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A Christian Vision of Marriage and Family

“For the first time in its history, Western civilization is confronted with the need to define the meaning of the terms ‘marriage’ and ‘family.’” So states author Andreas J. Kostenberger who, with the assistance of David W. Jones has written God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation. Read Dr. Mohler’s review and commentary on the book today.

Wednesday, May 17, 2006

“For the first time in its history, Western civilization is confronted with the need to *define* the meaning of the terms ‘marriage’ and ‘family.’” So states author Andreas J. Kostenberger who, with the assistance of David W. Jones has written *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*.

This sense of crisis and the need for definition sets the stage for this book and its central thesis—that the only way out of our present cultural confusion is a return to a biblical vision of marriage and family.

As Kostenberger observes, “What until now has been considered a ‘normal’ family, made up of a father, a mother, and a number of children, has in recent years increasingly begun to be viewed as one among several options, which can no longer claim to be the only or even superior form of ordering human relationships. The Judeo-Christian view of marriage and the family with its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures has to a certain extent been replaced with a set of values that prizes human rights, self-fulfillment, and pragmatic utility on an individual and societal level. It can rightly be said that marriage and the family are institutions under seize in our world today, and that with marriage and the family, our very civilization is in crisis.”

In one sense, the statistics tell the story. The great social transformation of the last two hundred years has led to an erosion of the family and the franchising of its responsibilities. The authority of the family, especially that of the parents, has been compromised through the intrusion of state authorities, cultural influences, and social pressure. Furthermore, the loss of a biblical understanding of marriage and family has led to a general weakening of the institution, even among those who would identify themselves as believing Christians.

At the cultural level, Kostenberger suggests that the rise of a libertarian ideology explains the elevation of human freedom and a right to self-determination above all other principles and values. The quest for autonomy becomes the central purpose of human life, and any imposition of structure, accountability, boundaries, or restriction is dismissed as repressive and backward.

Within the Christian church, Kostenberger discerns what he identifies as a “lack of commitment to seriously engage the Bible as a whole.” As he correctly observes, evangelical Christianity has no shortage of Bible studies, media production, parachurch ministries, and the like. Yet, most Christians are woefully unaware of the deep biblical, theological, and spiritual foundations for marriage and the family that are central to the Christian tradition.

“Anyone stepping into a Christian or general bookstore will soon discover that while there is a plethora of books available on individual topics, such as marriage, singleness, divorce and remarriage, and homosexuality, there is *very little material* that explores on a deeper, more thoroughgoing level the entire fabric of God’s purposes for human relationships,” he observes. To fill this void, Kostenberger and Jones, along with Mark Liederbach, who contributed sections on contraception and reproductive technologies, attempt to offer an integrative approach that would establish a biblical theology of marriage and family. The primary focus of Scripture, they assert, is “the provision of salvation by God in and through Jesus Christ.” Nevertheless, the Bible also addresses an entire spectrum of issues related to marriage and the family—extended to issues such as human sexuality, gender, reproduction, parenthood, and more.

Kostenberger and his co-authors begin their consideration of marriage and family in the book of Genesis, establishing the starting point for these considerations in the doctrine of creation. Throughout the volume, a complementarian understanding of the relationship between men and women is affirmed, and the man and the woman, both created in the image of God, are assigned different responsibilities and roles.

Early in the book, Kostenberger makes an audacious claim: “Our sex does not merely determine the form of our sex organs but is an integral part of our entire being.” This flies in the face of the postmodern claim that gender—indeed the very notions of male and female—are nothing more than the product of social construction and ideology. This complementarian arrangement is correctly grounded before the Fall and its consequences.

Yet, Kostenberger gives careful attention to the effect of the Fall and the consequences that follow. Thus, sin and its effects becomes the explanatory principle for all confusion over gender, sexuality, marriage, and the integrity of the family.

In successive chapters, the book moves through a series of special topics, surveying the biblical material and presenting a systematic exposition of the Bible’s teachings. The authors balance considerations from both testaments and deal honestly with the biblical narratives concerning biblical characters. Thus, the Patriarchs become examples of faithfulness, even as their own sin and misadventures in marriage and parenting are candidly observed. The authors use a very helpful outline format in setting out the various scriptural passages and their importance to each question. In this sense, they succeed in presenting an integrative model, pulling from a comprehensive reading of the biblical text.

For example, marriage and the roles of both husbands and wives is grounded in Genesis and then traced through the entire Old Testament. Husbands are to love and cherish their wives, to bear primary responsibility for the marriage union and to exercise authority over the family, and to provide the family with necessities for life. The wife, on the other hand, is to present her husband with children, manage her household with integrity, and provide her husband with companionship. Contemporary readers may be shocked by the candor of Kostenberger’s presentation, but he grounds his arguments directly in the biblical text. Thus, readers are offered the opportunity to read the critical passages for themselves, and then to understand how Kostenberger framed his argument.

