

# *Theology Matters*

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## **Is Marriage Worth Defending? Part I**

**by Alan F. H. Wisdom**

### **Executive Summary**

By many measures, marriage has weakened in our society over the past two generations. Fewer people marry. More people divorce. Increasing numbers of people move through a series of sexual relationships without ever forming a lasting marriage.

Not only the practice but also the understanding of marriage has shifted. Our society's view of marriage, centered on mutual emotional satisfaction, is already far from classic Christian teaching. Now pro-homosexuality advocates are seeking to radically redefine the institution, reducing it to a relationship between any "two people who love each other." Amidst all this conflict, is it worth the cost for Christians to continue to defend and promote this embattled institution?

The Bible teaches that God brought together man and woman in marriage for the good of all humankind. The love between husband and wife is a temporal image of the eternal bond between God and his people. All major branches of the church bless and honor marriage for the way in which it unites the two sexes as "one flesh," provides the appropriate setting for childbearing and childrearing, offers a legitimate channel for sexual desire, and fosters faithful lifelong companionship between husband and wife.

Marriage is the most basic building block of human society. Almost every known culture distinguishes the marriage of man and woman from other relationships. Typically, marriage is the means by which children are ensured the care of a socially obligated father and mother. The state has a crucial interest in marriage as the incubator for the next generation of citizens. Contemporary social science confirms the benefits of marriage—in terms of physical and psychological health, social adjustment, and economic prosperity—for both adults and children.

As marriage comes under challenge, U.S. Christians face three options: They can yield to the cultural trends devaluing marriage. Or they can admit defeat in society but try somehow to maintain traditional teachings inside the church. Or they can swim against the current and insist that both church and society lend a hand in strengthening marriage. We believe that only this last option is faithful to the Scriptures and conducive to the long-term good of society.

### **Marriage in the Bible: A Theme All the Way Through**

The first word to which Christians must attend in any matter is the Word of God. We receive that Word especially in the incarnate Son of God, Jesus the Christ,

as revealed by the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Those Scriptures have much to say about marriage, from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation. The marital relationship opens a window to understanding both God and humankind. Biblically grounded Christians will place a high value on marriage, as Jesus did.

On several occasions Jesus faced interlocutors who raised questions related to marriage. He responded with a very high and demanding view of the institution. Most important is this incident, recounted in the gospels of Mark and Matthew:

Some Pharisees came to him [Jesus], and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Matthew 19: 3-6)<sup>1</sup>

The Pharisees pose a question about a particular situation, pushing Jesus to see how far a husband might go in extricating himself from an unsatisfactory marriage. But Jesus quickly turns the conversation from human desires to God’s intentions. Jesus affirms that the author of marriage is God, not human society. It is God who “joins together” every husband and wife—not merely the wills of the two spouses.

Jesus also affirms that God’s establishment of marriage goes back to “the beginning,” to God’s providential design in creation. Marriage, in Jesus’ telling, is rooted in God’s choice to “make them [humans] male and female.” It is an essentially “gendered” relationship uniting the two sexes.

Jesus, by explaining marriage in terms of God’s order of creation, makes clear that marriage was instituted for all humankind. The law of Moses contained particular provisions regulating marriage and divorce within Israel, which was what interested the Pharisees. Jesus, however, looks to a pattern of “a man ... leav[ing] his father and mother and be[ing] joined to his wife” that was practiced far more widely.

### **Back to Creation**

The verses cited by Jesus come from the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis 1:27-28 says:

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

These verses suggest a number of insights that are developed later in Scripture and Christian tradition. First, the division of humankind into male and female is no accident. It is, on the contrary, the first feature that the biblical writer mentions about humankind. Being “gendered,” having a male or female body, is a fundamental aspect of our humanity as God created it.

This sexual duality seems to be related somehow to the “image of God” that is found in humankind. Later Christian theologians have speculated that the communion of the three persons of the Trinity is reflected whenever distinct persons join together in community, as a man and woman do in marriage.

Moreover, the creation of humans as male and female is linked to God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply.” Procreation is necessary if humankind is to fulfill its destiny of sharing in God’s gracious dominion over the earth. And, obviously, procreation occurs only through an act involving one man and one woman.

Genesis 2 tells how God brings the man and woman together. God starts with the observation that “[i]t is not good that the man should be alone.” God then resolves to “make a helper for him as his partner.” None of the animals is found to be suitable for this role:

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he 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 and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and they were not ashamed. (Genesis 2: 21-25)

This is the passage in which Jesus, his Jewish compatriots, and the church located the origin of marriage. Alongside the emphasis on procreation in Genesis 1 there is now an emphasis on the companionship of the two spouses of opposite sex. God does not intend for humans to live alone, and so he establishes the first social relationship, the relationship upon which human society will be built.

This marital relationship is intrinsically good—the man joyfully recognizes that “[t]his at last” is the mate who will relieve his solitude. It is also instrumentally good—the man and woman will be matched partners in fulfilling God’s economic purposes. Together, they will “till and keep” the garden, as God had commanded.

The right mate for the man is one who shares his deepest identity—“bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” But she is also different. She is not a replica of the man; she is his “helper” or “partner” or complement.

The relationship described in Genesis 2 is a deep and intimate bond. Husband and wife “cling” to one another. They “become one flesh.” This last phrase clearly refers to the union of the two bodies in sexual intercourse. But it probably also refers to the strong, durable union of the two persons, surpassing other human relationships. The tie between the two spouses takes precedence even over loyalties to their families of origin, as the man must “leave his father and mother” to be united with his wife.

When sin enters God’s garden in Genesis 3, it distorts every aspect of creation, including marriage. Upon the joyful partnership of the previous chapter falls a curse: “To the woman he [God] said, ‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you’” (Genesis 3:16). Henceforth the relationship will be shadowed by desire, domination, and pain. What was given as a divine blessing may now be soured by human abuse.

### **Old Testament Laws**

Nevertheless, the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21) show that marriage remains an important part of God’s design for human life. Twice God enjoins the Israelites against violating the marriage bond. “You shall not commit adultery,” he warns them, and later he adds, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.” Other provisions of the Mosaic law prohibit or punish rape, incest, prostitution, bestiality, and same-sex relations. These practices are characterized as “abominations that were done before you [by the Canaanites].” Repeating such practices would cause the land to “vomit you out for defiling it” (Leviticus 19:26-30).

If a Hebrew man takes a liking to a female captive, he is instructed to treat her fairly as his wife rather than a slave (Deuteronomy 21:10-14). The unspoken assumption is that marriage is the proper setting for sexual intercourse. This assumption is visible in another provision:

When a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged to be married, and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. But if her father refuses to give her to him, he shall pay an amount equal to the bride-price for virgins. (Ex. 22: 16-17)

The reasoning seems to be that the young man and woman have effectively consummated a marriage through the act of sexual intercourse.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the proper thing to do in most cases is to formalize the marriage through the payment of the bride-price. There does not appear to be an option for a continuing sexual relationship outside of marriage.

