

# MALE AND FEMALE

*Christian Approaches  
to Sexuality*

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## chapter 6

### CHANGING PATTERNS OF MARRIAGE

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*John Snow*

The danger in discussing changing patterns of marriage is that one may suggest by the topic itself that there is some sort of orderly, conscious, ideological shift from one marriage pattern to another. This is probably not the case even where couples, or even whole communities, believe that they are involved in precisely this. No institution is more conservative than marriage, because it lies at the heart of social organization. Marriage is concerned with ordering the relationships between the sexes, the procreation and raising of children, and the orderly transfer of both culture and property from one generation to the next. In the past, precisely because of its crucial importance, marriage has proved to be extraordinarily adaptive to its environment, but in all cultures the adaptation is achieved slowly, and once an equilibrium is found it tends to be maintained fiercely.

What we are experiencing in Western society, and with a vengeance in many regions of the United States, is the disruption of the core institution of marriage, and what seem to be changing patterns of marriage are in reality frantic, impulsive, desperate attempts of this core institution to maintain its equilibrium—or even more frantic, impulsive, and desperate attempts to find a new equilibrium. What we are experiencing at present is chaos at the center of society. To state the issue less radically is to avoid it; and to avoid it is cruel, for marital agony is currently experienced and understood most often as a private, personal inadequacy.

In order that some new and nonalienating equilibrium might be discovered, we must understand what is happening to us. Only then shall we be able to begin to deal with the chaos and to move rationally toward a newly viable institution.

Among human beings, all sense of meaningfulness and purposefulness is found in continuing relationships. As Peter Marris points out in his book *Loss and Change* (Pantheon Books, 1974), when we suggest to recently bereaved persons that they should cheer up and go out and have some fun, they look at us uncomprehendingly. They actually do not know what we mean. What could they possibly do without the person they have lost that would be fun? Their agony is that they can't really see any reason for doing anything. Radical discontinuity in human relationships, whatever its cause, results in at least momentary loss of purposefulness, and the restoration of purpose and meaning will depend on establishing some new relationship with the lost past, on seeing oneself in a new way in relationship to it. In American life, innovative technology causes many such discontinuities, and they are largely unplanned and undealt with. The disruption of the core institution of marriage is primarily a result of these discontinuities, and the history of this disruption is not hard to trace.

During World War II, American business and industry discovered that transportation in the United States had reached a level of sophistication that made it possible to move a large labor force wherever it was needed by offering sufficient wages. They discovered, too, that management was equally amenable to moving about. indeed, the whole country seemed to find a new exhilaration in its wheels and wings and movement. Soldiers and sailors stationed in a once lovely California vowed to return, and did when the war was over. The G.I. Bill sent millions of young men to college who otherwise might not have gone, and these young men and the women they married felt no desire to return to the small towns and cities of their birth when they could go into junior management jobs and partake of the joys of suburbia wherever suburbia was.

Business and industry also discovered that a transient management was a more efficient management. The newly arrived manager had no investment in things as they were, no embarrassing friendships with peers or subordinates. He could shake and move his department in ways impossible for the manager buried in an enclave of relationships. By the early 1950s it was accepted that to go up in a large company was to be willing to move and move often. Most people wanted to go up, and most people moved.

And children were born. Lots of them. School systems strained, first to meet the demands and then to anticipate the demands of the population explosion. More and more teachers and administrators were hired, and these, too, began to get in the habit of moving, or, if they were the wives of industrial management, moved whether they

wanted to or not. Children were faced with a bewildering array of discontinuous relationships which they were expected to regard as normal. Television became the most dependable relationship they had, even though it lied to them constantly and they knew it.

By the third move, many of the mothers and children of transient suburbia began to show signs of combat fatigue. Mothers complained of irritability, constant fatigue, an inability to feel much of anything. Doctors prescribed amphetamines. Mothers complained of sleeplessness. Doctors prescribed tranquilizers. Drug companies cooperated by supplying blends of the two. Children became listless or hyperactive or developed learning problems. Some mothers innocently shared their drug expertise with their children. Television urged pills of whatever kind on everyone. Emotional disorders became too numerous for psychiatry, and counseling of one kind or another became a growth industry. Martinis became dryer and dryer and larger and larger.

