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The Purpose of Marriage

Christopher Ash

Three kinds of question are asked about sexual ethics: What? How? Why? The 'What?' question focuses on definition, what is or is not marriage, what is or is not moral or right. The 'How?' question addresses resources needed to build or repair marriages. Both definition and resources are given attention in our society and in the church. The 'Why?' question, the purpose of marriage, is the Cinderella of the three. And yet it is fundamental.

Men and women are called to love God; this is our primary human obligation. To love God involves aligning our desires with his will and purpose. We cannot therefore begin to understand marriage until we have considered the Creator's will and purpose in this regard. It is the privilege of the human calling gladly to embrace the task, the opportunities and the dignity of aligning ourselves with the Creator's will. Before we delineate *what* marriage is, let alone address *how* we may be (and remain) well married or help others to do so, we must ask *why* the Creator instituted marriage at all, what we may call purpose with a capital 'P'. The definition of marriage follows theologically and logically from the purpose of marriage.

To ask the Purpose question is not to ask of any particular man or woman, or any couple, what were *their* purposes in marriage. People enter or continue in marriage with widely differing goals or hopes. Nor is it to ask of a particular social culture for what purposes it 'constructs' what it calls marriage, and what benefits it perceives in any particular sexual social arrangement. These too may differ. Both individual and social purposes may vary widely, and are certainly culturally, relative. Nor is it simply to look at how human beings 'are', or even how the human body 'is', and to try to deduce from 'nature' what the purpose of sex might be; 'nature' is inadequate as an uninterpreted foundation for ethics.

The concept of the 'created order' includes teleological order – order that serves the Creator's purpose. Those who locate only in human beings, like the

newspaper columnist who wrote 'The purpose of marriage is personal to each couple[1] will not accept this. But their subjectivism fails to address the question why sexual differentiation and sexual attraction exist at all. The Christian theologian must insist that these things exist because the Creator made them; and he did so for purposes of his own, which purposes transcend our varied hopes or fears.

Consideration of the Creator's purposes serves another function. This is to bring precision and perspective to the rather hazy humanist ethics of sex, which is often conditioned by some concept of human 'flourishing' or fulfilment. It is a truism in sexual ethics, as in much contemporary ethics, to speak of what does or does not promote the flourishing of human beings, and to consider the promotion of human flourishing as a criterion for ethical analysis. For example the report *Something to Celebrate* asks, 'what will best support...people...and enable them to be *happy and fulfilled?*'[2] Such an ethic asks primarily, 'What will be good for men and women?' This is a laudable aim, and a proper doctrine of creation will lead us to expect that the creation ethic we propose will indeed promote human flourishing rather than human frustration. But we will not reliably discover what does promote human flourishing simply by consulting human beings. The criterion is almost infinitely elastic.

Indeed to adopt human flourishing as a fundamental criterion in ethical analysis is to build on sand; the foundation is too soft. It will not do to ask what some human beings feel makes for their fulfilment; the answers would be muddied by culture, confused by personal histories and obscured by sin. Either we end up with what O'Donovan calls the endless 'balkanisation' of knowledge or one group imposes its will by cultural and ethical imperialism on others.[3] We must ask of the Creator his purpose beyond culture for all men and women. For what reason does the Creator make man male and female and so order human affairs that a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife? What purpose of the Creator ought this union to serve?

1 Jasper Gerrard, *The Times*, 19.6.00.
2 *Something to Celebrate: The report of a Working Party of the Board for Social Responsibility* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995), p. 13 (my emphasis).
3 O.O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Leicester: Apollos, 1994), pp. 50-2.

The Main Candidates: The Procreational, Relational and Public 'Goods' of Marriage

In the history of Christian thought various 'Goods' or purposes of marriage have been suggested or argued, and these have been formulated in different ways. In each case the reason for teaching them is that the particular couple entering marriage may, at least approximately, align their own individual purposes with the purposes for which the Creator ordained marriage; they are pointers to the purposes inherent in 'creation order'.

For simplicity we may say that three candidates (or admixtures of these) have been proposed for the purpose of marriage. These so-called 'goods' may be called the Procreational Good (that sexual union usually leads to children), the Relational Good (the good focussed on the couple's relationship as beneficial to them and as a visible sign of the covenant between the Lord and his people) and the Public or Institutional Good (the benefits of ordered and regulated sexual relationships in human society).

The major focus of this article is a reassessment of the procreational and relational 'goods' of marriage in the light of the teaching of Genesis 1 and 2. This is important because during the twentieth century both Protestant theology and western culture have asserted the primacy of the relational good and marginalized the blessing of children as central to the purpose of marriage.

