

THE MYSTERY OF MARRIAGE

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Marriage holds a unique place in all the Bible: what else joins two image bearers together as one, serves as a key concept for understanding the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, and then between Christ and the church, and consequently affords to every married couple the opportunity to live out the gospel? God sets himself on display in marriage, which means that God shows his glory in marriage. Thus, the thesis of this essay is that *marriage exists as a unique display of God's glory*.¹ In order to establish and exposit this thesis we will look first at the way that marriage joins two persons in the likeness of God as one. From there the second section explores the way that Yahweh's relationship to Israel is treated as a marriage, and the third section of this

¹I am humbled to have this opportunity to honor John Piper. The Lord has used him mightily in my life, mainly as I have listened to recorded sermons and addresses across the years. In this preaching, the Lord has used John Piper to herald again and again the infinite glory of God in Christ. I cannot adequately thank him for showing me such glory, but I can join him in praising this glorious God, this worthy Savior, and this powerful Spirit, three persons, ever one God, worthy of all praise. And praise be to God for John Piper! I am also grateful to write on the topic of marriage in honor of Piper, since his chapter on marriage in *Desiring God* provided a key insight I have pursued in my own marriage and announced at every wedding at which it has been my privilege to speak: love seeks its joy in the joy of the beloved. "The reason there is so much misery in marriage is not that husbands and wives seek their own pleasure, but that they do not seek it in the pleasure of their spouses." John Piper, *Desiring God*, 2d ed. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996), 175–76. See also John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

essay will examine the way that marriage exists to portray the relationship between Christ and the church. The final section will look at marriages as minidramas of the gospel.²

The current that flows through the four sections of this essay is constant: the energy all comes from God's intention to display his glory. God's character is displayed by his image bearers, and this display is augmented when two become one. God's character is displayed in his relations with Israel, where he shows himself to be just and merciful, a faithful husband to a wayward wife. And God's character is displayed as Christ weds himself to the church, laying down his life to present her to himself as a spotless bride. That bride will one day descend from heaven, and the Lamb will be the lamp, radiating glory, giving light to his beloved.

Adam and Eve: Two Become One

God built the universe as a realm in which he would commune with his image-bearing likeness. The world was designed as a cosmic temple³ in the sense that the universe was intended as a place for God to be known, worshiped, and served. There are many indications that the tabernacle and temple were symbolic microcosms of the universe, and several statements in the Bible imply as much. For instance, the ark of the covenant within the Holy of Holies is referred to as God's "footstool" (1 Chron. 28:2; Pss. 99:5; 132:7). This imagery suggests that the Holy of Holies is part of God's throne room.⁴ This means that when Yahweh declares through Isaiah,

Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool, (Isa. 66:1)

the earth is seen to be pictured as Yahweh's cosmic temple.

It seems, then, that when he made the world, Yahweh built a cosmic temple into which he placed his image and likeness. This next point is so basic that it is easy to move past without reflection, but it needs to be asserted: Yahweh's image and likeness manifest Yahweh's glory. What other god has created the cosmos as a theater for the display of his majesty?

²For a wider discussion of marriage in the Old Testament, see Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 466–69. For a broader discussion of marriage that takes up the issues of divorce, qualifications for elders, and children, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 776–86.

³See esp. G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

⁴See further J. M. Hamilton, "Divine Presence," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 117–18.

What other god has created human beings as those who represent him, embodying aspects of who he is? Not only has no other god created anything like the world we inhabit, or anything like us as human beings, but no other god has created anything at all. The creation of human beings in the image and likeness of God is an astonishing display of skill, wisdom, power, engineering ability, and material mastery. To take one example of God's creative prowess, what other substance is both as resilient and as light as bone, which even grows back together when broken? And bones are not even unique to human beings.

What is so glorious about human beings? What does it mean that they are in the image and likeness of God? Peter Gentry has argued that image and likeness have to do with worship and relationship—worship to God and relationship to other humans and the rest of creation.⁵ Humanity is unique in its ability to worship God: what other species devises musical instruments, melodic tunes, and rhythmic poetry to sing the praise of its Creator? And humans are unique in their ability to relate to other human beings: what other species has anything like marriage? Humans display the glory of God in all the ways they exercise intelligence, spirituality, sensitivity, and morality, especially as they worship God and relate to other human beings. Marriage, however, is a unique display of God's glory.