Of course, as these passages illustrate, the social setting for marriage and family in ancient Israel was very different from what modern U.S. Christians would find familiar or just. Women did not have equal standing with men, and their interests were often ignored. Slavery and other inequalities of power meant that many marriages lacked the free consent of both spouses. Economic and political advantage for the family often figured more prominently than personal affection in the choice of marriage partners. Old Testament teaching, if properly understood and applied, would have limited the abuses. But the society remained deeply patriarchal.

Polygamy is an example of this dynamic. The practice was never commanded in the Hebrew Scriptures. Indeed, Genesis 2 and other passages presuppose monogamy. Nevertheless, multiple wives are frequently reported in the earlier Old Testament narratives. Over the centuries, the incidence of polygamy diminished among the Jews. After the Babylonian exile, one man-one woman marriage apparently became the norm.<sup>3</sup>

The Hebrew Scriptures do not pretend that God’s law was ever fully obeyed. On the contrary, they bear witness to frequent disobedience with sometimes catastrophic consequences. Even venerated patriarchs and monarchs had marital troubles and dysfunctional families. The rivalries among Jacob’s wives and sons would have torn apart the chosen family, were it not for God’s grace through Joseph (Genesis 29-50). The hero Samson brought much suffering upon himself and others through his impetuous marriage and foolish sexual liaisons (Judges 13-16).

King David’s adultery with Bathsheba set off a train of deception, bloodshed, and division within the royal household (II Samuel 11-19). David’s son Solomon, who “loved many foreign women,” did no better. “For when Solomon was old,” the Scripture says, “his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the LORD his God.” The result was that an

angry God decreed the division of Israel—a division that was never healed (I Kings 11).

This passage and several others (e.g., Jeremiah 3:1-14) hint at a deep parallel between the commandments forbidding idolatry and those prohibiting adultery. Sexual promiscuity goes hand in hand with a religious laxity that is willing to worship any number of false gods. On the other hand, monogamy goes with monotheism. Exclusive devotion to the one true God is correlated to exclusive fidelity to one's spouse.

God's covenant with Israel, in other words, is like a monogamous marriage. The zealous, jealous love of the human relationship finds its match in the zealous, jealous love of the divine. This metaphor is the lens through which traditional Jewish interpreters saw the eroticism of the Song of Solomon. In an unmistakable image of sexual intercourse, the bride says of her bridegroom:

My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to pasture his flock in the gardens, and to gather lilies.

I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine; he pastures his flock among the lilies. (Song of Solomon 6:2-3)

The poet praises this "love [that] is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave" (8:6). The immediate reference is to the overwhelming sexual passion between a human bride and bridegroom. Figuratively, however, later Jewish and Christian interpreters saw a portrayal of the all-consuming love between God and his people.

The metaphor is made explicit in the prophecy of Hosea. God asks the prophet to "take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom" as a living illustration of how "the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD" (Hosea 1:2). Hosea's wife, Gomer, goes after other lovers; however, God (or Hosea) persists: "Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her" (2:14). Hosea buys Gomer back out of prostitution, as God will redeem Israel from its apostasy. The promise in both cases is that "I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy" (2:19).

It is hard to imagine a more vivid depiction of God's unconditional, enduring love for Israel. The implication, too, is that human marital love should have the same qualities, always ready to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with the spouse to whom one has pledged oneself.

The Old Testament does not treat divorce directly or at any length. The most significant reference is a snippet in Deuteronomy (24:1-4) that raises a hypothetical case:

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife. Then suppose ....

Clearly, divorces did occur in practice. The process of writing out a certificate of divorce was quick and simple. But the acceptable grounds for divorce were not so clear. What constituted "something objectionable" that would justify dissolving a marriage?

There were two schools of thought within ancient Judaism. One held that a husband could initiate a divorce for any reason. Even a burned dinner would be sufficient cause, according to Rabbi Hillel's interpretation of the law. The other school, represented by Rabbi Shammai, set a higher bar. It held that the "objectionable" or "indecent" behavior justifying a divorce would have to be a specific act of sexual immorality.<sup>4</sup>

### Jesus Enters the Debate

The Pharisees invite Jesus to enter this debate when they ask him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" (Matthew 19:3, Mark 10:2) Jesus' response goes beyond Shammai in its strictness. "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her," Jesus warns in the Gospel of Mark, "and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Matthew's account adds an exception allowing divorce in the case of "unchastity."

Jesus also explains in that Matthew passage: "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." At minimum Jesus affirms that God's intention is for lifelong marriage, even though sometimes the grave sins of one or both spouses may cause a marriage to fail.<sup>5</sup>

This demanding position on divorce fits into a larger pattern in Jesus' teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount he summons his followers to a "righteousness [that] exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees" (Matthew 5:20). He extends the prohibition on adultery to cover not only external acts but also internal affections: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall

not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28).

Elsewhere, Jesus lists adultery and fornication among the “things [that] come from within” and that “defile a person” (Mark 7:18-23). Likewise, the apostles at the Council of Jerusalem stress that although Gentile converts were free from many requirements of the Jewish law, they must take care “to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:20). For the New Testament church, as for Old Testament Israel, refraining from violations of the marriage bond is a moral imperative on par with rejecting idolatry.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus performs his first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11). Later Christian interpreters have understood his presence at that event as a gesture honoring the institution of marriage. In turning the water into fine wine, Jesus illustrates how the grace of God released through him transforms the natural order and fills it anew with God’s glory. Thus the wedding at Cana becomes an anticipation of the consummation of God’s kingdom at the end of the age.

In a similar vein, two of Jesus’ parables (Matthew 22:1-14 and 25:1-13) compare God’s kingdom to a wedding feast. The returning Christ, it appears, is the bridegroom for whom the wedding is to be celebrated. The same notion appears repeatedly in the Revelation to John. Toward the end the heavenly multitude cries out, “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb [i.e., Christ] has come, and his bride [the church] has made herself ready” (Revelation 19:7). John sees “the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2).

### **Advice from the Apostle Paul**

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul amplifies the marriage metaphor. Paul, like Jesus, looks back to the Genesis 2 verses about how “the two will become one flesh.” The apostle exclaims, “This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ.” Husbands, he says, “should love their wives as they do their own bodies”—just as Christ loves the church “because we are members of his body.” Paul advises married couples:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the

body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind— yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish . . . . (Ephesians 5:21-27)

It is not possible here to address the disputes about the meanings of “headship” and “subjection” in this passage. It should suffice to note the many apt comparisons between the husband/wife and Christ/church covenants:

1. Both covenants rest on something fundamental held in common: the image of God engraved in humans, male and female.
2. In both covenants, however, there is a fundamental difference between the two parties, a gap that must be bridged.
3. But that gap can be bridged and the two united: man to woman in God’s common grace of marriage, humankind to God in the special grace of Jesus Christ.
4. In this union there is a yielding of self on both sides, as Christ and the husband must “give themselves up” in love for the church and the wife, respectively, while the latter reciprocally subject themselves by identifying their wills with the will of the former.
5. This union demands a total and lasting commitment. Christ made the final and complete sacrifice of his own life for the sake of the church. Likewise, nothing can be withheld when “the two [spouses] become one flesh.”
6. Exclusiveness is the expectation in both covenants. Christ is the “one Lord” of the church, and a church leader is to be “the husband of one wife” (I Timothy 3:2).
7. The object of both relationships is the glory of God, as husbands and wives, Christ and the church prepare for God’s kingdom in its fullness.

