

“Marriage” – 5

XXXV. Texts that Transform

Ephesians 5:22-33

“What is Marriage?”

What is marriage? We have not yet answered this most basic of questions. We must begin to answer by recognizing that marriage is of *divine institution*. God has ordained marriage. He designed it. It is “instituted of God and regulated by His commandments,” as the traditional Christian wedding service affirms. It is not for us to make of marriage whatever we wish. Marriage was not our idea, but God’s. He “established and sanctified marriage for the welfare and happiness of mankind,” as, again, the traditional wedding service affirms. God made the woman “and brought her to the man” (Gen 2:23). He did not reject her, but received her, and she, in turn, accepted him. This is the foundation of all marriage. One man and one woman consent to be united to each other.

This divine origin of marriage was assumed by the Apostle Paul until verse 31, where the implicit became explicit.

*“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh.”* (Eph 5:31)

The “leave and cleave” of Ephesians 5:31 (“leave... and hold fast” in ESV) is a citation from Genesis 2:24 whereby the husband and wife become “one flesh.” This, of course, indicates sexual union, the *social* meaning of which is marriage and the *biological* meaning of which is procreation. Marriage is the indissoluble union of one man and one woman for life. It is initiated by the acceptance of each other as partners through some form of covenant or commitment (oral or written), and the consummation of the commitment through sexual union. What are the characteristics of marriage as divinely intended?

Permanence

Sexual union is “*the marriage act*,” *the act* by which a permanent union between a man and a woman is consummated. This union is intended to be lifelong. “What therefore God has joined together,” Jesus exhorts on the basis of Genesis 2:24, “let no man separate” (Mt 19:6). Hence the traditional vows stipulate that the relationship into which the bride and groom are entering is “for better or worse” and “as long as we both shall live,” or in the older language, “till death do us part.” Christian marriage is permanent. Divorce is prohibited for Jesus’ disciples (Mt 5:31-32; 19:3-12).

The permanence of marriage as designed by God requires that those entering into such an obligation do so with a different outlook than those for whom divorce is an easy option. One must be more careful. What one is getting into one cannot get out of. It is better not to marry,” was the disciple’s cynical response to the severity of Jesus’ divorce prohibition (Mt 19:10). If

once in one is stuck; if one is not allowed to punt when the going gets tough, one must give the decision to marry more careful consideration than if divorce is easy.

One unintended consequence of “no fault” divorce, first legally enacted in Ronald Reagan’s California in 1969, was to cheapen the marriage covenant itself. Marriage was no longer classified as a legally enforceable contract. The *intention* behind the law was to ease the process of exiting a terrible or even abusive marriage. The *effect* was to devalue marriage itself. It allowed the dissolution of a marriage without requiring the petitioner to provide evidence that the terms of the marital contract had been breached. Easy out meant easy in, now in all 50 states.¹ The decision to marry and the marriage bond itself has been rendered by “no-fault” a less serious, less consequential commitment, and as a result, one less likely to endure. A huge spike in the divorce rate resulted in the 1970’s to over five times what it was in the early 20th century and doubling what it had been as recently as 1960. In the fifth grade, sometime in the years 1964-65, I met the first classmate I had ever known whose parents had divorced. This was in an elementary school of 600 students. A decade later (the mid 1970’s) divorce had become epidemic.²

Consider for a moment the difference between typing and word-processing. Typing on either a manual or electric typewriter involves a different mental process than when one composes on a word processor. With the former, one mistake meant one had to tear up the page and start over,

¹ It is of interest that the first modern no-fault divorce was passed in Soviet Russia in December 1917, just two months after the October Revolution in which the Bolsheviks seized power.

² Divorce rates have declined in recent decade from their peak in the 1970’s, but this is attributed to declining marriage rates, especially among the millennials.

or at best white-out, wait, and restart. With the latter, one need only backspace to correct. The product of the typewriter is permanent in ways the product of a word processor is not. At the typewriter one had to think about what one was going to say two and three sentences ahead and formulate exactly how one was going to say it. One had to be more careful. Commitment to a word or sentence is a different kind of commitment on a manual typewriter than on a word processor.

Likewise, the commitment to marry is a different kind of commitment when it is permanent than when one enters marriage thinking “we’ll see if it works out.” For Christians, the commitment is for life. It is a more serious commitment because it is a permanent commitment. It is an arrangement that is initiated by promises, by verbal commitments, and consummated by physical union.

Why should marriage be permanent? Why is it that when we tire of each other we can’t just turn each other in for a new model? Because permanence is what we are designed for in connection with this intimacy. Permanence is what we need, as we’ll explain in a moment.