'It is not good for the man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18). This word of the Creator is often taken to mean that it is not good for man to be 'solitary'[4]. Man is a social creature, made for relationship; and the creation of woman is God's primary provision for his social need. So the Relational Good focuses on the good inherent in the marriage relationship, irrespective of whether or not there are children. Further, theologians note that the bible gives to the marriage *relationship* a deep and uniquely theological significance. It is

4 To use Barth's word. *Church Dogmatics* (English Translation, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961 – hereafter *CD*) III.1 §41.3, p. 289 and often elsewhere. 'Einsame' in the German.

marriage that mirrors the God-man covenant relationship, the relationship of loving faithfulness between the LORD and his people Israel, between Christ and his Church. The theologian who has expounded this theme most influentially in modern times is Karl Barth. Barth sees in marriage a strong apologetic value, because marriage points beyond itself to the God-man relationship. The possibility and indeed the need for man to be in relationship with God is already imprinted on man by virtue of his nature as male and female. 'In virtue of his nature man must be formally prepared for grace.'[5] So, 'If God comes to man, He comes to his possession which he has already marked as such in creating it'.[6] And, for Barth, this fundamental anthropological marker is human sexual differentiation.

It is this covenant significance which forms the theological summit of the relational good of marriage. So Barth argues passionately that 'the Old Testament Magna Carta of humanity' is to be found not in the high Old Testament valuation of procreation but in Genesis 2:18-25 backed up by the Song of Songs and validated by the motif of the covenant relationship of Yahweh with Israel, anticipating that of Christ and his Church (with major emphasis on Ephesians 5).

Our ethically foundational texts are Genesis 1 and 2. Here are the most fundamental presentations in scripture of the structure of creation before the Fall. That sexual differentiation is ordained before the Fall 'in the time of man's innocency'[7] points to its rightful place in the good created order. When Jesus was asked ethical questions about marriage it was to Genesis 1 and 2 he turned (Mark 10:6f, Matthew 19:4f, quoting both Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24).

Genesis 1:1-2:3

Central to the placing of order in creation in Genesis 1 is the creation of man

5 Barth *CD* III.1 §41.3, p. 290.
6 Barth *CD* III.2 §45.3, pp. 321-3.
7 Cranmer's introduction to the marriage service in the *Book of Common Prayer.*

(v. 26), made in the image and likeness of God in order to be the ruler over the living creatures of sea, air and land. The reason man is given this unique dignity of being created in the image of God is that he may fulfil a task, the task of responsible dominion. And *in this context* in the next verse (v. 27) we are told that man is created with the sexual differentiation of male and female. And, in the same context of task, man is blessed (v. 28) with the possibility of procreation, with the purpose of filling the earth and subduing it. Verses 26-28 are emphatically bracketed with the creation mandate and task of exercising responsible dominion, and it is in that matrix of meaning that human dignity (in the image of God) and human sexuality (as male and female) are placed.

Within the order of Creation, mankind is placed uniquely with a dual orientation. On the one hand, towards the Creator, mankind is given moral *responsibility*; on the other, towards creation, he is entrusted with a *task*. The co-ordination of both aspects of this orientation is the key to the ethic of sex. In order to delineate with understanding a proper sexual ethic, we need to understand both the character of the Creator, to whom we are responsible, and the nature of the orderly creation, over which he has set us as stewards.

We need to tread carefully in relating four aspects of the human condition: the task of dominion, the human responsibility to the Creator, our sexual differentiation as male and female, and our human dignity in the image of God. We are not justified in dissolving any one of these into another. For example, Barth goes too far when he seeks to *equate* 'the image of God' with human sexual differentiation; this is not justified by the text, and Barth fails convincingly to address the objection that animals too have sexual differentiation, indeed that sexual differentiation is one of the most obvious features shared with non-human living creatures.[8] But he is correct to distinguish 'the image of God' from the task of dominion, so that human

8 Barth argues that in Man alone sexual differentiation is the unique and only distinction (*CD* III.1, p186), since "Man is not said to be created or to exist in groups or species, in races and peoples, etc.". But the same may surely also be said about, for example, dogs. It is an argument that relies on contrasting 'Man' on the one hand with 'Non-Human Living Creatures' on the other. If, for example, we were to compare 'Dogs' with 'Non-Canine Living Creatures' we could turn the argument on its head.

lordship over creation is 'not the essence but the accessory'[9] of man's determination as the image of God. Man's ontology as the image of God and man's function as God's vicegerent over creation are intimately co-ordinated. And human sexual differentiation is set in the same context.

It is sufficient for our purposes to note the close relationships between these parts of the fundamental matrix of human meaning. Man is given sexual differentiation as a basic and unique distinction unlike, for example, race, which is miscible, or class, which may change. There is no such thing as an androgynous human person; there is only the human male and the human female.