Yet it is clear in the New Testament that priority goes to the church’s commitment to Christ. Jesus tells his followers, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple”

(Luke 14:26). He anticipates that many will lose these family attachments “for my sake and for the sake of the good news” (Mark 10:29). His disciples will find their true family in the church: “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:34-35).

Marriage, while honored among Christians, is only a penultimate good. Jesus, answering a question from the Sadducees, explains, “For when they [humans] rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25). Marriage is only for this life.

In I Corinthians 7 Paul gives delicately balanced advice on marriage and singleness. In a break with traditional Jewish views, he prefers singleness while still acknowledging the sanctity of the marriage bond:

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife. (I Corinthians 7:8-11)

Paul’s perspective in this passage is shaped by his sense of “the impending crisis”—events leading up to Christ’s return. The apostle sees marriage as a source of “distress” and “anxiety” as the married person “is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please” the spouse. By contrast, the unmarried person can be “anxious about the affairs of the Lord” (7:26-34).

Regarding religiously mixed marriages, Paul advises the Christian spouses to stay in their marriages as long as the unbelieving spouse “consents to live with [them]” (7:12-16). He enjoins all husbands and wives to give one another their “conjugal rights” to sexual intimacy. “For the wife does not have authority over her own body,” the apostle reasons, “but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does” (7:3-4).

In summary, the church received from the Scriptures all these strands of teaching about marriage:

- that marriage was established by God in creation for the good of all humankind;
- that marriage unites the two created sexes, man and woman, as “one flesh”;

- that marriage is related to God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply”;
- that marriage is consummated by sexual intercourse, and thereafter the husband and wife have reciprocal and exclusive claims to one another’s sexual intimacy;
- that through marriage the spouses bring one another companionship and help through the vicissitudes of life;
- that the marriage relationship has been corrupted through human sin;
- that violations of the marriage bond are among the most abhorrent sins, comparable in God’s eyes to idolatry;
- that God has provided marriage as the proper way to satisfy sexual desires that otherwise might lead to sinful non-marital relations;
- that God intends marriage to be lifelong, and that divorce can be justified only for narrow reasons as a concession to human obstinacy;
- that marriage is an icon of God’s relationship with Israel, and of Christ’s with the church;
- that faithful marriage is to be honored among Christians, as also a life of celibate singleness is to be honored.

It is through interweaving these strands that the church has developed its doctrines and practices regarding marriage.

## The Church Changes the Culture

Church doctrines and practices develop in social contexts—generally ones that reflect human waywardness. The early church confronted pagan cultures that frequently tolerated or condoned polygamy, concubinage, prostitution, incest, and homosexuality. Many marriages had an element of coercion. Roman parents could commit their minor daughters in marriage to older men. Germanic warriors practiced “marriage by capture.”

Ancient slaves could not legally marry; their only option, with the master’s permission, was an informal cohabitation. Many Roman and Greek men used marriage as a means toward social and economic advantage. A wife could display a man’s status, help to manage his household, and bear children to inherit his property. But a man’s closest companions were his male

friends, not his wife. It was fairly easy for a man to divorce a wife who had failed to produce an heir or otherwise displeased him.

From the beginning, church leaders challenged these cultural attitudes. For several centuries they had little power to impose Christian teachings on anyone. But the church had the power of persuasion as it laid out an alternative vision of marital life. And, over the course of a millennium, it gradually changed society.

### Early Church Fathers

The fourth century Greek preacher John Chrysostom, in a homily on Ephesians, counseled his male hearers: “Let us look for kindness in a wife, and moderation and modesty. These are the true marks of beauty. We should not look for physical beauty...” Chrysostom added: “Let us not seek money, or noble birth in the external sense, but noble birth in the soul. No one should hope to get rich from a wife, for that kind of wealth is base and disgraceful.”<sup>6</sup>

The Greek church father asserted, counter-culturally, that “no relationship between two men is as close as that between a man and a woman, if they are joined together as they should.” He contended that “nothing so welds our lives together as the love of man and woman.” Sexual desire [*erōs*] is “deeply implanted in our nature” by God’s “providential arrangement” to “knit together these bodies of ours.”<sup>7</sup>

When husband and wife are in harmony, Chrysostom said, “the children will be brought up well, the household will be properly ordered, and neighbors, friends, and relatives will enjoy the sweet fragrance.” He praised the Christian household as “a little church.”<sup>8</sup>

Chrysostom briefly echoed Paul’s command that “wives be submissive to your husbands, as to the Lord.” But he had much more to say to the husbands:

Show how much you value [your wife’s] company by staying home with her rather than going out in the marketplace. Cherish her more than all your friends, more than the children born of her, and love the children for her sake. If she does anything good, praise and admire it. If she does something wrong, as young girls sometimes do, give her encouragement and advice.<sup>9</sup>

The early church insisted on strict monogamy. “The very origin of the human race supports the law that prescribes a single marriage,” argued the North African Tertullian. “Therefore, the man of God, Adam, and the woman of God, Eve, by observing a single marriage, established a rule for the people of God.” The early third century theologian maintained that a husband and

wife could be said to be “one flesh” only when “the union and fusion into one happens only once. But if they marry a second time, or more frequently, there will cease to be one flesh, and they will no longer be ‘two in one flesh,’ but rather one flesh in many.”<sup>10</sup>

The early church agreed that Christ’s teaching ruled out not only multiple marriages at the same time (polygamy) but also serial marriages to contemporaneous spouses (called digamy). The fourth century bishop Ambrose of Milan advised, “Do not seek a divorce, because you are not allowed to marry another while your wife is living.... It is the crime of adultery.”<sup>11</sup> As to the propriety of widows and widowers remarrying, there was disagreement.

The early church took very seriously Jesus’ warnings against lust. It fastened particularly upon Paul’s advice that “it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.” Many church leaders agreed with Paul’s view that lifelong celibacy was the best option for a Christian. But if this degree of sexual self-control were not possible, marriage was seen as a second-best option. Some even regarded marriage as the lesser of evils—not as bad as fornication, but hardly praiseworthy like celibacy.

