

Finding Our Voice: Sex, Marriage and Christian Vision

Why Get Married? Six Models of Marriage

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“Marriage is nothing but a prison. We don’t need a piece of paper to prop up our relationship.” That remark came from a young man when I asked him whether he was married. He said that he was living with his girl friend but wanted to have nothing to do with marriage. He had a clear, negative picture of what marriage was and wanted nothing to do with it. And I must say that he was right in rejecting it, if it were true that marriage is a legal contract which shackles a man and a woman to each other and locks them up in a lifelong jail. If marriage were that, I would never had married my wife, let alone stayed married to her for 49 years.

Once marriage was an unquestioned social institution. Most people had a clear picture of what it was, even if they did not like it and never intended to get married. It was a matter of common sense; it did not need to be described because that had been clearly depicted over the centuries and was clearly modelled in the social order. The traditional conjugal view of marriage was backed by religion, custom, popular culture and the law of the land. A happy marriage is, after all, the stuff of fairy tales and every romantic story ever told. But that has now changed for many reasons, the latest of which is the invention of same sex marriage. Given the confusion about the nature of marriage and the negative press that it receives, it is amazing that homosexual couples want to be married. Whatever the reason, it does show how deeply appealing marriage

is even for people who are all too aware of marital failure, people who reject the traditional view of it. Even if there is little clarity in people's minds on the nature of marriage, the unconscious appeal of marriage shows how powerful a vision of marriage is and how firmly it grips the popular imagination. I must admit that my own vision of the beauty of a sexual relationship in a good marriage sustained and motivated me as a young man much more powerfully and winsomely than all the moral teaching that I received.

“That’s great! That’s awesome! I think that I should speak with my partner about getting married.” I had officiated at the wedding of my oldest daughter Louise in which I had preached on the natural and supernatural mystery of marriage from Ephesians 5:22-33, well aware that many of the guests had little connection with Christianity and most of them thought that the church disapproved of sex and sexual enjoyment. At the reception I was accosted by this young man who told me that he had lived with his partner for about ten years but had decided not to marry, even though they had two children. Yet something struck a cord with him in what I said. He was not touched by the beauty of the ceremony but by the vision of marriage as state of being that initiated a couple into something larger than just their own relationship with each other. His reaction taught me that our intellectual, moral, legal and political efforts to promote marriage will not succeed unless they are associated with a vision of the beauty of marriage, not as an emotional state of perfect romantic love but as an ordinary, unspectacular way of life in which two people love and cherish each other “for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health”.

If marriage is to thrive in our world, we need to give people a realistic, positive vision of the beauty of marriage that grips them so strongly that it is not dimmed and distorted even by dismal failure and its ugly abuse. And that is what I want to do here today as I outline six models of marriage and assess how adequate they are in depicting it in its various dimensions. In doing so I am guided by the conviction that, like life and the whole of the natural world, we do not create marriage, nor do we construct it to suit ourselves. Rather, we receive it as a gift for our enjoyment and are reshaped by it as we submit to it and cherish it.

Six Models of Marriage

1. The experimental model: marriage as sexual cohabitation

This has become increasingly common, so common that de facto relationships are now legally recognized as common law marriages. It is characterized by the sexual cohabitation in an open-ended relationship in which both parties are free to decide the nature, extent, and length of their involvement with each other. Although it may lead to a permanent union, its main feature is that either party is theoretically able to opt out if the arrangement proves to be unsatisfactory. Sexual cohabitation is justified by the need for a couple to discover whether they are sexually and personally compatible with each other.

The one good thing about this view is that in many cases it does eventually lead to marriage. But there are also many problems with cohabitation that hamper the development of the relationship personally and sexually. I mention only two. On the one hand, important differences and conflicts are usually suppressed for fear that their emergence may end their precarious sexual relationship. Someone usually gets hurt.

