



MARRIAGE

Watson Jones III

ACTS 29
COMPETENCIES

Biblical Foundation

Marriage is not a prerequisite for being a church planter. Church planting is a task that all people are called to. In this paper, we will discuss a biblical understanding of marriage and its impact on church planting.

As an institution, marriage begins with God and the creation of the woman from the man. After God creates light from darkness, day from night, plants, animals, and the first man, God recognizes that Adam exists alone and decides that he will create a woman to correspond with him. In Genesis 2:18 God says, "I will make him a helper fit for him." We see that it was the creation of the woman that leads to the first union between a man and woman. The union of man and wife begins with God.

Before God decided to create the woman, we see the rationale for this creation. In Genesis 2:18a God says, "it is not good for the man to be alone." Gordon Wenham says, "against the sevenfold refrain of 'and God saw that it was (very) good' in chap. 1, the divine observation that something was not right with man's situation is startling. It alerts the reader to the importance of companionship for man."¹ God saw the insufficiency of man on his own. It was God's divine intent that an intimate companionship exist in the context of marriage and it was, for this reason, he created the first woman from man.

In God's creation of marriage, he created it with equality in mind. In Genesis 1:27-28, the Godhead converses within itself to create humankind. In the deliberation, God says "Let us make mankind in our image, after our likeness... So, God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." In the marriage, each shares equal value and dignity. There is no lesser or greater individual, but each stands equal before God as they both bear the Imago Dei.

Equality, however seems challenged in 2:18 and 20 when the word "helper" is used to describe the woman. A cursory reading of the passage would suggest that the wife exists as a living being subject to the husband. However, a deeper study of the word "helper" shines a light on the author's intent. In Psalm 54:4 the same word is used to refer to God when the Psalmist says, "God is my helper." God, who is superior to all mankind, serves and is our helper. We can see that being a helper has less to do with stature than it does with providing aid to someone for a task or during a given situation. In fact, the use of the word "helper" does not imply weakness or strength. Wenham asserts, "to help someone does not indicate that the helper is stronger than the helped; simply that the latter's strength is inadequate by itself."² In God's mind, the man was inadequate to complete his God-given task alone, but rather needed a complementary equal to help him.

When one considers the rendering of the Hebrew construction *etser ce'neg-du* (or helper opposite of him) as found in 2:18 and 2:20, we see that the unique combination of these words communicates an idea of correspondence. The writer has in mind the complementarian

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15. Vol. 1. Word Biblical Commentary*. (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 68

² Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 13

nature of marriage where one corresponds to the other; where one spouse relates to and matches the other. The imagery of the woman being formed by God from the man's rib, paints a picture of partnership. There is a mutuality versus a subjugated role play.

In a marriage, two equals come together to form one union or one-fleshness. After God made the woman, she is brought to the man, and he calls her "woman" saying, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." (Genesis 2:23). The writer concludes this portion of the narrative by stating, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." (2:24). The creation of the woman to be the wife of Adam is the paradigm by which scripture paints marriage—two equals who become one flesh. The point made in Genesis 2:24 is a crucial point in understanding marriage because it is a deliberate statement that elevates the relationship between a husband and wife above all other earthly ties. Understanding that passage in its cultural context, a person's identity was bound up in the identity of the family. Therefore, when a man leaves his family—mother and father—to be joined to a woman who has done the same, these two are forming a union and new family together. Their union is more important than the familial relationship of parents to children and, it is therefore through the gospel that we guard marriage.

Genesis 2:24 is so important in establishing the precedent for the sanctity of marriage that when Jesus and Paul speak about the subject, this passage is quoted. In Matthew 19:4-10 Jesus is asked about divorce. In his answer, he elevates marriage in order to say that adultery is the only provision to end a marriage citing Genesis 2:24 as his rationale for his position. Paul in Ephesians 5 also quotes Genesis 2:24 as part of his argument to teach the church at Ephesus that marriage is a matter of mutual submission of Christ-like sacrificial love from the husband to the and Christ-honoring submission of the wife to her husband.