### Augustine

It was this debate that prompted Augustine of Hippo to write the first systematic exposition of Christian doctrine on marriage, his early fifth century treatise on *The Good of Marriage*. He concluded, “Marriage and fornication, therefore, are not two evils, one of which is worse, but marriage and continence are two goods, one of which is better.”<sup>12</sup>

According to Augustine, “human nature is a social reality” and “the first natural union of human society is the husband and wife.” The North African bishop set a pattern for future Christian teaching by listing three goods to be found in marriage: the procreation of children, the virtue of fidelity exercised between husband and wife, and the “sacramental bond” uniting the two as one flesh.<sup>13</sup>

The priority on procreation was deliberate. “Marriage itself, of course, in all nations exists for the same purpose, the procreation of children,” Augustine explained. “No matter how these children turn out in the end, marriage was instituted in order that they might be born in an ordered and honorable way.”<sup>14</sup>

The Latin church father believed that there was always some taint of sin attached to sexual intercourse. For this reason, he saw procreation as the only adequate justification for marital intercourse: “The intercourse that is necessary for the sake of procreation is without

fault, and only this belongs properly to marriage. Intercourse that goes beyond the need for procreation follows the dictates of lust [*libido*], not of reason.” Nevertheless, Augustine regarded lust in the marital relationship as a “forgivable fault.”<sup>15</sup>

The bishop, however, had no such tolerance for concubinage—a practice in which he had engaged before his conversion to Christianity. “For if a man is living with a woman only until he finds someone else who is worthy either of his position or of his wealth, whom he can marry as an equal,” Augustine said, “in his heart he is an adulterer .... The same applies to the woman, if she is aware of this and is still willing to have unchaste intercourse with a man, with whom she does not have a commitment as a wife.”<sup>16</sup>

Augustine stipulated, “I do not believe that marriage is a good solely because of the procreation of children.” He pointed to the marriages of elderly and childless couples, where “even if it has lasted for many years and even if the youthful ardor between the male and female has faded, the order of charity between husband and wife still thrives.”<sup>17</sup>

There is a third good of marriage, according to Augustine, in the “kind of sacramental quality” associated with the divine origins of the relationship. He had in mind the Ephesians 5 description of marriage as a “mystery,” translated as *sacramentum* in Latin. Augustine rooted the indissolubility of marriage in this “sacramental quality.”<sup>18</sup>

### **The Medieval Architecture of Marriage**

There is evidence of church blessings of marriages going back to the second century. But for most of the first millennium marriage remained largely a transaction between the families of the two spouses, regulated by Roman civil law or Germanic customary law. The first complete liturgy for a church wedding dates from around 1000.

By 1200 a massive shift had taken place in Christian Europe. Marriage had come inside the church. Multiple variants of the nuptial mass contained common elements: a priestly blessing of the couple at the church door, a statement of their intention to marry, an exchange of symbolic gifts, the father of the bride giving her away, the vows, the rings, the couple prostrating themselves during the Eucharist, the groom passing the peace to the bride with a kiss.<sup>19</sup>

The keystone of the church’s new architecture of marriage was its numbering among the seven sacraments. The greatest of the medieval theologians, the 13th century Italian Thomas Aquinas, explained the

rationale. Drawing on Augustine’s three goods of marriage, Thomas taught that “[m]atrimony is instituted both as an office of nature and as a sacrament of the Church.” The natural “end of marriage” and “the most essential thing in marriage” is the offspring. The faith of the spouses in “keeping one’s promises” is also a natural good—“a part of justice.”<sup>20</sup>

The same institution has an extra dimension for Christians, according to Thomas: “Matrimony, then, in that it consists in the union of a husband and wife purposing to generate and educate offspring for the worship of God, is a sacrament of the Church; hence, also, a certain blessing on those marrying is given by the ministers of the Church.” But in this case the sacrament is not performed by the priest; it is performed by the husband and wife as they take their vows. “And as in the other sacraments by the thing done outwardly a sign is made of a spiritual thing, so, too,” Thomas said, “in this sacrament by the union of husband and wife a sign of the union of Christ and the Church is made.”<sup>21</sup>

The great theologian held that marriage conferred grace upon the spouses to live faithful lives together. In his thinking, the place of marriage among the sacraments made necessary its indissolubility:

Since, then, the union of husband and wife gives a sign of the union of Christ and the Church, that which makes the sign must correspond to that whose sign it is. Now the union of Christ and the Church is a union of one to one to be held forever. For there is one Church, ... and Christ will never be separated from his Church, for he himself says, “Behold I am with you always, even to the consummation of the world (Matt. 28:20)....” Necessarily, then, matrimony as a sacrament of the Church is a union of one man to one woman to be held indivisibly....<sup>22</sup>

As this sacrament came under the jurisdiction of the church, a complex system of canon law developed to regulate disputes about marriages. The principle of sacramental indissolubility was the foundation of that medieval system. A husband or wife could petition church courts for “separation from bed and board” for at least three reasons: adultery, desertion, or cruelty. But the separated spouses were encouraged to reconcile whenever possible. Neither was free to remarry as long as the other lived.

Medieval canon law laid down a second challenging principle: a valid marriage required the publicly expressed consent of both spouses. The English Council of Westminster in 1175 decreed: “Where there is no consent of both parties, there is no marriage; and so those who give girls to boys in their cradles achieve nothing—unless both the children give consent after



they have come to the age of discretion.”<sup>23</sup> Any evidence of coercion was grounds for blocking a planned marriage, or for voiding a marriage already celebrated.

On the other hand, the medieval church declared that slaves were able to consent and thus could be married. Pope Adrian IV in the 1150s ruled, “Just as in Christ Jesus there is neither a free man nor a slave who may be prevented from receiving the sacraments of the Church, so too ought not marriages between slaves to be in any way prevented.”<sup>24</sup> Church weddings were encouraged, but not required until the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Canon law set forth a list of impediments that would cause a marriage to be barred or annulled: duress, fraud, insanity, bigamy, the paganism or apostasy of either spouse, vows of celibacy taken by either party, connections up to the fourth degree with a common ancestor, or the existence of morally repugnant conditions attached to the marriage (e.g., “that we permit each other sexual liberty with others”).<sup>25</sup> Marriages that were never consummated by sexual intercourse were accepted as valid; however, such sexless marriages were readily annulled at the request of either spouse.

Marriage, in addition to being a relationship of nature and a sacrament of the church, was also regarded as a contract between the two consenting parties. As a contract, it was enforceable under canon and civil law. Church courts could order couples to live together and to fulfill their sexual obligations to one another. Civil courts could compel husbands and wives to abide by the property arrangements specified in the marriage contract. Adultery brought down upon the perpetrators both civil and ecclesiastical punishments.

It would be a mistake, however, to exaggerate the power of the medieval church over marriage. The main incentive at that time for formalizing a marriage was to ensure the orderly transmission of property to legitimate heirs. For the vast majority of peasants who had few possessions, there was no such incentive. Their marriages were less formal, more shaped by popular custom than by canon law.

Nor was the aristocracy fully committed to the church’s vision of Christian marriage. Tension often arose when a nobleman wished to end a childless marriage and give a second try at producing an heir. The church would say no. Then the nobleman would seek out canon lawyers to find some reason to justify an annulment—often the claim of distant, previously unknown kinship between himself and the wife he wished to put aside. It was such a situation that launched the English Reformation, as

King Henry VIII broke with the papacy in 1534 over its reluctance to grant his annulment petition.

## **Reformation and Counter-Reformation**

The Reformation was about many issues besides marriage. But marriage was one of the important matters on which the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestants blazed a new path. They aimed a withering critique at what they saw as abuses fostered under the medieval church: priests, monks, and nuns carrying on non-marital liaisons because they were prohibited from marrying; separated persons doing the same because they were not allowed to remarry; and annulments secured through legal chicanery.