The men began to burn out, to drink too much, smoke too much, work too much; and finally, by the middle 1960s as their children reached adolescence, to die too much. They had a good deal of money by now. The economy was booming. Many had lost interest in their work and felt they deserved some diversion. The death of peers and the gnawing of their own ulcers had made them aware of their own mortality. Many chose sex as their diversion, but since most had been brought up to be responsible people, the sex led to divorce and remarriage—a new life. Their ex-wives, too often out of despair, became sexually predatory, hoping against hope to be married again because marriage was all they felt prepared for—although they suspected they weren't very good at that either. The "togetherness" family, the most successful advertising hoax of history, that brave little band of consumers out to vanquish the world, was no longer together. In its place was a plastic jungle, a competitive hell.

So much for the picture, the sociological image. It is not, of course, any more accurate than the manufactured mythology of the togetherness family. It leaves out the heroic, the quietly heroic, resistance of millions of middle-class Americans who were, during this time, trying to make sense out of their lives and the society within which they lived their lives. It leaves out the unnumbered families who tried to build a sane community around worship and sacrifice and service and mutual care. Worst of all, it trivializes the innate seriousness of individual human beings. Yet the dark sociological picture is part of the way even the most serious suburbanites see their own life experience, especially if an angry child, home from college or commune, has spelled it out to them in graphic, ruthless terms.

The picture also leaves out the life experience of most Americans—the urbanite of whatever class or color, the people who continue to live in small towns or cities, the farmers and rural people in general, and the entire laboring class. But this picture is a part of their fantasies and dreams as it filters through the media, and it influences their marriages as well. If we are talking about changing patterns of marriage, the classical image of the suburban togetherness family falling apart is the source of whatever new patterns of marriage are developing; for only the children of these marriages, the parental survivors of these marriages, or the Korean War generation influenced by them are affluent enough to experiment with new forms. To some degree, the new forms are all reactions to this image or variations on it.

The first technological development to affect marriage, then, was in the area of transportation, and resulted in a mindless transiency which made the American middle class an essentially rootless, disenfranchised, and powerless sector of society. The best educated and politically most sophisticated people in the country were removed from its political life and placed in pleasant enough camps where they managed the middle levels of its economic life. In their affluent, consumptive impotence these people lost any felt sense of meaning or purpose, and in too many cases their marriages (and families) began to disintegrate. But while this was happening, two other technological innovations occurred which were to affect radically the lives of their children and, to a lesser but still important degree, their own lives.

The first was the computer, all the social results of which we have not yet begun to understand. Nevertheless, one result of it was a raised ecological consciousness which was to have devastating consequences for the self-image of the American middle class. It was out of computer projections that we came to understand that we lived in a finite cosmos, and that what we had come to regard as the good life was in reality an impulsive squandering of limited planetary resources which, in turn, resulted in a rapid poisoning of the earth's air and water. To describe the situation in less brutal terms would be to do injustice to how it was apprehended emotionally by the younger generation, the most intelligent and sensitive of whom saw their future and the future of humanity ripped off by our mindless greed.

The second technological innovation was the mixture of effective birth control and safe abortion. Those who had children were made to feel irrationally guilty, and those who continued or began to have children were made out in the media to be irresponsible. Parenthood, the most sanctioned and legitimated estate in Western society, was under question. What, in its inevitability, had been regarded as

a blessing and source of hope and commitment to the future, very suddenly became an option, and as an option, a possible threat to the future. An unquestioned core value of society was, if not removed, radically modified, and women began to wonder what on earth they were here for. The extent to which men were made to feel the same way has not yet surfaced so violently. But both men and women became considerably less convinced that they were here to be married until death should them part.

