

CONTENTS

Contributors 11

SECTION 1: FOUNDATION

The Importance of Beginning the Conversation 17

Curt Hamner and John Trent

1. *The Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Meaning of Marriage and Sex* 21

John C. Clark and Marcus Peter Johnson

2. *The Revelation of God's Commitment* 43

Erik Thoennes

Continuing Insight: Loving Like Jesus in Our Marriage 61

by Darryl DelHousaye

Continuing Insight: Marriage and Music in the Early Chapters of Genesis 65

by James F. Coakley

3. *The Foundational Language of Marriage in Scripture* 69

Darrell Bock

Continuing Insight: Cohabitation in Biblical and Theological Perspective 84

by David L. Woodall

4. *The Choice and High Calling of Marriage and Singleness* 89

Craig Blomberg

Continuing Insight: Keys to Premarital Training 107

by Greg Smalley

SECTION 2: DESCRIPTION

5. *The Language of "Embodied" Differences in Marriage* 117

Gregg R. Allison and Jason E. Kanz

Continuing Insight: Understanding Why "Embodiment" Matters 135

by Beth Felker Jones

6. *The Beauty and Design of Marriage: An Image for the Church and Its Gospel* 139

Curt Hamner and Rebekah J. Byrd

Continuing Insight: Marriage—God’s Design 150

by Timothy R. Jennings

7. *The Dance of Gender in New Covenant Marriage* 155

Eric L. Johnson

Continuing Insight: Uncomfortable Love 173

by Brett McCracken

8. *Reclaiming Holy Sexuality* 181

Juli Slattery

Continuing Insight: Shaking Souls 199

by Mike Mason

SECTION 3: CHALLENGES

9. *From Shame to Wholeness* 205

James S. Spiegel and Amy E. Spiegel

Continuing Insight: “Waiting” to Move toward Forgiveness 222

by Deborah Gorton

10. *Reclaiming Beauty Amidst Brokenness* 225

Andrew J. Schmutzer

Continuing Insight: Shame: Creating/Finding a Healing Marriage 242

by M. Ashley Schmutzer

11. *When Marriage Falls Short of the Christian Ideal* 245

Eric L. Johnson and Jonathan T. Pennington

Continuing Insight: Self-Protective Façade in Marriage 265

by Tony Wheeler

Continuing Insight: A Social Sacrament

by Jared Pingleton 271

12. *Divorce and Remarriage* 277

William A. Heth

Continuing Insight: Pastoral Considerations 294

by Chuck Hannaford

*Continuing Insight: Ministry, Remarriage, and God's Redeeming Power
for the Next Generation* 299

by Ron L. Deal

SECTION 4: MISSION

13. *Marriage and Community in the Body of Christ* 305

Donna Thoennes

Continuing Insight: The Church's Mission to Enrich and Restore Marriages 324

by John McGee

14. *A Philosophical Affirmation of Marriage from Natural Law* 327

Sean McDowell

Continuing Insight: Christian Suffering and the Same-Sex Attracted 344

by L. Eugene Burrus

Continuing Insight: Why Marriage: Celebrating the Christian View 348

by Chris Brooks

15. *Marriage and the Mission of God* 353

Mark S. Young and Priscilla R. Young

Continuing Insight: God's Ordained Vehicle 372

by James Spencer

16. *For a Time We Cannot See* 375

Crawford W. Loritts Jr.

The Importance of Continuing the Conversation 379

Curt Hamner and John Trent

Acknowledgments 383

Notes 385

Scripture Index 425

Subject Index 431



CHAPTER 1



THE TRINITY, THE INCARNATION, AND THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE AND SEX

by John C. Clark and Marcus Peter Johnson

They covered their nakedness. With eyes opened to their broken humanity, the terrible and tragic reality of their sin, the very first thing our primal parents did was cover their naked bodies. The dawn of sin had shed its first dark light on the sexuality of the perpetrators; from this awful new beginning, it exposed a deep rupture in what is so precious to God: male and female he created them. So the first grand cover-up began. In a feeble effort to cover up their sin and shame, to protect themselves not only from themselves but also from God, Adam and Eve attempted to fashion their own rescue—by hiding. Yet nothing sufficed. The fig leaves proved futile, as did the trees of the garden. They were acutely aware of their nakedness, but only God knew what it meant. So he sought them out in that condition, ripe as they were with the potential for sexual distortion and violence, initiating what only an incarnate God could at length complete. He exchanged their coverings with coverings of his own making and eventually exchanged their nakedness—with his own.

The second grand cover-up began many years later, east of Eden, and continues today. It too was preceded by a shame-soaked nakedness. But this time the nakedness belonged to God, hanging on a Roman gibbet, exposed to public ridicule, awash in blood, sweat, and spit. God was doing the unthinkable,

plumbing the depths of our sin—all the way down. He took to himself our fallen nakedness, our sin-compromised sexuality, sanctifying and justifying our sexual perversion in his death and resurrection. He reconstituted our humanity, re-creating us as the image of God: male and female he *re-created* them.

But even though God became naked for us, we seem to prefer him covered up. As if to insist that our sexuality was not a prime casualty of the fall, and therefore not in need of salvation, we cover up our Savior. Too ashamed and too “modest” to allow God to suffer our sexual sin and shame, we clothe Jesus on the cross. In the first cover-up, God graciously clothed us; in the second, sadly, we return the favor. The irony ought to be revealing. Right at the point where we need God to both judge and redeem our unholy nakedness, we insist that he be clothed.