The reformers’ foremost target was the exaltation of celibacy above marriage. They reversed that order of preference, maintaining that virtually every Christian woman or man would do well to marry. Only those few who had a “special gift” of continence should remain single. “Such persons are rare,” Martin Luther wrote, “not one in a thousand.”<sup>26</sup> Luther saw little possibility for sexual self-restraint: “It is certainly a fact that he who refuses to marry must fall into immorality. How could it be otherwise, since God has created man and woman to produce seed and to multiply? ... If this does not occur within marriage, how else can it occur except in fornication or secret sins?”<sup>27</sup>

The 16<sup>th</sup> century German reformer gave unreserved affirmation of marriage:

Now the ones who recognize the estate of marriage are those who firmly believe that God himself instituted it, brought husband and wife together, and ordained that they should beget children and care for them. For this they have God’s word, Genesis 1, and they can be certain that he does not lie. They can therefore also be certain that the estate of marriage and everything that goes with it in the way of conduct, works, and suffering is pleasing to God.<sup>28</sup>

Luther did not share Augustine’s misgivings about the dangers of excessive sexual desire within the marital relationship. He insisted that even the most ordinary tasks of married life were “truly golden and noble works.” He imagined a father praying as he tended his young child:

O God, ... I confess to thee that I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How is it that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving thy creature and thy most precious will?<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, Luther and the other reformers denied that marriage was a sacrament of the church. Marriage demands no Christian faith and conveys no promise of salvation in Christ, they argued. “[N]owhere in Scripture do we read that anyone would receive the grace of God by getting married,” Luther said.<sup>30</sup>

For this reason, the reformers abolished the church courts that had decided marriage cases. They transferred such cases over to civil magistrates in Germany, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands. Luther pronounced, “No one can deny that marriage is an external, worldly matter, like clothing and food, house and property, subject to temporal authority, as the many imperial laws enacted on the subject prove.”<sup>31</sup>

But this transfer of power did not imply a secularization of marriage. Luther taught that the civil magistrates were equally established by God, and responsible to God, alongside church leaders. He expected the two sets of authorities to cooperate in upholding marriage for the good of society. Together, church and state developed a new marital regime in the Protestant states of Northern Europe.

Central to that regime was the conviction that marriage should be a social institution involving many parties besides the two spouses. In Protestant Europe (except England) secret marriages were forbidden. A couple wishing to be married first had to visit the parish pastor and seek his counsel. Public notice had to be given of the intended marriage. Parents had to give permission for their minor children to be wed. The wedding ceremony had to be held in a church, before at least two witnesses. The marriage was then entered in a public registry kept at the church. Petitions for divorce were made and granted publicly.

During the same period, the Catholic Church also moved to make marriage more public. The Council of Trent in 1573 prohibited secret marriages and mandated that all marriages be held in church and before witnesses. Parental permission was strongly encouraged, although not required.

The Protestant magistrates did not totally cast aside the long tradition of canon law. They retained many of its principles, such as the necessity for consent to marriage and most of the impediments to marriage. Other principles were adapted to fit Protestant readings of Scripture.

Divorce was granted for the same reasons that earlier had led to separation: adultery, desertion, or cruelty. The definitions of these reasons gradually expanded to cover offenses such as emotional desertion and emotional cruelty. So, through the early modern period,

divorce became somewhat easier to obtain in Protestant Europe. But social pressures to avoid the embarrassment of a public divorce case worked to keep divorce rates very low.

A crucial difference was that these new Protestant divorces brought with them the right to remarry. Luther explained, “In the case of adultery, Christ permits divorce of husband and wife so that the innocent person may remarry.”<sup>32</sup>

Many of these same patterns held true in the Reformed or Calvinist parts of Europe; however, John Calvin gave a somewhat different theological account of marriage than Luther had. The Genevan reformer preferred to speak of marriage as a “covenant” with three parties: the wife, the husband, and God. Warning against divorce, he preached:

Consider what will be left of safety in the world—of order, of loyalty, of honesty, of assurance—if marriage, which is the most sacred union, and ought to be most faithfully guarded, can thus be violated. In truth, all contracts and all promises that we make ought to be faithfully upheld. But if we should make a comparison, it is not without cause that marriage is called a covenant with God.<sup>33</sup>

Calvin saw the various third parties participating in the wedding ceremony as all representing God in one way or another. The parents, as God’s “lieutenants,” prepared the couple for marriage and gave their blessing. The minister, with “God’s spiritual power of the Word,” instructed the couple in their biblical duties to one another. The magistrate, with “God’s temporal power of the sword,” certified the marriage and promised to protect it. The two witnesses, as “God’s priests to their peers,” testified to the vows that were exchanged between husband and wife.<sup>34</sup>

Calvin’s Geneva developed a unique collaboration between the church consistory and the city council. The council held final authority in recognizing or dissolving marriages. But the consistory gave pastoral admonitions to couples and their families, in an effort to mediate conflicts before they reached the council. The consistory intervened in all sorts of situations, from disputed betrothals to allegations of spousal abuse or adultery.

### **A Christian Model of Marriage**

The combined effect of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation was to bring European society significantly closer to longstanding Christian ideals regarding marriage and family life. The rate of illegitimate births in many parts of 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe was in the stunningly low range of two to three percent.<sup>35</sup>

As late as 1870, the annual divorce rate in England was a miniscule .05 divorces per 1000 marriages.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, none of this is to claim that those Christian ideals were anywhere near realization at any time in the past. The stench of sin clung to many aspects of marital and family life. Early modern diaries and letters show many instances of loveless and even abusive marriages. Under civil law, wives were often treated as dependents of their husbands, rather than as their partners.

The law courts saw regular cases in which young men had seduced young women with false promises of marriage. Many brides came to the altar pregnant. Thousands of prostitutes plied the back alleys of Europe's growing cities.

Nevertheless, a Christian model of marriage had been established through the first 1900 years of the church's existence. And in a remarkable number of cases, that model was lived out in joyous, fruitful unions that delivered all three of Augustine's goods of marriage: offspring to serve God and the community, lives of faithful devotion to one another, and a sacred bond that showed the world a fleshly image of the spiritual union between Christ and his church.

[Editors note: The Mar/Apr issue of *Theology Matters* will continue this section with: Where We Are Today]

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**What follows are three excurses on issues related to marriage.....**

### **Stretching Scripture Too Far: Galatians 3:28**

One of the subtlest dangers facing Christians in public life is the temptation to "stretch the Scriptures." Wanting to rest our arguments on biblical authority, we cite a few Bible verses in support of our contemporary agenda. But in doing so, we can sometimes wrest the verses far out of their proper context. We try to make them answer questions that the biblical writers did not address; we try to make them say things that the biblical writers never intended. This temptation must be resisted if we are to hear what God actually says through those writers, rather than what we wish he would have said.

A favorite verse of religious "progressives" today is Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Taking a simplistic reading of this verse, in isolation from the rest

of Paul's letter, they interpret it to mean that Christ has abolished all the distinctions named and that Christians henceforth should pay no attention to any such distinctions.

In particular, radical feminists and other progressives today seek to minimize the distinction between male and female. They prefer to speak of "gender" rather than "sex," implying that virtually all perceived male-female differences are "socially constructed" fictions. Within the church they like to quote Galatians 3:28 as support for their agenda of deconstructing anything that acknowledges a necessary complementarity of male and female roles.