Why? For what purpose has the Creator made man this way? In the context of Genesis 1 man is made to rule a world that is already teeming with living creatures, a world which is abundantly fecund, but which will be out of control unless it is ruled. How may man fulfil this task? He also, like the sub-human living creatures, needs to 'be fruitful and multiply' so that there will be sufficient human beings to exercise responsible dominion.

There is also a suggestive link between image and procreation in Genesis 5:1-3. 'When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. (5:2) He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them "man." (5:3) When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.' It is possible to read verse 3 simply to mean that Seth had a physical resemblance to Adam; he looked like his father and shared his father's anatomical structure. But coming immediately after the reminder in v. 1f of the creation image and likeness, it suggests that even after the Fall, the work of procreation echoes the work of creation. It passes on image and likeness. Of course, in the wider perspective of the bible's theology, we know that this image and likeness are now flawed. As Calvin observed, Adam cannot now avoid passing on his corruption, 'because Adam, who had fallen from his original state, could beget none but such as were like himself.'[10] Nonetheless, the implicit

9 Barth, *CD* III.1 p. 186.
10 Calvin's commentary on Genesis, *ad loc.*

connection between image and procreation has powerful ethical implications for marriage; it carries with it the entailment that godly nurture is ethically integral to procreation which, when understood in the context of task, should never be caricatured as just 'making babies'.

We note also that this close association of procreation and task is repeated after the Flood in Genesis 9:1-7, where the repeated blessing command, 'be fruitful and multiply' in verses 1 and 7 brackets a renewed (albeit modified) teaching both of image (v. 6) and of dominion (v. 2f).

It is clear in Genesis 1 that the procreational good of marriage appears on the Creation map from the very beginning in this context of task.[11]

Genesis 2:4-25

What happens when we move to Genesis 2:18-25? The explanation of the narrator in verse 24 (quoted by Jesus and Paul) gives this passage deep significance as a theological explanation of the nature, purpose and meaning of marriage. In Genesis 2:18 we hear the Creator speaking with himself about something 'not good' in Creation, something that is made good only by the creation of the woman. If we can discern what was 'not good' before this epochal completion of humanness then we shall understand theologically the true *bonum* or 'good' of marriage. Genesis 2:18 is therefore the key text when we ask the Purpose question.

Perhaps because it is rather fuller and warmer in style, Genesis 2 is referred to more often than Genesis 1 by Christians seeking a Creation basis for sexual ethics. Also, if the seemingly merely functional procreative emphasis of Genesis 1 seems not to do justice to the passion and power of sex, we turn with relief to the delight of Genesis 2:23. Here at last the Bible is in tune with

11 Tim Stafford, *Sexual Chaos* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), ch. 7 touches on this when he says that procreation lifts the eyes of a couple beyond themselves to the task of raising children, which is their part in subduing the earth (p. 79).

what men and women experience in the sexual sphere. Here we may wax eloquent about man as a relational being who cannot live without love. Doesn't verse 18 tell us that 'it is not good for man to be alone'? "Ah," we say, "poor Adam was lonely. A pet dog or cat or ox or budgerigar or goldfish didn't meet his needs. It is not good for him to be alone and lonely. God is going to give him a wife so he won't be lonely any more. Marriage is God's provision against man's loneliness. And therefore his evident delight on seeing the woman is a pointer to the role of sexual union in remedying our aloneness. The primary function of sex is relational and unitive, to bring healing and fulfilment to the sexual partners."

It is common to understand Genesis 2:18 in this way, and the forceful exposition of this theme by Karl Barth has been influential: it is not God's purpose that the man should be alone, and the creation of the woman is God's remedy for his loneliness. From which it is deduced that the institution of marriage and sexual union is *in principle* God's remedy for human aloneness or loneliness (although these are not quite the same) and God's anthropological marker pointing to the covenant relation between Man and God. That is to say, if Genesis 1:26-8 points to the procreational good of marriage, Genesis 2:18-25 points with equal vigour to its relational meaning. And while Barth himself maintains a rigorous theological insistence on the covenant structure of marriage as a pointer towards the God-man covenant, in popular perception and protestant piety this has dissolved into a focus on marriage as God's remedy for human loneliness.

This idea has seeped deep into the substructure of our thought, both in western society and in the church. If I may be forgiven a personal anecdote, at the end of a day when I was thinking about these things, I was reading our young daughter at bedtime from a generally excellent children's story bible. We had come to Genesis 24 (supposedly) and I found myself reading the words, 'Abraham was very old. His wife Sarah had died. He said to himself, "I must make sure that Isaac has a wife to love him. *I don't want him to be on his own when I die.*"'[12] (my emphasis). Re-reading Genesis 24 I could not find this motivation in the text, and it was not clear how the storybook

12 *Lion Story Bible,* Vol.5 "Isaac finds a wife," p. 4.

author claimed this intriguing insight into Abraham's mind; it reads more like a revealing imposition of contemporary western culture onto the Genesis account, in which the major concern is not Isaac's state of mind but rather the proper continuance of the line of promise.

