husband and wife in body, soul and spirit is intended by God to reflect the union of love within God's own divine nature.

Of course, in God's providence, some people are called to lifelong singleness. That does *not* mean that they do not reflect the image of God or that they are somehow spiritually inferior; of course not. Who was it that most perfectly reflected the image and glory of God? (*Was He married?*) So, marriage itself is not essential in terms of living a life of purpose to the glory of God, or in terms of experiencing the loving fellowship of God. But marriage was instituted for humanity in general so that, in the holy bond of marriage, men and women might give holy expression and visible illustration to the invisible reality of the union of love which exists in the fellowship of divine love within the Trinity.

I realize that that's pretty heavy stuff, but grasp as much of it as you can. It was not good for the man to be alone, because God intended that a man and a woman live in a union of love which reflects the union of love in the fellowship of the Trinity.

The verses which follow may well contain some divine humor, but they are intended to teach us something very serious. God brought the animals to Adam. You can imagine it: dog, horse, giraffe, cat, hippopotamus. "But for Adam, there was not found a helper fit for him." (There is a point of moral application there, upon which I will comment on further).

Adam needed a "helper," a companion suitable for him. Adam needed a helper-companion who would *complement* him. This implies a creature—listen carefully—a creature *different* from him. But it also implies a creature like him: a creature that is different from him, but also like him. God makes the point by first of all bringing to Adam the creatures that are completely *different* from him, not sharing his likeness. They are not suitable for Adam. "So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman...." (Genesis 2:21-22).

Note carefully that God did not make Adam another creature exactly like him. He did not make another male human. And here's the reason why: ***absolute sameness cannot be joined in oneness, without violating the very nature of the thing itself.*** This principle is built into the reality of creation, because it reflects the reality of the Trinity: the Father and the Son and the Spirit are "one," but they are not the "same." At the level of human experience, for example: You may have tried to hold two magnets together, but learned that you can do so only by over-riding the natural law. And, even though most of you do most things with your right hand, isn't it a good thing that you don't have two right hands? If you had two right hands, exactly the same, you could not do this...(putting hands together in clasped union).

And so, God made a creature essentially like Adam, of his substance, equal in terms of being created in the image of God, yet different from Adam...but different not for the sake of distance from Adam, but for the sake of oneness with Adam, for the sake of union with Adam—a union which, by definition of the Creator's design, Adam could not have with another male: a union of love which would bring forth *life*. This is the human reflection of that divine, eternal, transcendent communion of love between the Father and the Son in the bond of the Holy Spirit which brings forth...*life*.

And so Adam exclaimed, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man."

Listen to Calvin's commentary on this passage:

Adam was taught to recognize himself in his wife, as in a mirror; and Eve, in her turn, to submit herself willingly to her husband, as being taken out of him. ...something was taken from Adam, in order that he might embrace, with greater benevolence, a part of himself. He lost, therefore, one of his ribs; but instead of it, a far richer reward was granted him, since he obtained a faithful associate of life; he now saw himself, who had before been imperfect, rendered complete in his wife.²

And really, this is how every husband ought to view his wife—as a part of himself, given back to him by the hand of God the Creator, that we might cherish our wives and love our wives and care for our wives as we do our own bodies. This is precisely what the Holy Spirit teaches us through the Apostle Paul, in his Letter to the Ephesians, chapter five.

Also, concerning the creation of Eve out of Adam's rib, as teaching us spiritual truths applicable to marriage today, consider this pastoral counsel from Matthew Henry:

...the woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.³

Isn't this truly a beautiful portrait of marriage as intended by the Creator? But marriage, as we said earlier, is about more than the couple; ultimately, marriage is about the glory of God, and especially about the glory of God as revealed in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ. Ephesians 5 teaches us that Christian marriage is to be a living illustration of the union between Christ and His bride, the Church. And even this—Christ's love for the Church—can be seen in Genesis, chapter two. Here, in Genesis chapter two, we can see, foreshadowed and prefigured, Jesus Christ upon the cross! Matthew Henry comments:

Adam was a figure [symbol] of him that was to come [Christ, the second Adam]; for out of the side of Christ, the second Adam, his spouse the church was formed, when he slept the sleep, the deep sleep, of death upon the cross, in order to which his side was opened, and there came out blood and water, blood to purchase his church and water to purify it to himself.⁴

Think of that! Your marriage is a spiritual reality, a spiritual reality which is to be a metaphor, a living symbol—a living, walking, talking illustration—of the love and faithfulness which binds Christ and the Church. Marriage is a holy bond because it is instituted and ordained by the Holy Trinity, the infinite and eternal Creator, who has taken upon Himself human flesh and blood to enter into a ***covenant*** of redeeming love and faithfulness with us through His Son, Jesus Christ, who loved His bride, the Church, and gave Himself up for her. This is what your marriage is all about! Husbands and wives, walk in love

with one another; have fellowship with one another in faithfulness; show forgiveness and mercy to one another with tenderness; live and work and worship together with thanksgiving and joy so that your marriage—*your marriage!*—might proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world! Amen.

1. This sermon was preached in July 11, 2004.
2. John Calvin, *Commentary On Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981, Vol.1), pp.132-133.
3. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, Vol. I of 6), p.20.
4. Ibid.

A Sermon: A Christian Vision of Marriage

Preached by Lee Wyatt

Scripture Texts: Genesis 2:18-25; Matthew 28:16-20

Marriage is in trouble in our culture! Big trouble! And I'm not referring to the high incidence of divorce, nor the number of people who stay married though they are radically unhappy. Nor do I mean the increasing number of people cohabiting outside of marriage or the prevalence of pre- and extra-marital sex. These are merely symptoms of a deeper problem, one that I dare say troubles every marriage, former or present, represented in this sanctuary today.

None of us should feel too good about our marriages! No matter how solid they seem and may in fact be. No, none of us should feel too good about our marriages, even the best of them. And it's the church's fault! And by "church" I mean the kind of Christianity most of us have experienced most of our lives, regardless of the particular denominational label.

It's the church's fault! I mean that quite literally. Though I do not intend to relieve any of us from our rightful responsibilities to spouse and family, I do mean that few if any of us ever had a chance to have a genuinely Christian marriage! And that, friends, is indeed the church's fault. And it impacts more than just the married folk among us. It touches everyone—single, widowed, separated, divorced, remarried, or married. Most of what goes on in marriage is simply an intensified form of the relationship we are all called to as brothers and sisters in the church.

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Our failures in understanding marriage then, will be mirrored in our teaching about other relationships as well.

The answer to why the church is at fault in this matter is simple but not straightforward. Let me begin with an episode from a TV series a few years ago, "Midnight Caller." Gary Cole starred as Jack Killian, a cutting edge late night radio talk show host. A man convicted of murder is about to be executed and Jack Killian gets permission to spend the day of his execution with him. Over his years in prison this convict has come to terms with what he did, with his life, and with his fate. He is not anxious or distressed as the hours roll on and midnight draws nigh. He bids his lawyers cease their eleventh-hour efforts to gain him a stay of execution.

Killian, however, is thoroughly nonplussed by all this. His consternation and distress in the face of this convict's calm is palpable. He sweats profusely, paces endlessly, and never stops trying to penetrate what he believes is just a facade of peacefulness. It is beyond his capacity to imagine that someone could go to their death with such resolution and composure.

Finally, as they walk together down the hall to the room with the electric chair, Killian blurts out "How can you do it? How can you go without a fight?" The convict turns, looks Jack in the eye, and says, "You've gotta know who you are, Jack. You've gotta know who you are."