God put the man in the garden to work and keep it (Gen. 2:15); then he made the woman to help the man (2:18). It was the Lord himself who brought the woman to the man (2:22), like a father walking his daughter down the aisle. The man then poetically sang his solidarity with and authority over the woman:

This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man. (2:23)

The statement of solidarity is in the first clause, stressing that the man and woman are made of the same substance and thus equal before God. The statement of authority comes in the second, when the man announces what the woman will be called, just as God had earlier announced that the light would be called day (Gen. 1:5). In the garden, then—before sin, before the curse, before the expulsion from God's presence in Eden—there was a harmonious union that worked itself out in different roles:

⁵Peter J. Gentry, "Kingdom through Covenant: Humanity as the Divine Image," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12, no. 1 (2008): 28–30.

the man working and keeping, and the woman helping.⁶ These roles, moreover, were undertaken within a hierarchical structure of authority. The man acted in God's place to name God's creation, even to the point of naming the woman, created in the image of God and made to be his helper.

The narrator of Genesis then draws a conclusion from the primordial scene he has depicted: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (Gen. 2:24–25).⁷ This conclusion shows the narrator's understanding of what took place between Adam and Eve, and what we see is that the narrator holds that this event has implications for others. Because of the way the Lord made the man, made the woman, then brought the woman to the man, a man is to separate himself from his parents, cleave to his wife, and the two become one. Genesis 2:24 asserts that the primordial pattern exemplifies what should take place between man and woman.

In marriage two human beings are united to become one flesh. At the level of whole Bible theology, this can be seen as another way in which humanity is in the image of God. The married two in one become a living picture of the way the three persons of the Godhead are one in essence, equal in power, glory, and every perfection. God spoke the world into being by his word, and by the same creative power of his word, God declares that when a man and a woman enter into the holy covenant of marriage, the two shall become one flesh.⁸

At a linguistic level, the same Hebrew term for "one" (אֶחָד) in the declaration that the two become "one flesh" appears again in the *shema*, "Hear, O Israel: Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one" (Deut. 6:4).⁹ From this we can observe that the use of the word "one" does not exclude a plurality within unity. The transcendent reality that God exists as a Trinity, as one God who is three persons, is embodied in a profound way when two of God's image bearers—a man and a woman—are united to

⁶Similarly Andreas J. Köstenberger with David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 34–37.

⁷For searching reflections on the original shamelessness and the meaning of clothing, see Piper, *This Momentary Marriage*, 32–38.

⁸Commenting on Genesis 2:24, C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 108n36) writes, "I take this to be the narrator's comment, speaking on behalf of God (typical of the narrator in the Hebrew Bible), and this explains why Jesus in Matt. 19:4–5 attributes this saying to the Creator himself (he had a high view of Scripture)." For a helpful discussion of Genesis 2:24 and Proverbs; Malachi 2:14–16; Matthew 19:3–9; 1 Corinthians 6:16–17; and Ephesians 5:31, see *ibid.*, 142–45.

⁹In this and similar passages I am substituting the divine name Yahweh for LORD in the ESV text.

become one flesh in the holy covenant of marriage.¹⁰ Marriage displays the glory of God.

God charged the man and the woman with the task of filling the earth and subduing it (Gen. 1:28). They were to expand the borders of Eden so that the glory of Yahweh would cover the dry lands as the waters cover the sea (cf. Num. 14:21). Eve's fall into temptation and Adam's headlong plunge into sin radically disrupted God's good creation. God had promised that disobedience would be punished by death (Gen. 2:17), but in the curse on the Serpent, God announced that the Seed of the woman would crush the Serpent's head (Gen. 3:15).¹¹ Adam heard in this judgment on the snake the news that the woman would have offspring, which meant they would live to have offspring. Thus, when he named his wife "Eve, because she was the mother of all living" (Gen. 3:20), he acted on faith.¹² Adam trusted the word of God, the promise of a delivering descendant.

God cursed the Serpent, but rather than cursing the man and the woman, God made their roles more difficult. The woman's role of helping the man and joining with him to fill the earth was made difficult in that she would have pain in childbearing and would desire to control the man the way sin desired to control Cain, while the man would rule over her the way that Cain was called to rule over sin (cf. Gen. 3:16 and 4:7).

Expelled from the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve no longer had the opportunity to extend its borders. Yahweh's promises to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 announced that he would overcome the curses of Genesis 3:14–19 through Abraham and his Seed.¹³ The Seed of Abraham would not only roll back the curse, he would renew harmony in marriage, a theme sung in the most sublime Song (cf. Gen. 3:16 and Song 7:10).¹⁴ Yahweh thus initiated a relationship with the family of Abraham through which he pursued the task of covering the dry lands with his glory. Then, in a remarkable development at Sinai, as the Mosaic covenant was inaugurated, Yahweh married Israel.

¹⁰For discussion of the nature of marriage as a sacrament, contract, or covenant, concluding that the biblical concept of marriage is best described as a covenant, see Köstenberger with Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 81–91. So also Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 163–64.

¹¹See James M. Hamilton Jr., "The Skull-Crushing Seed of the Woman: Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 3:15," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 2 (2006): 30–54.