New patterns of marriage, then, can be seen as attempts of couples to deal with the psychic and institutional wreckage brought about in the society by interpersonal discontinuity and a heightened sense of cosmic doom. These new patterns can be divided into two categories. The first might be called passive-adaptive, and the other, countercultural.

Passive-adaptive patterns of marriage are based on the assumption that human beings can adjust to discontinuity and cosmic meaninglessness by arranging a set of secondary interpersonal adjustments centered around the single value of hedonism. People choosing the passive-adaptive modes of marriage feel that the discontinuity is essentially liberating, and that the need for any sense of cosmic meaning or purpose is not basic to human life but an anachronistic, learned construct which binds people to static social institutions by causing them to identify with these institutions and to be blindly loyal to them. To rely on any form of institutional identity or continuing relationship is to be trapped. To remain sane and free, it is held, one must forge an identity together enough to avoid any commitment to any institution or other person which might begin to interfere with one's personal fulfillment or growth. All this is best summed up in the much quoted extrapolation from Fritz Perls, often referred to as a "manifesto" but certainly not to be taken as Perls' last word on the nature of interpersonal reality:

I do my thing and you do your thing. I am not in this world to live up to your expectations, and you are not in this world to live up to mine. You are you, and I am I. And if, by chance, we find each other, it's beautiful. If not, it can't be helped.

It must be remembered that those who quote this manifesto with most passion are of that generation who, from the time of their birth, were in too many cases never permitted to have a relationship of more than a few year's duration with anyone but their parents, and who often had no continuous relationship with either parent. It must

also be remembered that in the bewildering discontinuities of their growing up they were continually meeting with conflicting expectations of who they should be and how they should behave. Although these people view this manifesto as something new and liberating, it is hardly more than a confirmation of their own experience; but this confirmation of who they are is understandably reassuring. The children of discontinuity and loss simply do not know if they are capable of a lasting relationship, and this manifesto at least gives them the courage to make a tentative beginning.

Marriages entered into under this rubric, then, are tentative. The institution of marriage is no more to be trusted than any other, and the people who believe this, even though they may have gone through the forms of marriage required by law, do not regard themselves as "married people." Marriage does not become a part of their identity. They do not feel much obligation to live up to the classical expectations of this institution. They may have quietly made a contract with each other, renewable, say, in five years, and to be renegotiated at that time. Or they may have agreed upon an open marriage, hoping that it would "work" and be a continuing relationship, but assuming that the classical role-expectations of traditional marriage would be destructive rather than supportive to a continuing relationship. The breadwinning male and the child-rearing, homemaking female and the whole concept of lifelong sexual fidelity are not role-expectations to be trusted, particularly since sex and procreation no longer have any inevitable connection, and having any children at all in an option. The marriage relationship, then, is more like a friendship spiced with sex and with interchangeable roles and functions. If there is a child or two, all aspects of the parenting will be shared. Possible extramarital sexual experimentation is agreed upon from the start, with the proviso that it will not be done secretly and will not be persisted in if it begins to prove threatening to the primary relationship.

It is important to note that the trend toward agreed upon extramarital sexual experimentation began in traditional marriages during the middle 1950s with the advent of the pill. This was before role-expectations had broken down, and just the term "wife-swapping" expresses the male dominance involved in the process. Within a traditional marriage this kind of experimentation proved to be destructive to women, increasing their sense of submissiveness and exploitation. It was a reflection of the generally competitive atmosphere of the suburbs which was already doing them in, and the matter of "who was the best lay" was determined by the men. Women began to feel like another consumer item, and their gathering resentment, whether

the experimentation led to divorce or not, was to give a particular vehemence to their participation in the liberation of women a few years later.