"You've gotta know who you are." That's the simple answer to why marriage is in such big trouble in our time. We, as Christians, no longer know who we are; hence, we no longer know what marriage is or the skills necessary for a faithful marriage. That simple answer, however, is not a straightforward one. We no longer know who we are but

we don't know that we no longer know who we are! We have bought into a variety of cultural myths about marriage and have blessed them as Christian in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We've married people into these myths for generations, and now, when marriages built on them fall like dominos, we are as perplexed and discombobulated as any one. All we can do is confess our fault and seek to learn anew who we really are as the community of faith gathered around one crucified and risen Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. That's what we'll try to do this morning as preparation for considering today's texts.

A little boy, on his first day of Sunday School, was quite taken with the biblical story of the creation of woman. The idea that God had taken out one of Adam's ribs and made it into Eve, his wife, fascinated the lad. That afternoon the little guy was out running races with his friends. He came puffing into the kitchen and collapsed into a chair. He grabbed his side and exclaimed, "Mommy, I've got a big pain. I think I'm going to have a wife!" In all candor, that's not terribly far from the level of sophistication of our culture's view of love and marriage.

For generations the church has bought into our culture's myths about marriage thus forfeiting its own identity as the people of God. Four myths in particular stand out.

Myth one: love's all you need. Our culture banks everything on love, doesn't it? Our wedding ceremony is supposed to be a service of worship to God, yet it seldom rises above the level of a celebration of two people's love for each other. So marriage is made to rest on our love. And when that love falters or fails, as it all too regularly does in our time, the marriage folds up and disappears. And that's the way it will be as long as we base marriage on love.

The truth, however, is that love is not enough. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a letter on the occasion of his niece's wedding, tells why:

God has sealed your "I will" with his own. He has crowned your assent with his own. In other words, God creates out of your love something that did not exist before—the holy estate of marriage.

Your love is your own private possession; marriage is more than a private affair; it is an estate, an office. As the crown makes the king, and not just his determination to rule, so marriage and not just your love for each other makes you husband and wife.... As God is infinitely higher than humans, so the sanctity, the privilege and the promise of marriage are higher than the sanctity, the privilege and the promise of love. It is not your love which sustains the marriage, but from now on marriage sustains your love.

Unless and until our weddings are celebrations of God's holy presence in the midst of our love, they remain simply celebrations of human love but not that of marriage,

Christianly understood, and thus we do those we marry a grave disservice.

Myth two: there's that special person out there for me and I must find him or her. This is romantic nonsense, friends. That are lots of people we can love, share life, raise children with, and with whom we can grow old and gray together. The search for "that special person" is doomed and fraught with danger.

The truth, from a Christian perspective, is almost the opposite. Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches at Duke Divinity School has what he calls "Hauerwas' Law," which is: you always marry the wrong person! I'll use his "Law" even though I use it a little differently than he does. It cuts in two directions. First, it means that whoever we marry, we always marry our ideal mate in them. No matter how well or long we know them before marriage, in the act of committing ourselves to another person "till death do us part," we can't help but commit to our image of the ideal mate. To make such a commitment to the real person across the aisle from us would be too daunting and scary!

The second thrust of this "Law" moves in the other direction. The person we know and marry today is not the person we will be married to in five months, five years, or five decades. We can't know how and how much they will change from what they are on our wedding day. What we see is not what we're going to get. So...we always marry the wrong person!

It's only God's grace embodied in our commitment to the disciplines and accountability of growth within the Body of Christ, which keeps together people who thus "marry the wrong person." What binds brothers and sisters together in that body is the same grace that alone binds together husband and wife. Bonhoeffer helpfully explains,

Live together in forgiveness, for without it no human fellowship, least of all a marriage, can survive. Don't insist on your rights, don't blame each other, don't judge or condemn each other, don't find fault with each other, but take one another as you are, and forgive each other every day from the bottom of your hearts.

Myth three: marriage will cure our loneliness. As single folks we get lonely, especially in the impersonal, fast-paced, highly-stressed world of the late twentieth century. Our culture, and the church right along with it, encourages marriage as the balm for this inner ache. In a family established by marriage, we are told, we will discover companionship, understanding, creativity, and care.