¹²Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 68.

¹³See James M. Hamilton Jr., "The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," *Tyndale Bulletin* 58, no. 2 (2007): 253–73.

¹⁴James M. Hamilton Jr., "The Messianic Music of the Song of Songs: A Non-Allegorical Interpretation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (2006): 331–45.

Yahweh and Israel: Covenant Broken and Kept

Perhaps the most prominent treatment of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel as a marriage in the Old Testament is found in the book of Hosea.¹⁵ The likening of the covenant between Israel and Yahweh to the closest of human relationships captures the inexpressible intimacy Israel was to enjoy with her covenant Lord. It also gives emotional traction to the shock of their betrayal and idolatry.

The prophet Hosea became a living picture of the way that Yahweh loved his people, and this was at Yahweh's instigation. The book of Hosea teaches that marriage is a picture of the relationship between God and his people, and it teaches the significance of both male and female contributions to this picture. In Hosea's case, his personal history with Gomer presents Yahweh's history with Israel in miniature. As these themes are intertwined in Hosea 1–3, Hosea's understanding of Israel's history and Israel's future is extrapolated from his own experiences with Gomer. As we go forward, we will see Hosea's personal experience with Gomer in Hosea 1 applied to Israel's history and future in Hosea 2; then in Hosea 3 his experience is resumed and applied to Israel's future.

Hosea 1: Hosea and Gomer

Yahweh instructed Hosea to take a “wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking Yahweh” (Hos. 1:2).¹⁶ So Hosea married Gomer, and Yahweh told him to name her children Jezreel (1:3–4), No Mercy (1:6–7), and Not My People (1:8–9). With the naming of Not My People Yahweh explained, “for you are not my people, and I am not your God.”

These judgments were announced because the nation had forsaken Yahweh by relying on the Baals to provide rain, grain, and new wine. Yahweh regarded this as spiritual adultery, and Hosea lived out the heart-rending realities of the emotional devastation brought on by infidelity.

Hosea's reputation with friends and neighbors would have been affected by his marriage to Gomer, and the same applies to what happens to Yahweh's reputation when he takes for himself the unimpressive nation of Israel. This is compounded when the nation proves unfaithful. Not only would Hosea's judgment be called into serious question when he engaged in such a marriage, but the offense would be aggravated by the strange names given to the children. The firstborn child had a rather strange name, Jezreel. The

¹⁵For a study of this theme that focuses on Malachi, see Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

¹⁶See the compelling argument that “Gomer was already a promiscuous woman when Hosea married her,” in Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 44–49.

second child's name was shocking, No Mercy. And the third child's name essentially declared that Gomer had not been faithful, Not My People.

The identifications in this enacted parable are not difficult: Hosea represents Yahweh. Gomer represents the nation of Israel, and the children born to Gomer point to the people of Israel and the judgment that Yahweh will bring on them.

Whatever else we might say about the name Jezreel (Hos. 1:4; cf. 1 Kings 21 and 2 Kings 9–10), we can affirm that what took place there in Israel's history hardly matches what we would expect from the nation charged to spread the glory of Yahweh over the dry lands as the waters cover the sea.¹⁷ The naming of No Mercy shouts the termination of Yahweh's patience, and then Not My People means just that. Yahweh has disowned the children of Israel. All of this is informed by the history of Israel related in Exodus through Kings.

Historically speaking, Hosea prophesied before the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to Assyria in 721 B.C. (1:1, 6–7). Though he promised mercy to Judah (1:7), the southern kingdom did not learn from Yahweh's treatment of their northern kinsmen. Judah's adultery eventually bore the same fruit as Israel's.

Though Yahweh's mercy came to an end and the children of Israel were disowned, still Yahweh announced a hope for Israel beyond judgment. Through the judgment of the coming exile, Israel would be restored to the land, shown mercy, acknowledged as "Children of the living God," and encouraged that "great shall be the day of Jezreel" (1:10–2:1).

Hosea 2: Israel's History and Future

The covenant infidelity of the nation takes center stage in Hosea 2 as Israel's idolatry brought an end to the marriage of Yahweh and Israel. Yahweh denounced Israel in Hosea 2:2:

Plead with your mother, plead—
 for she is not my wife,
 and I am not her husband—
 that she put away her whoring from her face,
 and her adultery from between her breasts.

This statement treats the nation's reliance upon other gods as "whoring" and "adultery." This is a figurative description of the way the nation has spiritually broken their covenant with Yahweh.

¹⁷See the discussion in Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *God's Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 51–52.

