

What is Marriage?

by Richard C. Eyer

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Is marriage the union of man and woman, or is it also the union of a man to another man or a woman to another woman — the gay “marriage”? Is it a promise of commitment for life before God and the community, or is marriage simply any two people choosing to live together, without a commitment for life, for sexual convenience or mutual financial benefit?

Is marriage the prerequisite for procreation, or should today’s society affirm any unmarried woman who chooses to have a child with the assistance of a fertility clinic and donor sperm? Is marriage little more than an invention of an outdated culture and, therefore, something that needs to be revised from generation to generation?

The message for 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.

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 into eternity. Christ is the groom and we are the bride, and we are 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, even between closest friends or between parent and child, compares with the experiences unique to marriage.

Two themes in the Bible help us understand marriage. The first theme is the “image of God” found in Gen. 1:26-27: “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness. ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

To be made in the image of God is to be made in some ways like God. God reveals Himself in these verses in the plural form (“us” and “our”) and in the singular (“his” and “he”). God is a plurality and a unity, which is to say, “we worship one God in three persons” (Athanasian Creed).

Man, being like God, is also a plurality and a unity. He is man, a unity, and also male and female, a plurality. This likeness to God is seen most vividly in marriage where the two (plurality) become one (unity) — the “one flesh” union of husband and wife.

The second theme of marriage, the “one flesh” union, is found first in Gen. 2:24: “A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”

Biblically, marriage is the one-flesh union of a man and a woman, the most natural expression of which is the procreation of children. The theme of marriage is expressed in the message of the prophets when they speak of God marrying Himself to his people only to have his people commit adultery by following other gods.

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.

Martin Luther wrote that 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. 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. Those familiar with the Microsoft icon will know that when you click on the icon, it opens up something behind it, the “Windows” operating system. 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” as Luther put it.

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 for life, but also a paradigm of God’s commitment to us for life.

This is more than saying marriage is an illustration of our life with God; rather it is an earthly enactment of a heavenly reality. Marriage is the sign that reveals to those who have the eyes of faith to see it that God has wed Himself to us for all eternity.

This is why marriage cannot be whatever a *society* wants it to be. It is given by *God* and as such 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.

It is not our human prerogative to redefine marriage for the sake of political correctness, social justice or to accommodate 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.

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