Understanding the permanence of marriage also plays a vital role in preserving marriage. If one marries knowing that the commitment is permanent, then when troubles come, one is forced to work out differences. Because one is unable to escape, accommodation and compromise are necessary. Because one must, one does.

Divorce rates in previous generations were extremely low. Why? Largely because society frowned upon it. Divorce was considered a great evil. During my childhood, people whispered, “She’s divorced,” about a husbandless woman. No doubt this was at times unfair and even cruel. However, it meant people remained married and worked out their problems. Everyone, especially the children and grandchildren, were the better for it. Couples grew old together.

An example I don’t often point to is my grandfather David Richard “Pop” Lewis (b. 1897) and grandmother Geneva Oswald “Nanna” Lewis (b. 1900). Occasionally, as a young boy I would spend the night with them. They would get into arguments in the course of the evening, yelling angrily back and forth. He was a hot-blooded Welshman, she a Pennsylvania Dutch (German) house frau. They would go at it, which shocked and frightened me. My mother and father never argued. I had never even heard them raise their voices at each other.

When Nanna died, I thought Pop would be secretly relieved. No longer would he be tormented by her belligerence. Instead, it was immediately obvious even to an eleven-year-old that he was devastated. I had always seen him as the powerful Pennsylvania coal miner that he was. Now he was a shadow of his former self. Without her, he lost the will to live. Nine months later he too died. I have often thought that if they had married in the 1970’s or later, their marriage would never have survived. If they argued as they did in their 60’s, what did they argue like in their 20’s? “Irreconcilable differences” have been claimed. My mother and her brothers would have grown up separated from their father. Instead, they were forced by social pressures to stay

together with the result that, though they argued, they honored the design of marriage, and in the end they depended on each other and deeply loved each other.

Exclusivity

Marriage is not only permanent but exclusive. Marriage as divinely designed is not “open,” where sexual intimacy might be indulged with others. One is to “forsake all others and cleave only to one’s spouse,” as traditional vows require. Any violation of the marriage covenant is termed “adultery” and vehemently condemned by God, not the least by the 7th commandment. Moreover, marriage is the only God-approved and designed context within which sexual expression may take place. All others are sinful and forbidden: fornication, polygamy, homosexuality (sodomy and lesbianism), and bestiality. All others are harmful. All others are destructive.

Permanent and exclusive marriage between one woman and one man is the intended and designed environment in which this depth of intimacy can safely be enjoyed. It is for this that we are designed. “Sin is not merely rule breaking,” Rod Dreher reminds us in his important book, *The Benedict Option*, “but failing to live in accord with the structure of reality itself.”³ All other forms of erotic expression damage us. The Apostle Paul refers somewhat cryptically to those who engage in “shameless acts” as “receiving in themselves the due penalty for this error” (Rom 1:27). He doesn’t explain what that means. He doesn’t elaborate. He merely warns of harmful

³ Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), 200.

consequences, of an internal “due penalty,” and leaves it at that. Again he refers to those who indulge in “sexual immorality” (*porneia*) cryptically yet ominously. He writes,

Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. (1 Cor 6:18)

The Apostle has already made the horrifying point that “he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her,” and thus uniting her with Christ with whom the believer is united (1 Cor 6:15-17). He then draws a line across human behavior as he places sexual immorality on one side of the line and “every other sin” on the other side of the line. Sexual sin is uniquely harmful. All other sins are “outside the body.” However, when one sins sexually, one “sins against his own body.” Again, he doesn’t explain or elaborate. The warning is cryptic but severe. There are uniquely damaging consequences that accompany this selfish, uncommitted, impermanent sexual indulgence.

Still, we can begin to surmise the damage of which the Apostle warns. We can speak of harm to physical health with multiple forms of venereal disease (some 20 types) afflicting millions of Americans. It is impossible to calculate psychological harm. When we give ourselves to another person in sexual union, there is no stage beyond that to which we can go. The beginning point may be holding hands, but this is the final and ultimate expression of affection. If I have given myself to a person and that person then abandons me, despises the gift of myself, the wounds are considerable. Compare it, say, to opening up to a new friend and telling him or her the deepest,

darkest secrets of one's soul: one's hitherto unspoken fears, dreams, aspirations, and failures. Then imagine that he/she despises one's confidentiality and walks out of one's life. He/she abandons one, in effect scoffing at one's vulnerability. The emotional hurt would be deep.

