

Position Paper on Weddings

“What Is Marriage?”

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THEO3413: Theology of Ministry Essentials

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December 9, 2017

In the book of Genesis, God commanded the first humans, Adam and Eve, to “‘be fruitful, and multiply’” (Blue, Gen 1.28). When looking to the Bible to find the original institution of marriage, many look to this verse, since it is a command to produce children through the obvious only way of doing so. So many people associate sex with marriage that the two seem intertwined. Why, then, do people wait until they’ve had a few kids before they get hitched? Marriage is not about having kids. Having kids is something that ideally would come after marriage, but it is not the basis of marriage. What is marriage besides the obvious wedding ceremony? When and why was the institution of marriage created? Does it matter how we get married today?

Marriage and weddings have changed drastically throughout the centuries. We always see the same idea of two people living together and making babies, but the customs have been altered over time and throughout different cultures. Let’s take a look at a few examples of what weddings and marriage used to be like.

For one thing, men in the Old Testament often had more than one wife. Lamech, Elkanah, and Joash each had two wives, Abraham and Saul each had a wife and a concubine, Esau had three wives, Jacob had four wives, Gideon had many wives and at least one concubine, David had eight wives, Abijah had fourteen wives, Rehoboam had eighteen wives and sixty concubines, Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, and Ahab may have had too many wives to count (Trimiew, 146). In general, the idea was for men to “have as many wives as they could afford” (Trimiew, 144). The custom of only having one wife did not start until after the Exodus of the Israelite slaves out of Egypt—but even then, some chose more than one wife, like Saul, Gideon, and Solomon (Trimiew, 144).

Also, in those early days and up until the nineteenth century, it was not uncommon for people to be married at the age of thirteen (Trimiew, 144). However, most such marriages were

arranged by the parents (Trimiew, 144). “In Old Testament times, marriages were arranged within the same clan—and often to a first cousin” (Trimiew, 144). The main reasons for this were economical;

In the ancient world, marriage was the chief way—along with inheritance—of acquiring property. Marriage also produced legitimate heirs...In early medieval Europe, rulers used marriage to forge peace treaties and gain land and to establish political alliances. Upper-class families with property brokered marriages between their children to consolidate their resources and accumulate wealth. From the Middle Ages until the eighteenth century, brides in Europe came with dowries, which were often “the biggest infusion of cash, goods, or land a man would ever acquire.” Likewise, “finding a husband was usually the most important investment a woman could make in her economic future”...Parents married their children to one another so that their fields were adjacent or so that their families were better connected...Marriage marked one’s entry into “adulthood and respectability” and provided the couple with what we now call “social security, medical care, and unemployment insurance” (Long, 40-41).

Since the bride was considered a working asset, she had to be paid for. The fee (called the *mohar*) was paid to the girl’s father. In return, the young woman’s father gave the couple a dowry (Trimiew, 145).

This is probably the reason fairy tales are about love triumphing over arranged marriage; marrying for love was an extremely rare event (Long, 32). It was more of “a real estate transaction” or a business contract than a covenant or a heartfelt promise (Long, 40).

Today there is still some pressure from parents and family on who to marry, and there are even arranged marriages still in many cultures, but most people marry for love, lust, money, or because it’s the next step in the relationship.

One thing that customarily never changes about marriage is the celebration of weddings. A marriage has always typically been followed by a celebration, or has been commemorated by a community gathering or event. We all know what weddings are like today: large family gatherings, food, dancing, etc. Here is an example of what weddings were like in the Bible days—and still are like in some countries today--:

At the binding ceremony of betrothal, gifts were exchanged between the couple.

On the day of the wedding, in the evening, the bridegroom and his party went in procession to the bride’s home, where she was waiting, veiled and in her wedding dress. A blessing was given, then the bridegroom took the bride through the village to his own home. Friends went in torchlight procession to the new home.

The marriage celebration and feast that followed sometimes lasted as long as a week (Trimiew, 145).

There has been one very recent change to weddings and marriage, though: the controversial same-sex marriage. This wasn’t made fully legal in the United States until June 26, 2015 (“A Timeline”). There has, however, been a long history of same-sex couples—not

marriages—even in the Bible. Many have heard of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, two cities that were well-known for their homosexuality (Blue, Gen 19). Paul also speaks in general of people having same-sex relations (Blue, Rom 1.27). Homosexuality itself is not a new thing, only the legalization of same-sex marriage.

But what does the Bible define as marriage? With customs changing over time, what remains the same? Most people would answer, “love,” but that wasn’t usually the case in the past; love might have come after a few years of being married, but it wasn’t the basis of marriage, and not every couple ever loved each other. In a world that is ever-changing, how do we know what is right and what is wrong? The Bible states many things about marriage, but they’re often in the context of a past culture. What does the Bible have to say about marriage that always stays the same?

