

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The *telos* or ‘Chief End’ of Marriage

Simon Vibert

What is the chief end of marriage? If the ‘chief end of man’ is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever (as the answer to question one of the Westminster Shorter Catechism clearly states), could the same be true of the one-flesh relationship of marriage?

If this is the divine perspective on human marriage, why has marriage, for many Christians, become a joyless fulfilment of duty, rather than an anticipation of the delightful union between Christ and the Church? The purpose of this article is to spell out my exegetical conclusions on the ‘chief end of marriage’.

Genesis 2:24

Genesis 2:24 is a critical text for our understanding of the biblical view of marriage. It is directly quoted by Jesus, responding to the Pharisees’ trick question about divorce. Jesus replies by upholding God’s original intention for marriage and dislike of divorce, referring to Genesis 2:24 as the basis of his argument (Mt. 19:5, Mk. 10:8). The Apostle Paul concludes his argument about marriage as a living illustration of Jesus’ unity with his bride, the church, by quoting Genesis 2:24 (Eph. 5:32). Paul also quotes this text in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 6:16), assuring the Christians in Corinth that sexual immorality certainly will be judged by God because sleeping with a prostitute makes ‘one flesh’ language with the body but with no intention of a permanent God-honouring relationship.

Jesus responded to specific questions about divorce to a Jewish audience quoting Genesis 2:24. Paul rebuked aberrant behaviour amongst Corinthian believers and taught about the earthly anticipation of the heavenly reality of ‘one flesh’ union to a predominantly Gentile audience, quoting Genesis 2:24. We infer, therefore that Genesis 2:24 is God’s normative, created design for marriage. Jesus and Paul were teaching in very different cultural and religious settings, but both refer to this text as fundamental for a universal understanding of marriage.

Clearly, understanding Genesis 2:24 is foundational if we are to appreciate what marriage, according to God’s design, is all about. Moreover, judging by the four New Testament occurrences of this verse, here are principles about marriage as

designed by God which transcend cultural and religious expectations in every age.

Context

A cursory glance at Genesis 1-2 reveals that these two chapters relate the account of creation in two distinct ways. This acknowledgment has had a far-reaching impact on Old Testament hermeneutics over the last century or more.

At the end of the nineteenth century it became popular to interpret Genesis 1-11 as an Israelite interpretation of the Babylonian accounts of creation in the ancient world (see Rogerson, 1991). This view of the early chapters of Genesis was taken up by S.R. Driver and G. Von Rad. While we will observe that other ancient Near-eastern narratives seem to have had an influence on the way in which the author presents his material, there are some fundamental differences, chiefly relating to the theocentricity which may be inferred from Genesis 1-3.

Von Rad argues that the reason why Genesis 2:24 is included in the narrative at this point is to answer a specific question:

A fact needs explanation, namely, the extremely powerful drive of the sexes to each other. Whence comes this love ‘strong as death’ (Song 8:16) and stronger than the tie to one’s own parents... this drive towards each other which does not rest until it again becomes one flesh in the child? (Von Rad 1972: 85)

Whilst acknowledging the scholarly perplexities surrounding the change of tone and style between Genesis 1:1 to 2:3 and 2:4ff., Von Rad’s division of Genesis into four authors (JEDP) does little to acknowledge the distinctly different purposes of Genesis 1 and 2. However, the question “What is the reason for the differences between the two creation accounts?” needs a response.

At the end of Genesis 1, man is presented as the climax of God’s creation (1:26). He alone is made in the image of God (both the male and the female, 1:27) and ‘God saw all that he had made, and it was very good’ (1:31).

Towards the end of chapter two we have the account of the making of Eve (2:18-22) as the answer to Adam’s loneliness. This is an extraordinary act of creation, with God being literally ‘hands on’ and not creating by word alone (21).

The woman was created, not of dust of the earth, but from a rib of Adam, because she was formed for an inseparable unity and fellowship of life with the man, and the mode of her creation was to lay the actual foundation for the moral ordinance of marriage (Keil & Delitzsch 1986: 89).