All through Hosea 2 we find two kinds of overlapping imagery. On the one hand there is the imagery of Israel's *adultery*, with her lovers, her lewdness, and her bastard children. On the other hand is the *exile* imagery that arises from the consequences of the broken covenant. Both kinds of imagery are on display in Hosea 2:3 when Yahweh warns that in response to Israel's adultery he will "strip her naked." With Israel depicted as a scandalous wife who will be publicly humiliated, the exile comes into view when the shaming of the adulterous wife is explicated with the words:

and make her like a wilderness,
and make her like a parched land.

The whore will be stripped naked and exposed to shame, which means that the nation is going to be depopulated by an invading army, with the result that the cultivated cities will be thrown down and revert to wilderness because the inhabitants have been killed or carried away captive.

Yahweh himself will thwart Israel's efforts to play the whore (Hos. 2:4–6), with the result that she will return to him (2:7). Israel thinks that her "lovers"—foreign gods—have caused the rain to fall so that the grain, vines, and olive trees grow, but in reality it was Yahweh who gave her the gifts she used for the worship of Baal (2:8). Yahweh promised to exile Israel for these adulterous deeds (2:9–13), but in wrath he remembered mercy.

Yahweh swore to "allure" Israel into the wilderness and to "speak tenderly to her" (2:14). Hosea 2:15 describes Israel's point of entry into the land that was marked by Achan's sin, the Valley of Achor (cf. Josh 7:25–26), as "a door of hope," suggesting a new conquest. This suggestion is strengthened as the verse goes on to state, "And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt" (2:15). The two statements in Hosea 2:15—first the Valley of Achor being a door of hope, and second the reminder of the way Israel answered when she came out of Egypt—both assume that Israel will be exiled and return to the land. They will enter the land as they did before, and they will respond to Yahweh as they did before.

This response to Yahweh recalls the way that Israel gladly agreed to Yahweh's terms at Sinai, and the answer Israel gave there seems to have functioned as consent to Israel's marriage to Yahweh.¹⁸ This view is strengthened as Hosea 2:16 states, "And in that day, declares Yahweh, you

¹⁸Similarly Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 270.

will call me ‘My Husband,’ and no longer will you call me ‘My Baal.’” When they answer as they did when they came out of Egypt (2:15), Yahweh will be their husband.

Yahweh promises to cleanse his bride of idolatry (Hos. 2:17), protect her from the beasts, birds, and creeping things, and abolish the implements of war as he establishes a safe place for his beloved (2:18). Yahweh then declares his intention to betroth his people to himself in Hosea 2:19–20: “And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know Yahweh.” Yahweh’s promise to Israel to enter into this new covenant with Israel begins with the assertion that this betrothal will be forever, and it ends with the assertion that he will be faithful. Between the bookends of this promise of everlasting faithfulness are assertions that the betrothal will display Yahweh’s severity and his kindness, with two terms for holiness (“in righteousness and in justice”) and two terms for kindness (“in steadfast love and in mercy”). The final statement that Israel will “know” Yahweh resonates with the intimacy of two becoming one flesh, but it also states that Israel will know Yahweh in his steadfast love and mercy, his refusal to clear the guilty, and his forever faithfulness (cf. Ex. 34:6–7).

These are the very attributes of Yahweh that have been displayed all through his marriage to Israel. He has upheld justice and truth and righteousness, resulting in his willingness to state that Israel has ceased to be his wife. Thus comes his judgment in the form of the exile, when the whoring wife is stripped naked by the lovers she sought. And Yahweh also displays his mercy and love for Israel by promising to bring them back after exile, to accomplish a new exodus from bondage, a new conquest of the land, replete with a new marriage covenant between Yahweh and Israel.

Perhaps no other metaphor for Yahweh’s relationship to Israel could capture the pain of betrayal and the wonder of forgiveness the way that marriage does. Where are betrayal and forgiveness more poignantly displayed than when adultery happens, justice is done, and mercy and forgiveness flow in restoration?

Hosea 3: Hosea and Israel’s Future

Marriage exists for the glory of God, and when Hosea married Gomer this truth was put on display. The consequences of Gomer’s whoredom made it necessary for Hosea to buy her back, which he did (Hos. 3:1–3), and this action is likened to the way that Yahweh will deal with Israel (3:4).

Indeed, this will bring Israel to repentance. Israel will be saved through judgment for Yahweh's glory:¹⁹ "Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek Yahweh their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to Yahweh and to his goodness in the latter days" (3:5). Israel's latter-day salvation will include a *new redemption*, like Hosea buying Gomer back (3:2); a *new exodus*, as the children of Israel again "go up from the land" (1:11; cf. Ex. 1:10); a *new conquest*, as the Valley of Achor becomes a door of hope (Hos. 2:15); a *new covenant*, as Yahweh betroths himself to his people in forever faithfulness with justice and mercy (2:19–20) and Israel repents and seeks her *new David* (3:5). Yahweh sends his whoring wife into exile to discipline her, but he will bring her back for a fuller and deeper experience of marital intimacy.²⁰

When Jesus comes, these promises are fulfilled in unexpected ways. We turn to the New Testament for further exploration of the way that Yahweh's glory is uniquely displayed in marriage.