Indeed, the open marriage is, among other things, an attempt to find a secondary adjustment to the hazards of competitive, extramarital sexuality by giving the woman as much choice as the man in the matter of extramarital sexual partners. Whether it simply removes the competition among men and puts it between spouses is still an open question. The issue of jealousy is not yet resolved, but in the open marriage it does not have to be resolved. If the jealousy of either spouse becomes obsessive and cannot be resolved by using encounter-group techniques or by repairing to a marriage counselor, there are always the options of fidelity or divorce. If the divorce begins to become sticky, there are divorce counselors to ease the passage and help with an amicable settlement. Indeed, it is held that both partners may "grow" in awareness and self-knowledge in the process of divorce.

The passivity in passive-adaptive patterns of marriage is most certainly not within the relationship itself. Partners work endlessly at improving their sexual techniques and interpersonal skills. They may attend encounter or sensitivity weekends. They read books about new patterns of marriage, evaluate and negotiate and schedule the roles and functions of living together in a household, and try to encourage each other's personal growth. In many respects they take marriage more seriously than it has ever been taken before, or, to be more accurate, they take their relationship as spouses more seriously than such relationships have been taken before. Their passivity manifests itself in their acceptance, basically a despairing acceptance, of the status quo of a society which they themselves regard as corrupt and dangerous; and for all their secondary adjustments to it, it is just as dangerous to them as it was to their parents. Often hating their work, they nevertheless want to succeed in it in order to indulge themselves in a good life that consists mainly of elegant play requiring untold consumption of expensive gear.

It is true, perhaps more true than ever with the present economic downturn, that to succeed, to make more money, one must be mobile. But with more and more wives regarding their own careers as of primary importance in their self-realization, it is often not possible for a husband and a wife to find new and better positions in the same city or even the same state. Career conflict has become a major issue for couples who have chosen to live and work in the mainstream of American economic life, and the centrality of hedonistic values in the passive-adaptive marriage makes the "commuter marriage" a

very perilous arrangement indeed. The inevitable loneliness of such arrangements has a way of turning convenient sexual liaisons into companionate relationships which eventually take precedence over marriages that have become weekend and vacation affairs. Eventual divorce is normative for the commuter marriage among passive-adaptive spouses.

The types of countercultural marriages are so diverse and numerous that they defy even listing, to say nothing of description. What they have in common is a basis in revolt against the economic-institutional life of the free-enterprise system as it currently operates in the United States, and an ideological core which throws them into conflict with it or into alienation from it. The politics of people in countercultural marriage ranges from underground revolutionary to John Birch reactionary, with a religious commitment to the apolitical in-between. Countercultural marriages are entered into with the belief that marriage cannot have any human value for either spouse if it exists apart from meaning and purpose. For most people in these marriages it is understood that meaning and purpose depend upon a trustworthy community as well as upon an ideology, that an ideology without consensual validation is powerless.

Perhaps an example is in order. A group of ten young professional couples with a political activist orientation in a large university city are closely allied in their efforts to effect social change. These lawyers, professors, doctors, and clinical psychologists had, during their early years in the "movement," become very aware of the oppression of women ("The only place for a woman in the movement is on her back"). They decided to meet regularly with a psychiatrist (also a political activist) to work out among themselves the nature of an "egalitarian" marriage. Their original assumption, deriving from their political orientation, was that in a traditional marriage both husband and wife were regarded as each other's property. Their logical conclusion from this premise was that the group should share themselves sexually with each other. This practice proved hugely disruptive to their relationships and most gave it up. (Those who didn't were eventually divorced.) They arrived at the conclusion that marital fidelity was the authentic activist style and agreed, as a group, to live this out. It is easy to trivialize this by saying that five years' expenditure of energy and intelligence had succeeded in re-inventing the wheel, but to do so is to miss the point. The point is that for these people marital sexual fidelity was given strong emotional consensual validation. There was no aching doubt in their minds—as there often is in the minds of an isolated, maritally faithful Christian couple—that they were hanging on to some crazy, anachronistic custom.

Other significant conclusions were reached in this closely observed group. They found that the equal sharing of all tasks was impossible within a family, and that the tasks one spouse did better and liked better should be taken care of more (though not exclusively) by that spouse. This was particularly true in the matter of raising children. It was not that the more "parental" spouse should raise the children, but that that spouse should spend more time with the children than the other. Only mutually loathed tasks were to be shared equally.