That defeats the reason for cohabitation, for sexual compatibility does not just depend on similarities but also on complementary differences in a sexual relationship. That needs to be developed by the friction of honest interaction in safe relationship rather than simply discovered. What's more, unmarried cohabiting couples seldom discover whether they are really incompatible because both parties are on probation and so usually feel the need to put their best foot forward. On the other hand, you let yourself in for much more than regular sexual intercourse once you live together sexually. The partnership sets its own direction and establishes a momentum that may differ from the initial wishes of the couple, such as the need for more comprehensive intimacy, more explicit commitments, greater certainty about the future of the relationship, and the increasing desire for children. On the positive side, a de facto relationship does recognize the need for a couple to discover the nature and extent of their compatibility. That, however, is best ascertained in the process of courtship before marriage during which the couple can sort things out for themselves without the pressure of sexual cohabitation and its demand for sexual adequacy.

2. The romantic model: marriage as emotional affinity

This bases the sexual relationship of a couple on a particular intense kind of love as a passionate emotional state. Since we women and men aren't just bodies but people with bodies and minds, we desire and are emotionally attracted to another person of the opposite sex. So sexual attraction and sexual happiness often has more to do with our imagination and our emotions than our sexual organs and our physical senses. A romantic sexual relationship is experienced as a passionate, emotional exchange between two persons, like a spark or electric current that flows to its opposite

pole, the union of two kindred souls who are meant for each other, like two halves of a circle, the Yin and Yang of Chinese philosophy. These two persons find their match and enter into a state of love with each other. They don't decide to love another person but fall in love with their soul mate. It's a passive experience, something that happens to them. In such an ecstatic experience they are taken out of themselves and feel at one with the other person as they are gripped and possessed at all levels of their being.

This kind of romantic love is, in fact, a rather rare experience that occurs most often in societies where there is a certain mystique about the opposite sex to kindle the imagination and inflame desire because the sexes are sharply segregated. The virtue of that powerful, mythical model of romantic love is its recognition of the emotional side of a good marriage, that fine school for the development of emotional sensitivity and sensibility. The imaginative appeal of this romantic view of marriage is so strong that it still provides the ideal model of a good marriage for most of our contemporaries. But the problems with it are obvious. It could apply equally to sexual attraction to a pubescent child or to a person of the same sex or two persons at the same time. What's more, it bases the relationship of a couple on feelings which are notoriously fickle and deceptive and all too often unequal and unreciprocated. At best it kick starts a relationship and evokes a passionate sense of commitment that leads to marriage. Despite its traditional association with a heterosexual relationships since the Romantic movement, the view that marriage is based on emotional affinity has now been claimed by most of those who advocate same sex marriage. That's their main model of marriage which they share with their compatriots.

3. The conversational model: marriage as a personal relationship

In most traditional Christian rites for marriage a declaration of intent precedes the exchange of vows. Back in the seventies I attended a wedding where the pastor changed the wording of the question addressed to the couple from their intention to live together in the state of marriage to living together in an authentic personal relationship, a relationship of caring for each other and sharing with each other. That startled me and upset me, not because it was entirely mistaken but because of its confusion of marriage with friendship to the detriment of both.

While this view of marriage is not entirely new, its recent revival has been influenced by Martin Buber's advocacy of I-Thou personal relationships. It has also been promoted by popular psychology with its concern for frank self-disclosure, unconditional acceptance, and open communication. It is, I think, the mainstay of most marriage counsellors. Such a personal relationship calls for total honesty and complete sharing at all levels in word and deed, in mind and body, in heart and soul. This kind of relationship depends on verbal intimacy, honest conversation, the sharing of thoughts and feelings.

Even though there is much that is valuable in this model as something to aspire to, it has some obvious weaknesses. The more articulate and more emotionally intelligent party, usually the woman, is privileged and therefore able to call the shots. Its disenfranchisement of the less articulate partner leads to frustration and the concealment of deep seated conflicts that often enough result in the breakdown of the relationship. It presupposes a sure sense of self that few people possess and a degree

of emotional maturity that can withstand personal criticism in the cause of honest self-expression. Worst of all, it puts too much weight on a single person in a one to one relationship for social and personal fulfilment apart from both families and other kinds of friendship. Like the romantic model, this view of marriage applies equally well to homosexual partnerships and, most obviously, to many lesbian unions.