Now it is surely right and important for us to seek and find companionship, understanding, creativity, and care. The problem is pointing everyone to marriage as the place where such things can be found. That would seem to make marriage necessary for human fulfillment and create an impetus to marry that can (and does) push many into ill-advised marriages.

The pathetic irony here lies in the church's adopting such a viewpoint. The church is the family of God. Life in the church is where we most readily and regularly share companionship, understanding, creativity, and care with one another. In fact, such "family" experience would seem to be a necessary prerequisite for any meaningful determination about whether and whom to marry. If we seek to marry to get what we haven't gotten (even in the church), we are in a terribly vulnerable position. Marriage by itself will not cure our loneliness. Our demand and expectation that it do so, puts a cruel and unendurable strain on it. That so many in the church feel they have to marry to find intimacy and family is but another index of how we have failed one another.

Myth four: marriage is a cocoon of happiness. We know that's often not true, but we persist in believing it ought to be. Pastors and church leaders tirelessly tell us it can be. Madison Avenue tells us it will be—if we just buy their products.

Lewis Smedes wisely points us to sanity here:

Romantic lotus-eaters may tell you marriage was designed to be a pleasure-dome for erotic spirits to frolic in self-fulfilling relations. But they play you false. Your marriage vow was a promise to suffer. Yes, to suffer; I will not take it back. You promised to suffer, only to suffer with, however. You get your share of suffering from, willy-nilly, thrown at you. You promised to suffer with. It made sense, because the person you married was likely to get hurt along the route, sooner or later, more or less, but hurt he or she was bound to get. And you promised to hurt with your spouse. A marriage is a life of shared pain.

(Smedes clearly differentiates suffering *with* our mate from suffering *from* our mate and highlights the former, not the latter, as the kind of suffering we sign-on for in marriage.)

I want to go a step further even than Smedes and suggest a biblical counter-image to our cultural image of a cocoon of happiness. And it is this; marriage is an outpost of mission. Clearly, married folk stand just as much under the mandate of the so-called Great Commission (which you heard read earlier), as do non-married Christians. God's dream to reclaim, renew, and restore the creation is just as much a priority for the former as the latter. All of the risks and responsibilities of discipleship fall on married couples and their children too. There are no exemptions from the call to take up our cross, no waivers from the call to be missionaries in neo-pagan North America. We cannot plead tending to spouse or family as justification for evading God's call to serve and even to suffer!

Well, if I have not irritated you up till now, I suspect I just did. For nowhere is the church's failure in this regard more egregious than its tendency to see marriage and family as ends in themselves—something which everything else, even the service and worship of God, is subordinate to. In

biblical language, anything to which the service and worship of God is subordinated to is an...you guessed it, an idol! And I fear that much of the current rhetoric about "family values" steers very close to such idolatry. There are no "family values" other than those laid out in the Beatitudes we spent a couple months exploring earlier this year. Remember them: poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, a passion for righteousness, being merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and reviled and persecuted?

Are those the "family values" married couples here intentionally focus on? I doubt it. And we have no reason to! Our churches have not inculcated in us over the years an awareness that such should be our "family values." Instead, we've been fed on illegitimately baptized attitudes like success, pride, happiness, positivity, being liked and avoiding conflict. And we raise our families that way. The measure of your surprise or irritation at what I have just suggested is, perhaps, the most profound measure of the church's failure toward its couples and families.

What then is "a Christian vision for marriage?" Drawing on the four myths of marriage considered today, along with the counter proposals I put against them, we can sketch the following outline:

1. Marriage is triangular. It involves you, your mate and the Triune God. It is the ministry and mission of this God that establishes and nurtures the love that binds you to your mate. Without a focal, intentional awareness of God's holy presence in the midst of our marriages, we will fail whether we stay together or not.