Jesus and the Church: Marriage and the Gospel

In order to understand marriage in the broader context of biblical theology, we must briefly consider the way that the New Testament presents Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament expectation. This broader context will regulate the atmospheric pressure of our thoughts so that when we consider Paul's comments on the meaning of marriage, we will not experience vertigo from the sudden plunge into the great deep.²¹

The Fulfillment of Old Testament Expectation

It is interesting that Jesus came calling himself the bridegroom (Matt. 9:15). It would seem that Jesus and the authors of the New Testament understood his death in terms of the fulfillment of the exile—the moment when the temple would be destroyed (John 2:19). Simultaneously, as Jesus died he accomplished an "exodus" (Luke 9:31), and Paul can assert that "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7). In Jesus the exile is fulfilled, the new exodus dawns, and the return from exile begins. Like Moses, Jesus ascended the mountain and gave teaching from God (Matthew 5–7). Like Joshua, Jesus began the process of cleansing the

¹⁹See further James M. Hamilton Jr., "The Glory of God in Salvation through Judgment: The Centre of Biblical Theology?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 57, no. 1 (2006): 57–84, and *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

²⁰For discussion of Israel's spiritual adultery in other Old Testament prophets, see Ortlund, *God's Unfaithful Wife*, 77–136.

²¹For discussion of other New Testament texts on marriage (e.g., Matt. 19; 1 Pet. 3:1–7; 1 Cor. 7; 1 Tim. 2, 4), see Köstenberger with Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 61–66, and see the extensive discussion of marriage in the Pauline texts in Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 413–31.

land (e.g., Matthew 8–10), and one day he will return to finish the work (Revelation 19). At that point his people will receive the Promised Land, the new heavens and the new earth (Revelation 21–22).

In fulfillment of the hopes of the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament authors present what has taken place in Jesus as the completion of the exile, the beginning of the return from exile, and the new exodus, replete with the new covenant and the new David—Jesus himself—leading his people to a new conquest of the new heavens and the new earth. All this will culminate in the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9), when Jesus will consummate his relationship with his blood-bought bride.

The Deep Waters of the Meaning of Marriage

As he reflects on Spirit-filled relations in the church (Eph. 5:18), Paul begins his discussion of households with the relationship between husbands and wives in marriage (Eph. 5:21–33). From there he will go on to discuss parents and children (6:1–4) and slaves and masters (6:5–9).

Having discussed the way that husbands and wives should model their behavior on the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22–30), Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 (in Eph. 5:31) and then states the meaning of marriage in Ephesians 5:32–33. In order to understand Paul's conclusion in Ephesians 5:31–33, we must follow the argument he makes in 5:21–30.

Paul begins with the instruction that being filled with the Spirit results in “submitting to one another in the fear of Christ” (v. 21).²² He then explains that wives are to submit to their husbands (vv. 22–24), while husbands are to die for their wives (vv. 25–30).

In Ephesians 5:22–24 Paul explains the way that wives are to submit to their husbands (v. 22), the reason they should do so (v. 23), and then restates the way that wives are to submit (v. 24). The first statement of the way that wives are to submit is a simple assertion that fills out the verbal idea in Ephesians 5:21, “submitting to one another in the fear of Christ,” with the words “wives to their own husbands as to the Lord” (v. 22). This statement presents us with the first of several comparisons using the little word “as.” The comparison dictates that a wife is to submit to her husband in the same way that she would submit to the Lord.

The reason for this sacred submission is stated in Ephesians 5:23: “because a husband is the head of the wife, as also Christ is the head

²²Throughout this discussion of Ephesians 5:21–33 I present my own intentionally wooden rendering of the Greek text.

of the church, himself the Savior of the body.” This reason fills out the comparison that will be developed throughout the passage: a husband is to his wife as Christ is to the church and vice versa. The husband being head of the wife is here compared to Christ being the Head of the church, and this Christlike headship grounds the submission articulated in 5:22. What this means for the way that husbands are to relate to their wives is anticipated in the final clause of 5:23 when Paul states that Christ is “the Savior of the body.” Christ saved his body by laying down his life, and Paul will elaborate on that in Ephesians 5:25–30. Having introduced the idea in Ephesians 5:22 and given the reason for it in 5:23, Paul restates the concept in 5:24: “but as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives to their husbands in everything.” This call for a wife to submit to her husband as the church submits to Christ is nothing less than comprehensive. That scope is astonishing.²³ The reason that Paul calls for this all-encompassing churchlike posture from wives will become clear as he continues. At this point we can observe that whatever the reason is, it must merit what it demands. That is, if Paul is going to call wives to submit to their own husbands as the church submits to Christ, something massively significant must be at stake. What would necessitate a wife submitting to her husband as she submits to Christ?