This is what happens to the sexually promiscuous. They have given themselves to another person in a way, to repeat, further than which we cannot go. Their openness and vulnerability have been despised. Look no further for the causes of rampant cynicism about love. Look no further for the causes of bitterness between the sexes. Countless people have been used by others as depersonalized objects of sexual commitment. Physical intimacy was designed to be expressed only in the context of the commitment of one man and one woman for life and the security and safety that that commitment ensures. Because marriage is permanent, there is no morning after. Couples are able to give themselves to each other because they are confident their spouses will be there the next day, the next week, the next year, and for life.

Procreation

Sexual union also is the act whereby, in the normal course of events, all things being equal, children are conceived. It is not designed primarily for pleasure, or excitement, or personal gratification. Its biological design is procreation. It is pleasurable by design so that *we would procreate*. This is why we can no more speak of gay "marriage" than a square circle. Once a circle is squared, it is no longer a circle. Once the "marriage" is homosexual, it is no longer marriage. Marriage must be heterosexual because it is procreational by design. What if a heterosexual couple cannot have children? Are they married? Yes they are. Why? Because we

are talking about design and intent. An airplane that can no longer fly does not become an automobile because it is restricted to land travel. It is still an airplane because it is defined by its design. Marriage is designed for procreation. All men are potential fathers and all women are potential mothers, even if that potentially remains unrealized. Whereas no men are designed to be mothers and no women are designed to be fathers, or have the potentiality to be such.⁴ When a man and woman marry and find that they are unable to have children, theirs is still a marriage because the procreational design is being honored.

This is not about “whom we may love” or marry, as so often the question is framed. With considerable indignation people will say, “Don’t let anyone tell you that you may not love/marry whomever you choose to love/marry!” This misses the point. The issue is not whom we may love. We may love all sorts of people: relatives, friends, neighbors, strangers, and enemies. Rather, it is a question about with whom we may engage in this procreative act. Contrary to the propaganda, sexual relations have always been and still are restricted. We may not engage in erotic unions with our parents, our siblings, our children, or with other people’s children. We can and do love all of the above, even intensely. However, we do not and must not love them with erotic love. Marriage, the permanent and exclusive bond between a man and a woman, the one-flesh relationship, is the context in which sexual expression is to take place. A man and a woman are to be physically united in marriage and children are to be conceived and reared.

⁴ J. Budziszewski uses the language of potentiality in his article “What Makes Men Men?” in *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*, Vol. 32, Number 3, May/June 2019, 31-35.

This procreational understanding of what characterizes marriage is not something new or strange. It is the understanding of the entire human race from the beginning of recorded history until, well, yesterday. This is true without exception: east, west, south and north; Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, South America, Australia, and the Pacific Islands; people ancient and peoples modern. Why? Why has procreation always been fundamental to humanity's understanding of marriage? It has to do with the preciousness of life. More or less there has been an understanding that if life is sacred, *the act that conceives life* cannot but be sacred as well. It cannot be engaged in flippantly, casually, or promiscuously. Children are to be conceived and born into a home in which the father and mother are committed in marriage.

Current social trends are for this reason alarming. We are engaged in a social experiment that is unprecedented. Eight million couples in America are living together outside of marriage. Premarital sex is epidemic. To this one may add post-marital and extra-marital sex. Unwanted pregnancies have led to millions of abortions, the vast majority by unnamed women. The illegitimacy rate is now at 40 percent. Twenty three percent of American children, or 17.2 million, are being reared by single mothers. That number tripled between 1960 and 2016. Study after study have shown that children without fathers are far more likely to grow up in poverty (four times as likely), abuse drugs and alcohol, (“dramatically greater rate,” according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), to commit suicide (two times as likely), manifest aggressive behavior, commit crimes (20 times as likely), drop out of school (nine times as likely), suffer health and emotional problems, and the girls are more likely to become pregnant. The list goes on. All these trends are well known and have been documented for years.

Because the lives of children are sacred, they are to be conceived into a permanent and exclusive two-parent household consisting of a husband and a wife. Why? Because it is for this that children are designed. The permanent union of a man and a woman, a home with a father and a mother, is what every child needs. This is the arrangement that is most conducive of human flourishing. If death or military deployments prevent this, God may be gracious and make up for the loss. The church also may step in and help. Yet that doesn't alter the fact that the norm is, the need is, the optimum is a home with a mother and a father. Because a man is not a woman and a woman is not a man, each has a distinctive contribution to make to marriage and family. Neither is expendable. Neither can be replaced. Two parents of the same sex cannot do what two parents, one of each sex can do. Children need a mom and a dad. Children need the masculine perspective and the feminine.