The comment of v.24 is directly related to Adam's poetic gasp in v.23. Verse 24 is included by the author as a commentary on marriage

One Flesh

Kidner explains the drama of verses 23-24:

The naming of the animals, a scene which portrays man as monarch of all he surveys, poignantly reveals him as a social being, made for fellowship, not power: he will not live until he loves, giving himself away (24) to another on his own level. So the woman is presented wholly as his partner and counterpart; nothing is yet said of her as child bearer. She is valued for herself alone (1967: 65).

Many commentators have pointed out the apparent connection between the accounts of the creation of Eve with the Sumerian story of Enki, where a woman is made from the rib. Her name Nin-ti could mean 'lady of the rib' or "lady who makes live". But apart from the play on language in Sumerian there is little else in common with Genesis 2. 'Enki was a god who had brought eight diseases on himself, and Nin-ti was one of eight goddesses created to heal the eight affected parts (in this case, his rib)' (See Kidner 1967: 65, n.3).

There are a number of unique features in the account of how Eve was formed which tell us of the role she is to play. First, God took woman from man: they were originally one flesh. Secondly, she is made differently—from Adam's rib, not from the dust of the earth. Thirdly, when Adam sees her he exclaims: 'bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh'. He is filled with joy at the sight of Eve and shows that delight in the poetic structure of his response. In other words, we infer, even before the more general statement on marriage (in v.24) Adam acknowledges that there is something about Eve that makes him complete, and marriage brings about a reuniting which is reflective of the way in which she was made. There was only one thing in the garden that was not good – loneliness – and Eve is created as God's unique answer to that problem.

The intimacy and delight Adam feels is because Eve is made from a part of Adam, as Matthew Henry delightfully observes: “Not made out of his head to top him, not out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved” (Matthew Henry, n.d.: 20).

Here at last is a truly complementary partner for Adam (v.18, v.20), (literally ‘a helper as opposite him’, that is, ‘corresponding to him’, Kidner: 65), intended for a lifelong union: by leaving one family unit and then being joined/united to his wife (in exclusive and permanent union) the two become ‘one flesh’. There is a sense of fulfilment now for Adam; she belongs to him and he belongs to her.

Some have seen a mini-wedding ceremony being enacted here as “...God himself, like a father of the bride, leads the woman to the man” (Von Rad 1972: 82). In this perfect state (prior to the Fall) ‘they were both naked and felt no shame’. “The removal of a piece of the man in order to create the woman implies that from now on neither is complete without the other. The man needs the woman for his wholeness, and the woman needs the man for hers”. (Atkinson 1990: 71).

Calvin sees further significance in this act and takes this verse to be the words of Moses explaining the intention and pattern for all future marriages of what God has done in making the woman from Adam’s side:

[A]fter he has related historically what God had done, he also demonstrates the end of the divine institution. The sum of the whole is, that among the offices pertaining to human society, this is the principal, and as it were the most sacred, that a man should cleave unto his wife. (Calvin 1989: 136).

Marriage, accordingly, is more than a social convenience, and more than a religious ceremony. Rather it is the reuniting of two people at the deepest level of their creation: “Therefore they must come together again and thus by destiny they belong to each other ... The alliance of one sex to another is seen as a divine ordinance of creation.” (Von Rad 1972: 85).

The Marriage Covenant

The delight of Genesis 2:23 is followed immediately by the narrator’s comment

in 2:24. It could not be said more clearly that marriage is the context of committed love in which the fully physical expression of sexual relationships is meant to belong (see Atkinson 1990: 74).

By the leaving of father and mother, which applies to the woman as well as to the man, the conjugal union is shown to be a spiritual oneness, a vital communion of heart as well as of body, in which it finds its consummation. This union is of a totally different nature from that of parents and children; hence marriage between parents and children is entirely opposed to the ordinance of God. (Von Rad 1972: 90-91).