This question begins to be answered as Paul turns to address husbands, filling in the details of the comparison he is making and tracing out the true meaning of marriage. He writes in Ephesians 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives, as also Christ loved the church and gave himself for her.” If the wife’s duty to submit is all-encompassing, the husband’s duty to love is all-consuming. A wife’s submission to her husband demands the sacrifice of her freedom. A husband’s love for his wife demands his life. Here Paul’s reasons for calling wives to such submission and husbands to such sacrifice begin to come into view. The beauty of living out the gospel in marriage—and that is what happens when husbands lay down their lives and their wives submit to them—is that the benefits of the gospel are unleashed in the lives of husbands and wives who live it. By submitting to Christ, the church finds freedom in obedience, freedom from the tyranny of sin. The commands of Christ the King, the loving husband, become a wide, safe place, in which those who embrace his reign run free

²³See the discussion of six things that submission is not (from 1 Pet. 3:1–6) in Piper, *This Momentary Marriage*, 99–101: (1) it does not mean agreeing with everything the husband says; (2) it does not mean total surrender of brain and will; (3) it does not mean the wife does not try to see her husband change for the better; (4) it does not mean putting the husband’s will before Christ’s; (5) it does not mean the wife gets her spiritual strength primarily from her husband; and (6) it does not mean the wife is to act from fear.

and fearless. G. K. Chesterton describes Christianity's beliefs and ethical requirements as

the walls of a playground. . . . We might fancy some children playing on the flat grassy top of some tall island in the sea. So long as there was a wall round the cliff's edge they could fling themselves into every frantic game and make the place the noisiest of nurseries. But the walls were knocked down, leaving the naked peril of the precipice. They did not fall over; but when their friends returned to them they were all huddled in terror in the centre of the island; and their song had ceased.²⁴

Paul is teaching that the freedom that women should seek is the freedom that comes from what the flesh wrongly perceives as the surrender of freedom. Obviously women are not to submit to their husbands if their husbands order them to do something that would dishonor God, something sinful or inappropriate. Nor is God honored by women who cease to think, who cease to have desires, leaving the exercise of will and intelligence to their husbands. And obviously husbands do not carry the authority of Christ himself. Still, the path to freedom starts at the biblical point of submission, and submission sustains the guardrails on that straight and narrow path through the mountains. The same is true of what Paul calls husbands to do. What looks like death gives way to life. Just as the death of Jesus opened the gates of life, so also the husband's death-to-self love for his wife puts gospel life in his heart. There is an awe-inspiring symbiosis in this, too, for the wife who knows her husband is ready to lay down his life for her will gladly submit to such a man.

Christ's self-sacrificial love for the church did not exploit the church but met her deepest need. Christ did not love the church by doing what he wanted but by doing what the church needed. Nothing Christ could have done for the church could have benefited her more—indeed, anything else would have been meaningless. Had Christ not gone to the cross for his bride, no adornments, no privileges, no worldly status would have kept her from going to hell. Jesus laid down his life for the church, paying the penalty for her sin and reconciling her to the Father, and this self-sacrificial church-benefiting love provides the pattern husbands are to follow as they love their wives.

In Ephesians 5:26–27, Paul states two purposes Christ pursued as he laid down his life for the church. First, Christ gave his life for the church “that he might *sanctify her*, having washed her with water by the

²⁴G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; repr., Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2001), 220 (chap. 9).

word.” This purpose statement focuses on what the church gains from Christ’s laying down his life, and it states the way that Christ prepared the church for the status she gained. Christ died for the church to “sanctify her,” which means that his death sets the church apart for God. It is as though the church was in an unclean state, separated from God by sin and death, banished from his holy presence, and not qualified to enter the clean realm, proceed through the Holy Place, and worship in the Holy of Holies. Christ prepared the church for her new status of holiness by washing her with water by the word.

The church is here personified, depicted in terms drawn from the Levitical system of sacrifice. Like one who had become unclean, the church needed a ritual washing to enter the clean realm. The cleansing that Christ provided was a cleansing accomplished by the word of promise, for no external lustration could accomplish what was necessary. The church will be saved by faith, and the word with which Christ washed the church accomplishes the necessary cleansing. Christ calls the faith of the church into existence by his word, and by his word he has provided the content of the church’s faith. Christ washed the church by the word, removing her uncleanness by giving her faith. That done, he offered the only sacrifice that could sanctify her: himself. Thus the church is no longer banished to the realm of the dead outside the camp. She has been cleansed by the word of Christ, which gives her the right to enter the camp. She has been sanctified by his death, which gives her access to the Holy of Holies. By Christ’s work she is holy.