A crucified but clothed Jesus speaks volumes about the church’s understanding of marriage and sex. If we have only a clothed Christ, how are we to understand and interpret our nakedness? If *the* Word of God did not subject himself to our nakedness and shame, can he still function as the subject of our words about God at this most crucial of points? When the church is theologically deaf and blind to the implications of God’s self-giving in Christ regarding our sinful sexuality, our broken maleness and femaleness, the clothed Christ may be a powerful explanatory symbol. In clothing and therefore cloaking Christ, we are bound to turn elsewhere for what ought to be a specifically theological undertaking. So the church’s attempts to speak to marriage and sex, and their multitudinous distortions, have too often been merely political, moral, ethical, social, or psychological—but rarely christological, Trinitarian, ecclesial, and sacramental. If the church fails to regard her deepest theological beliefs as pertaining to marriage and sex, then marriage and sex are bound to be understood in relatively trivial ways, and treated accordingly. Do we really believe that the deepest and most intimate human relations can be properly understood and addressed when detached from God’s self-disclosure and self-bestowal? If not, then let us be forthright about it, for marriage and sex are fundamentally theological issues, and unless we wish to relegate our thinking about them to the relative obscurities of moral sentiments and political platitudes, we desperately need to know and say what they have to do with God himself.

We hear often enough about what God hates and thus opposes. From pulpit and paper, from book and blog, we hear variously that God hates divorce, adultery, premarital sex, homoeroticism, and many other sexual and relational sins. What we get far less often are theologically rich accounts as to *why* God hates and opposes distortions of marriage and sex. Do they break God’s

command, or even more to the point, do they break his image and break his heart? Apart from a christological and Trinitarian account of the beauty, wonder, and mystery of gender and sex, we fear that the church's teaching will be reduced to moral bromides—even if superficially adorned with biblical proof texts. Primarily, what we hope to offer in this chapter is a description of how marriage and sex are *internally and directly*, rather than externally and peripherally, related to the gospel of God's self-giving in Christ through the Spirit, why marriage and sex are thus so very precious and holy, and why that description necessitates a triune and incarnate God.

DIVINE INDWELLING: PERSONS IN INTIMATE UNION

Marriage and sex are not self-explanatory. They are beautiful and sacred mysteries that point beyond themselves to the mystery of our three-person God and to his redemptive self-giving in the incarnation. Theology is meant to found, form, and fund the church's deepest convictions and experiences, giving holy expression to the meaning of our lives, sanctifying our thought and speech against the inevitable depreciation and trivialization that occurs whenever we divorce the grandest human realities from their divine origin. Marriage and sex surely qualify as issues needing theological interpretation, not only because they exist at the center of our human experience, but also because they were given to us by God as echoes in the created world of who God is and how God loves us. Again, a failure to think theologically where we need it most—that is, at the point of our deepest, most intimate relations—is especially dangerous for the church. Such a failure forces the church to look elsewhere to explain what marriage and sex mean. Just as we cannot grasp the meaning of God's love for us apart from understanding that God is the very love by which he loves us, we cannot grasp the meaning of our deepest personal intimacies apart from the intimacy that God *is*. The meaning of these relations, basic and foundational to every human existence, can neither be grounded in nor exhausted by creaturely investigation. "Indeed," writes Michael Reeves, "in the triune God is the love behind all love, the life behind all life, the music behind all music, the beauty behind all beauty and the joy behind all joy."¹

The love, life, harmony, beauty, and joy we were created to experience are echoes of a reality that transcends and interprets them. That reality is the love-creating, life-giving, harmonious, beautiful, and joyful personal communion shared by the Father, Son, and Spirit. The importance of the theological

term *perichōrēsis* [referring to the triune relationship of the three members of the godhead] comes to the fore. [This term has] vast significance for the church's articulation of the inner life of God in faithfulness to the witness of Jesus Christ, who opens to us the mystery of God's eternal three-person existence. This term gives sacred expression to the interrelations among the persons of the holy Trinity, asserting no less than that God has eternally been, and will eternally be, a mutually indwelling and interpenetrating communion of persons who exist in self-giving, life-giving love. Indwelling and interpenetrating personal love is *who God is*. God the Father is who he is only in union with God the Son; God the Son is who he is only in union with his Father; and the Father and Son are who they are only in the communion of God the Spirit. The term *perichōrēsis* is important in relation to salvation, directing us to the fact that God does who he is, which is to say that in redeeming us, God the Spirit joins us to God the incarnate Son so that we may share in the life and love of God his Father. The eternal life we receive in salvation is the life shared by the Father with the Son in the Spirit. God loves us and gives us life through the love and life that he is. Without their grounding in the reality of God, life and love become mere abstractions that end up forfeiting their significance—literally, their purpose as *signs*.

The reality of the perichoretic communion that exists among the persons of the Trinity alerts us to a provocative insight that ought to give us pause: the personal and sexual intimacy that Adam and Eve experienced as they became one flesh was not the first indwelling or penetration to occur among persons. It was, of course, the first of all human sexual unions, but the first indwelling or penetration among persons belongs to the eternal union between Father, Son, and Spirit. God is who he is by virtue of the indwelling intimacy shared by the divine persons; apart from it, God would not be his triune self. This most sublime of all realities is reflected in our human existence, for we are who we are by virtue of the indwelling intimacy shared by human persons, apart from which we would not be ourselves.² The existence of every descendant of Adam and Eve depends upon a prior union of persons—necessarily male and female—who share indwelling intimacy. The fact that a human has being is predicated upon the existence of two others joined as one. Thus, any given human being requires two others in such a way that human existence is necessarily and fundamentally tripersonal.