The argument can be made that the sexual revolution was launched when we allowed pleasure to be separated from procreation. If sex is only about pleasure, if procreation can be severed from the biological meaning of physical union, then what difference does it make how, or in what form, or in what kind of relationship one chooses to experience erotic pleasure? However, to divide pleasure from procreation is to undermine and ultimately to corrupt its design. "We have gay marriage," Rod Dreher maintains, "because the straight majority came to see sexuality as something primarily for personal pleasures and self-expression and only secondarily for procreation."⁵

⁵ Dreher, *Benedict Option*, 203.

We may illustrate this principle in connection with eating and sleeping, two other natural bodily functions. When we eat we are to do so with both health and pleasure in view. Eat only for pleasure, and gluttony, obesity and an early grave are likely. Eat only for nutrition, and the joy of eating will be lost. God gave us things to eat both for health and that He might satisfy our hearts “with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17). Pleasure and purpose belong together.

Sleep is another natural function. Its design is to rest and refresh the mind and body. Sleep also is pleasurable. What is more beautiful than a Sunday afternoon nap? Yet the pleasure of sleep should not be severed from the purpose of sleep. Sleep only for pleasure and one may never get out of bed. Sleep thereby becomes sloth, a corruption of rest. The purpose of sleep, rest and refreshment so that we may reengage in life’s tasks, must always be kept in view.

We must never sever what God has joined together. Natural bodily functions are corrupted when their biological design and the pleasure they provide are not united. We are to eat for pleasure *and* for health, sleep for pleasure *and* refreshment, and to engage in sexual relations for pleasure *and* for procreation. Both purpose and pleasure must be honored and kept in mind. We are to sleep for pleasure and for refreshment. Sexual relations only for pleasure reduces one’s spouse to an object for one’s own personal gratification. Sexual relations only for procreation severs procreation from love and also objectifies one’s spouse as a baby-maker, valued only for their functional role.

True love does not terminate on oneself. The beauty of marital love can be seen in that it is not self-absorbed. Rather, it produces another to love. Its love is not self-consuming, but rather multiplies by generating another, that is, a child to love. Marital love, by design, is creative. Marital love, by design, is giving. Marital love, by design, is sacrificial. Marital love mirrors the love of Christ for His church, the very point the Apostle Paul is striving to make.

The Gospel

We close with this: what else is at stake? We've seen that marriage is at the foundation of the family, the church, the school, and the nation. Marriage is not a sacrament, but a creation ordinance. Yet Christian marriage also plays an important role in providing a picture of the gospel. The husband's sacrificial love portrays the love of Christ for His church. We are told that people, even educated people, are reading less and less. We also are told that fewer and fewer people are attending church. Where then are they exposed to the gospel? The answer is, through Christian marriage. Christian marriage is not *egalitarian*, with no distinction in roles or authority. Were it such, it could not portray the gospel. Christian marriage is *complementary*, the husband portraying the love of Christ and the authority of Christ, and the wife, like the church, sweetly complying with and showing respect for his authority. When Christian marriage is on display, the world sees a husband who protects and provides for his wife, who is attentive to her needs, who understands both her desires and fears, who is tender, caring, sensitive, sacrificing, even laying down his life on her behalf. It sees a wife in turn who follows, encourages, and supports and loves her husband, a picture of the church at its best.

We have referenced Rodney Stark's book *The Rise of Christianity*. One could reduce his case for the growth of Christianity in the early centuries to one point: the Christian family. Christianity taught the predatory males of the first century to be loving husbands and fathers. It forbade infanticide and abortion, both widespread in the Roman Empire. It prohibited homosexuality, bisexuality, prostitution, and deviant forms of sexual practice, thus channeling all erotic energy into procreation. It taught believers to cherish children and welcome their conception and arrival. It urged couples to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28). It taught believers that "God is love" and that His people were to love each other, their neighbors, and even their enemies. Thus they cared for the sick with the result that many survived even the plagues of the second and third centuries. In a culture of death, the Christians celebrated life. In a society with declining birth rates, the Christians out loved and out lived their pagan neighbors and by the fourth century had grown in just 300 years from a tiny minority to the majority of the entire Roman Empire.⁶ Our hope is that the same might happen once again.

⁶ Stark, in *Rise of Christianity*, projects a growth rate of 40% per decade (under 4% a year). He charts the following:

100 AD	8000 Christians
200	217,000
300	6.2 million
350	33.8 million