The second purpose statement in Ephesians 5:27 focuses on how Christ benefits from his love for the church. He laid down his life for his bride, “that he might present to himself *the church in glory*, not having stain or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she might be *holy and blameless*” (Eph. 5:27). Christ’s service to the church does benefit him. It benefits him in that having cleansed the church by his word and sanctified her by his death, he then presents her to himself.

Here is a paradox: by sacrificing himself Christ wins for himself a glorious church. Jesus gains what is desirable from an undesirable death. The very things that selfish people desire for themselves—good things that are desired inordinately and sinfully—are the things that Jesus gains by being unselfish. The very things that keep men from behaving in an unselfish way, from being concerned for the welfare of their wives first, are gained by Christ because he was unselfish. A selfish husband desires to be served and satisfied by a glorious wife. By unselfishly giving himself for his wife, Christ creates for himself just such a wife.

But it is not as though Christ alone benefits from this—the church gets a husband like no other. The church is made clean and holy, and then she is presented to a husband who has demonstrated himself to be supremely concerned for her welfare, supremely devoted to her good, supremely worthy of her trust. By laying down his life for his bride, Jesus makes the church glorious, stainless, spotless. He cleanses her of the stain of sin. He wins for her a resurrection body, magnificent like his own. Sanctified by the death of Jesus, the church is presented to him, holy to the Lord and blameless—there will be no grounds for satanic accusation against those for whom Christ died.

Just as Paul *called* wives to submit to their husbands as the church does to Christ (Eph. 5:22), gave the *reason* for that submission (v. 23), then *restated* the call to submit (v. 24), so now having *called* for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church (v. 25), and explained *why* Christ did that (vv. 26–27), Paul *restates* the call for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church: “In this way husbands are to love their own wives like their own bodies. The one who loves his wife loves himself” (v. 28). This statement assumes and anticipates the reference to the one-flesh union between man and wife that Paul will articulate in verse 31. So on the one hand, the one-flesh union between man and wife makes it so that the one who loves his wife loves himself. On the other hand, the blessings that follow loving one’s wife as Christ loved the church validate the truth that “the one who loves his wife loves himself.”

This dynamic is pressed home in Paul’s next statement, where assuming the one-flesh union and the joy of having a wife who knows she is loved, who trusts her husband, Paul writes in Ephesians 5:29, “For no one ever hated his own flesh but nourishes and cares for it, just as Christ also the church.” No one ever hated his own flesh, but those who treat their wives hatefully do so without realizing it. The fool exalts himself over his wife, mocks her, demands service, and speaks in derogatory ways of her. Without realizing it, such fools are hating themselves. They demean their wives and suffer the consequences: highlighting the flaws of their wives only causes their wives to become less attractive as they grow more bitter, more discouraged, more frightened, and more suspicious. A one-flesh union with a bitter, discouraged, frightened, suspicious woman is hardly pleasant. Fools hate themselves. And wives of fools will have a difficult time respecting and submitting to husbands who treat them hatefully. When fools present their wives to themselves, they get what they have created for themselves: misery. Only by the abundance of God’s

common grace do fools get any blessing from the wives they have abused. They have hated themselves. They suffer for it.

Paul calls the Ephesian husbands to recognize these truths and love their wives the way Christ loves the church. He calls on them to recognize the one-flesh union between themselves and their wives and to treat their wives as they treat their own bodies—not hating them but nourishing and caring for them. At the end of Ephesians 5:29 Paul again compares the way that husbands are to love their wives with the way that Christ loves the church, and then he gives the reason for Christ’s beneficent treatment of the church in verse 30: “because we are members of his body.” Paul here calls husbands to recognize that those who are united to Christ by faith have not been treated by him as they deserve. If anyone deserves to be treated hatefully, sinful rebels against almighty God do. But rather than give them what they deserve, much less treat them hatefully, Christ has cleansed them with his word and sanctified them by his death, uniting them to himself, making them members of his own body. He then treats them as he would treat his own body, nourishing, caring, sacrificing, loving. This calls any man who deems his wife unworthy of tender care, unworthy of special attention, unworthy of extraordinary sacrifice to look at the way that Christ has loved wretches, rebels, and revolutionaries.