Theological Reflection

In Genesis 1:26, God says "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." There is no indication from the text that "let us" should be interpreted as angels as some would posit. The verse shows us an intentional deliberation among the Triune Godhead to make mankind in their image. What we recognize within the Godhead is three distinct persons—God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—existing in sameness of substance and a shared love. Perhaps this theological truth shows us that part of the Imago Dei is that humankind is made with the capacity for relationship. The marital union is an example of this. Tim Keller argues that humans are designed to "need horizontal relationship" and this is the reason God makes a "helper-companion" namely the woman to be a friend to the man.³

We understand that although one has the capacity and desire for marital companionship, many live in the reality of singleness. This in no way means a person is a *lesser* image bearer of God. The single and married person in Christ-likeness finds their significance and identity in the person, life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

³ Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Dutton/Penguin, 2011), Kindle Edition

In Ephesians 5, the Apostle Paul uses the love and union of Christ and his Church to communicate how the gospel impacts marriage. Paul explains that Christ is the head of the church in the same way that the husband is the head of the bride (v. 23). In marriage, the bride submits to her husband in the same way that “the church submits to Christ” (v. 24). Christ and his cross then form a paradigm of love that the husband is to live out for his wife (vv. 25-31). For Paul, the gospel is the basis by which we understand marriage and how a couple is to thrive in it. Christ then calls the husband and the bride to live in a reality of mutual submission; the wife exhibits a Christ-centered submission to her husband and the husband exhibits a Christlike, self-sacrificing love for his wife.

In Revelation 19:7-9, John uses the imagery of a wedding to point to the future hope of the church—Christ’s return— and says:

Let us rejoice and exult
and give him glory!
For the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready.
it was granted her to clothe herself
with fine linen, bright and pure.
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.
And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the
marriage supper of the Lamb” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God”

John sees Christ’s return as the wedding ceremony where the bridegroom receives his long-awaited bride who has adorned herself in beautiful attire. In the mind of the New Testament writers, marriage and the union therein was the closest human relationship that could communicate the beautiful truth of Christ’s love and his everlasting commitment to the Church. These truths that the writers communicate illustrate the premium that Christ places on marriage.

Cultural Engagement

When one looks at the importance of marriage, we would naturally conclude that all people should embrace it with great joy. Our society and culture feel somewhat different about marriage. Some would argue that marriage is not given the seriousness it deserves. In the United States, marriage is declining, and the growing belief is that marriage is either less important than it was or it is altogether obsolete.⁴

In his book *The Meaning of Marriage*, Tim Keller argues that many people opt out of marriage because of the assumptions that marriages are unhappy. He contends that this growing trend reveals a shift toward what he calls “privatized marriage,” where marriage is less

⁴ *The Decline of Marriage And Rise of New Families* | Pew Research Center. n.d., (Pew Research Center, 2010), accessed May 31, 2017, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/11/18/the-decline-of-marriage-and-rise-of-new-families/>.

about any lifelong devotion, procreation, or a humanitarian good, and more about personal satisfaction and self-gratification.⁵

Assuming Keller is correct in his assessment, people view marriage less as a God-ordained institution and union, and more as a mutual contract contingent upon satisfaction of agreed parties.

With the growing skepticism toward marriage, studies show that cohabitation has increased. Richard Fry and D'Vera Cohn of Pew Research contends that the rise of cohabitation is closely related to the decline of marriage.⁶ To many, the cohabitation is the solution that prevents you from entering a marriage that can lead to unhappiness. Living with a partner allows for a trial period to measure compatibility.

Cohabitation is a way to prolong the life commitment of marriage. If one lives by the view that fornication and cohabitation do not displease God, then the byproduct is a lack of urgency of marriage and a devaluing of the institution. One is then free to "experiment" with partners, acting as if they are married to test for compatibility.