2. There is no one special person for you waiting to be found. You and your mate (whoever that may be) are special people to God though, chosen people, in fact. God will lavish on you the grace of forgiveness, which each of you will provide the other ample opportunity to practice.

Through such experience you will be bound together into a fuller and richer (though not necessarily easier!) experience of your triangular marriage.

3. The indispensable training ground or preparation for marriage is the church. Only here, in the family of God, will we find the satisfaction of those urgent needs for companionship, understanding, creativity, and care such that those needs will cease to be forces driving us to marry simply for the sake of meeting them.

4. Our marriages serve as mission outposts for the kingdom of God. As couples and families we strive to nurture ourselves on God's "family values" (the Beatitudes) and have our lives shaped by that "mission" prayer Jesus taught his people to pray, which we prayed together earlier in the service—the Lord's Prayer.

5. An important corollary to all this is the answer as Christians we give to the question, "Who should I marry?" The answer we must give is this: beyond physical attraction, beyond shared interests and horizons, beyond

all the basic compatibilities we look for, the only necessary and sufficient reason to marry someone is that you can be a better disciple living with them than without them!

This is a vision, to be sure. As I have detailed, it is far from the reality any of us here have known. Yet for the sake of our health as God's family, for the sake of those

we know and love who will marry here, and above all, for the love of our Triune God, let us make this vision our own. Let us wrestle with it as Jacob did the angel at Peniel, refusing to let go unless it blesses us (Genesis 32) and helps us to know again who we are and the difference that makes.

Thanks be to God for this Word to us today. Amen.

A Sermon: Clothe Yourselves with Love

Preached by Ralph Hawkins

Preached for a marriage enacted during Lord's Day worship, January 20, 2002

Scripture reading Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

The truth of the matter is this: we need more **courageous Christian marriages**.

Perhaps these words are worth unpacking a bit.

Marriage...

...a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman, to live together and to make a home, to support one another through the trials and triumphs of life, to tend to one

another in every situation and in every need, and to promise that each will seek the good of the other.

At a minimum, we can say that it is a legal civil contract between a couple. Better still, it is a lifelong commitment that is bigger and more substantial than either of two individuals would be on their own. Even more, it is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family.

Christian marriage...

...still a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman, but now understood from the eyes of biblical faith.

Regardless of our age or even if we are married, *everyone* who is baptized is called to live a life of faithfulness before God: loving God and loving neighbor. We call this *discipleship*.

But in Christian *marriage*, two people are called to live this life of faith *together*. They now have each other to walk with in this journey we are *all* called to make: to worship, to pray, to love, to serve, to do justice, to make peace, to nurture faith in children and in others. These callings are possible because God makes them possible.

Christian marriage affirms God's old, old observation, first made in Genesis. God turns to Adam—which in Hebrew means *human*—and says, "it is not good for you to be alone." And God creates a corresponding partner.

As such, we have the audacity to confess that it is indeed possible for two people to relate to one another on such an intimate level—heart, mind, emotions, body, and faith—

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that we can come to speak of those two people as becoming *one flesh*. And this becoming is only possible within the strength, security, convictions, confines, and commitments of the marriage vow made in the presence of God.

A *Christian* marriage stands before Jesus and says, “Use us together to build up your kingdom and better your world, and along the way use our marriage to make us the people you have called us to be. Sanctify us through each other and in the process we will root ourselves in a community of baptized faith, lest we forget that these vows we have taken are larger than our individual selves, they are bigger than we are. And so we need Scripture, congregation, sacrament, prayer, worship, and faithful brothers and sisters in order to fulfill this heavenly calling.”

That, or something very much like that, is what we mean by *Christian* marriage.

But even still, what we need more of; what the world needs most to have modeled; what can and must take place lest we all slide further into the murky mess that is male-female relations these days; what the Lord Jesus calls us to are more **courageous Christian marriages**.

