

The Mystery of Marriage

Rev. Richard C. Eyer, D.Min.
Concordia University Wisconsin

May, 2000

Ephesians 5: 21-33

(The following is offered as a theology of marriage that can serve as a foundation for evaluating the implications of reproductive technologies from a Christian perspective.)

If God's Story is a great revelatory mystery, marriage is, in part, a revelation of that mystery as it relates to husband and wife. Marriage is more than meets the eye. There is a mystery beyond the promise of lifelong union with each other. The word mystery comes from the Greek New Testament word *musterion* translated in the Latin New Testament as *sacramentum*. The meaning of the word mystery or sacrament suggests a visual sign of an unseen reality hiding beneath the surface of a thing. Marriage is such a mystery or sacrament, a sign of the nature of our relationship with God. Just as an icon in the Greek Orthodox Church is a picture that reveals the hidden presence of a deeper reality, so marriage is an icon that opens up the deeper meaning of our relationship with God in Christ. The submission of a wife to her husband is a sign of God's people's submission to Christ. The husband's unconditional love for his wife is the paradigm of Christ's unconditional love which leads him to suffer the cross for the salvation of all. Marriage, for the Christian, in its unconditional love and faithful devotion, has become the earthly enactment of the relationship between God and his holy people. There is in marriage, as St. Paul says, "a great mystery and I take it to mean Christ and the Church."

One Flesh

Genesis 2: 18-25

The Story as it unfolds in Genesis 2 describes the oneness unique to marriage in terms of a man and woman becoming one flesh. This one flesh meaning is a description of wholesome sexual desire, as Wollenberg says, of the man and woman looking upon the other as if the other were his or her missing half. This one flesh union of the two expresses itself in the procreation of children. When children are not forthcoming due to infertility, this does not mean a loss of the one flesh significance of marriage. The one flesh significance expresses itself also in the unique commitment, intimacy and companionship of marriage as well as in the possibility of children. Children are a gift of God, but the gift is not given to all. This too is a hard truth for many to accept but implies no lack of God's love and favor toward a childless couple.

Because male and female were made for the oneness and companionship of marriage, as Meilaender reminds us, it is not appropriate to think of husband and wife as autonomous persons contracting for equal rights. If, as is the case in our culture,

individual freedom or autonomy is the primary justification for unlimited use of reproductive technologies, then it follows that marriage and reproduction begin to have little to do with one another. That is, if each person is free to engage in use of any and all reproductive technology available for producing a child, such as through the making of embryos in a laboratory and the implantation of those embryos in any woman, married or not, then marriage no longer has anything to do with human reproduction. The biological then becomes separated from the relational and marriage no longer has the meaning intended by God.

It is possible, in a fallen world, to think of ourselves as being in charge of human life, of bringing children into existence by our own will when and how we please. However, producing children artificially in a laboratory as a woman's right, or to satisfy a researcher's moribund scientific curiosity, or to comply with what may become a desperate couple's demand, defiles a relationship with God and distorts the meaning of children as a gift from God to be given only in the fullness of time. If the command given by God to "have dominion" over living things certainly does not apply to domination of spouse over spouse, neither does "subdue the earth" apply to the production of children in a laboratory without regard for marriage.

The Gospel in Marriage

The Gospel message in marriage is that God has revealed something of his own plan of salvation in marriage. As God makes himself "one" with his people through the giving of his Son Jesus Christ on the cross for the Sin of the world, so in marriage, the husband and wife become "one flesh" through a mutual submission and self-giving to one another in love. Marriage is more than it appears. As in the loving embrace on the cross God gives us the new birth of eternal life, so in the loving embrace of marriage a child is given life.