Although the homosexuality debate is not the focus of this article, it is worth noting the widespread assumption in this connection that celibacy and loneliness are inevitable partners. For example, in Paul Avis's book *Eros and the Sacred* he suggests that homosexual partnership may be 'the lesser of two evils, the greater evil being enforced celibacy *and the accompanying loneliness*' (my emphasis).[13] But as Thomas Schmidt points out, this 'objection to celibacy rests on a false assumption that the homosexual person is thereby consigned to relational loneliness'.[14] We must question this assumption.

I want to suggest that protestants especially have tended to read Genesis 2:18 in the context of what follows (to v. 25), but neglected the context that precedes. Rather like an old-fashioned Form Critic treating a gospel pericope as an isolated pearl only extrinsically connected to the other pearls on the string[15], we have failed to read Genesis 2:18 as part of a coherent and continuous narrative. The effects of this have been very significant.

A Reassessment of Genesis 2:18

Two arguments may be marshalled to question this exegesis of Genesis 2:18, a wide one and a narrow. On the one hand as Christian theologians, we must exegete Genesis 2:18 in the context of the whole of Christian Scripture; on the other, we must do justice to its immediate context. I want to suggest that the meaning of Genesis 2:18 is more integrated with the earlier part of Genesis 2 and indeed with Genesis 1 than is sometimes implied. While there is undoubtedly value in integrating Genesis 2:18 with the doctrine of

13 P. Avis, *Eros and the Sacred* (London: SPCK, 1989) p. 147.
14 T. Schmidt *Straight and Narrow* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), p. 167 where he expands on the rebuttal of this assumption.
15 To borrow Prof. Morna Hooker's caricature of some treatments of Mark's Gospel.

Redemption as an anticipation of Covenant, the immediate context is the doctrine of Creation.

Loneliness in the wider context of Scripture

First, we should note that the theological superstructure erected on what we may call the social reading of Genesis 2:18 is very weighty and sometimes only rather slightly linked to the text in context. Here is one example from Barth, who writes of human sexual differentiation, that 'here at the heart of creation there is a gap which must be filled if man is really to be man and not in some sense only so potentially, and in the presence of which, even though surrounded by the superabundance of the rest of creation, man would always be solitary, always in a vacuum and not among his equals'.[16] But on this account we must ask why this gap must be filled with *woman* and not by a second human male. The mere idea of relationality could have been achieved by unisexual humans in whom was planted a strong homosexual urge. Those who rely on purely relational arguments are driven to rather speculative comments about the 'otherness' of woman which in some way 'answers' to man's cry; it is sometimes hard to know what this means.

If it is true that in some profound way marriage is, in principle and in general, God's gracious provision for human loneliness, the answer to man's heart cry, and if it points to and signifies also in itself the satisfaction of the religious longings of the human heart for its Creator, we might reasonably expect to find support for this elsewhere in scripture.

We must certainly admit that the theme, so central in Barth's thought, of the God–Man Covenant is indeed intimately linked with marriage language. But when we look to find this theme earthed back into the supposed benefits of human marriage for man or woman, we draw something of a blank.

The bible has a great deal to say in various places about the longings of the human heart. This element is more pronounced in some parts than in others;

16 Barth, *CD* III.1 §41 p292

but it is not insignificant. There is much about love and friendship and fellowship. But it is very striking that almost never are these longings and their satisfaction placed in the context of sexual relationship. If Genesis 2:18 does indeed indicate that marriage is God's principled provision for human loneliness, this is surprising. Some examples may be considered.

1 John 4:7-21 is eloquent about love, the love of God for his people, the love of his people for God and the love of his people for one another. There is reference to love driving out fear (v.18), which is exactly where we might expect a reference to the healing power of unconditional acceptance in a marriage. Yet there is no hint of sexual relationship anywhere within the horizons of this passage. And if we ask how the presence of God is *signified*, the answer in verse 12 (in language which is reminiscent of the Incarnation language of John 1:18) is not found by looking at marriages, but rather 'if we love one another'. The passage is about the love found in the fellowship of a Christian church.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:6-8 Paul employs language of great warmth to describe the love he has for this church, the sharing of his life with them, his gentleness in dealing with them. Again, there is no hint of sexual relationship or even sexual imagery. In 1 Corinthians 13, where the context is again the life of a church (although in this case in ironic contrast to a church which conspicuously fails to show such love) again there is no allusion to marriage, but rather to the fellowship of the church.[17]

In John 13–16 Jesus speaks with great love and intimacy to the inner circle of disciples, at a time of great stress, about his love for them and the love they must have for one another. There is much about the Father's love for the Son, the Son's love for the disciples, the disciples' love for one another, but again, there is no hint of sexual relationship or sexual imagery. One of the highest things he can call them is not his (sexual) lovers (this is nowhere in sight or thought) but his friends (15:15).