4. The social model: marriage as an order and estate that is recognized and protected by statutory or customary law

This is by far the commonest model of marriage in recorded human history, albeit with many variations. It is based on the public commitment of a man and woman to each other in an exclusive sexual relationship that is officially recognized by society and is legally protected by it. For us in the Christian western world that involves the mutual exchange of vows which creates a safe place for the couple to establish their marriage, found a household, and bring up children.

This model of marriage does justice to three important sides of the sexual relationship of a woman and a man with each other. It recognizes the sexual partner as a public person, a member of a family, and a part of a given society. By the public exchange of vows before witnesses, both parties withdraw from sexual engagement with others and so provide each other with an objective basis for the trust and confidence that is essential to the growth of their marriage and the foundation of a family. By their public commitment to each other in the presence of their families, they recognize that their sexual union brings each of them into the family of their spouse, unites two separate families, and extends both of them by the formation of a new family unit. By the legal recognition of their vows, the couple affirms that society at large has

legitimate interest in marriage and its stability, for it depends on marriage as the basis for its organic order and the natural means for its own growth by the birth and nurture of healthy children.

There are two potential problems with the application of this model in our modern democratic societies. On the one hand, under the influence of commercial consumerism it can degenerate into the notion that marriage is a legal contract to supply certain specified goods and services, a contract which can be terminated by either party at default. On the other hand, it can also allow the state to interfere with marriage under the mistaken impression that, since it give legal recognition to marriage, it actually creates it by its legislation and thus has the power to change it, as with the invention of same sex marriage or the one child policy in China.

5. The ecological model as a natural order and state of being

Marriage is not just a way of relating to my wife, doing something with her, or feeling close to her. Like being alive, it is a state of being with her as her husband. It has to do with myself as a person, my soul, who I am as a man with a unique identity in a unique relationship with her as my only wife with her unique identity, a reciprocal relationship in which we identify and define each other, so that we no longer consider ourselves as separate from each other. It provides us with the proper context for our full sexual development as complementary persons who, together, become one flesh as a result of the sexual union.

By marriage I participate in a given order which is biological, social and personal, an estate as it was traditionally and rightly called, the estate of matrimony. Just as a plant needs the right environment to flourish and reach its full potential, so a couple

needs a place where they can be at home with each other bodily in the natural world, produce children in physical safety, and grow together in a fruitful bodily symbiosis. In this view marriage is part of the given ecological order in which everything has its niche and its part to play in the web of being, the natural order created by God as described in Genesis. There marriage is envisaged as part of God's cosmic order, the order that sustains life on earth. There marriage stands under God's life-giving blessing at the apex of the ordered world that God has created. In this view marriage relates two persons of the opposite sex as partners with each other in three ways: bodily in the biological order, personally in each family, and socially in the community of humanity.

Well what is marriage from this ecological point of view? It is the way of life by which we participate in a pre-existent order of being, like adulthood or parenthood, an order that carries us along as we go along with it and fit in with it, like ball room dancing with a partner to the rhythm of music. This order not only coordinates sexual activity but helps to establish a flexible, dynamic complementary relationship with different roles and responsibilities all directed toward a common goal. By providing freedom within set limits and space for the growth of both persons in an ordered sexual relationship, it creates a balance between engagement and disengagement, intimacy and self-possession, union and separation, interdependence and independence. It sets times and seasons for consolidation, change and growth in tandem with each other. Above all else, it is not an order for control but an order for the reception and transmission of life.