Undergirding these assumptions and trends is the core assumption that life is about the pursuit of personal happiness. When there are things that impede this "happiness", changes must be made to allow for pleasure. One cannot make the mistake of thinking that this idea has not crept into the doors of our churches. The reality is, that since we are not immune to sin, we are all equally given to the belief that Keller alludes to—that life and everything in it is for our benefit and self-gratification. Essentially, this is an individualized mindset where the self is the center of the universe. To approach marriage in this fashion is a recipe for disaster.

Many people also view the love for a spouse through the Hollywood painted lens. Love is perceived as deep infatuation and less of a commitment to the other and their wellbeing. This distorted view of love will stifle the permanence of marriage. One must adapt a view of love that is consistent with the love that is exhibited by God in Christ, our Lord who died for us while we were perpetually sinning against him (Roman 5:8).

There is a more Christ-centered approach to marriage; one that requires the individual to die to self in sacrificial love for Christ and a potential partner—mutual submission. In Ephesians 5:21 Paul says, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Paul sees that the primacy of Christ as the basis for mutual submission and through the gospel, he calls husbands and wives to practice it in marriage. Submission then is both a response to the gospel and an act of worship for a believer in Jesus Christ.

Paul is preparing to show how in a marriage, mutual submission is essential. The wife submits to the husband in verse 22, but the husband submits to the woman in the form of sacrificial

⁵ Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Dutton/Penguin, 2011), 27.

⁶ Richard Fry and D'Vera Cohn, I. *Prevalence and Growth of Cohabitation* | Pew Research Center, (Pew Research Center, 2011), accessed May 31, 2017, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/06/27/i-prevalence-and-growth-of-cohabitation/>.

love that finds its model in Christ who died for the benefit of the church. In verses 25-28 Paul says:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

While this statement is made directly to the husband, it is equally applicable to the wife because she submits in "reverence for Christ." (Ephesians 5:21) The husband and wife are called by Christ to approach marriage thinking about the other person rather than thinking of the benefits one gains from the marriage. As individuals view marriage through the lens of our Lord, they can then deemphasize self meanwhile elevating the other.

Secondly, when one understands and appreciates God's cultural mandate and utility in marriage as found in Genesis 1:28 to "be fruitful and multiply" and sees the order, finding fulfillment in the context of marriage, then one can overcome the trend toward viewing marriage as obsolete. Keller highlights that of those who are married, people never understand and appreciate the nearly 61% who see themselves and happy and fulfilled.⁷

Missional Significance

While marriage is not a prerequisite for church planting for those who are married, it can play a significant role. First, a healthy marriage can crucially assist in discerning and clarifying a conviction to plant a church. Given that in marriage a woman is given to a man as his perfect helper, husbands and wives are thus to approach church planting as a one flesh unit. Their different roles will uniquely complement each other. Therefore, if a planter's wife is not entirely comfortable with her husband's conviction to plant, then it may mean God has not opened the door for such an endeavor. Even deeper, it has been found that some pastors have discerned the Lord's leading through their wives' godly intuition. It is essential that husbands and wives approach church planting as a one flesh unit, and share the burden to plant. In the context of marriage, the conviction to plant must be nurtured, tested and discerned by both husband and wife. Men who pursue a conviction to plant without their wife's full engagement will damage both their marriage and the church they are seeking to plant.

Secondly, given the premium God places on marriage, it is no surprise that the health of a marriage can qualify or disqualify a person for ministry. In 1 Timothy 3:1-7 the second qualification for an elder is one who is faithful to his wife. Paul continues by saying in verse 5, "if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" Note, Paul is speaking about the orderliness of an elder's children in this verse and not suggesting that a wife is to be 'managed.' The point Paul is making is that a pastor/

⁷ Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 26.

planter/elder's first call is to the family and, since the husband is one flesh with the wife after Christ, his first obligation is to his wife.

In many countries, marriage is devalued and trivialized. The idea of a life-long marriage between a man and a woman is often challenged by confused gender roles and or is rejected as unnecessary and at times oppressive. Therefore, for the married couple engaging in church planting, there is an opportunity and need to live distinctly, establishing a gospel culture within their church plants where both men and women, single and married can flourish in their identity in Christ.

Further reading and reflection questions are available at acts29.com/competencies.