From what I can tell, there are two basic rules in the theology of marriage. The first is that marriage must be between a man and a woman. There is a reason for this that is intertwined with the second basic rule, which will be revealed shortly.

God created man (humans) in His image (Blue, Gen 1.26; Malphurs, 79). Yet later, He took Eve out of Adam because Adam was lonely and needed a helper. Let me put it to you this way: Adam (man) was the image of God. Certain aspects of Adam were taken out of him to create Eve—this is why we see that woman complements man; it is because she is everything he is not, and vice versa. God created us this way, and it can be compared to the holy trinity: the Father, the Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are three separate people—like man and woman are two separate people—but they are one being, like man and woman are two parts of humanity (Malphurs, 80). “They are *one in essence, three in function*” (Malphurs, 80). Marrying completes your threefold relationship between you, God, and your “other half” (Malphurs, 80, 83, 101). A

relationship between two men, two women, or between a human and an animal deprives the people in it of the understanding of this relationship between man and God, and thus the relationship between men and women.

God recognized at Creation that it was not good for a man to be alone (Gen. 2:18)...Two are stronger than one (Eccl. 4:12b)...A marriage is best with three (Eccl. 4:12c)...Typically, we do not think of a marriage triangle as a good thing...But when Jesus Christ is the unifying cord in a threefold cord, the marriage gains great strength (Malphurs, 101).

It was explained once to me like this: it is very easy to break one strand of string. It is a little more difficult to break two strands, and it is nearly impossible to break three strands. A marriage is strongest with a man, a woman, and Jesus in the middle. There is also the “marriage triangle,” where God, man, and woman are at each point of the triangle. The closer you get to God, the closer you will get to your spouse. This is the threefold marriage that you should want. But you can also get closer to your spouse without getting closer to God. This is the twofold marriage that most people choose, but because it is not as strong, it is less likely to last.

We were created by design in the image of God to be male and female (Penner, 36; Blue, Gen 1.26-27).

Our image, as it reflects God and as it relates to sexuality, includes two dimensions: our sexual functioning and our functioning in relationship as a

couple. Both of these functions grow out of our becoming “one” physically, spiritually, and emotionally. (Penner, 37).

This “oneness” is “far more than a mere physical meeting of bodies...the total person—intellect, emotions, body, spirit and will—becomes involved in the process of giving ourselves to each other” (Penner, 41-42).

So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh (Blue, Gen 2.21-24).

There can only be “one flesh” between a man and a woman—no other type of relationship. I believe God created sex as a physical illustration of this intimacy. You cannot have this between two men, two women, or between a human and an animal. We were not created for that. In essence, homosexuality and bestiality are a defiance against creation—and thus against God. It is also inhuman, because it is not something natural, something that we were created for.

Marriage is also a permanent, binding connection. “For God, marriage is a *covenant*. A covenant is a formal agreement made in the presence of God in which both parties vow to carry out their responsibilities...It illustrates God Himself” (Malphurs, 79).

The other basic truth about marriage, which is closely connected to the first, is the shadow of marriage to God's relationship with the Church. A shadow is like a parallel, some similar illustration of a thing. This is clearest in Ephesians 5:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband (Blue, Eph 5.21-33).

The whole passage is basically saying that the sexual relationship is what best symbolizes the relationship between Christ and the church. This is not only true in Ephesians but in other places, including the Book of Revelation. The Bible,

particularly in Revelation 19:6, 7, talks about Christ's bride, the church, coming for the celebration, the wedding supper (Penner, 40).

Ephesians 5 clearly compares husbands to Christ and wives to the church. It is both an example of how we should love God and how we should love our spouse, because the relationships are so similar. This following statement about love is a picture of Christ's love for us—the love that spouses should have for each other as well:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails (Blue, 1 Cor 13.4-8).

However, when referring to Christ as the bridegroom and the church as the bride, is isn't referring only to our individual relationships with Him; it is a shadow of the heavenly wedding to come, when the church finally joins her groom. "According to the book of Revelation...the world itself ends with a wedding: the eternal 'marriage supper of the Lamb' and the unveiling of the new Jerusalem as the Bride of Christ (Revelation 19, 21)" (Pitre). Therefore, "every earthly wedding feast, however sumptuous or simple, anticipates the wedding feast of the Lamb that celebrates the marriage of heaven and earth" (Long, 1-2). When a man and woman marry, it is not only a celebration for the two of them, but also a picture of the celebration to come.

There is, of course, much more to be found in the Word about marriage and its connection to our spiritual relationship with Christ; this has simply been the tip of the iceberg. Yet these two basic truths—which really are one whole idea—are a good foundation for anyone learning about matrimony.

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