It therefore provides certain rewards, benefits, satisfactions, and blessings for those who fit in with it and play their given part in it according to their social location and its given responsibilities. They are enriched by this order as persons as they give of

themselves appropriately to their spouse in the stages and seasons of their association. In it they can truly become one flesh, a true husband or wife with each other. This order stage manages the course of their convivial relationship and its gradual evolution over the course of time.

The order of marriage also exacts certain penalties, losses, frustrations, and curses on those who flout it, go their own way, and do their own thing in it. They become personally impoverished and frustrated by it as they withhold themselves from their spouse and refuse to submit to its requirements. Yet even when things go wrong, this order still persists with its demands, like the division into male and female roles in a homosexual relationship and the secret hankering for marriage and children in some such unions.

It is my conviction that we need to give much more thought on how to present this view of marriage as a natural, life-giving order to a generation of that is captivated by ecological order and afraid of ecological chaos. We would do well to make marriage green once again. Better, let's keep it fresh and green and clean. For me the best summary of this view of marriage is to be found in the German Lutheran "Evangelical Congregational Catechism" (*Evangelischer Gemeindekatechismus*) published in 1979 (p. 247): ***Marriage is a life environment (Lebensraum) for a man and a woman, which is willed and given by God... It is a pattern of life (Lebensform) which gives support and shape (Halt und Gestalt) to their common life and love...It provides a safe place (Geborgenheit) and creates its own magnetic field (Krauffeld). Its order (Ordnung) cannot simply be equated with the love between a man and a woman, yet it does shield their love. In it husband and wife are not only united with each***

other but are also at home (zu Hause) in their marriage. Marriage is in itself an order (Ordnung) in which bodily values come into their own as they are inextricably interwoven with spiritual values.¹ Note the range of metaphors for marriage: *Lebensraum*: place to live; *Lebensform*: a pattern of life; *Geborgenheit*: safe place; *Kraftfeld*: a magnetic field; *Ordnung*: order; *Haus*: house or home with its pun on the derivation of ecology from the Greek word for a house, *oikos*. For me the most intriguing and helpful of these is the picture of the state of marriage as a magnetic field with its dynamic interplay of polarities.

6. The Christological model as a holy order and state of being

Marriage is a natural order that is good in itself but is not as such holy. It becomes holy when it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer (I Tim 4:3-5). The Christian rite of marriage makes ordinary marriage holy matrimony, what Roman Catholics call the sacrament of marriage. It therefore needs to be kept holy and free from sexual pollution and defilement that desecrate its holiness (Heb 13:4).

The model for that holy order is provided by the relationship between Christ the heavenly bridegroom and his holy bride the church. This view of marriage adds something vital to all the other models which are all equally open to abuse by the frustrating struggle for sexual power which has been highlighted by Marxist and by feminist critics with their notion of sexual politics. St Paul actually offers this as a solution to the perennial battle of the sexes in Ephesians 5:22-33 where he presents a Christological model for Christian marriage. He presupposes that disappointment and hurt in marriage sets up a vicious, passive-aggressive cycle in which husbands

¹ Horst Reller, Herman Müller, & Martin Voigt, *Evangelischer Gemeindekatechismus*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1979, 247. My translation)

withdraw into undemonstrative silence and wives treat them with disrespect them by nagging them. For sex to work well as mutual self-giving in a marriage husbands need to give themselves wholeheartedly and demonstrably in love to their wives. But most men find it hard to offer themselves to their wives like that, for fear of manipulation and rejection or the threat of loss of sexual power and control that undermines their masculinity and virility. They are simply too unsure of themselves to give of themselves simply, freely, and reliably. For sex to work well in marriage as mutual self-giving, wives need to have reliable husbands who take responsibility for their welfare and their marriage, emotionally steady husbands who actually show that they love them and cherish them, husbands who exercise spiritual headship. With such husbands they can relax physically and surrender emotional control because they feel sexually safe and beautiful, cherished and cared for.