We need couples who have the courage to be active, responsible, brave participants in what is surely the most daunting, challenging, mysterious, and wonderful relationships ever conceived by God. So wonderful and mysterious is it that the New Testament sees fit to describe the relationship between Christ and his people, the gathered church, as a marriage: Jesus the groom, we the bride.

It takes great *courage* to live into this kind of calling. Marriage is not for wimps. And we all need all the courage we can find.

We need couples who recognize the great gravity and enormous significance of the vows we take in marriage. Listen closely to what will be said here in just a few minutes: *I vow to be faithful through whatever may come. Till death do us part.*

We need couples who understand that the working out of a good marriage, a faithful marriage, is a lifelong journey. Their sights are set on the big picture. They understand that it is something you work at, not at all automatic, but a thing you practice every day.

We need couples who are wise enough to understand that romance, sexual intimacy, warm affection, heartfelt passion, etc. are the *fruits*, not the foundation for a good marriage. Everyone hungers for these things these days. And as well they should: they are good and blessed things, gifts from God. But you cannot put the romantic cart before the marital horse.

We need couples who are brave enough to remember that the question is not *whether* you will disagree, fight, argue, or struggle. That much is certain. The only *real* question in a courageous marriage is *how* you will do these things; *how* you will disagree, fight, argue, or struggle. For the Christian, these things can be done with love, kindness, forgiveness, and patience. Not *if*, but *how*.

We need couples who are not afraid to be honest with each other, with themselves, with God, and even with those around them about their struggles, their imperfections, and especially their need for each other. Let us stop trying to pretend that we are totally self-sufficient people. Hear this: self-sufficiency is idolatry of the highest order. We are built to need each other. The need is the gift, as long as that need is fulfilled in good and right ways. Outside of those few who are called to a life of singleness, for most of us *marriage* will be the primary way we are kept from “being alone.”

We need couples who are courageous enough to realize that in order to make a lasting marriage, a man and a woman have to be willing to dig deep into their own lives, to be honest about what they find there, good and bad, and to take responsibility for their own actions and habits. Then, and only then, will a marriage—a “two becoming one”—take place. How much time do we spend trying to work on our spouse? Perhaps instead we should let our marriages work on us.

We need couples who are sober enough to realize that this world is no longer a friend to faithful marriages, if it ever really was. The prevailing culture no longer applauds what we are about here this morning, at least not in the main. This ever encroaching culture of promiscuity, entitlement, resentment, “what’s in it for me,” profound isolation, addiction, cynicism, and secrecy—it is, at best, benign to a faithful marriage; at worst, it is hostile to it. We must be careful and intentional about how and where and with whom we spend our time; careful about how we nurture our lives and our marriages.

We need couples who realize that what most characterizes a faithful Christian marriage is *not* the fact that two people are parents, workers, wage earners, home maintainers, or even lovers. At the bottom of a good marriage are two people who are simply Christian friends. When everything else in your marriage becomes mundane, predictable, painful, or worn out, try just being a faithful friend for awhile. Learn to do that again, and everything else that is a part of marriage will soon follow. We need couples who sense that there is deep and powerful connection between our relationship to God and our relationship to our spouse. The more one nourishes their soul and follows Christ where he leads, the more one worships, prays, reflects on Scripture, serves the world, and fellowships with faithful folk, then the more one will be able to, even *desire* to love his/her spouse.

We need couples who have the courage to remember that no matter how bad things get, no matter how hopeless it

seems, how bad it feels, how bumpy the road gets, or how dysfunctional it may become, the vows they took are always bigger than the difficulties they face. Again let me say, the vows they took are always bigger than the difficulties they face. I am a pastor, so I see a lot of brokenness. Yet I believe this to be true: that God is able and willing to redeem even the most broken of marriages.

We need couples who will make *daily* decisions to keep at it, to do their part to be faithful to these marriage vows so that the Holy Spirit can do its part: to pour into those fragile, clay jars of human faithfulness the divine treasures of affection, joy, blessing, and hope.