What are we to make of the relationship between man and woman? There are evidences of covenant language in v.24. The covenant is based on an external social and legal framework, and an internal heart centred on personal relationship (Atkinson 1990: 74). So, too, marriage is not a purely private arrangement but the social acceptance of a couple in the wider society – borne out of the personal relationship between the two of them.

In an interesting article on the pastoral implications of the teaching in Genesis 2:24 about marriage, J.H. Olthius puts together the leave, cleave, ‘one flesh’ aspect of v.24 and the vulnerability of the union in v.25:

To ‘cleave’ is the Old Eng. word for keeping the troth, clinging to, holding fast. Keeping the troth is counting on each other, giving the utmost, sharing deeply from inside, sticking through thick and thin, husbands and wives are open and vulnerable together, not closed and defended. (Olthius 1995: 566).

Jack Dominionian summarizes a healthy marriage in these terms. “A good marriage is to be the context in which each can be to the other a means by which each receives sustenance, healing and growth in maturity” (quoted by Atkinson 1990: p 75).

The marriage is to be exclusive (the man leaves his family before being joined to another in marriage); it is to be permanent (cleaving) and sealed by God (in ‘one flesh’). Israel was told to cleave to the Lord (Deut. 10:20, 11:22, 13:5) by forsaking all other gods. Some have suggested that because Genesis uses the terms ‘forsake’ and ‘stick’ in the context of Israel’s covenant with the Lord, Genesis 2:24

has in view human marriage as a kind of covenant. (Wenham 1985: 71).

While it is some time later before covenant language is applied more specifically to marriage there may be some strong hints that marriage is to be viewed in this way in this passage. For example, L. Smedes makes the following observations about the three stages of marriage which make up the covenant:

‘Leaving’ – implies an emotional and physical separation from parents. The wedding ceremony is important and brings about a social accountability. Forsaking implies prioritising wife above parents, not abandoning responsibility towards them altogether. The loyalty to the wife is even higher than the loyalty to the parents. This demand would be quite a shock in such a traditional society.

‘Cleaving’ – a word of ‘covenant-faithfulness’. The expectation of faithfulness covers four main areas:

- a) Faithfulness to a vow
- b) Faithfulness to a calling
- c) Faithfulness to a person
- d) Faithfulness to a relationship

Wenham agrees that the phrase ‘and sticks to his wife’ suggests that both passion and permanence should characterize marriage (Wenham 1985: 71).

‘One Flesh’ - includes sexual union but is more than that:

Sexual intercourse is thus given a meaning: it is meant to express, consolidate and deepen the ‘one flesh’ union of man and wife, as they grow more and more together in a relationship which expresses something of God. (Smedes 1982: 14).

Despite the practices in later Israel, there is a clear assumption that monogamous marriage was God’s created and intended ideal. Two distinct individuals become one new person:

One flesh...refers to that oneness which – initially in intention, and gradually more and more a reality through time – marks a good marriage

relationship... The one flesh relationship of husband and wife can issue in the one flesh of their child. By linking the marriage covenant to the family in this way, we can see the divine intention that the family is the context in which children are to be brought up by, and not just begotten by, their parents. In other words, the marriage and family interrelationship of Genesis 2:24 is the divinely intended pattern in which the creation command of Genesis 1:27-28 (“be fruitful and multiply”) is intended to be fulfilled. (Atkinson 1990: 76).

Atkinson is surely right to comment that the idea of ‘one flesh’ combines the ‘unitive and procreative’ aspects of marriage (1990:77). From the commentary of v 24 we are supposed to infer that through subsequent generations all who leave, cleave and become one flesh join together in a marriage bond that is as ‘bone of bones and flesh of flesh’. Surely there is no higher expression of intimacy or unity between human beings than is anticipated in these few words?