17 This is spite of the common association of 1 Corinthians 13 with wedding sermons in popular culture.

In Paul's letter to Philemon we find 'the hearts of the saints' being 'refreshed' by the love of Philemon. Again, sex and marriage are nowhere in sight.

Friendship again is described with great warmth in the love of David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18-20 and *cf.* 2 Samuel 1:26 'better than the love of women'). The context is loyalty (including political loyalty) and friendship; sexual relationship is nowhere in sight.[18]

Perhaps supremely in scripture it is the Psalms which express and address the deep longings of the human heart, longings deep and urgent like a deer for water (Psalm 42:1) or all-absorbing bodily longings of 'heart and flesh' crying out (Psalm 84:2). There is in the Psalms healing for the broken-hearted in many deep ways. And yet (apart from the royal marriage, Psalm 45) sexual relationship and marriage are conspicuous by their absence. Indeed when the 'lonely' are specifically mentioned in Psalm 68:6, the Lord's remedy is to put them 'in families', not necessarily in sexual relationships; the cure is belonging, security, trustworthy relationships, but not necessarily the marriage bed. All this eloquently suggests that the Lord has remedies other than marriage for human loneliness.

We must be careful not to overstate our case. When the wise men note, 'Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life' or '...sweet to the soul' (Proverbs 13:12,19), we must not exclude the place of sexual desire and sexual fulfilment from this observation. Likewise when the psalmist sings of his 'desires' being satisfied with good things, so that his youth is renewed (Psalm 103:5). We would place ourselves clean contrary to frequent human experience if we did, and there is no theological reason to attempt this. No, what we are arguing is that while sexual fulfilment is indeed one of the ways in which God may remedy human loneliness the Bible does not teach that it is the only, or even the major remedy.

The Creator God understands the human heart and feels with its longings,

18 It is a sad symptom of our sexualised society that commentators read sex into any relationship of warm trust, whether David and Jonathan or Jesus and his disciples.

including longings for fellowship. But it is not at all clear that marriage or sexual relationship is his general provision to meet these yearnings. On the contrary, God's general provision for human loneliness appears to be friendship and fellowship, both with God and with fellow-believers, rather than necessarily marriage.

Loneliness in the context of Genesis 2

When we turn from the rest of scripture to consideration of Genesis 2:18 in its context, we again find the social reading inadequate. 'Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."' We need to ask where the man is and what he is doing there at this point in the narrative. The word 'helper' means just that, 'one who helps or comes to the aid of someone needing help'. But why does the man *need* help? With what does he need assistance? This can only be answered by reading the story so far.

The story begins with a picture of incompleteness, 'when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up'(v. 5). This is an unsatisfactory scenario, to put it mildly. It is difficult to see from verses 5 and 6 exactly why there is this absence of vegetation. There seems to be no shortage of water (v. 6) so presumably the problem is connected with the absence of man, (v. 5 – 'there was no man to work the ground'); man is the one to bring the water to the ground in irrigation and to 'work' the ground.[19]

It comes as no surprise to find in verse 7 the formation of man. This is not an arbitrary irruption into the story, but the logical meeting of creation's 'need'. Only then does the 'garden in Eden' appear (v. 8), into which the man is put. We are not told at this stage why the man is placed in the garden. And indeed it is often assumed that man is there for his own pleasure, given the plethora of pleasant trees (v. 9). But we need to remember that the incompleteness of creation is connected with the need for man to be a 'worker' or 'servant'. Man is not in the garden for sensual enjoyment, despite what von Rad scathingly calls 'the commonly accepted fantastic ideas of 'Paradise'". This is

19 This is suggested by G. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1987) *ad loc.*

confirmed in v. 15: 'The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till (lit. "work") it and keep it.' The purpose of man's presence in the garden is to work or serve and to watch or guard. If in Genesis 1 man's calling is described with reference to Creation as one of dominion, in Genesis 2 any thought that this dominion is self-serving is corrected by its description in terms of service and work. This is not a burdensome or miserable calling, it is true. This service is in the context of abundant goodness (v. 9, v. 16f). But it is service nonetheless. Where Genesis 1 speaks with grandeur of the dignity of responsible dominion and rule, Genesis 2 speaks with homely warmth of the need for gardeners in God's parkland. Ethically, both point beyond humankind (and certainly beyond the horizons of any given couple in marriage) to work that needs to be done.