In an interesting section, Kostenberger acknowledges that, within six generations of Adam, the biblical vision of monogamy was at least occasionally compromised by the practice of polygamy. As Kostenberger observes, “While it is evident, then, that some very important individuals (both reportedly godly and ungodly) in the history of Israel engaged in polygamy, the Old Testament clearly communicates that the practice of having multiple wives was a departure from God’s plan for marriage.” Further, the Bible is clear that individuals in the history of Israel who abandoned God’s design of monogamy and participated in polygamy did so contrary to the Creator’s plan and ultimately to their own detriment. The sin and disorder produced by polygamy, then, is further testimony to the goodness of God’s monogamous design of marriage as first revealed in the marriage of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.”

In light of contemporary confusions, this is a most helpful and accurate clarification. Similarly, Kostenberger deals honestly with the Bible’s teachings concerning deviant sexual practices, ranging from homosexuality and adultery to incest.

In another helpful section, Kostenberger differentiates between “traditional” and “biblical” visions of marriage. The traditional vision is deeply rooted in middle-class experience in America. The biblical vision is not dependent upon this traditional model.

Considering the nature of marriage, Kostenberger dismisses the notion of marriage as a sacrament or as a mere contract. Instead, he argues that marriage is rightly understood as a covenant, defined as “a sacred bond between a man and a woman instituted by and publicly entered into before God (whether or not this is acknowledged by the married couple), normally consummated by sexual intercourse.” Thus, marriage is not merely a bilateral contract, but is a sacred bond. Moving from marriage to the larger family context, Kostenberger suggests that a biblical definition of family points to the structure constituted by “primarily, one man and one woman united in matrimony (barring death of a spouse) plus (normally) natural or adopted children and, secondarily, any other persons related by blood.” Citing Old Testament scholar Daniel Block, Kostenberger identifies the family in ancient Israel as patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal. As Block helpfully suggests, the Old Testament family might best be described as “patricentric.” In other words, the family is

centered around the father.

In the New Testament, the structures of marriage and family are explicitly affirmed, even as the church is identified as the new family of faith. Nevertheless, the emergence of the church does not eliminate marriage, family, or the bonds and responsibilities established in Creation.

In a helpful section originally contributed by Mark Liederbach, the authors survey questions related to procreation, contraception, and the use of advanced reproductive technologies. The authors write with sensitivity, but also warn against a superficial embrace of contemporary technologies as without moral and theological complication. Readers are advised to look carefully at the nature of reproductive technologies, as well as contraceptive choices, in order to evaluate such options in light of biblical principles and mandates.

Kostenberger also presents a wealth of material related to the structure of the family, parenthood, and the care and discipline of children. He deals honestly with the need for parental correction and discipline, and affirms the role of corporal punishment in the raising of the young. “*Of course* children will disobey—they are sinners!” Kostenberger observes. “Parents rather should be expecting their children to sin, even after they have come to faith in Christ. Such an expectation is realistic and enables the parent to deal with each infraction calmly and deliberately, administering discipline with fairness, justice, and consistency.”

The authors also provide a very helpful consideration of the biblical material concerning homosexuality. “The biblical verdict on homosexuality is consistent,” Kostenberger argues. “From the Pentateuch to the book of Revelation, from Jesus to Paul, from Romans to the Pastorals, Scripture with one voice affirms that homosexuality is sin and a moral offense to God. The contemporary church corporately, and biblical Christians individually, must bear witness to the unanimous testimony of Scripture unequivocally and fearlessly.” In later chapters, Kostenberger deals with questions related to divorce and remarriage and to the roles and responsibilities of men and women within the church. Even those who disagree with this understanding of divorce and remarriage will appreciate his careful consideration.

Against the backdrop of civilizational crisis, Kostenberger concludes by arguing that this crisis is “symptomatic of an underlying spiritual crisis that gnaws at the foundations of our once-shared societal values.” Further, “In this spiritual cosmic conflict, Satan and his minions actively opposed the Creator’s design for marriage and the family and seek to distort God’s image as it is reflected in God-honoring Christian marriages and families.”

Thus, recovery of a biblical understanding of marriage and family is itself a witness to the gospel and to the grace and mercy of God in giving humanity these good gifts for His good pleasure. Kostenberger and his coauthors are to be congratulated on a volume that takes the biblical text seriously and seeks to apply Scripture to contemporary questions in a way that is neither arbitrary nor piecemeal. Their integrative approach will assist Christians to think through the most important issues of our day and, more importantly, lead their families to show the glory of God in the midst of a fallen world. This book should be welcomed and widely read.

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