The ideal of marriage is that of harmony and intimacy. Like all of Genesis 1-2 it portrays the ideal to which Israel hoped to return when the promises of Abraham were fulfilled. Though poetic in character the narrative clearly intends the reader to understand some fundamental principles about the nature and purpose of marriage. (Wenham 1991: 69).

Verse 25 is the bridge pointing both backwards and forwards. Verse 25 accounts for the existence of shame evidenced in chapter 3 which, as Von Rad says, “is one of the most puzzling phenomena in our humanity. The closing sentence of the narrative speaks of it as a phenomenon that is inseparable from sexuality” (Von Rad 1972: 85). At the end of v 25, however, the couple are ‘unashamed’ a word which implies contentedness and unhindered intimacy clearly enjoying the openness of the one-flesh relationship (v 24).

From our examination of this key text we may draw some conclusions about the Divine intention in creating marriage:

First, Genesis 1 concentrates on the coequality of the male and female. Both are made in the image of God as together they reflect the climax of all that God has made. Consequently, God assumes that, in Eve, Adam will find fulfillment in the joyful union with an equal.

Secondly, Genesis 2 emphasizes God's intimate involvement in making a suitable companion for Adam: God parades the animals before Adam so he may name them (thus exercising his authority over them) and that he may see that no suitable helper is to be found among the animals. Next, God makes Eve specially from a part of Adam—from his own flesh. In other words, even within the clear understanding of their equality there is portrayed the impression that their created differences will be best expressed by the woman responding and the man leading. This is God's design pattern for fulfillment within marriage. She alone is specially made for him; she alone is the answer to Adam's loneliness.

Thirdly, when Adam exclaims in joyful satisfaction 'this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called 'woman', for she was taken out of man' (2:23) he was describing the sense of oneness which they had with each other. 'Bone of my bones' is a Hebrew idiom rather like our phrase 'blood relation' (Atkinson 1990: 70). Consequently when the commentary on marriage made in verse 24 concludes with 'and they will become one flesh' it is speaking about marriage as the coming together at the highest level of ontological union, a rejoining of the man and the woman almost as if the woman was put back into the man's side again. The spouse, through marriage, has become just like a blood relation – of flesh and bone. Finally, Adam is happy! This fact is reinforced by the contentedness in their naked state.

Eschatological Tension in Genesis 2

We have noticed several 'tensions' in Genesis 2. First, there is the surprise of verse 18. The words, "It is not good" interrupts the flow and sequence of chapter 1. As God surveyed everything he had made the writer interjects the affirmation: 'And God saw that it was good' (1:10b, 12b, 18b, 25b, 31a).

Since the idea of 'good' describes that which is appropriate and fitting within the purpose of creation, the man's being alone was not good, because he could not do all that God had planned for humankind. As he began to function as God's representative, naming the animals that God brought to him, he became very aware of his solitude. Being alone is a negative concept, for the full life is found in community (see Eccl. 4:9-12; Jer. 16:1-9). The tension of man's incompleteness continues to build until God fulfills his resolution of verse 18 (Ross 1993: 126).

The words 'It is not good for the man to be alone' raise an important question:

Was Adam's sufficiency to be found in God alone? It appears that, according to divine decree, Adam needed more, someone in addition to God, in order in order to find joy. One could infer the words 'at last', from the Hebrew, preceding Adam's cry of delight: 'this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman', for she was taken out of man' (2:23).

Secondly, there is still eschatological tension in these verses which must not be missed by the modern reader. Pre-fall, Adam, and now Eve, enjoyed intimacy with God. Their communion with him was unhindered. Post-fall, all this changes. The intimacy they knew both with each other and with God is spoiled in Genesis 3. Adam blames Eve (and God), and Eve blames the serpent for their rebellion (3:12-13). Their relationship is already beginning to show signs of strain. Worse, Eve will continue to desire her husband, but he will rule over her (3:18).

Marriage was never intended to substitute for obedience to God's command to worship him with the whole heart, and the intimacy which Adam and Eve knew pre-fall can never be fully experienced in all its fullness until the full implications of Genesis 2:24 are worked out in God's soteriological purposes.