The natural thought from the flow of the text, therefore, when we are told that Adam needs a 'helper' is that this is connected with the work he has been given to do. He needs someone to come to his aid, for he cannot do this work 'alone'. We know the end of the story, and it is hard to read it as though for the first time. But in v. 18 there is only the slightest hint about the nature of this necessary helper. The word 'fit for him' (literally 'as one opposite to him, as a counterpart to him') suggests complementarity rather than identity. It is not just that the man needs another pair of hands, for which another male would suffice. Wenham cites in this context Ecclesiastes 4:9-10: 'Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up.' Purely on the level of statistical averages of strength, and at the risk of seeming pedestrian, we must surely admit that a second male is likely to be more useful for this. In some as yet unexplained way, he cannot carry out his calling without one who is complementary to him.

This calls into question reading verse 18 in terms *purely* of the social nature of man. For as soon as we have said this, we have to admit that same-sex friendship is and has always been a fruitful and valid context for companionship, fellowship, and sociability. So why, in the terms of the story, does it have to be the woman?

For Woman it has to be. The drama of disappointment followed by seemingly endless disappointment (v. 19f) followed at last by delight (v. 23) is told as only the Hebrew storyteller knows how. Verse 23 may be rendered like this: 'And the man said, *This one* – at last! Bone of my bones, and Flesh of my flesh. I shall call *this one* Woman for from Man she was taken, *this one*!'

We must not deny the note of affirmation of sexual desire and delight implied here, nor the innocent picture of verse 25, of nakedness untouched by shame. The caveat I want to enter concerns the *telos* or ultimate goal of the man-woman match. Yes, this is a picture of delight and intimacy and companionship. But it is delight with a shared purpose, intimacy with a common goal, and companionship with an outward-looking focus. As we rejoice with the lovers in the garden, we must not forget that there is work to be done. The garden still needs tilling and watching. The purpose of the man-woman match is not their mutual delight, wonderful though that is. It is that the woman should be just the helper the man needs, so that together they may serve and watch.

We are left to surmise just how the woman is to be this helper. It is hard to exclude the thought that it includes procreation, for the same reason as in chapter 1.[20] And it may be that the common task is the underlying reason why the man-woman union in marriage is spoken of so very strongly in verses 23 and 24. Just as a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, so the garden-tilling task will fail unless the helper and her man stand and work together.

Loneliness and Marriage

When we read Genesis 2:18 in the context of Genesis 2, following Genesis 1, and in the wider context of all of scripture, we are led to recognise that both the procreational and the relational benefits of marriage are set before the Fall in the context of an over-arching purpose, the achievement of a task calling humankind into an awesome dignity. Any Creation ethic of marriage must set

20 The observation that Genesis 2 does not mention procreation is less significant than some claim, for Genesis 2 follows Genesis 1 as part of a connected narrative.

it in this outward-looking context of task; and never simply as God's answer in principle to human loneliness.

It is necessary at this point to admit that we will seem to many to be tilting at windmills. The perception and indeed the experience of so many, that sexual union is indeed the answer to loneliness, is so widespread and so deep that it will take more than one short article to change it.

It is therefore important to be clear about what we mean. The phrase 'in principle' is crucial. In the life of an individual, God may indeed – and often does – use the companionship of a loving husband or wife as a significant, if not overwhelming, factor in remedying his or her loneliness. This is obvious from the deep loneliness experienced by the recently widowed or indeed many recently divorced. It would be absurd to deny this. In these cases the pain is not only (or even mainly, depending on age) the sexual frustration that accompanies bereavement or divorce; it is the deprivation of valued companionship.

The argument of this book is that marriage is not *in principle* God's remedy for human loneliness. This remedy, in general, in principle and for all men and women, is fellowship and friendship. If in our society the unmarried (or those not 'in a relationship' as we revealingly call it) experience loneliness (as they undoubtedly do) we are therefore not to point their hopes inevitably in the direction of a new sexual relationship, but rather to human relationships of friendship and fellowship. This is a challenge to every Church.

The Damaging Effects of Unbridled Relational Primacy

Marriage ought therefore to be considered under the umbrella of the governing ethic of human responsibility (to the Creator) and human task (over the creation). The purpose of marriage is to serve the execution of this task in loving obedience to the Creator. Both the procreation and godly nurture of children and the faithfulness of the marriage relationship are together to serve this task. Much more needs to be said about how such a responsible task-focussed ethic is delineated and worked out in marriage

teaching and practice.[21] But before concluding it will be worth reflecting on how important this ethic is. The effects in contemporary culture and Protestantism of unbridled relational primacy have been disastrous.

Merely couple-focussed marriage is both wrong and foolish. It is wrong because it promotes a selfish perception of sexual relations. 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?' asks Jesus (Luke 6:32). Any relationship of mutual love, which looks only inwards in mutuality, fails this critical moral test. It is not a loving relationship unless its charity extends beyond the bounds of reciprocity. In Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man in Hades has consideration for his five brothers in danger (Luke 16:27f); perhaps he had always been a good family man with concern for his family circle. But his 'charity' never extended to Lazarus at his gate; and so it is not accounted as true charity at all.