But when husbands become withdrawn and cold and sexually insensitive, their wives become dissatisfied and disillusioned and increasingly critical of their husbands. They lose respect for their husbands, despise them for whimpering out, and hit back by putting them down in private and, even worse, shaming them publically. Since this undermines the confidence of their husbands, they compensate by emotional withdrawal or chauvinist self-assertion. That in turn produces a domineering and insubordinate wife. It creates a vicious circle that turns marriage into a battlefield, the fabled battle of the sexes. It invites Satan into the bedroom and allows him to mess with them sexually.

In Ephesian 5:22-33 Paul offers an antidote to that malady for those who are Christians and therefore open to sexual liberation by Christ through his Holy Spirit in the

holy order of marriage. The crux of his remarkable teaching is given in the following verses:

Wives, be subordinate to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church is subordinate to Christ, so also wives are subordinate in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish...let each one of you love his wife as himself, and the wife (see) that she respects her husband.

We need to clarify two key terms in this passage to forestall misunderstanding and its misapplication. Subordination means fitting in with the God-given order of marriage, like the arrangement of a football team on the playing field or the stance of a woman in ball room dancing, in which the husband is the head and both husband and wife are coordinated with each organically, like the head of the body with the body. Headship describes responsible, self-sacrificial leadership that coordinates the operation of the marriage as a cooperative partnership, like the working of the body with its many parts.

In the holy order of marriage both wives and husbands are ruled by Christ, since they are members of his body. Christ rules the church by loving her and giving himself for her so as to unite her with himself in baptism and to share his status and glory as

God's Son with its members. They receive their status and worth and beauty from him. So in holy matrimony the rule of power is replaced by the rule of self-giving love.

By the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit husbands are taught and empowered to give themselves graciously and demonstrably in word and deed to their wives just as Christ gives himself to them. They nourish their wives by meeting their need for physical tenderness and considerate affection and by cherishing them as God's gift to them and fellow saints. They take pride in their wives and praise them just as Christ takes pride of the church and glories in the church as his lovely bride. They regard them appreciatively as Christ regards them, beautiful and holy persons without spot, wrinkle, or any blemish.

By the guidance and direction of Holy Spirit wives are taught and empowered to love their husbands with due respect for them and in willing subordination to them. This is not the fearful submission of slaves to their master or oppressed people to a tyrant but the happy self-surrender of a lover to her beloved, like the church to Christ. By that kind of respectful subordination of a Christian wife to the spiritual headship of her Christian husband both husband and wife are freed from the need for self-assertion and struggle for sexual power in their marriage.

This Christological view for marriage takes a married couple out of themselves and beyond themselves. It does not provide them with an ideal, human form of marriage for them to emulate. Rather the ideal model for marriage is found outside marriage in the union of Christ the heavenly bridegroom with his holy bride. It is received as a gift from him, something granted to them as their marriage is sanctified daily by the word of God and prayer and weekly by their participation in the divine service. And that is a

great mystery which is open to all Christian couples. It is experienced by them more and more fully as they are drawn together into Christ and share in his love.

Conclusion

I have sketched out for you six models of marriage: sexual cohabitation, emotional affinity, a personal relationship, a social order, a natural order, and a holy order. In each case there is so much more that could and should be said in any fair assessment of them and their utility, for even though marriage is, at its core, quite simple, it is also amazingly complex in its various dimensions and the different shapes that it has taken and still takes in different parts of the world. But I present these models to you in order to stimulate your own positive appreciation of marriage in the hope that you may be better equipped to deal with the issue of same sex marriage by promoting a realistic vision of the beauty of marriage as an exclusive sexual union between a woman and a man.

My assessment of each model presupposes the traditional view of marriage as an exclusive sexual relationship between a man and a woman for the immediate purpose of sexual intercourse, complementary companionship, and economic cooperation, and the ultimate goal of bearing children and caring for them. While each of the first three models recognizes some valid aspect of marriage, the last three are not only able to include what is valid in the first three, but, when taken together, are also able to give as a much fuller picture of it in all its simplicity and complexity, its mystery and ordinary beauty.