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The Glory of God in the Goodness of Marriage

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That familiar language from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, recited thousands of times each week in various forms, presents a vision of marriage as a deeply Christian institution—even a necessary portrait of the love that unites Christ and His church. As marriage signifies this “mystical union,” it points to an understanding that takes us far beyond the relationship of the husband and wife. Do most Christians have even the slightest understanding of this?

It is bad enough that the secular world has discounted marriage into a quasi-legal contract that, like other voluntary contracts, can be made or broken at will. The greater tragedy is the failure of Christians to take marriage seriously. According to the Bible, marriage is not only designed by the Creator as an arena for human happiness and the continuation of the human race—it is also the arena of God’s glory, where the delights and disciplines of marriage point to the purpose for which human beings were made.

Marriage is about our happiness, our holiness, and our wholeness—but it is supremely about the glory of God. When marriage is entered into rightly, when marriage vows are kept with purity, when all the goods of marriage are enjoyed in their proper place—God is glorified.

Our chief end is to glorify God—and marriage is a means of His greater glory. As sinners, we are all too concerned with our own pleasures, our own fulfillments, our own priorities, our own conception of marriage as a domestic arrangement. The ultimate purpose of marriage is the greater glory of God—and God is most greatly glorified when His gifts are rightly celebrated and received, and His covenants are rightly honored and pledged.

Marriage is not greatly respected in our postmodern culture. For many, the covenant of marriage has been discarded in favor of a contract of cohabitation. An ethic of personal autonomy has produced successive generations who think of the world as the arena of their own personal fulfillment and of marriage as an outdated relic of an outgrown culture of obligation.

Ours is an era of self-expression. Individuals express themselves through marriage, and then express themselves through divorce—as if all of life is nothing more than a succession of acts of self-expression.

A divorce culture explains away obligation and sacred promises as temporary statements of emotional disposition. I may feel married today—I may not feel married tomorrow.

Our culture is so sexually confused that the goods of sex are severed from the vows and obligations of marriage. Thanks to modern technologies, we can have sex without babies, babies without sex, and both without marriage. For many, marriage has become an irrelevancy.

For others it is worse. Some have lambasted marriage as a domestic prison, a patriarchal and oppressive institution foisted upon unsuspecting men and women in order to deny them freedom, autonomy, fulfillment, and liberation. And, for a post-Christian culture, there is that nagging problem of the essential character of marriage as sacred institution. A society that disbelieves in God will eventually disbelieve in marriage.

Christian couples who are committed to this high conception of marriage must see themselves as counter-revolutionaries. In a very real sense, they are. They are standing against the tide of public opinion, against the trend of modern morality, against the erosion of order and the deflationary market in faithfulness. Before God, they stand committed to each other—and only to each other. To live together for each other, no matter what may come.

The church has recognized three great purposes of marriage, and all three of these have been subverted by the sexual revolution and its aftermath.

The first is the procreation and nurture of children, if God should grant children to the marriage. This purpose is dishonored by many, but it is honored among believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Children are to be welcomed as gifts to the institution of marriage, transforming husband and wife into father and mother. In our anti-natalist age, some see children as impositions—or worse. The denial of a procreative orientation for marriage—every marriage genuinely open to the gift of children—is a denial of the biblical vision of marriage itself.

The second great purpose of marriage, as the ancient language expresses it, is “as a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication . . . that [believers] might marry and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ’s body.” Marriage as a remedy for sin? This purpose is ridiculed among many, but it is honored among Christ’s disciples. This is exactly what the Apostle Paul took as his concern in writing to the church at Corinth. Confused and seduced by sexual sin, that church had compromised its own ability to represent Christ. Paul pointed to marriage as a means of channeling sexual desire into its proper context, lest believers “burn with passion” and sin against God. [1 Corinthians 7:9]

Our culture has turned “burning with passion” into a hedonistic art form. Explicit sexuality—stripped of the constraints of marriage—is the energy behind much of our economy, the material for entertainment, the substance of art, the enticement of advertising. Those who believe that sexual intercourse should be limited to marriage are dismissed as moral throw-backs, hopelessly outdated creatures who simply have no clue about the modern world.

The third great end of marriage is companionship throughout life, through good and bad, comfort and loss, sickness and health, until death parts the husband and wife. The mystery of completeness is expressed in the statement that the two shall become one. When a man and a woman exchange marriage vows, they become one solitary unit. After the exchange of these vows, we can no longer speak of the husband without the wife, or of the wife without the husband. They have become one, both in the physical union of the marital act and in the metaphysical union of the marital bond. As a married couple—husband and wife—they will live to the glory of God with each other, for each other, and to each other.

The end of marriage is its beginning—the glory of God, the mystery of Christ and the church. The exclusivity and purity of the marriage bond points to the exclusivity and purity of the relationship between Christ and His church.

How does marriage glorify God? Tertullian, one of the early church fathers, offers wisdom: “How beautiful, then, the marriage of two Christians, two who are one in home, one in desire, one in the way of life they follow, one in the religion they practice . . . Nothing divides them either in flesh or in spirit . . . They pray together, they worship together, they fast together; instructing one another, encouraging one another, strengthening one another. Side by side they visit God’s church and partake God’s banquet, side by side they face difficulties and persecution, share their consolations. They have no secrets from one another; they never shun each other’s company; they never bring sorrow to each other’s hearts . . . Seeing this Christ rejoices. To such as these He gives His peace. Where there are two together, there also He is present.”

Marriage is the source of great and unspeakable happiness. Yet because of sin it is not unmixed happiness. But marriage is not first and foremost about making us happy. It is for making us holy. And through the covenant of marriage two Christians pledge to live together so as to make each other holy before God, as a testimony to Christ.

Remember these truths as you celebrate Valentine’s Day. Perhaps we should seize this day in order to launch a Christian counter-revolution for marriage.

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