Perhaps we have in Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) a model of what today's world might consider a 'successful', because intimate, marriage. So far as we can judge this couple are at one; it may be they communicate admirably, understand one another perfectly and share deep levels of agreement as regards their goals in life. And yet they come under terrible judgement. Intimacy is not a moral goal for marriage, for it may be intimacy in evil.

But unbridled relational primacy is not only wrong; it is also foolish. The couple working at the project of coupledom for its own sake face the problem that introspection is stifling and self-destructive. Much might be said about the therapeutic impact of an outward-looking focus on dynamics such as anger and forgiveness. The idea of a couple 'staying together *for the sake of* the children' is sometimes ridiculed; rather it should be extended, so that a couple accept a strong moral obligation to stay together not just for the children (if any) but *for the sake of* neighbours and wider society.

There is only a short step between marriage as coupledom and marriage as

21 This article is a greatly-abbreviated extract from a draft chapter in a forthcoming book on sexual ethics.

self-actualisation. And once the relationship is self-actualisation, all extrinsic motivation for faithfulness 'for better or worse' has evaporated. Indeed my motive for marrying will be the same as my motive in staying married or in ending a marriage; in each case my motive will be that I should become all that I can become as a person. 'So in fact I have a *moral obligation* to divorce and seek a new mate if my original wife can no longer promote my growth and self-actualisation.'[22]

The problem is heightened because of the unrealistic expectations thus loaded onto the man-woman relationship. Not only do I easily slip into seeking my own self-actualisation, I also look primarily to my marriage partner to promote and be the major instrument to provide or at least catalyse this result. As Christopher Brooke comments, 'While faced with the spectacle of broken marriages, we have come (by a strange paradox which however goes very deep into the roots of our subject) to expect far more from a happy marriage'.[23] And it is the problem of what each *expects* that makes an introspective religion of coupledom so destructive. 'The leech has two daughters. 'Give! Give!' they cry.' (Proverbs 30:15). Couple-centred marriage dissolves into self-centred marriage; and self-centred marriage is like a leech. Or, to put it another way, it is like a pair of parasites trying to feed off one another. Scott Peck in his bestselling book *The Road Less Travelled* suggests that we can shape other people into host organisms on which we are parasites. 'People say, "I do not want to live, I cannot live without my husband (wife, girlfriend, boyfriend), I love him (or her) so much." And when I respond, as I frequently do, "You are mistaken; you do not love your husband (wife, girlfriend, boyfriend)". "What do you mean?" is the angry question. "I just told you I can't live without him (or her)." I try to explain. "What you describe is parasitism, not love."'[24]

The Orthodox theologian Vigen Gurioan observes that Americans overload 'the nuclear family with too great a responsibility for providing persons with a sense of identity and significance in life'. 'Under this moral weight marriage cracks, and the family is incinerated from within by the intense psychological

22 R. Clapp *Families at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), p. 63.
23 C. Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford: University Press, 1989), p. 8.
24 Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), p. 98.

demands placed upon it.'[25] Guroian goes on to contrast intimacy, which he defines as expansive,[26] reaching out to wider spheres of activity and association, with privatism, which is reflexive, withdrawing from a world in which it cannot find value. (In contemporary Protestant piety, the word 'intimacy' means much what Guroian means by 'privatism'.) The cult of privacy thrives where there is 'a gnostic distrust of the world outside the self'.[27] At the conclusion of his argument Guroian says that families need a *transcendent purpose* for 'coming together, remaining together, and raising children'.[28] This transcendent purpose we find in Genesis 1 and 2 in the task the Creator has given to humankind.

There is a paradox here. Protestant emphasis on the marriage *relationship* is linked with the theme of the covenant relationship in scripture. The love of a husband for his wife is to be a visible image of the love of the Lord for his people, and this relationship is so central to reality that the project of imaging it is seen as the primary purpose of marriage. The paradox is that when we begin to think of the marriage relationship as an end in itself, or even as an end that serves the public signification of the love of God, we slip very easily into a privatisation of love that contradicts the open, outward-looking and gracious character of God's covenant love. By this I mean that the covenant love of the Creator for his people is a love that has the world, the whole created order, as its proper object; in loving his people with a jealous love he has in mind that that people should be a light to the nations and that through them blessing should spread more and more widely. But the moment we begin unquestioningly to treat marital intimacy as the primary goal of marriage we contradict this outward-looking focus and the project becomes self-defeating.

It is worth exploring more deeply and theologically why merely couple-focussed marriage is self-defeating. The theological theme that suggests itself

25 V. Guroian, 'An Ethic of Marriage and Family', in *Essays in Orthodox Ethics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1987), p. 107.