All this is gone into in some detail because it is typical of the intentionality of most countercultural marriages. As one communitarian remarked, "Whether a commune lives or not depends on whether the people who got it together did so intentionally or wishfully."

The distinction between willing and wishing is an important one in any marriage, as it is in any community, but what creates this distinction is more important. Where loss and discontinuity lie at the heart of motivation, as Peter Marris explains, people will at all times be trying by what they do in the present to establish continuity with the past. In passive-adaptive marriage patterns one still sees a kind of nostalgia for the suburban life of the 1950s, the childhood decade of the people who choose these patterns. But nostalgia is wishful, not willful, and will accomplish little toward making sense out of either the past or the present.

From a Christian point of view, the issue of intentionality, will, commitment, must be considered of primary importance in evaluating changing patterns of marriage. It is present, of course, in both the passive-adaptive and the countercultural patterns. But in the former the commitment is to self-realization or personal growth, often understood entirely in hedonistic terms; and in the latter, it is usually to an ideology, whether philosophical or political or, in the widest sense, religious. There is also a theological dimension to both these marriage patterns, to be discovered in their mistrust or institutional loyalty. Christians have traditionally been warned against worshiping—that is, giving ultimate loyalty to—principalities and powers; but at least within Anglicanism a strong sacramental tendency has kept this institutional distrust from amounting to a creed in itself. Indeed, if there is an Anglican heresy, it may be found in a too high doctrine of institutions. It was Richard Hooker who described the church as the state at prayer. Nevertheless, St. Paul was of two minds about institutions. Although his dictum that it was better to marry than to burn cannot be described as a high doctrine of marriage as an institution, it was to this institution that he turned as a metaphor for the relationship between Christ and his Church, which is certainly to give it primary importance.

Marriage, then, for the Christian, is a secular institution with potential theological significance. There is no such thing as a Christian marriage, but a marriage can be committed to the sovereignty of Christ and blessed as Christian. The spirit of the marriage, not the form, is Christ's. There is then no very profound theological reason for Christians to adhere to one form of marriage as Christian, and there may be very good theological reasons for Christians to abandon a form of marriage which is in direct conflict with what a Christian believes. A marriage which has submitted itself to the sovereignty of the economic ideology of a particular nation, as was the case with so many American middle-class marriages in the 1950s and 1960s, cannot also be considered Christian even though it may have been blessed by the church and endured with sexual fidelity. Christians saying of divorced people: "What has happened to the concept of sacrifice and self-denial?" might ask themselves as well: "Why should a wife sacrifice herself for a corporation which is unaware of her existence as anything but a potential consumer, and why should a husband sacrifice himself and his family to maximize profits, his own and the corporation's?" There are answers to these questions: "To put the kids through college." "To succeed." "To have access to the good life." Perhaps the most honest and profoundly felt answer would be "to survive in a wildly untrustworthy and competitive society." This last is how many, many people perceived their predicament, and how a few articulated it. But none of these answers has proved adequate. None, certainly, is Christian. The nuclear family, the famous "togetherness" family, as a competitive, mobile unit in an economic system which serves itself far more than it serves the society that supports it, should be abandoned. But the church must give much more thought to what should take its place, and perhaps less attention to the futile task of trying to hold it together.