The Purpose of Marriage

Christopher Ash's helpful article ('The Purpose of Marriage', Churchman Spring 2001, pp.7-28) has highlighted what he sees as a common misunderstanding of Genesis 2. The purpose of marriage has been perceived as being God's answer to the problem of loneliness. After all, Genesis 2:18 does say: 'It is not good for the man to be alone'. He argues that Karl Barth has influenced the interpretation of this text so that marriage has been reduced purely to the answer to man's loneliness (Ash 2001: 17-29).

His anxiety that this view may turn marriage inwards and ignore the other remedies that God has provided for loneliness (particularly the church and the community) is well put. He is also surely right to suggest that part of the reason for Eve's creation was in order that she might be a 'helper'. Man is given the task of exercising dominion over the creation and clearly no other companion was found.

I find his conclusion on page 21 most interesting, however. Ash states that marriage, on its own, will not meet man's loneliness and, moreover, Eve is

made as a creative counterpart to Adam to help in the work. But the purpose of marriage is bigger than this:

The caveat I want to enter concerns the *telos* or ultimate goal of the man-woman match “...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.” (2001: 21).

I would endorse Ash’s conclusion that intimacy is not a moral goal for marriage (2001: 23), although I would probably place it higher than he does. My main point of contention surrounds the *telos* of marriage. The outward focus in marriage is clearly important. However, we need to turn briefly to Ephesians 5:31-32 in order to see the *telos* of marriage accordingly to God’s eschatological purposes.

Ephesians 5:31-32

John Stott entitles his commentary on Ephesians *God’s New Society*, proposing that the whole epistle is about this new society formed by God under the headship of Christ.

Its central theme is ‘God’s new society’ – what it is, how it came into being through Christ, how its origins and nature were revealed to Paul, how it grows through proclamation, how we are to live lives worthy of it, and how one day it will be consummated when Christ presents his bride the church to himself in splendour, ‘without spot or wrinkle or any such thing...holy and without blemish’ (Stott 1982: 25-26).

Paul uses the term ‘church’ to mean more than individual congregations or churches, and, argues O’Brien, more than the universal church, to include the idea of the church assembled around Christ in the heavenlies (P.T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Apollos, Leicester, 1999: 26-27):

‘[T]he church’...may be taken as speaking of this heavenly gathering that is assembled around Christ, and, at the same time, of a local congregation of Christians, in which Jews and Gentiles are fellow members of the body of Christ, as a concrete expression of this heavenly entity (O’Brien 1999: 27).

O'Brien quotes positively the conclusion of Max Turner: "Ephesians makes dominant a theme which was already important in Colossians, that is, cosmic reconciliation in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:9-10, 20-23; 2:20-23 and 3:6...)" (O'Brien, 1999: 56-57).

It is in this context that the teaching on Christian marriage needs to be appreciated:

Marriage between Christians serve as an example of the kind of unity the apostle has in mind between the 'head' (both the husband and Christ) and his 'body' (5:25-27). Such a marriage bears living witness to the meaning of the 'two becoming one', and reproduces in miniature the beauty shared between the Bridegroom and the Bride. Within the wider context of the letter as a whole, the union between Christian husband and wife, which is part of the unity between Christ and the church, is thus a pledge of God's purposes for the unity of the cosmos (O'Brien 1999: 65).

Our main interest in this passage is how Paul reaches his conclusion in Ephesians 5:32, namely that Genesis 2:24 leads him to talk about Christ and the church, and how this conclusion enables us to see God's ultimate purpose for his chosen people. Let us examine the text in its preceding context.

First, verse 22 indicates that behind the loving rule of the husband (v.25), the wife is to see beyond him to her Lord and his Lord. Even the godliest husband does not love his wife as Christ loved the church, which makes submission difficult for the wife. However, behind his imperfect love she is to see the perfect love of Christ for his church. Paul assumes that this will enable the wife to submit and find satisfaction in her partner. The meaning of *hupotasso* (submit) implies a voluntary deference out of love. "It is an appeal to one who is equal by creation and redemption to submit to the authority God has ordained" (Piper and Grudem: 1991, 168).

