

Marriage in the Fellowship of the Faithful

BY JOHN THOMPSON

Marriage is a calling to ministry for some Christians that is realized within and for the whole church. The love between husband and wife transcends the ideal of romantic love, for they share a friendship through which they develop the virtues they need to become Christ's faithful disciples and build up the church body.

Christians do well to join the contemporary public debate on the future of marriage. Yet too often when we discuss who should be allowed to marry, the boundaries of sexual ethics, and when it is permissible to divorce, we are unclear about what constitutes a Christian marriage. "Marriage is something which happens in and to the whole church," the contemporary Orthodox theologian Vigen Guroian writes, "for it is an institution with a purpose that transcends the personal goals or purposes of those who enter into it."¹ A Christian marriage, then, involves more than two individuals; it belongs to the larger church body.

How can we reclaim this richer sense of marriage within and for the fellowship of the gathered faithful, the Church? We must begin by drawing a clear distinction between secular marriage and Christian marriage, and understand that the tools to reclaim marriage as Christian come only through the worship of the church body. Furthermore, we must understand the love between husband and wife in a Christian marriage as transcending the ideal of romantic love, for they share a friendship through which they develop virtues that help them become Christ's faithful disciples and build up the church body. As we reflect on these distinctive aspects of Christian marriage, we will see how premarital counseling, the marriage service, and the marriage relationship might properly be called "Christian."

MARRIAGE AS VOCATION

Why does anyone today get married? What is it about marriage that leads us to give up our individual lives and unite ourselves with another person? Our society, of course, provides certain financial incentives for marriage through breaks on taxes, insurance, and inheritance, but the main reason we enter into marriage is to mollify the fear of loneliness. Through marriage we secure a family that keeps us from living and dying alone. Many churches today merely echo this secular and pragmatic function of marriage with their extreme focus on family and family values.

Christian marriage, however, does not serve this purpose of providing a supportive family. As Christians, we do not need to marry to overcome loneliness, since our true family is the Church. The good news of the gospel is that in Christ strangers can become family. Marriage might even hinder our life together in the church family, for it can distract from the primary goal of becoming a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. This is the Apostle Paul's point to the Corinthians:

I wish for you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how he might please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how he might please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman or the girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, in order that she might be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how she might please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your unhindered devotion to the Lord. (1 Corinthians 7:32-35, *my translation*)

Thus, the Church should teach that singleness is the first, default, and standard way of life for every Christian.

Marriage is certainly not wrong for Christians, and existing marriages should be nurtured. Yet Christians have no imperative to become married as soon as they can, or to prefer marriage over singleness as a more whole or wholesome situation. Jesus and Paul expressly relativize the priority of marriage within a Jewish culture that made marriage the norm.² Indeed Jewish religious teachers considered it to be the normal state of human life; frequent was the saying, "He who has no wife lives without joy, blessing, or good."³

Though this new teaching on the superiority of singleness is not widespread or repetitious in the New Testament, it is univocal. Furthermore, early church tradition continues this emphasis. Methodius of Olympus sees marriage as a good because it is a source of new Christians (*Symposium* 2.1), yet he proclaims celibacy as a "higher form of life" (1.2). Similar sentiments are found in the *Divine Institutes* of the African theologian Lactantius when he proclaims sexual abstinence as "the peak and summit of all virtues," al-

though he points out that it is no requirement (6.23.29). Later Christian writings such as John Chrysostom's *Homily 20 on Ephesians* and Augustine's *De Bono Conjugali* echo the preference for singleness.⁴ Thus, both Scripture and the early church tradition proclaim that marriage is not necessary for a contented and complete Christian life.

Given this priority of singleness, Christians should see marriage as a calling to ministry. And if marriage is a vocation, the theologian Karl Barth

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writes, then it is not an arbitrary choice by two individuals but a divine command. In the Messianic age marriage is a specific vocation, not a natural structure or "order of creation" to which everyone is called. Christian marriage is precisely a calling of the two partners in Christ; hence the ultimate norm for their relation is

Christological—a relation of mutual love and service to the other. A strength of Barth's account of marriage as vocation is its unsentimental character; mutual forgiveness and patience are more important in a marriage than romantic love.⁵

Once marriage is seen as a specific call to ministry, it becomes clear that significant numbers of Christians are not called to it. Paul uses the term *charisma* (or gift) to describe singleness, marriage, and chastity (1 Corinthians 7:7). Members who believe that they cannot fulfill the obligations of Christian marriage must resist any pressure they feel to marry. Moreover, they should not view their ostensible unfitness for marriage as a character deficiency. As Paul states, "Each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind" (1 Corinthians 7:7).

MARRIAGE AS WORSHIP

Since marriage is a vocation from God, we should look to the Church to provide the tools necessary to fulfill properly our marriage vows, and we should fully expect that marriage will include participating in the common life of the faithful. The worship and thanksgiving of the Church are a real source of grace and the true ground of marriage.

