What Is Marriage?

by Richard C. Eyer

How shall we define marriage? Shall marriage be exclusively the union of man and woman or also the union of man to another man or woman to another woman? Shall marriage be a promise of commitment for life before God and the community with which we are all one, or shall marriage be any two people who choose to live together for sexual reasons without any faithful commitment for life? Shall marriage be the prerequisite for procreation, or shall society affirm any unmarried woman choosing to have a child with the assistance of a fertility clinic providing donor sperm to fulfill her wishes? Is marriage little more than an invention of culture and therefore something needing to be revised from generation to generation? The message of Christians from the Word of God is that marriage is not whatever we choose to make of it. It is what God has made it to be! But that is no longer a popular view these days. In a letter to the editor of a major newspaper in support of gay marriage following the action of the Supreme Court to allow it, one person celebrated with apparent relief, “The dark age of religion is fading away!”

Nevertheless, marriage is what God has made it to be and to remain. The theme of marriage fills the pages of God’s Word as a message about the nature of the relationship between man and woman in this world and the relationship between us and God that lasts into eternity. Christ is the groom, and we as the Church are the bride — married for life. We, who are married to Christ, live in a unique relationship that brings fulfillment on earth and in heaven. Marriage is a one-of-a-kind experience between human beings. No other relationship, either between closest friends or between parent and child, compares with the uniqueness that is found in marriage.

Marriage as a sign of Christ and the Church

Eph. 5:21–33 speaks of marriage, but verse 33 comes as a surprise, as Paul reminds us that what we are really speaking about here is not just marriage, but marriage as a sign of Christ and the Church. Paul uses the word “mystery” (Greek: mysterion) in speaking of marriage. Martin Luther called marriage a mystery that God has made known to us. Martin Luther wrote of this mystery of marriage. It is:

“a sacred sign of something spiritual, holy, heavenly and eternal. … [Marriage] is an outward and spiritual sign of the greatest holiest, worthiest, and noblest thing that has ever existed or ever will
exist: the union of the divine and human natures in Christ. The holy apostle Paul says that as man and wife united in the estate of matrimony are two in one flesh, so God and man are united in the one person Christ, and so Christ and Christendom are one body. It is indeed as Paul says [Eph. 5:32] that the estate of marriage truly signifies such a great reality. Is it not a wonderful thing that God is man and he gives himself to man and will be his, just as the husband gives himself to his wife and is hers? But if God is ours, then everything is ours.”

An illustration from computer technology might help us understand the biblical revelation that is marriage. When you click on an icon, it opens up something behind it, so to speak. Marriage, as God has given it, is such an icon: “An outward and spiritual sign of the greatest holiest, worthiest, and noblest thing that has ever existed or ever will exist.” When you “click” on marriage, you see the deeper reality of the relationship between Christ and His Church, the people of God. That is, when you look more deeply into marriage what you see is not just two people with a commitment to one another, but also a parallel of God’s commitment to us for life. This is more than saying marriage is an illustration of our life with God; it is rather an earthly enactment of a heavenly reality lived out on earth. Marriage is the sign or mystery that reveals to those who have the eyes of faith to see it that God has wed Himself to us for all eternity.

**Society attempts to redefine marriage**

Marriage is given by God, so it carries a message. Even more than an experience between a man and a woman who promise lifelong faithfulness to each other, marriage mirrors the relationship between God and His faithful people. One of the greatest challenges before us today is the possibility offered through reproductive technologies. Before we can know which of them are compatible with the Christian life, we must assess the implications of our being made in the image of God, as we enter into the one-flesh union of marriage and procreation. For example, in marriage and procreation the two literally become one flesh, but with the use of donors or surrogates, someone outside the union stands in for one or both of those whom God has made one. Such standing-in mirrors an adulterous interruption in the marriage. (Oneness does not necessarily mean procreation, but it is challenged and the waters muddied by those who make use of embryos and other means that are not from the same married couple.)

It is not our human prerogative to redefine marriage for the sake of political correctness, social justice or as an accommodation to the changing times. As God does not change, but is ever faithful, so marriage does not change and ever proclaims the faithfulness of God to His people. Marriage is a mysterious proclamation of the Gospel in our world, for God has not left Himself without such witness of Himself in this world. The Gospel proclamation not only forgives sins, it also changes lives! Marriage cannot be whatever a society wants it to be. We as Christians bear witness to the truth and the dark ages of sin will not change it. Rather than argue with those who will not listen, we Christians live out the reality of a good marriage. We will bear witness to the truth by paying attention to our own marriage and making it an example of truth.

The world around us is always changing. Pastors and parishioners are obligated to educate the world by proclaiming the Gospel and its presence around us as we “speak the truth in love.” Many have never thought nor heard about the mysteries of God in marriage and in Baptism and Holy Communion. We need to speak tenderly and informatively to our young people, so they can live lives of holiness and purity. Others will notice and will see something different about us that may lead to our love for them in seeing Christ in the midst of it all. That is our calling, in marriage and in all of life.

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Marriage

Bible Study Questions

1. In what way is your attitude toward marriage influenced by what you see and hear about marriage on television or among your friends?

2. What is the argument of those who favor same-sex marriage? Take time to hear and understand these arguments.

3. In regard to the biblical understanding of marriage, what is wrong with each of the arguments in favor of gay marriage? Are you able to articulate them?


5. What confusion arises for adopted children of a gay marriage regarding role models for life as a man and woman?

6. Read through these biblical passages and practice being able to discuss them with someone else as a witness to the biblical understanding of marriage.
   a. Gen. 1:26–27
   b. Gen. 2:24
   c. Rev. 22:17
   d. Eph. 5: 22–33

7. How is marriage a sign of Christ and the Church?