Although it would be difficult to find a more obvious way in which our triune God images himself in us, we would be remiss not to mention another, perhaps less obvious, way: every human literally dwells inside another as he

or she moves from that crucial point of conception to birth—another way in which humanity is defined by interpersonal indwelling.

These echoes of God's interpersonal life in our own existence might be written off as merely coincidental or forced analogies if not for the striking correspondence between our original birth and our new birth, the original creation and the new creation. In the redemption and re-creation of the world, God the Son was sent by his Father in the power of the Spirit to be birthed into our humanity. He was made one flesh with us that we might be made one flesh with him by the Spirit, and so experience new birth and eternal life in his. Our original existence and our new existence are both constituted by interpersonal indwelling. When God deigned to image himself in our humanity, both in the original creation and in the new creation (Jesus Christ), he did so in a way that is essential to who he is. A truly Christian anthropology, in other words, must be founded on christological and Trinitarian grounds:

What is needed today is a better understanding of the person not just as an individual but as someone who finds his or her true being in communion with God and with others, the counterpart of a trinitarian doctrine of God. . . . God is love and has his true being in communion, in the mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—*perichoresis*, the patristic word. This is the God who has created us male and female in his image to find our true humanity in perichoretic unity with him and one another, and who renews us in his image in Christ.³

MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM: THE IMAGO DEI

What we have thus far referred to as echoes or reflections of God's tripersonal unity in human existence have their scriptural origination in the first chapter of Genesis. Here we see that God spoke something about his human creatures that should leave us speechless. Among all that the Father created through and for his Son by the Spirit, God did something utterly unique with his human creatures—he created us in his image: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’ . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:26–27 *ESV*). The church and her theologians have wrestled with this text for two millennia, attempting to give interpretive expression to the fearful and wonderful blessing pronounced here by God. What exactly does it mean that

humankind is the *imago Dei*? What is it about humans that constitutes us as God's likeness? The history of the church's interpretation on this point is far too vast to recount in the space of this chapter.⁴ Suffice it to say that two strands of interpretation have been characteristic. One interprets humanity as the image of God with relation to our rational, moral, or volitional faculties—often called the substantive theory of the image. The other interprets the image in relation to the ensuing mandate for humanity to “rule over” or superintend the creation (Gen. 1:26, 28)—often called the functional theory.

Such theories are indeed helpful in attempting to delineate what marks humankind as distinctive among God's creatures, as part of an extended accounting for the ways in which we image God. However, they cannot account for something basic to a proper understanding of that image. Specifically, neither theory, as commonly or popularly understood, requires for its application that humankind be what God says we are: both male and female. A male does not require a female, nor does a female require a male, in order to moralize, exercise reason and will, or exercise dominion over the earth. Such things might be done reasonably well by a single human being. But a solitary male or female most certainly cannot image God in a way that is most basic to who he is: depicting his personal, relational, and life-giving intimacy.

Recall our text: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’ . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”⁵

The plurality in God's address has been a source of consternation among many modern Christian commentators, who, under the tutelage of the currently dominant mode of historical-grammatical interpretation, tend to hold the doctrine of the Trinity in hermeneutical abeyance in their exegesis of Genesis. The “us” and “our” of God's self-reference thus become problematic: Who is God talking to? This question necessarily arises for those who insist on delaying the theological, canonical, and Christian implications of the text in search of an interpretation that is strictly suitable to the original author and audience.⁶

We believe, however, that it is incumbent upon modern Christians to recognize the Trinitarian implications of this text, as the church has done for the vast majority of her two-thousand-year existence. “Indeed,” writes Martin Luther, “it is the great consensus of the church that the mystery of the Trinity is set forth here.”⁷ Stopping short of a christological, and thus Trinitarian, interpretation of the creation account bypasses Christ's self-disclosure as the very Word of God by whom all things, including humans, were created (John

For every work or act of creation is threefold, an earthly trinity to match the heavenly.

First, not in time, but merely in order of enumeration there is the Creative idea, passionless, timeless, beholding the whole work complete at once, the end in the beginning: and this is the image of the Father. Second, there is the Creative Energy or Activity begotten of that idea, working in time from the beginning to the end, with sweat and passion, being incarnate in the bonds of matter: and this is the image of the Word. Third, there is the Creative Power, the meaning of the work and its response in the lively soul: and this is the image of the indwelling Spirit.

And these three are one, each equally in itself the whole work, whereof none can exist without other: and this is the image of the Trinity.⁸

—Dorothy Sayers

1:3; Col.1:15–17), the One in whom alone the *imago Dei* can be properly interpreted.

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381), to which all orthodox Christians subscribe, has us confess belief in Jesus Christ as the One “by whom all things were made,” and in the Holy Spirit as “the Lord and Giver of life,” so that the church may joyfully affirm that God the Father created humankind through and for God the Son by God the Spirit. What is most basic to God’s inner life is wonderfully and fearfully reflected in his human creatures, who, as male and female, and *specifically* as male and female, image the interpersonal intimacy inherent to God’s inner being. Thus, the phrase “male and female he created them” functions to give specificity to the phrase “in the image of God he created [them].” Our existence as male and female is not something that God “tacks on” to the solitary human already in his image. On the contrary, our existence as male and female is *intrinsic* to that image.⁹ This is not to say that being male and female *exhausts* what we may say about the *imago Dei*, but that the distinction-in-communion that characterizes humankind as male and female is absolutely basic to the *imago Dei*. As Colin Gunton writes, God “replicates” his communal being in our humanity:

If, first, to be created in the image of God is to be made male and female, what is implied is that in this most central of all human relatedness is to be found a finite echo of the relatedness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To be God, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, is to be persons in relation: to be God only as a communion of being. It is that which is replicated, at the finite level, by the polarity of the male and female: to be in the image of God is to be called to a relatedness-in-otherness that echoes the eternal relatedness-in-otherness of Father, Son and Spirit.¹⁰

Male cannot properly echo or image God by himself, nor can female by herself. Adam, apart from Eve, could not fulfill what it means for man to be the *imago Dei*—alone, he would have been a distorted, “not good” image: “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make a helper fit for him’” (Gen. 2:18). That God pronounced negatively upon his creation at the point of Adam’s solitude is telling: “It is the only negative assessment in the creation narrative,” observes Henri Blocher, “and it is emphatically negative.”¹¹ Something was not right, and it apparently could not be remedied with another male or a beast, either of which might have provided Adam superior strength in tending the garden.¹² Would it not be better to say that it was impossible for Adam to be the blessed *imago Dei* by himself, precisely because he could not be male and female—persons in communion?¹³ That would certainly qualify as “not good,” for it would mean that creation was bereft of God’s image. “In isolation man would not have been good,” writes Karl Barth. “That is, he would not have been created good . . . we might say that it would not be good because solitary man would not be man created in the image of God, who Himself is not solitary.”¹⁴ The solitary man can only and ever reflect a unitarian God.

Enter Eve. Into Adam’s isolation, and out of Adam’s flesh and bones, the image-fulfilling Eve was created. What a glorious event this must have been for Adam, and for his Creator! Adam sang for joy as he was joined by the one who was “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23), exulting in the fulfillment of humanity, the completion of the image of God: “in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”¹⁵ Once Eve was present, humanity was able to reflect the personal and relational intimacy that God is. Eve’s presence meant that humanity could experience life-giving interpersonal penetration and indwelling, a finite and temporal echo of God’s triune, perichoretic life.

So from the time of the first male and female, every human being, every

image of God, has had something extraordinary in common: each of us owes our existence to both a divine and human union of persons. We are created by, and image, God, who, as a union of persons, is one God. We are also created by, and image, our parents, who, as a union of persons, are one flesh. Personal union is the ground of all human *being*.

For the church, the sacred beauty of marriage and sex is to be maintained as a “*theo*-logical” reality whether or not it can be maintained on the level of the world’s abstract ethical or political whims. The church delights in the holy love and intimacy of male and female because the church exists as a sign of the holy love and intimacy that brought humankind into existence. This is why the church must proclaim that the differentiation between, and the union of, male and female is utterly holy and beautiful. Indeed, it is precisely the distinction of our persons that allows for the beauty and holiness of the union—as it is with God. Human persons are defined by both the distinction and the union—as it is with the Trinitarian persons. Humans are distinctly male or female, but neither can exist except for the life-giving union between male and female.¹⁶

To celebrate and delight in the holy marriage and sexual union of others is by no means to denigrate the status of the *imago Dei* in males and females who are themselves not married. Far from it. Every human life is living proof of having shared most intimately in the union between male and female—our existence completely depends upon it. Each of us exists as the living bond between the male and female from whom we came. We are persons, in other words, who necessarily derive our personhood from others. We are not, and cannot be, who we are except by virtue of the one-flesh union of male and female. Contrary to the modern *zeitgeist*, humans are not self-defined. It is for this reason that the church should view with proper suspicion unqualified talk of the “single” person, for in reality, there is no such person. Each of us, whether or not we are joined in holy marital union, is constituted by interpersonal communion.¹⁷ Our lives are not only shaped by way of sexual procreation, but also by the ways in which our nonsexual relational intimacies profoundly affect who we are and how we know ourselves. We share together, and never as isolated individuals, the mystery and wonder of our existence as male and female persons.¹⁸

The fall of humankind into sin, however, introduced a rupture in the image. East of Eden, male and female are not how they are supposed to be, created as they were to delight in their distinction and rejoice in their union. In fear and shame they cover themselves and hide, a feeble attempt at self-

justification. The tragedy of the fall, and the corruption and condemnation that followed, manifests itself in the lives of broken images in manifold ways, but perhaps never so clearly as in our broken and distorted intimacies. The differentiation between, and the union of, male and female are utterly sacred, for they echo God's holy existence. Tragically, then, trespasses against the holy distinction, and violations of the holy union, typify the story of humanity east of Eden. Fractured images muffle and mute the holy echo in myriad ways, joining what should be divided and dividing what should be united. Cornelius Plantinga envisions the fall as entailing both the confusion and disruption of God's creation:

According to Scripture, God's original design included patterns of distinction and union and distinction-within-union that would give creation strength and beauty. . . . Against this background of original separating and binding, we must see the fall as anti-creation, the blurring of distinctions and the rupturing of bonds, and the one as the result of the other.¹⁹

From this tragic "anti-creation," male and female are by no means exempt. The unraveling of creation leads to confusions and disruptions that seek to rob males and females of their God-given strength and beauty. These perversions are pervasive among God's fallen images, and are exacerbated in our attempts at sexual self-definition and self-justification, when we take pleasure in what God does not. What God has joined together, we are prone to separate, and what God has separated, we are prone to join. In either case, the image becomes rather dim. We desperately need to be re-created; we need reimagining.