Marriage is among the institutions that progressives aim to deconstruct. They oppose the notion that marriage requires a man and a woman, because that notion assumes that the husband and wife bring distinct and non-interchangeable contributions to their union. Gender roles should be more fluid, progressives believe. Therefore, they would redefine marriage as simply a union of any "two persons who love each other." They see no difference between husband-wife couples and relationships involving two men or two women, because "there is no longer male and female."

This interpretation ignores the context of Paul's letter to the Galatians. The apostle is arguing against a faction in Galatia that would have made Gentiles second-class members of the church, requiring them to be circumcised and to obey the Jewish law in order to be accepted. Paul insists that this demand is a perversion of the Gospel. He reminds the Galatians that all have come to God on the same basis: "And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law ..." (2:16).

Paul's point in 3:28 is that all believers—Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female—are equally members of Christ. The preceding verses state the point directly: "[F]or in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." The apostle is not advocating that Rome abolish slavery. He is not saying that the church should ignore all differences of language and culture. He is not seeking to tear down all distinctions between male and female. He is simply saying that—amidst all these differences, natural or "socially constructed"—all stand on the same ground of God's grace.

With the passage of time, the logic of that equal grace did undermine the oppressive institution of slavery. It challenged racial and ethnic prejudices. It helped to break down limitations on women's opportunities that

were indeed “socially constructed.” But the message of Galatians 3:28 does not contradict or invalidate God’s common grace in creating two complementary sexes. It does not change God’s design in bringing the two together in marriage. It does not justify the radical, gender-bending egalitarianism of today’s progressives.

### Arguments from Nature

Those who would diminish or redefine marriage often accuse Christians defending the institution of “trying to impose their narrow religious views.” They assume that there could be no reason other than Christian faith for treating the lifelong union of man and woman as a unique relationship of crucial social importance. This assumption is false. The observation of nature and human history, apart from any claims to special divine revelation, provides a strong rationale for even a secular society to favor marriage above other sexual relationships.

The Bible itself presents marriage as a common human institution—not a peculiarly Jewish or Christian institution. The passage in Genesis 2 about how “a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife” speaks of all humankind. In the biblical narrative, marriage long predates God’s covenant with Abraham and his new covenant in Jesus Christ. The church has always recognized the validity of marriages between non-Christians.

Modern anthropological research confirms the universality of marriage. David Blankenhorn, in *The Future of Marriage*, concludes:

In all or nearly all human societies, marriage is socially approved sexual intercourse between a woman and a man, conceived both as a personal relationship and as an institution, primarily such that any children resulting from the union are—and are understood by society to be—emotionally, morally, practically, and legally affiliated with both of the parents.<sup>37</sup>

Societies show varying degrees of tolerance for non-marital heterosexual and homosexual relationships; however, all distinguish these relationships from marriage.

Blankenhorn argues that marriage is part of what makes human beings human and civilizations civilized. The key is what he calls “social fatherhood.” In almost all other mammal species, fatherhood is merely biological. A male spots a female in heat, impregnates her quickly, and then leaves her to her own devices. Blankenhorn notes: “[M]ost male primates, although they may live

near their children, are unable even to identify them. With the exception of humans, no male primates regularly provide food to weaned offspring.”<sup>38</sup>

Human children need such care because they are uniquely vulnerable. The large size of the human brain, relative to a woman’s birth canal, dictates that an infant must be born before its brain is fully developed. It will not survive without the constant care of adults over many years. Psychologically, too, a human child will not develop properly unless it becomes “attached” to specific adults upon whom it can rely.

“Helping an infant grow over the years into a flourishing human being is the most difficult, time-consuming, and important work of our species,” Blankenhorn declares. Hence the need for not only a mother but also a father:

For the prematurely born, large-brained, slowly developing, psychologically needy human infant, a mother alone is not enough. She needs someone to help provide food. She and the child need protection from predators and other dangers. She needs someone to relieve, spell, and comfort her. She needs a companion that she can count on. She needs someone to be her partner in raising the child—someone who will love the child (almost) as much as she does and who is willing to sacrifice deeply and permanently for the child’s sake.<sup>39</sup>

Where is a woman to find such a partner? Here, providentially, biology gives her an assist. Human females are unique in that their ovulation is concealed rather than open. A man cannot tell when a woman is fertile and when she is not. This fact implies, according to Blankenhorn, “that in order to ensure successful reproduction, sexual relationships need to last longer and become more intensive.”<sup>40</sup>

There is a chemical aspect to the bonds that develop between a man, a woman, and the children that are the fruit of their union. The hormone oxytocin is released into a woman’s bloodstream particularly on three occasions: during sexual intercourse, childbirth, and breastfeeding. This hormone “appear[s] to promote emotional intimacy and feelings of love” for the man and then for the child that she holds in her arms. In men there is this biochemical effect: “Studies suggest that marriage—sexually bonding with a spouse—reduces levels of testosterone in men. This hormonal change appears to incline men to less violence, less sexual promiscuity, and more nurturant fatherhood.”<sup>41</sup>

It seems that the biblical language about “the two become one flesh” is more than a colorful metaphor. It has a basis in biological fact. Natural law philosophers such as

Germain Grisez, John Finnis, and Robert George argue that “the marital act” of penile-vaginal intercourse is unique in uniting two mated individuals as a single reproductive principle.<sup>42</sup>

This “one flesh” union—marriage, in other words—is the solution to society’s dilemma about how to give human children the intensive personal care that they require. The mother and father bond sexually, and they maintain that bond over a span of decades. The marriage vows ensure that a human father recognizes his child and commits himself to join with the mother in rearing it. As an institution, marriage is how society tries to guarantee that every child has both a mother and a father caring for it.

Marriage works in this fashion today, as an abundance of social science research demonstrates. No other relationship has shown comparable capacity for rearing healthy, happy, well-adjusted children.<sup>43</sup> This capacity is society’s bottom-line reason for favoring the lifelong union of man and woman above all other sexual relationships. Christians can make that case without asking anyone to believe a single verse of the Bible.

### **What’s the Harm in Same-Sex Marriage?**

Proponents of same-sex marriage have an argument that they believe trumps all others: “Suppose my same-sex partner and I were to get married,” they ask. “How would that harm your heterosexual marriage?” The question is rhetorical. The answer is assumed to be: “My heterosexual marriage would not be harmed in the slightest.” The conclusion follows naturally: If same-sex marriage causes you no harm, then why not permit it?

This simple argument conceals an assumption that, once granted, virtually gives away the game to the same-sex advocates. The assumption is that marriage is a purely private affair involving the emotional attachment between two autonomous individuals. If that assumption is true, then the private emotional attachment between two members of the same sex has no necessary effect on the private emotional attachment between their opposite-sex neighbors.

But the entire history of marriage bears witness against that assumption. Heretofore, marriage has never been a purely private relationship. It has been a social institution with a set of rules: It takes two to marry. Everyone has a limited pool of potential mates. You cannot marry a minor. You cannot marry a close relative. You cannot marry someone who is already married. And you cannot marry someone of the same sex. These rules apply equally to all.

Marriage always involves more than the two spouses. That’s why witnesses are required. That’s why brides and grooms usually seek the presence of parents and other family and friends. That’s why the state registers marriages and treats married couples differently from single persons.