The church practices of baptism and communion provide the proper lenses for us to view Christian marriage. Baptism lets us see that we are grounded in a community more determinative than marriage. The grace offered to us in our baptism allows us to see our spouses as family even before the marriage ceremony. Thus, we are brothers and sisters, friends in Christ, before we are husband and wife. In the celebration of communion

we are reminded that our lives and our marriages are based on grace, that they are gifts.

When we were baptized, the minister used words like “new birth,” “new creation,” or “newness of life” to proclaim to us and the church body that a new beginning had occurred. Baptism is a death to death and is also the beginning of life; we die to our old sinful life and are raised to new life (Romans 6:3-8; cf. Colossians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:1-5). Our baptism, then, was not an individual and private action, but a communal and public action performed for and from the church body. Baptism welcomed us into the body of Christ, where we are no longer strangers. It follows that within marriage or without, we are not alone. And if we do marry, our marriage is a relationship within a community of friends, and it enriches and is enriched by that community.

Likewise, the act of communion also draws us into this remarkable friendship. We share our lives literally as companions (Latin for “with bread”). At the table of God we are called to offer forgiveness and be patient toward one another, because patience and forgiveness were first shown to us.

If we isolate Christian marriage from the gathering of the faithful and these practices of baptism and communion, it will be misunderstood. When we look at marriage through the lenses of these practices, we can see that we do not make or break our loves by our own will and strength. We see that our marriages are great gifts from God that enrich and are enriched by the community of friendship in the Church. Without these lenses, of course, this view of marriage is almost unthinkable in our age of self-reliance.

MARRIAGE AS FRIENDSHIP

The language of “friendship” can appear out of place as a description of marriage today. From one perspective, it might appear just too obvious or simple to say our spouse is our “friend,” because after all we eat, drink, sleep, talk, and spend a lot of time with him or her. From another perspective, and one that appeals especially to Christians, it might look inadequate to say our spouse is our friend. Shouldn’t we cultivate self-giving love (or what the ancients called *agape*) rather than friendly affection (or *philia*) toward our spouses? Both of these objections challenge us to dig deeper into the meaning of friendship. This concept has a rich history and there is no better place to begin our digging than into the ideas of the Greek philosopher Aristotle.

A good life, one that is filled with virtue, cannot be realized by an isolated individual, Aristotle famously claims in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. It can only be lived in the right sort of community. Friendship, therefore, becomes a crucial ingredient in any good life because friendship creates the community necessary for the pursuit of virtue.

Every friendship is built up around the friends’ similarity of interests,

agreement on likes and dislikes, and especially agreement on what is important. Thus, for Aristotle, friendship is always the “sharing of a common project.”⁶ He recognizes three very different kinds of friendship – those where the common project revolves around pleasure, usefulness and advantage, or goodness and virtue.

The deepest and most permanent friendships are of the third type, where the friends are bound together by their shared love of the good. Each friend is drawn to the other for who he or she is, because each one loves the good and the friend to some degree embodies that good. In short, they love one another because they are people of goodness and virtue.⁷

Ideally every marriage should grow into a friendship of this third sort, where husband and wife are drawn together in love for one another because they share a conception of the good. In Christian marriage, the common good of loving God and neighbor enables couples to develop virtues, like forgiveness and patience, they need to be faithful disciples and build up the church body. In the friendship of marriage, Christian spouses can become skilled in the art of forgiveness because they realize that they share in the undeserved, extravagant mercy of a grace-full God. Reconciled to God and to one another through the cross of Christ, they must never allow hurt and brokenness to prevail between them. Furthermore, they should patiently share their lives with each other. This is more than just passing their time together; they should be present to one another in what we might call “virtuous time,” wherein they model and learn the virtues necessary to sustain marriage and be more faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Character, of course, develops gradually through a process of discernment that requires talking and listening, understanding and sympathizing, leading and following. In a word, it requires that we exhibit some of the patience that God shows humanity by giving us time, hearing our prayers, enduring our sins.

The friendship that characterizes Christian marriage is not an insular partnership, but it is open to the wider friendship and support of members who seek one another’s good through the church body. An interesting way of expressing this continuity of friendship within a marriage and extending through the Church can be found in the Roman Catholic doctrine of “domestic churches.” This doctrine

directs our attention to the ecclesial character of Christian families and, conversely, the familial character of the Church. Alternative expressions are “church in miniature,” “church of the home,” “house church,” or “little church.” [The domestic church] is a recognition of Jesus’ promise to be present whenever two or three are gathered in his name. The idea of domestic church presupposes that religious activity is not confined to a sanctuary or a particular day of the week; rather, it incorporates the Pauline principle “Whatever you eat or drink – whatever you do – you should do all for the glory of God.”⁹

Since the tradition sees domestic churches as units within the larger church body and their good as continuous with the common good of the Church, marriage becomes a vocation within the Church, and the friendship between spouses, though it is appropriately distinctive, becomes continuous with the friendship among all believers.