THE TRUE IMAGE OF GOD: JESUS CHRIST WITH HIS BRIDE

While interpreting the meaning of the *imago Dei* in humanity must employ careful consideration of Genesis 1 and 2, it must not terminate there; the issue is a canonical one. The incarnate Son of God is the true *imago Dei*, the fully authentic human person, the fulfillment and destiny of God's creaturely images. In other words, Jesus Christ ultimately defines for us what it means to be the image of God. When we speak of Christ as the true and perfect image of God, we must avoid the temptation to collapse that image into his deity, as if it were his divine nature, *per se*, that constitutes him as that image. That would hardly be good news for human beings. The significance of Jesus being the quintes-

sential image of God lies not in his existence as the eternal Son—for whom the ascription “image” would border on blasphemy—but in the fact that the eternal Son has become human.²⁰ Prior to the incarnation, the Son did not “image” God. The *imago Dei* is a predicate of created humanity, not humanity’s Creator. God the Son is the true and full image of God precisely because, without ever ceasing to be fully God, he became truly and fully human. The enfleshing of God provides us with the “theo-logic” of the *imago Dei*.

It was into the confusion and disruption of the anti-creation that this most inexplicable reality transpired. God the Son was born into our flesh. He was born into the world that had been created by him and for him, taking on the humanity he had created. The descriptions of him in Scripture are tantalizing. He is, after all, the “image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15). He is the “exact imprint of [God’s] nature” and the “firstborn among many brothers” (Heb. 1:3; Rom. 8:29). And he is all of this as the second and last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45, 47). In Christ, God is not only re-creating the world and reconciling it to himself, he is also reimagining the world in himself. Jesus Christ is the quintessential image of God, the new Adam through whom creation has begun again. He is the new creation, in whom we are re-created and reborn into the image of God we were originally created to be. In order to enact this astounding act of re-creation, rebirth, and reimagining, the last Adam came to share fully in the humanity of the first. But as with the first Adam, so with the last: to truly image God, he needs his bride. It is not good for him to be alone.

If Jesus Christ is indeed the last Adam, the true fulfillment of the image of God in our humanity, we should expect that he would fulfill what was said of humankind in the beginning: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” If, as we have argued, “male and female” is descriptive of, and basic to, the *imago Dei*, we should expect that Jesus would satisfy that description. In a most beautiful and transcendent way, this is exactly what he does. He refuses to be who he is as the quintessential image of God without us. Indeed, the purpose of the incarnation is that Christ may have for himself an eternal bride, his holy church. In his act of unparalleled condescension and self-giving, God the Son became incarnate, joining himself to us, so that through his birth and baptism, through his faithful and obedient life, and through his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, we might belong to him as his beloved. By the Spirit, he births us anew, baptizing us into his death and resurrection, justifying and sanctifying us, so that we may be one flesh and one body with

him forever. In the beginning, Adam and Eve were united together as one flesh, the profound mystery of God's creative purpose begun. In the new beginning, Christ and his bride are united together as one flesh, the profound mystery of God's creative purpose fulfilled:

For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Eph. 5:29–32)

Right at the beginning of creation, God implicated the male and female in a mystery, that of the two becoming one. It was a beautiful and blessed mystery, no doubt full of rejoicing and wonder as the two came to experience each other, and thus life, as God intended it. And yet, as Paul tells us, this profound mystery was not self-defining, for it was a mystery that ultimately anticipated another. When God created humankind male and female in his image and joined them together as one flesh, he involved humanity in a mystery-sign, the fulfillment and reality of which awaited his incarnation. "The two shall become one flesh" is a mystery at the center of both creation and redemption, and Jesus Christ is the meaning of that mystery, because he is that mystery in himself. By assuming our flesh into union with himself—healing, sanctifying, and justifying our broken humanity in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension—we become one body and one flesh with him through Spirit-wrought faith. Thus, the mystery of creation is fulfilled in the mystery of redemption: the last Adam with and in his bride, and his bride with and in him.

Jesus Christ is the true image of God. However, he is not that image, any more than the first Adam was, as a solitary, independent being. Just as Adam would have been incomplete without Eve, Jesus would be incomplete without his bride. To echo the astounding pronouncement of Scripture, the church is none other than Christ's body, "the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:23). The promise that the church is the "fullness of Christ" is so extravagant as to sound blasphemous. Is not Jesus Christ complete in and of himself? Is it really true, in Calvin's words, that Christ "reckons himself in some measure imperfect" until he is joined to his bride?²¹ What sounds at first like blasphemy is, in light of the incarnation, the astounding promise that Jesus will not be who he is without us. In the extravagance of his self-giving

love, he has taken our humanity into union with himself so that, through his one act of atonement, we might be joined to him forever as his body and bride through the Spirit. In other words, the bridegroom “fills himself” with his bride; he becomes one flesh with his church in order to redeem, reconstitute, and re-create us as the *imago Dei*. In creation, Eve is the fullness of Adam, and together they are the image of God. In re-creation, the church is the fullness of Christ, and together they are the fulfillment of that image. In the incarnation of the Son of God, in the mystery of Jesus Christ, creation and salvation converge.

When God the Son became incarnate, he gave to marriage, and to the physical intimacy inherent to it, a meaning it could never have had on its own. This is true not merely because he upheld marriage as divinely ordained, but more importantly *because he fulfilled in himself the reality for which marriage is a sign*. The marital intimacy of the first human pair was a sign imbedded in their bodies of an intimacy to come, a marriage through which Christ would reconcile and reunite sinners to God. The union between Adam and Eve was, we might say, the *proto-protogospel*—the very first glimpse of the gospel recorded in Scripture, Genesis 3:15 notwithstanding. “The two shall become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31; cf. Gen. 2:24) *refers to* the saving union between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32).²² When God joined together the first male and female, he etched into creation a foretaste of a holy union to come, against which the gates of hell could never prevail.