The meaning of these practices is this: The community has a stake in every marriage. Every marriage that succeeds strengthens the rest of us. Every marriage that fails weakens the rest of us. No marriage is an island.

We see this truth worked out in practice. When divorces started to rise in the 1970s, they spread like an epidemic. As couples in a community saw their neighbors divorce, they started to doubt the solidity of their own marriage vows. Dissatisfied spouses began to consider divorce more seriously.

Likewise, in a community where people see adultery tolerated in their neighbors’ marriages, they are more likely to indulge their own adulterous desires. Where they see spousal or child abuse tolerated in their neighbors’ homes, they are more likely to lash out against their own spouse or children. Every married couple sets an example, good or bad, for every other married couple. Obviously, well-established couples may not be affected as much. But newer and less stable couples—and young people forming ideas of marriage for the future—will be more deeply influenced by the examples they see.

### **A Different Kind of Example**

So what kind of example might same-sex couples set for the rest of society? Contrary to blithe assertions that such couples are “just like the rest of us,” there are in fact major observable differences between marriage and same-sex relationships.

The proportion of homosexuals who are in partnered relationships is far lower. Census Bureau estimates show only about 30 percent of the U.S. homosexual population living in partnered households. By contrast, 56.3 percent of all Americans above 18 are married and living with their spouse.<sup>44</sup>

Where marriage or domestic partnerships have been available to same-sex couples, only a small percentage has come forward to claim the status. Scholars Maggie Gallagher and Joshua Baker estimate that in the Netherlands, where same-sex marriage has been recognized since 2001, only six percent of the homosexual population has chosen to marry. In various Canadian provinces, between 1 and 14 percent of the homosexual population has opted for marriage. In Massachusetts the range is between 10 and 25 percent.<sup>45</sup>

Clearly, when same-sex marriage is allowed, it does not become normative for homosexuals in the way that marriage has historically been normative for heterosexuals.

Same-sex relationships have much shorter durations than marriages. University of Chicago sociologist Edward Lauman reports, “Typical gay city inhabitants spend most of their adult lives in ‘transactional’ relationships, or short-term commitments of less than six months.” A Netherlands study estimates that homosexual men had an average “duration of steady partnerships” of 1.5 years. Only a small minority of same-sex relationships last more than a decade. By contrast, more than 70 percent of marriages reach their tenth anniversary.<sup>46</sup> Divorce rates for gay male couples in Norway and Sweden are 50 percent higher than for heterosexuals. Rates for lesbian couples are more than 150 percent higher.<sup>47</sup>

Same-sex relationships are far more promiscuous than marriages. The 1994 *Sex in America* survey found less than 2 percent of homosexuals to be monogamous, while 83 percent of heterosexuals were in a monogamous relationship. The average number of partners in the past year was 8 for the homosexual respondents, 1.2 for heterosexuals. The average number of lifetime partners was 50 for homosexuals, 4 for heterosexuals.<sup>48</sup> Prominent homosexual authors such as Andrew Sullivan and Michelangelo Signorile have touted this sexual “flexibility” as an advantage of same-sex relationships.

Homosexuals have a higher incidence of problems such as alcoholism, drug abuse, and some forms of mental illness.<sup>49</sup> Some homosexual advocates acknowledge these problems; however, they blame them all on negative self-images implanted by a disapproving society. They express the hope that, as homosexual relations are legitimated through marriage, gays and lesbians will acquire more positive self-images and change their behaviors for the better. But so far there is little evidence of such change in countries and regions where homosexuality is now widely accepted.

There are significant questions about whether, in a society that already has too many bad marital models, we should add problematic same-sex relationships into the mix. The normativity, permanence, exclusivity, and other-nurturing qualities of marriage are already called into question through heterosexual misconduct. Same-sex marriage would seem more likely to weaken than to strengthen those threatened qualities.

## A Different Lesson for Society

Nevertheless, the question arises: Are there not at least some same-sex relationships that display the desired qualities of permanence, exclusivity, and nurturance? Should not such relationships qualify as marriage?

Here the problem lies in the message that is conveyed by legitimizing same-sex marriage. For to accommodate those few same-sex couples, the definition of marriage must be changed for all other couples too. The law is always a moral teacher, and the lessons imparted by same-sex marriage would differ tremendously from those delivered by traditional marriage.

Traditionally, the law has taught that marriage is about bringing together the two complementary sexes. It has taught that marriage is consummated in a sexual act where the male and female unite their mated bodies, with the possibility of conceiving a new life out of that union. The law has taught that a central purpose of marriage is to provide the setting where that child can be reared by its biological father and mother. In addition, the Christian tradition has taught that God originated marriage when he created man and woman. It has exalted marriage as a mystical union of dissimilar persons, reflecting the eternal union between a transcendent God and his earthly people.

All these deep meanings would be lost if marriage were reduced to just an attachment between any “two persons who love each other”—as it must be reduced if same-sex couples are to be accommodated. Marriage would be just a convenient social arrangement. It would be little different from any number of other relationships, sexual or non-sexual. All couples would be impoverished by this diminution of marriage.

Ultimately, what’s driving the campaign for “marriage equality” seems to be the desire for a visible expression of society’s blessing. Homosexuals, perhaps still struggling with negative images of themselves and their relationships, are desperate to have society tell them that they are alright. They may not want the substance of marriage, but they crave the symbolic affirmation. Andrew Sullivan remarks, “Including homosexuals within marriage would be a means of conferring the highest form of social approval imaginable.”<sup>50</sup>

But this is precisely the kind of approval that many other Americans, including orthodox Christians, do not wish to grant. Based on both Scripture and natural law reasoning, they cannot approve of homosexual relations. These opponents of same-sex marriage are willing to let gays and lesbians form whatever relationships they choose; however, they do

not want the state blessing those relationships. They do not want the state to equate those relationships with marriage.

### **A Threat to Religious Liberty**

Where the state does equate same-sex relations with marriage, it generates an immediate threat to the religious liberties of those who oppose that policy. The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty held a conference (and subsequently published a book) on *Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty: Emerging Conflicts*. Participants included both proponents and opponents of same-sex marriage. All these legal scholars agreed that the conflicts were real and likely to grow; they disagreed over whether courts and legislatures should give preference to the claims of same-sex couples or the claims of dissenting religious people and groups. American Jewish Congress lawyer Marc Stern noted the high stakes: "... [S]ame-sex marriage would work a sea change in American law. That change will reverberate across the legal and religious landscape in ways that are unpredictable today."<sup>51</sup>

Sexual revisionists have shown that, when they triumph in the political arena, they will bring state power to bear against private persons and institutions that dissent. This is the logic of their position. Pro-homosexuality advocates regularly portray their cause as a matter of "justice" for "sexual minorities." The high constitutional principle of "equal protection of the law" mandates recognition of same-sex marriages, they claim. These advocates regard any distinction between marriage and same-sex partnerships as an illegal and immoral "discrimination." Frequently, they compare today's defenders of traditional marriage to the racists of an earlier generation.

Once a court or legislature grants the demand for "equal marriage rights" for non-marital relationships, this line of thinking becomes official state policy. Religious people who still see marriage as the lifelong union of one man and one woman become enemies of state policy who must be brought into compliance.