26 Contrast the negative characterisation of 'intimacy' in Stafford, ch. 4 'The Ethic of Intimacy'.

27 V. Guroian 'An Ethic of Marriage and Family', p. 107f. Guroian also observes, "Privacy becomes the clarion justification for abortion in our society. Intimacy values human presence and welcomes unknown others into a common world".

28 *ibid* p. 114.

here is idolatry. When the relationship of the couple is considered as an end in itself it becomes an idol. And idols, as every careful reader of the Old Testament knows, are empty nothings that make their worshippers grow like them. To make anything or anyone other than the Creator God the object and goal of a human project is to worship an idol and to place oneself on the path towards ever-increasing lightness and vacuity. It is dangerously possible for Christians to do this with regard to marriage while seeming to be pious. Rodney Clapp comments, 'With the private-public separation and the idealization of the home as a haven, I am afraid Christian families today often live for themselves. They think the church exists to serve them. They buy books that make spiritual disciplines important *because* they will strengthen the family, that tell them to go to church *because* going to church will make the family happier. But this gets it all backwards'.[29] We end up making church, prayer, and the Christian life a means to the idolatrous end of strengthening family.

It is dangerously possible to speak of marriage as if it were a discipleship-free zone. We hear in other contexts the hard words of the Lord Jesus about the cost of discipleship and the vital need to give absolute loyalty to himself. But somehow when it comes to the supposedly private sphere of marriage and family we do not really believe these challenges to be pertinent. One of the most helpful emphases in Richard Hays' treatment of Divorce and Remarriage[30] is that marriage is to be understood as one aspect of discipleship for those who are called to the married state. So, when listening to Mark 10:2-12 for teaching about marriage, Hays rightly notes that it falls in the middle of a challenging section of Mark (8:31–10:45) about discipleship.[31] The disciple follows the Lord who found his 'food' in doing the will of him who sent him (John 4:34). If the married disciple begins to *seek* fulfilment and satisfaction in his or her married relationship, this is not walking in the footsteps of the master. The stringent demands and the inspiring vision of discipleship must not be suspended within the theatre of the marriage relationship.

29 Clapp, p. 162.
30 R.B. Hays *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), ch. 15.
31 *ibid* p. 349.

There is a real danger that popular church-based courses or literature about marriage fall into this trap. When a practical book about marriage is subtitled 'Achieve a happy and more fulfilling relationship'[32] we ought to ask whether this is an appropriate motivational appeal. When a course is entitled 'Developing Closeness in Marriage',[33] again we must ask whether this implied goal is really the deepest or best. I received publicity for a marriage course entitled, 'You, Me and Us: The Relationship Course You Cannot Afford to Miss'. The leaflet claims, 'The course offers a blueprint for happiness with your partner'. The first of the four main themes is described as 'Love' in the words, 'Relationships begin when you fall in love. Relationships end when you no longer feel in love. So love is central, but it is rarely fully understood. The course will show how you can each give and receive the love you need. It will show you how to keep romance permanently alive'. The other themes are Communication, Understanding Yourselves, and Handling your Conflicts. Much if not most of the content of these books and courses is practical and wholesome. But it is too needs-centred, too couple-centred and too feelings-centred; ought we not to be asking how we may *serve God* in our marriages?

At the very simplest level, it does not take a Christian commentator to observe that our society is endlessly preoccupied with 'loving relationships', so much so that to watch many soap operas we might easily forget that anyone ever had work to do. In an intriguing column in *The Times*[34] Matthew Parris laments the excess of 'love' on television and ends by waxing eloquent about work: 'Leave love with its slippers by the fire; put on your boots. Lift your gaze from your lover's eyes and see the sky behind, and all the stars! There are mountains and forests and rivers, whole wide oceans to cross. There are furrows to plough, rocks to shift, streams to dam. There is work, so much work – that happiest of pursuits – to be done.' To this the Christian ought to give a qualified, 'Hear, hear!', qualified because in the vision of Genesis 1 and 2 it is both lover and beloved who together put on their boots to go into the garden to work and, if God gives them children, to nurture them praying that they will do the same.

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32 M. Lawson *The Better Marriage Guide* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998). I do not know if this subtitle was the author's or the publisher's.

33 Run by 'Rapport' on behalf of Care for the Family.

34 Matthew Parris, *The Times*, 26.2.96.

It may be that Christian responses to marriage breakdown have majored too much on trying to help people build and sustain relationships without giving them the outward-looking focus of serving God. In so doing we are buying unwittingly into the spirit of the age; we appear to accept much of the implicit relational primacy of our culture and just try to show our readers how to do it better than the world outside. Instead the whole paradigm needs to be challenged.

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