This is what we need, this is the kind of thing to which Christ calls us, and this is what we pray for in Stephanie and Mark and for anyone who would marry in our midst: ***courageous Christian marriages.***

So how does one set out to be courageous and Christian in a marriage? I have only been at this seven or so years. Most of you have been at this a lot longer than I have. And yet I can at least tell you where it starts: in Colossians 3.

“Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love.” What a marvelous image: clothe yourselves, put on these things, cover yourself in them like a good sweater covers your body. It is an image we can all relate to because we all wear clothing. And it is a particularly helpful image, I think, because clothing yourself is a *daily* activity. No matter what you are up to on a particular day, you have to put on clothes of one kind or another.

This Christmas my mother gave me a nice, new bathrobe. That’s no small order for someone this tall! I swear it is the most comfortable thing I have ever put on in my life. I would wear it to work if I could get away with it. So now, every morning, as a part of my routine I get up and put on that robe. We can all relate to this. Clothing yourself is an active, not a passive thing to do.

As baptized Christians, we are called to wake up and begin every day by clothing ourselves in Christ, to say with old Martin Luther from the 15th century, before the start of every day, “I am baptized.”

And to say, “On this day I will love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength and I will love my neighbor as myself.” This is our daily regimen, our daily calling.

And for a Christian in marriage, the same holds true. We are called to begin each day by taking again the vows we take at the beginning of marriage: to clothe ourselves in love.

Marriage—like the baptized life—is a *daily* decision. You take one set of vows, one time, but then you retake them again, day after day.

The worst thing you can do is imagine that once you have begun, the real work is behind you. That would be like a sea captain assuming that because he leaves port headed in the right direction, that his ship will stay on course on its own. It will not.

Winds will blow, storms will come, days will drag on, perhaps the helmsman will fall asleep at the wheel... Countless things will seek to take him off course. And so the smart captain takes the time to constantly check his bearings, to make constant little course corrections, knowing that a few degrees off at the beginning of a trip means several hundred miles off at the end.

The same is true for marriage. Every day is a chance to make course corrections, to live into the vows we take with our spouses.

Shortly after we were engaged, I found out that Elizabeth’s mother sent her a note. In it she said, “There will probably be days when you wake and do not feel as though you are in love with him.”

Now you interpret that however you like! I chose not to take it personally!

But she went on. “In those times you will have to choose to love him, and keep choosing, until the time when you *feel* in love with him again.”

Now that is pretty good advice. And very biblical as well. Even though the words of Paul in Colossians 3 are written to all Christians, married or not, they make a marvelous daily reminder for husbands and wives. Couples ought to put these words up on the refrigerator so that they can be seen every morning:

*bear with one another,
forgive each other when there is a complaint,
clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything
together in perfect harmony,
let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,
be thankful for each other,
let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,
teach and admonish one another in all wisdom,
and whatever we do, in word or deed, do everything
in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God
the Father through him.*

What would your marriage look like if you started each day by clothing yourself with these things?

This is our calling: courageous, active, loving marriages. Marriages clothed in the peace and kindness that only Christ can give.

I want to say to Stephanie and Mark that it is our great honor as a congregation, along with so many guests, family, friends, to gather with you here today in the context of worship to witness your marriage.

Having had the privilege of hearing their story and working with them in preparation for this day and their life together, I have no doubt that God, in his good providence, has brought them together at this time. They enter this marriage with great courage, great humility, and a deep love for each other. They are good for each other on many levels.

This marriage is a grace, a healing, and an encouragement to both of them at this time in their lives. I even sense it is a reminder to them that God really does wish them well. I am confident that they will seek to be faithful to God and to each other for the long haul, even as they learn from one another about what that looks like day after day.

Let us encourage and support them in this new marriage. Let us do our part to help them foster a courageous Christian marriage. And whether you have been married 5 or 50 years, whether you look ahead to a time of marriage

or look back on one that was, let us all renew the claim we share in Christian marriage.

Let us “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Amen

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