Revisionists sometimes promise that churches would never be forced to perform same-sex weddings. But they do not offer any protections against the more likely forms of pressure: Defenders of traditional marriage (like racists) could be shamed and driven off the airwaves and out of the public square. Teachers and other public employees who voiced "hate speech" against homosexuals could be disciplined or fired. Corporations would have to worry about "anti-discrimination" lawsuits alleging a "hostile environment" created by remarks critical of same-sex relations. The easiest way to guard against such lawsuits

would be to stop hiring persons known to hold "bigoted" religious beliefs on the question.

Public schools would teach that same-sex relations were morally equivalent to marriage. Parents who disagreed might not have the option of exempting their children from such indoctrination. Christian businesspeople could be forced to facilitate same-sex weddings. Christian counselors, social workers, and fertility doctors might lose their professional licenses if they refused to assist same-sex couples on an equal basis. Christian colleges might be compelled to admit and house students in same-sex relationships. Parachurch ministries with policies upholding traditional marriage could forfeit their access to public facilities, tax exemptions, and government contracts. They might be forced to hire employees in same-sex relationships, unless they could demonstrate that adherence to Christian teaching on marriage was essential to the particular job.

We have already seen this process advance in jurisdictions that treat same-sex couples as if they were married. The Roman Catholic Church has been driven out of the adoption business in Massachusetts and Great Britain because it prefers to place children with man-woman married couples. In Canada, Christian broadcasters and schoolteachers have been prosecuted for alleged "hate speech" against homosexuals. Appeals for "the free exercise of religion" may not be sufficient to protect Christian individuals and institutions from such attempts to compel their acceptance of non-marital relationships.<sup>52</sup>

If even a portion of these threats materializes in the United States, it would be a high price to pay in exchange for questionable benefits to a rather small minority. The harm is indeed great.

1. This and all subsequent biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version. The issue of divorce, raised in this passage, will be discussed below (p. 4).

2. The apostle Paul employs similar reasoning in counseling the Corinthians against any involvement with prostitutes. "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" Paul asks. "Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, 'The two shall become one flesh.'" (I Corinthians 6:15-16) The apostle is saying, in effect, that whoever has sex with a prostitute has married himself to the prostitute.

3. John J. Collins, "Marriage, Divorce, and Family in Second Temple Judaism," in Leo G. Perdue et al., eds., *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 121-122.

4. Mishnah, *Gittin* 90.

5. This reading comports with a passage in the late Old Testament prophet Malachi (2:13-16) in which God declares, "I hate divorce." God tells Malachi that the people's offerings are unacceptable "[b]ecause the LORD was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant."

The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian worldview. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it. Please donate today to this vital ministry.

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6. John Chrysostom, "Homily 20 on Ephesians," excerpted in David G. Hunter, trans. and ed., *Marriage in the Early Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 81-82. These and subsequent quotes naturally speak from a man's perspective, as the available sources are overwhelmingly male.
7. Ibid, 77.
8. Ibid, 78, 87.
9. Ibid, 93.
10. Tertullian, "An Exhortation to Chastity," excerpted in Hunter, 39.
11. Quoted in Frances and Joseph Gies, *Marriage and Family in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 40.
12. Augustine, "The Good of Marriage," excerpted in Hunter, 110.
13. Ibid, 102, 120.
14. Ibid, 117.
15. Ibid, 113, 108.
16. Ibid, 106.
17. Ibid, 104, 116.
18. Ibid, 115. Augustine was not naming marriage as one of the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. Those were not fixed until the 13<sup>th</sup> century.
19. Christopher N. Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 249.
20. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 49, articles 2 and 3, excerpted in Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass, eds., *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar: Readings on Courting and Marrying* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 87-90.
21. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book IV, Chapter 78, excerpted in Dana Mack and David Blankenhorn, eds., *The Book of Marriage: The Wisest Answers to the Toughest Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 492.
22. Ibid.
23. Brooke, 140.
24. Ibid, 51-52.
25. John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 33-34.
26. Quoted in Witte, 50.
27. Martin Luther, "The Estate of Marriage," excerpted in Mack and Blankenhorn, 372.
28. Ibid, 368.
29. Ibid, 370.
30. Witte, 52.
31. Ibid, 51.
32. Ibid, 66.
33. John Calvin, Sermon on Deuteronomy 5:18, quoted in Witte, 111.
34. Quotes from Calvin's sermons and commentaries, Witte, 95.
35. Lawrence Stone, "Passionate Attachments in the West in Historical Perspective," excerpted in Kass and Kass, 41
36. Witte, 204.
37. David Blankenhorn, *The Future of Marriage* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), 91.
38. Ibid, 30.
39. Ibid, 35.
40. Ibid, 31.
41. Ibid, 36.
42. See Robert P George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2001), 75-89.
43. Studies of children reared by same-sex couples are early and inconclusive. Almost all the studies that have been done suffer from serious design flaws. Even those studies show some disturbing differences. See Maggie Gallagher, "(How) Does Marriage Protect Child Well-Being?" in Robert P. George and Jean Bethke Elshtain, eds., *The Meaning of Marriage* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 2006), 197-212.
44. Timothy J. Dailey, "Comparing the Lifestyles of Homosexual Couples to Married Couples," Family Research Council, April 7, 2004, <http://www.frc.org/get.cfm?i=IS04C02>. Figures for overall U.S. population living with a spouse come from U.S. Census Bureau, "America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2007," Table A1.
45. Maggie Gallagher and Joshua K. Baker, "Demand for Same-Sex Marriage: Evidence from the United States, Canada, and Europe," *Institute for Marriage and Public Policy Brief* 3, no. 1 (April 26, 2006), <http://www.marriagedebate.com/pdf/imapp.demandforssm.pdf>. Figures for Massachusetts have been updated to include the 11,000 same-sex marriages registered through 2008.
46. Adrian Brune, "City Gays Skip Long-term Relationships, Study Says," *Washington Blade*, February 27, 2004, 12. Maria Xiridou et al., "The Contributions of Steady and Casual Partnerships to the Incidence of HIV Infection among Homosexual Men in Amsterdam," *AIDS* 17 (2003), 1031. These are cited in Dailey.
47. Gunnar Anderson et al., "The Demographics of Same-Sex Marriage in Norway and Sweden," *Demography* 43 (2006), 79-98.
48. R.T. Michael et al., *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1994), 134.
49. Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 112-114.
50. John Cloud, "Will Gay Marriage Be Legal?" *Time*, February 21, 2000.
51. Marc D. Stern, "Same-Sex Marriage and the Churches," in Douglas Laycock, Anthony R. Picarello, Jr., and Robin Fretwell Wilson, eds., *Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty: Emerging Conflicts* (Lanham, MD: Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 1.
52. Laycock, et al., 2-7, 96, 102.

*Alan F. H. Wisdom is vice president of the Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD). Additional material from Wisdom's Mt. Nebo Paper: "Is Marriage Worth Defending?" will appear in the Mar/Apr issue of Theology Matters. The full paper is available on the IRD web site: [www.theird.org](http://www.theird.org). Reprinted with permission from IRD.*

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