How can a marriage build up the church body? We all know husband and wife teams that minister together in their congregation—they work in the nursery, cook broccoli casseroles for church suppers, or sing in the choir. In these and many more very practical ways their marriages support the church body. Yet in a much more crucial way, these marriages can build up the Church by being a grace-giving sign. By faithfully living out the vocation of marriage, husbands and wives bear witness to the reality and hope that we can share in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Their steadfast union in marriage, St. Augustine writes, becomes a living sign of the “unity of all of us subject to God which is to be in one heavenly city.”¹⁰ It shows us what is possible for human community here and now because we share new life in Christ.

In a steadfast marriage, husbands and wives can live out the gospel before one another and for the world. “The family is placed at the service of the building up of the kingdom of God in history by participating in the life and mission of the church,” Pope John Paul II proclaims. Its grace-filled purpose is “to communicate Christ’s love to their brethren thus becoming a saving community. In this way, while the Christian family is a fruit and sign of the supernatural fecundity of the church, it stands also as a symbol, witness and participant in the church’s motherhood.”¹¹

REFORMING THE CHURCH’S PRACTICE

I have suggested that if Christian marriage is a vocation to which some are called (rather than a personal romantic choice) that can be understood only in the context of baptism and communion (rather than defined by or limited to the personal goals of the spouses), two things follow. Husband and wife must acknowledge one another as friends, and their marriage must be lived out *for* the church body.

When we view Christian marriage from this distinctive perspective as belonging to the Church, we will see that premarital counseling should be a continuation of proper catechization. The process begins when a congregation recognizes the calling of a man and woman that leads to a nuptial bond

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between them and it commends their faithfulness. Thus, the proper way of engagement is not to announce the forthcoming wedding in a newspaper, but to stand before the church body and seek its ordination of the marriage. After this blessing, the couple's premarriage counseling would look less like psychological profiling and more like Christian formation. While conversations with the pastor or marriage counselor will be helpful to the engaged couple, their true counseling will occur as they interact with the larger church body worshiping together. If a couple is not faithful enough to gather with the church body for worship, the church must not bless the couple's marriage.

Because worship provides the tools we need to understand marriage, the marriage ceremony should never be divorced from the worship service. How often do ceremonies performed in churches consist of some home videos, a bit of romantic music played by the church pianist or crooned by a singer, a short reading from 1 Corinthians (you know the verses!), and the couple's vows? This may be marriage within the church building, but it is not Christian marriage. This turning of the marriage ceremony into a romantic fantasy renders the church's witness of Christian marriage unintelligible. Why not integrate the marriage vows into the worship service? Before their vows the couple could celebrate communion with the congregation. They would proclaim that the Church views marriage in a different way than secular culture by abstaining from the wasteful extravagance that accompanies most marriage ceremonies.

Finally, the Church should make claims on the married couple after the marriage service, calling them to exercise their vocation of marriage for the building up of the church body. Marriage should not be granted to those who are unwilling to commit their time and service to the church body beyond merely attending weekly services. For just as our marriages are for the Church and do not belong to us, so too as Christians we belong not to ourselves, but to God and to one another.

NOTES

1 Vigen Guroian, *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 106.

2 This is a point at which the New Testament clearly moves beyond the Old Testament. Compare Mark 12:25 (and parallel Matthew 22:30), Matthew 19:10-12, and 1 Corinthians 7 to Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:18-24. See the rabbinic commentaries *Genesis Rabbah* 17:2, *b. Yebamoth* 63a, and *Midrash Psalms* 59.

3 Quoted in C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, eds., *A Rabbinic Anthology* (London: Macmillan, 1938), 1430, 1432, and 1437.

4 Although the priority of singleness over marriage dominates early church thought, there is a minority voice that places marriage in an equal and superior position. For example, Clement of Rome in his *Miscellanies* appealed to the married saints of the Old Testament and to the married apostles of the New Testament to argue that there is no incompatibility between the practice of a self-controlled marriage and a life of service

in the Church. Also, the Roman monk Jovian taught that married Christians and their celibate brothers and sisters did not essentially differ in sanctity (cited in Jerome, *Against Jovian*, 1.3). For more about this, see David G. Hunter, ed., *Marriage in the Early Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).

5 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/IV (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 183.

6 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 146.

7 Paul Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 52-58.

9 Florence Caffrey Bourg, *Where Two Or Three Are Gathered: Christian Families as Domestic Churches* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2004), 8.

10 Augustine, *De Bono Conjugali*, in Roy J. Deferrari, ed., *Saint Augustine: Treatise on Marriage and Other Subjects*, The Fathers of the Church New Translation, 27 (New York, NY: Fathers of the Church), 21. Elsewhere Augustine writes, "It is certain, then, that from the first men were created, as we see and know them to be now, of two sexes, male and female, and that they are called one...on account of the matrimonial union" [*City of God*, XIV, 23 (New York, NY: Modern Library, 1993), 470].

11 Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, December 15, 1981), 46.



JOHN THOMPSON

is a graduate student at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.