Secondly, verse 25 indicates that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. This is not primarily 'feeling' love but self-sacrificial love. The love of Christ is expressed in the aorist tense; in other words it was in the one supreme act of sacrifice that Christ demonstrated his love in a past event, supremely the cross.

If the wife is called to give up everything by submitting to her husband, the husband is called equally to give up everything by loving self-sacrificially. Both parties are to look, not to their own rights, but to the interests of their spouse. The wife wants nothing more than to be loved sacrificially by her husband, but because of the Fall the husband will be inclined to domineer (Gen. 3:16b.). On the other hand the husband, rather than actively and sacrificially loving his wife, will be inclined to abdicate his responsibility in the same way Adam was silent in the garden and refused to take the blame for their sin (Gen. 3:1-6, 12). Larry Crabb perceptively comments on this verse:

The silence of Adam is the beginning of every man's failure, from the rebellion of Cain to the impatience of Moses, from the weakness of Peter down to my failure yesterday to love my wife well.... Since Adam every man has had a natural inclination to remain silent when he should speak (Crabb 1995: 12).

Thirdly, the husband is to love his wife as he loves his own body (Eph. 5:28-29). The couple are no longer two distinct people, but one.

Paul is dealing with the fact that after we have given ourselves over to doing all we can to help others, we still have a strong concern for our own bodies. As long as we live in this mortal life, that self-concern is inevitable. Except for a few abnormal souls, we all try to secure the best we can for ourselves. Christian men, Paul is saying, are to extend that attitude to their wives. So close is the unity between a man and his wife that the apostles can say, "he who loves his own wife loves himself" (O'Brien 1999: 186-187).

'No one ever hates his own body', says Paul (v.29). This is shown in our instinctive care and sustenance of our physical body. The natural care we show for ourselves should now become part of the care the husband shows to his wife. Husband and wife are one flesh, and everything they instinctively did for themselves, they are now to do for their beloved. The husband's self-love is to be extended so far as to include sacrificial love for his wife.

Fourthly, husbands and wives are to anticipate the joyful completion of Christ's work in the joy of the final presentation of the bride to the Lord (v.22). This is part of the future consummation of the work which God has now begun in his church.

Negatively, it will not have ‘spot or wrinkle or any such thing’, where ‘spot’ signifies the smallest blemish or stain, and “wrinkle” a pucker that spoils the smoothness of skin...at present the church may rightly be accused of many shortcomings, but Paul looks for a time when all its blemishes will be removed.

On the positive side, the church will be ‘holy and blameless’...A holy place is a place where the deity is supposed to have manifested himself... When Jesus completes his work on the church, it will be wholeheartedly given over to the service of God (O’Brien 1999: 186).

It seems that these words, which anticipate the future completion of God’s work in the church (Rev. 19:7-9), also spell out the fact that marriage at some level is an anticipation of God’s completed work. For, at the resurrection there will be no marrying or giving in marriage. There is an aspect of marriage which is transitory and will be caught up in the final consummation of all things (Mark 12:25). We have more to say about this in a moment.

Fifthly, Ephesians 5:32 asserts that Genesis 2:24 speaks of a ‘profound mystery’, namely that beyond the immediate application to husband and wife, ‘one flesh’ language speaks of the more profound application to Christ and the church.

The word mystery in this context has been interpreted in three main ways;

1. The Mystery is the Marriage Relationship

The first interpretation of *mysterion* sees the human marriage analogy as primary. The word *mysterion* was translated *sacramentum* by Jerome in the Latin Vulgate. Later Roman Catholic teaching took this to mean that marriage is a sacrament and that this whole passage refers to human marriage.