This sacred marriage between Christ and the church possesses cosmic redemptive significance, for it is a blessed union that runs into eternity. God began creation with a marriage, he redeemed a fallen creation through a marriage, and he will finally consummate his unfathomable love for us in an everlasting marriage (Rev. 19:6–9). No one has expressed this as beautifully as Jonathan Edwards:

The end of the creation of God was to provide a spouse for his Son Jesus Christ that might enjoy him and on whom he might pour forth his love. And the end of all things in providence are to make way for the exceeding expressions of Christ’s close and intimate union with, and high and glorious enjoyment of, him and to bring this to pass. And therefore the last thing and the issue of all things is the marriage of the Lamb. . . . The wedding feast is eternal; and the love and joys, the songs, entertainments and glories of the wedding never will be ended. It will be an everlasting wedding day.²³

All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that “God is love.” But they seem not to notice that the words “God is love” have no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, he was not love.²⁴

—C. S. Lewis

In Jesus Christ, the marital union between male and female has been forever sanctified. Fulfilling that original creative sign in a truly majestic and transcendent way, he came to dwell with and in his bride, sharing with us who he is as the true image of God, giving new and eternal life to our flesh from his own. Regardless of how secular culture defines it, marriage, for the church, must be defined by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Marital intimacy is divinely intended to mirror the saving intimacy between God and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Further, because the church is one with Christ, even as he is one with his Father through the Spirit, marriage is a sacred manifestation, on a creaturely level, of the intimacy between the triune persons of God. Accordingly, the one-flesh union between male and female necessarily transcends typically abstract moral, ethical, political, and social definition. Rather, marriage is to be understood primarily in light of God’s self-revelation in Christ, and so given christological and Trinitarian definition by the church. In so doing, we will delight and take courage in confessing that marriage is a sacred and beautiful sign given to us to reflect God’s ineffable love. In the union between Christ and the church, God has accomplished his redemptive and re-creative purposes, making us his beloved sons and daughters forever. In Jesus Christ, we find that God will stop at nothing to bring us into the life and love that he is. Indeed, he is willing to become what he was not—incarnate—and literally spend himself in suffering, misery, humiliation, and death to secure us as the objects of his eternal affection. As the recipient of God’s love, Christ’s bride comes to share in the triune family of God, forever enjoying the love that defines all love, the life that defines all life, and the personal intimacy that defines all personal intimacy. Let us heed Edwards again:

Christ has brought it to pass, that those who the Father has given to him should be brought into the household of God, that he and his Father and they should be as it were one society, one family; that his people should be in a sort admitted into that society of the three persons in the Godhead. In this family or household God [is] the Father, Jesus Christ is his own naturally and eternally begotten Son. The saints, they also are children in the family; the church is the daughter of God, being the spouse of his Son. They all have communion in the same Spirit, the Holy Ghost.²⁵

MISIMAGING GOD AND OURSELVES

When God created Adam and Eve, joining them in marital union, he established within our humanity a sacred sign of his love. The self-giving, life-giving personal intimacy and indwelling that exists in the union between male and female was intended to mirror what God is like. It was, furthermore, an anticipation of the gospel, the exceedingly good news that the incarnate Savior would become one flesh with his bride, the church, re-creating our humanity in his self-giving, life-giving “at-one-ment.” The union between male and female is thus given sacred definition in Scripture; it is to be interpreted in relation to the holy marriage first established by God at creation and quintessentially fulfilled in redemption.

Between these two great marriages, however, stands a great divorce. By the rupture introduced into creation through sin, the image of God suffered distortion and division; we became alienated from God, and therefore alienated from ourselves and from one another. The image of God was broken *in* us, and therefore broken *between* us. Broken images by definition badly reflect God, and we do so in seemingly innumerable ways, but none more serious than the ways we distort God and therefore ourselves in our fallen intimacies and longings. The ravages of sin were bound to penetrate deeply into what makes us human: “in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” And so they have. We were created by God to mirror his self-giving, self-denying, humanizing, procreative, unconditional, and indissoluble love. Yet east of Eden, sadly, human love is all too characteristically selfish and self-gratifying, dehumanizing and objectifying, life-thwarting, conditional, and soluble. Sin has turned us inside out, as it were, leaving us curved in on ourselves. Disoriented by our self-orientation, we have become perversely proficient in unholy marital and sexual self-definition. Given the

holy gravity of human sexuality, the effects on our closest personal intimacies have been devastatingly weighty. After all, distortions and confusions of marriage and sex strike deep at what makes us human, distorting and confusing not only who we were made to be, but also how God images himself.²⁶ For the holy bride of Jesus Christ, the implications are more severe still, for when we implicitly or explicitly condone or participate in unholy marital and sexual expressions, we obscure the very gospel we are privileged to share.

Because the stakes are so high, the distortions of which we speak demand theological assessment. This is to be distinguished from arrogant and self-protective finger-pointing, which might suggest that each of us, in various ways, was or is not subject to, or a purveyor of, the maladies we seek to assess. It is also to be distinguished from an assessment born of joyless negativity rather than deep appreciation and joyful wonder at the holiness of marriage and sex. But we must assess them theologically, for if our theology has nothing to say to us here, it ultimately has little to say at all. In what follows, we will briefly highlight several of the most important and far-reaching symptoms of our marital and sexual sickness, acutely aware that there is far more that could be said, and perhaps said far better. The intended goal, for the authors and readers alike, is the liberation and joy that comes from repentance in Christ Jesus, the embodied Lord of our sexual identity.