Perhaps the church should begin by taking another look at the custom, usually tolerated, of the young living together out of wedlock. There seems to be about the same amount of commitment to a relationship among such couples as there is among couples who marry; but there is far less motivation to take the best-paying job available, however hateful it might be—which was the gateway to the primrose path for so many young couples who rushed to get married two decades ago. The children of discontinuity and loss have little confidence in their ability to sustain a lasting relationship, too often having had little opportunity during their lives even to know one, to say nothing of having experienced one. Their tentativeness is understandable and perhaps commendable, and makes it possible for them to avoid becoming an extension, a reluctant agent,

of a solipsistic economic system—however much their privilege is supported by this same system. The postponement gives them time to discover what they are called to do, and there are many more things that need doing than were apparent a quarter of a century ago. Some of these things require a specialized education, others require an apprenticeship, and still others require a newly recovered genius for entrepreneurship. But freed from the economic urgencies of early marriage, young adults are given time to make some sense out of their life work. For the Christian, this means the serious providing of goods and services, humanly necessary goods and services, or a serious, serving vocation to medicine, law, education, politics, government, or ordained ministry. This freedom is, of course, not an un-mixed blessing and can be used for aimless "swinging" or for simply going to pieces. Again, it is a question of intentionality and values, as much as of given psychic strength.

When the direction of both partners' life work is set, the couple who have maintained a relationship through the tentative stage of vocational discovery will often marry, and will often bring to this marriage habits of mutuality and sharing that include, not just each other but a number of friends—paired, married, or single—who share their value system. Where such people are Christians, as in some urban charismatic communities, eucharistic worship is the ordering dynamic of their shared lives. These marriages are open in the sense of being hospitable, generous, and socially concerned. They do not regard themselves as little islands of intimacy in competition with the world for survival, but as part of a community concerned with the redemption and renewal of that world for whom Christ became incarnate, suffered, died, and rose again. These marriages, like the community within which they exist and from which they draw continuous support, are open and trusting toward the people of this world, but bring a kind of creative mistrust, a critical restlessness, to its institutional, political and economic life.

Particularly in the matter of child care and education, young people seriously concerned with discovering more humane, or even more Christian, forms of marriage are taking quite a different tack from that of their parents. In the 1950s, serious parents were concerned that their children should have the best in education, and they were willing to endure higher taxes if they were in the suburbs, or higher private school tuitions if they were in the city. As for preschool care, concerned mothers believed it was irresponsible to let anyone but themselves take care of children under four. Concerned young parents today are more inclined to entrust their children from an early age to group care, but a rationalized group care

they have taken part in planning, and in which they continue to involve themselves as volunteer assistants or in some other capacity.

In the matter of schooling, a distrust of the public schools as they developed in the last twenty years is very widespread among this generation of young parents, from fundamentalist Christians in Appalachia to agnostic Ph.D.s in the suburbs. What is new about this discontent and distrust is that it is not with "bad" teachers or administrators, it is with the actual content of the curriculum, particularly with the value assumptions of the curriculum, both as they are revealed in the content of books and in the methods of teaching. To disagree with something so deeply at the center of an institution means involvement, and a surprising number of young parents across the country have shown themselves willing to give endless hours of work to alternative education, whether within the public school system or outside of it. People with a commitment to stay in the same place are able to effect institutional change in ways that were impossible for their nomadic parents.

What is described above is neither a passive-adaptive nor a thoroughly countercultural marriage. Neither is it as rational or utopian as the brevity of description makes it sound. There is much painful trial and error involved, and there is not a great deal of communication between the communities within which this pattern of marriage is taking place. Thus, marriages in one community may be struggling with issues which have already been coped with creatively by marriages in another. Nevertheless, this pattern of marriage, wherever it exists, is based either consciously or unconsciously on a dynamic of repentance and a new life rooted in mutuality, cooperation, and shared concern.

The similarity between these marriages in community and marriage as it was understood in the early church, as we know this church through the New Testament, is too strong to be dismissed. Yet even where the communities within which these marriages exist are consciously and explicitly Christian, they seem to show a surprising reluctance to identify with the institutional church as it is represented by the parish. To the extent that it is helping young people in their quest for more humane and viable patterns of marriage, the parish seems more concerned with helping passive-adaptive couples discover secondary adjustments to a sick society than in facing the extent to which any economic overdependence on this society, or any trust in its current hedonistic goals and values, will eventuate, for Christians especially, in a value conflict out of which no one can make sense.