However, this view ignores the analogy running all the way through the passage of Christ and his church (vv.30, 22, 31). The profundity of the mystery mentioned in v.32 implies that there is more to this text than is at first in view in Genesis 2:24.

2. The Mystery is the Union of Christ and the Church

The second interpretation of *mysterion* sees the union of Christ and the church as the primary focus. Throughout this passage there is a growing sense of climax which is reached with the statement of v.33, namely that Christ and the church

is Paul's main interest. The passage is pointing forwards to the great climax, beyond the physical relationship of husband and wife to the metaphysical union of Christ and the church. This view is common. For example, commenting on the similarities and differences in the two relationships (Christ and the church and the husband and the wife) L. Morris says of 5:23:

Paul reminds his readers that Christ is 'himself the Saviour of the body'. The words 'himself' is emphatic; it is Christ, not the husband who is in mind. We can see that the husband is the protector of the body, but he is certainly not the Saviour of the wife in the same sense that Christ is the Saviour of the church. (Morris 1994: 183).

According to this view, the mystery in all its fullness is not seen in the unity between man and wife, but in that unity displayed between Christ and the church. The oneness between man and wife is no more than a little picture of the ultimate purpose of Christ and his church. It is this of which Paul is speaking (Morris 1994: 188).

This position takes seriously the ecclesiastical focus of the book of Ephesians and the climax to which Paul is leading at the end of chapter 5. However, does this passage have nothing to say about marriage now? If it does, how is the analogy being worked out? There is a third possibility, held by O'Brien and others.

3. Christ and the Church as Typology in Marriage

The third interpretation of *mysterion* is to see marriage as a form of typology. The husband's love and the wife's submission are viewed as an expression or foreshadowing of the 'one flesh' relationship, which will be seen in all its fullness in the union between Christ and the church, as indicated by the reference to Genesis 2:24 which Paul uses to draw his argument to a close. This relationship is best understood typologically:

[T]he first Adam's love for his wife as one flesh with himself and the last Adam's love for his own bride, his body, are ... the typology [that] serves Paul's pastoral purpose of providing a model for Christian marriage which is grounded in primeval human origins and reflective of ultimate divine reality. (O'Brien 1999: 432-433, quoting R.C. Ortlund).

‘Mystery’ would then be taken to mean something different from the earlier usage in Ephesians: here it means “the deeper meaning of Genesis 2:24”. The mystery revealed is not the Gentile inclusion in God’s soteriological plans, but rather God’s fuller purpose for the church and marriage.

The theme of Christ and the church, and the typological reference to husband and wife, runs right through the section: “Christ and the church reflected in the dynamic interplay of a truly Christian marriage”. (O’Brien 1999: 433).

In the church, the picture of ‘two becoming one’ is worked out in the maturing and accommodating relationship between bride and groom. The unity of husband and wife, like the unity of Christ and his church, are an anticipation of the climax of God’s purposes of bringing all things into unity under Christ the head (1:10).

This view of the passage takes acknowledges the real application to the household, with the unity of husband and wife together reflecting God’s plans to bring all things under Christ (1:10). Moreover, it acknowledges the larger theme of Christ and the church to which the marriage analogy points, and is consistent with the Old Testament and New Testament theme of bride and groom as the extended illustration of how God relates to his covenant people (see Isa. 61-63; Hosea; Rev. 21; *et al*).

Conclusion

Our biblical studies have led us to conclude that the purpose which marriage fulfils in God’s wider economy is to give a living model and enactment of God’s relationship with his people, the church. If we are going to use the language of *telos* or ultimate purpose, then it should be with the big picture, given by the Ephesian interpretation of the passage, in mind: ‘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’ (Eph. 5:31-32).