PUTTING ASUNDER WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER

Marital union is a sign given to humanity that lends shape and substance to human love, for it images the indivisible, immutable love that God is. Divorce is thus also a sign, a countersign, that disfigures and disintegrates human love, implying as it does that God's love is divisible and unstable. As that countersign, divorce signals a rupture in the most essential of human relations, the union between male and female. It is a sign embedded in the anti-creation, and it constitutes an attempt to do the impossible: put asunder what God has joined.²⁷ In the new creation—the humanity of Jesus Christ—God has issued a resounding “No!” to this false sign, establishing, once again through marriage, an unbreakable sign of his indissoluble love. When Christ united himself in one flesh with his bride, he secured that union forever in himself, anchoring it in the eternal love of his Father through the Spirit. Because of his indefatigable and everlasting faithfulness, the church lives in the comfort and security that there is absolutely nothing that can divorce us from his love (Rom. 8:35–39). Christian marriage has the sacred privilege of

sharing in this sign of the new creation, the gospel, in which God overcomes our infidelities and divisions.

Understanding and rejoicing in the union between Christ and his church, we must ask ourselves very difficult questions, questions intended to lead us to the healing that can come only from our repentance in him. T. F. Torrance gives voice to these questions: “If Christian marriage is meant to reflect that union, how can the Church tolerate divorce? What would divorce mean but that Christ can and may cut off his Church, that he holds on to us only so far as we prove faithful? Where then would we fickle and faithless sinners be? . . . This must make us ask whether the current attitude to divorce in the Church is not evidence of something very wrong, in fact evidence of a serious weakness in its grasp of the Gospel.”²⁸

As difficult as such questions might be, can we ask any less if the mystery of marriage has indeed been fulfilled and reconstituted in Christ—that is, without ripping marriage from its proper context and moorings in the gospel? In so asking, we must not tread haphazardly and insensitively over the complexities that wither or break marriages under the pain of abuse or infidelity. Christ is, and will remain, an utterly faithful Savior despite our unfaithfulness. But we must ask these questions, just as surely as we must answer them, in the kind of humble and trusting repentance that shows that we have not grown cold toward our Bridegroom and his gospel.

JOINING TOGETHER WHAT GOD HAS PUT ASUNDER

It was not good for Adam to be alone. He needed Eve so that together they could be the *imago Dei*, and he needed Eve so that together they could foreshadow the life-giving union between Christ and his bride. But just as it was not good for Adam to be alone, neither was it good for Adam to be joined to another Adam, for two reasons. First, the image of God in humanity requires the male and the female: “in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Just as surely as solitary Adam could not image God, neither could Adam multiplied by two. Male and female are personal distinctions within our common humanity that define humanity, whereas Father, Son, and Spirit are personal distinctions within the one God that define God; where God is concerned, union requires distinctions among persons. Second, two Adams, or a hundred more for that matter, could not fulfill the mandate that immediately followed their creation: “And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’” (Gen. 1:28).

Fruitfulness and multiplication require that humanity be the image of God: a life-giving, fruit-bearing union of distinguishable persons. How very much like God this is! The unity of the Father and Son in the Spirit is the life behind every life, the reason for the existence of everything and everyone (John 1:1–4; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2). Where God is concerned, the creation of life requires distinctions among persons.

If the fall is anti-creation, and necessarily includes distortion of the image of God in humanity, we might expect exactly what we find east of Eden: divisions and confusions among male and female—a dividing of what God has joined, as we have seen, but also a confusing of what God has distinguished. As lamentable as it surely is, we should not be altogether surprised when we read in Scripture that fallen images, who have “exchanged the truth about God for a lie,” are given to sexual confusion: “For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another” (Rom. 1:25–27). The fact that this passage occurs in the context of Paul’s teaching on idolatry is telling. The sexual manifestation of self-worship is the anomaly of same-gender sex—the attempt to unite ourselves with ourselves. If idolatry means that we are curved in on ourselves doxologically, it means that we may also be curved in on ourselves sexually. Holy worship and holy sexuality both require someone who is “Other” than us. Blocher writes:

Immediately we can understand why the Apostle Paul makes a close connection between idolatry and homosexuality (Rom. 1:22–27). This sexual perversion as a rejection of the other corresponds to idolatry in its relationship to God, the rejection of the Other; it is a divinization of the same, the creature.²⁹

God sets himself against sexual idolatry, homosexuality, for ontological reasons, not political or moral reasons. As the Life of the world, he is implacably opposed to all creaturely forms of self-worship, sexual and otherwise, because idols are incapable of giving life. Confused worship, like confused sexuality, signals the death of humanity.

VIRTUAL SEX

The one-flesh union that God forged between his male and female image is the gift of personalization; the two come to experience their humanity in a

uniquely intimate way in the joining of their persons. This is a gift that redounds to every human being, for each of us is a product of, and defined by, just such a union. Divorce and homoeroticism are two ways in which this gift is obscured, one an unholy separation of persons, the other an unholy confusion. Pornography is a third. Constituted by its objectification and thus dehumanizing of the other, pornography is the absurd attempt to make the gift of sexual union what it cannot be: impersonal. It is a case of sexual unreality, a voyeuristic endeavor to steal the pleasure of sexual intimacy from that which defines it. Pornography is an invitation to the contradiction of sexual autonomy.³⁰ Counterfeits are sham substitutes, and pornography is no exception. It substitutes the holy images of God for impersonal images on a screen; self-giving love for self-involved lust; life-giving communion for life-sapping masturbation; and the beauty and fulfillment of personal union for the shame and regret of personal preoccupation.