Christ cleansed. Christ died. Christ made his bride spotless and then presented her to himself. In this way husbands are to love their wives. So goes Paul’s argument in Ephesians 5:22–30. After this argument, which comprises so many comparisons between man and wife, Christ and the church, the depths are sounded in Paul’s conclusion. This comes in Ephesians 5:31–32: “On account of this a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh. This mystery is great, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.” The connection between Ephesians 5:29b–30 and 5:31–32 is the point where the plunge is taken. This connection is such that having described the way that Christ has loved the church, Paul says that it is because of Christ’s love for the church that the words of Genesis 2:24 exist. This amounts to a declaration that God created humans as gendered persons who would unite in a one-flesh union as one man, one woman, in covenant marriage, the two becoming one, *so that the world would have a category for understanding the relationship between Christ and the church.*²⁵

Marriage was made the way that a novelist describes political buildup to war, battlements, strategies, troop deployments, and the personalities

²⁵Similarly Schreiner, *Paul*, 425.

and backgrounds of different soldiers, all to provide a backdrop against which shines the courage in the daring charge of the hero. The heroism and courage will not be understood without context. And marriage is part of the context that God writes into creation to highlight the heroism of Christ. Marriage exists so that people will understand Christ's love for his unworthy bride and his ability to cleanse, sanctify, and transform the lost and broken so that he presents her to himself as a thing of beauty and glory. And he does this not in selfishness but in unselfishness, not in pride but in humility, at no cost to the bride but at the cost of his own life.

These realities provide the answer to the question posed above as to what could possibly warrant absolute submission from a wife and to-the-death sacrificial love from a husband. What warrants churchlike submission and Christlike taking up the cross is the fact that marriage exists as a picture of the gospel. This is the mystery: that speaking about necessary behavior in marital relations is speaking about Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32). Paul presses home the implications this has for the way that wives and husbands relate in Ephesians 5:33: "Still, each one of you, each his own wife in this way he must love as himself; and the wife, that she might fear her husband." Paul is speaking of Christ and the church, but that does not nullify the need for husbands to love their wives and wives to submit to their husbands. That Paul is speaking of Christ and the church is precisely what creates the need for such behavior.²⁶

Paul's words in Ephesians 5:31–32 also reflect a profound interpretation of the way that Old Testament passages such as Hosea 3 are fulfilled in Christ. Jesus will one day have his messianic banquet, the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7; 21:2, 9–10; cf. Luke 22:16). All the promises of God find their yes and amen in him (2 Cor. 1:20).

The Gospel and Marriage

Every marriage, then, should be a minidrama of the gospel. Christlikeness is displayed to the world as selfish men are transformed into the image of Christ and unselfishly set aside their own needs and desires in order to pursue the good of their wives. The transformation of the church is on display as Christlike men love their wives, who are not necessarily worthy of Christlike treatment, but who are transformed by such love into confident women who know their husbands seek first their good. These ladies are well thought of by all around because their husbands speak well of them; they shine with the glory of Christ's own church, lovely as

²⁶Similarly Ortlund, *God's Unfaithful Wife*, 152–59.

Jerusalem, awesome as an army with banners (Song 6:4), because they have been loved with an extravagant transforming love.

There are also implications from this in a negative direction: foolish husbands misrepresent the One who is the bridegroom. Unsubmissive wives give a false impression about how the church is to relate to Christ. Like liberal churches in which Christ's Word does not mediate his lordship, wives who do not submit to their husbands set themselves against the very purpose of marriage. And unbiblical divorce tells the lie that a regenerate person could somehow be made unregenerate.

Conclusion

The mystery of marriage, then, is that in it the gospel is proclaimed as a wife submits to her husband as the church submits to Christ and as a husband loves his wife as Christ loves the church, giving himself up for her. Herein is displayed not only the love of Christ for the church, but also the love of Yahweh for Israel, and the latter is fulfilled in the former.

We await the marriage supper of the Lamb, the great wedding day for which the world was made. Marriage is about the glory of God in Christ. As men love their wives as Christ loved the church, and as women submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ, the age-old curse on gender relations in Genesis 3:16 is overcome. Through faith in Christ, by the power of the Spirit, for the glory of the Father, married couples who live this way find their lives blooming like the garden of Eden.

Marriage is a unique display of God's glory. It is a living picture of the way Christ has died for and transformed his people. The Spirit and the bride say, "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:12, 17, 20).



An Attempt at a Poetic Postscript

In a volume honoring John Piper, hopefully imitation will be a high compliment. In his recent book of poems to his wife, *Velvet Steel: The Joy of Being Married to You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), we are given an intimate look at the marriage between John and Noël Piper.

My own attempt below seeks to capture the glory of God and the gospel in marriage.

Marriage

Like land and sea and stars above
And all else he has made,
This too is for the glory of
The one who has displayed

A love not based on beauty's shades
Nor driven by some debt,
A love before there were yet days
Like none else ever met.

The archetype for man and wife
Is Christ's love for his bride.
To Christ her Lord the church submits,
And for her life he died.

And for this reason, man should leave
His parents and his kin,
And to his wife then he shall cleave
Never to leave again.