Marriage as an Anticipation of and Preparation for Heaven

The New Testament indicates that, whilst marriage is God’s gift to be enjoyed in this life, there is something about marriage which points beyond itself:

Marriage is a sign of eschatological hope. The festive mood at a wedding is a symbol of the joy and the fulfillment of human hopes that will be present at the end of time (see Mark 2:19ff.; Matt. 2:1-14; 25:1-13 etc.). It is therefore not simply necessary from the human point of view alone to celebrate the wedding as festively as possible, it is important to mark the occasion in this way as a hopeful anticipation and celebration in advance of the feast at the end of time. (Kasper 1980: 42-43).

In anticipating the heavenly fulfillment of marriage in the wedding of Christ to his bride, the church, there is also a sense in which human marriage is transitory:

There is also an eschatological reservation in the New Testament with regard to marriage (see Mark 12:25; 1 Cor 7:25-38). Marriage belongs to the form of this world which is transient. According to Christian teaching, it is not an ultimate, but a penultimate and to that extent a temporary value ... no partner can give the other heaven on earth. A person's urge to make such penultimate values absolute and his tendency to do violence to them can only cease when he recognizes God as the ultimate reality... The eschatological glorification of God is the final humanization of humanity. (1980: 43).

This is actually freeing for partners, he argues. The person who voluntarily forgoes marriage for the sake of the kingdom (see Mt. 19:12; 1 Cor. 7:7) expresses through remaining unmarried what all Christians should express, namely that they are entirely for the Lord and his priorities (1 Cor. 7:32). Thus the unmarried state is also an eloquent eschatological sign of God's ultimate purpose for all who are his (1980: 44).

The Chief End of Marriage

The chief end of marriage is identical to the chief end of man. This is a bold statement about the ultimate purpose of marriage. In the life to come, Jesus says, there will be no marrying and giving in marriage in heaven (Mat. 22:30). The climax at the end of time is the wedding feast of the Lamb where Christ is finally married to his church, superseding all other human relationships (see Rev. 19:6-9).

The radical feminism of the 1990s told us that following the biblical pattern for marriage is anachronistic and would be the end of marriage. At one level

they are right. We have concluded that the Bible anticipates the ‘end’ of marriage. The chief end of marriage relates to its appointed culmination and the *telos* or bigger purpose. By implication, this is also the pathway to a joyfully liberated marriage on earth, lived within the eschatological tension which awaits the fulfilment of all God’s purposes for marriage and the world. If Christians marriage can work towards that end, there is joy to be found now. Marriage will also become the living, enacted parable of God’s eschatological purposes for which God has created it – and thus a Christian witness to the world. And, finally, marriage will await the final consummation of all things in the wedding feast of the lamb, the joyful union of Christ and the Church.

Revd SIMON VIBERT is Vicar of St. Luke’s, Wimbledon.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ash, C. 2001 ‘The Purpose of Marriage’, Churchman. Watford, England: Church Society, Vol. 115, No 1, pp 17-29
- Atkinson, D. 1990 *The Message of Genesis 1-11*. Leicester: IVP.
- Calvin, J. 1989 *Epistle to the Ephesians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989.
- Crabb, L. 1995 *The Silence of Adam* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan .
- Henry, M. *A Commentary on the Whole Bible, Volume I. Genesis–Deuteronomy*. Iowa: Word Bible Publishers, (no date).
- Kasper, W. 1980 *Theology of Christian Marriage* London: Burns & Oates Ltd.
- Keil, C.F.& Delitzsch, F. 1986 *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes, Volume I. “The Pentateuch”*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Kidner, D. 1967 *Genesis*. London: Tyndale Press.
- Morris, L. 1994 *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians*. Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books.
- O’Brien, P.T. 1999 *The Letter to the Ephesians* Leicester: Apollos.
- Olthuis, J.H. 1976 *I pledge you my Troth* London: Harper & Row.
- Rad, G. Von, 1972 *Genesis a Commentary* (Revised edn) London: SCM Press.
- Rogerson, J. 1991 *Genesis 1-11* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Stott, J.R.W. 1982 *God’s New Society* Leicester: IVP.
- Wenham, G. J. 1991 *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 Milton Keynes: Word (UK).