Pornography promises sexual gratification, a promise impossible for it to deliver seeing that it is everything holy sexual union is not. It stands in stark contrast to holy intimacy precisely because it contradicts who God is, and who he is for us in Christ. God is, by definition, a communion of living persons who dwell with and in one another in self-giving, life-creating love—a love that always exists for the benefit of the other. By contrast, pornography is a stimulant to idolatrous intimacy, a self-preoccupied love devoid of the possibility of life, which seeks to exploit rather than give, deriving pleasure at another's expense. The contrast is exacerbated when we consider the way in which God is for us in Jesus Christ. By becoming incarnate and suffering the abasement of our fallen humanity from cradle to grave, God the Son brings us, by the Spirit, to share in the living communion of life and love he has with his Father. In so doing, he re-creates, reimages, and authenticates our humanity in his own. Pornography is salvation's polar and evil opposite. It is dehumanizing through and through, seeking selfish pleasure in the objectification and abasement of others. Whereas in salvation Jesus Christ personalizes us by joining us to himself, in pornography we depersonalize others whom we keep at a distance. Because pornography so thoroughly distorts the nature of sexual love, the results of such self-indulgence are devastating. Pornography, far from being a merely private affair, in fact functions as a demonically effective stimulant to every other sexual sin; it is a perverse gateway to a myriad of sexual adulterations and abuses, and wreaks havoc on holy marriages.

ABORTION AND THE MEANING OF SEX

God blessed and sanctified birth when he created the first male and female in his image: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” This fruitful multiplying was intended as a reflection of God’s own life-giving interpersonal love. God resanctified birth forever in Jesus Christ when he was conceived in the womb of Mary by the Spirit, a conception through which our lifeless humanity would be given new birth in his. Conception and birth, no less than marriage and sex, are given their meaning in Christ. The life that proceeded from the union of Adam and his bride was a sign of the new and eternal life that would proceed from the last Adam and his bride—life and new life, procreation and re-creation, birth and rebirth. The life that comes forth from the union of male and female has a double reflection, mirroring both the procreative union of the persons of the Trinity and the procreative union of Christ and his church. The male and female union is pregnant with life, echoing who God is in his personal relations and what God does in the gospel of our salvation. In describing why human birth is so very precious to God, we must go even a trembling step further: the new birth we receive in Christ Jesus comes about because in the incarnation, God himself experiences conception and birth! The sanctification of birth has taken place in the incarnation of God.

The meaning of sexual union is thus tied inextricably to new life.³¹ Herein the ignominy of abortion becomes apparent: it means that the male and female have said “No!” to the meaning of their union at the point where God has issued a resounding “Yes!” Abortion is a total misconstrual and manipulation of the meaning of sexual intimacy.³² As such, debating about the inception of life, as important as that is, misses the larger and looming theological point: “Why do we kill approximately 4,000 unborn babies every day in the United States alone?” asks Christopher West. “Because we are misusing and abusing God’s great gift of sex. Make no mistake: in the final analysis, the abortion debate is not about when life begins. It is about the meaning of sex.”³³ If fruit-bearing is a gift inherent to the blessing of sexual union, then the question of whether such life actually exists is nonsensical.

Common to all sexual and marital distortions—divorce, homoeroticism, pornography, and more—is the obscuring, refusal, or termination of life, possible or actual. In abortion, the “No!” to life is issued in such a way as to beget violent and bloody repercussions, leaving personal and relational devastation in its wake for all involved.³⁴ Like all murder, abortion is an assault on God because it is an assault on his image. It takes place, as does all hatred for God,

in the shadow of Golgotha, where our contempt was exposed to its depths: nothing would satisfy our rebellion save the bloody termination—shall we say abortion?—of God's true image, his one and only begotten Son. God experiences birth, but he also experiences its violent end.

In this violent end, the incarnate God suffers his own judgment on our sinful distortions, distortions that run deep into our being—all the way down to our naked bodies and the deepest personal intimacies that require them. In the midst of our marital and sexual sin, in our nakedness and shame, in the throes of the relational devastations we wreak upon ourselves and one another, God does the unthinkable. In Jesus Christ, God hangs battered, bruised, and bloody on a cross, naked and ashamed, the supreme demonstration that his love knows no bounds. There is no condition of ours, however humiliating and shameful, that God will not suffer to bring us forgiveness, healing, and peace. When we are included in Jesus Christ, we are put to death in his death, the death of our fallen humanity, the death of our broken marital and sexual self-definitions. And just as the Father raised the corpse of his Son from the dead by the Spirit, so we are raised in his resurrection, liberated from death and brokenness to share in his holy life.

The crucified, resurrected body of Jesus Christ is the judgment and salvation of our broken bodies. Jesus is the Lord over our twisted marital and sexual falsifications, but always as our merciful Savior. He alone is atonement and healing for our divided, confused, objectified, and aborted relations. The nakedness, humiliation, shame, torture, death, and burial that God in Christ suffers has as its end the glorious union between the resurrected Christ and his church. The everlasting, indissoluble, humanizing, and life-giving communion he establishes with his bride is the beginning of the re-creation of humanity in his image. In Christ, the church is re-established and re-oriented as male and female in the image of God, given freedom in repentance and forgiveness to experience marital and sexual holiness. In the mystery of Christ and his church, one flesh forevermore, marriage and sex become holy signs redeemed and fulfilled. Male and female God has created us, Christ and bride he has re-created us. We would do well to put this to prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, as you freely give yourself to your bride the Church, grant that the mystery of the union of man and woman in marriage may reveal to the world the self-giving love which you have for your Church; and to you with the Father and the Holy Spirit be glory and honor, now and forever. Amen.³⁵

MARRIAGE

This chapter has been taken from *The Incarnation of God: The Mystery of the Gospel as the Foundation of Evangelical Theology* by John C. Clark and Marcus Peter Johnson, © 2015, pages 209ff. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187. www.crossway.org.