If the Anglican communion has shown any special genius, if it has

made any essential contribution to the whole church, it has been in its determined incarnational insistence on historical continuity, involvement in the life of the world, and the ability of Christianity continuously to help human beings caught in the chaos of the present to find a new and comprehensible relationship to what has gone on in the past. Human beings are not genetically programed to know why they are born and how they are to spend their lives. In the human beginning was the Word, and words are all that humans have to communicate from generation to generation what it is to *be* human. Radical historical discontinuity resulting in a failure of communication between generations also results in a universal purposelessness, an aimless wandering toward death.

The Anglican communion, from Hooker to F. D. Maurice to William Temple to Reuel Howe, has resolutely refused to let theological or political or economic-technological discontinuity cast humanity blind into the wilderness. And neither has it demanded of its adherents an orthodox lockstep toward heaven oblivious to the chaos and suffering of the world. It is not that society should not change, but that the change should in some way, perhaps quite a new way, make sense in terms of what wisdom humans have garnered from the past. And the church has insisted that the core of this wisdom, an extraordinarily enlightening and spirited core, has been given to the world by God through it in Jesus Christ.

The responsibility of the church in such a critical matter as marriage, the primary social agent of human continuity, cannot be denied. But until it bases its own community, as that community is reflected in the parish, on something more profound than trying to make people caught in a demonic value conflict feel better about themselves—rather than continually and lovingly pointing out that value conflict and the need to choose one way or the other—it is hard to see how the church will be of much help to those who need it most and would perhaps respond most receptively and vividly to its message.

## chapter 19

### THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

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*Rosemary Haughton*

To get a full grasp of what the phrase “theology of marriage” means we have to make a great effort to get away from one kind of notion of theology, which is that it is a ready-made set of ideas and principles, bestowed on mankind at some point in history, and thereafter needing only to be elaborated and elucidated. Theology is a discovery, a perpetually renewed search for understanding of “the ways of God to man.” It is under the inspiration of the Spirit, always, but depends for its scope at any given time on the human experience—events, concepts, words—available to bring it within reach of real, historical people. So, although truth itself, the eternal wisdom, is unchanging, the discovery of truth and wisdom by human beings is a long, strange, and unpredictable voyage of exploration, in which new kingdoms are discovered in every era. Old insights are added to new ones, modifying both and enriching the Christian heritage of each generation with new treasure. Yet the search is never over, the full wisdom is always beyond the reach of human language, however inspired.

Theology grows from the relationship of God and man, and man’s share of the work is dependent on historical experience. This is true even of such apparently abstract doctrines as that of the Holy Trinity, whose development owed much to the particular kinds of philosophical concepts which were the “language” of theological discussion at the time. This is all the more obviously true of the theology of marriage, whose development has passed through some dramatic changes, as marriage customs shifted through tremendous cultural upheavals.

This essay is too short to permit of even a summary of the history of Christian ideas about marriage, but one or two ideas picked out

from the great store of historically acquired wisdom really help in understanding our present situation. One of the most important, for instance, in Christian thinking about the God-relatedness of marriage comes from the pre-Christian inheritance, and acquired special (and unique) character from the paradoxical fact that Hebrew religion, alone among those of neighboring peoples with whom they otherwise shared much of religion and custom, attached no magical or ritual significance to sex. Not only was sex not used in worship of the Hebrews' God, it was kept at a distance, literally and symbolically, from all ritual occasions. This has often been regarded as proof of Old Testament puritanism, but even a cursory reading of Scripture banishes this idea. The Israelites were not prudish, rather their attitudes to sexuality, marriage, and child bearing were based on a sense of human worth in relation to God. Sex was human, not divine. There was one God, Yahweh, Father-Mother, source of all, but not a sexual being such as populated the great pantheons of other nations. Yahweh blessed human fertility, and sanctified that of his own people, so that they might raise up more sons to Israel. For the same reason sex was surrounded with a careful and even fierce hedge of law, to ensure the protection of marriage and its offspring, and to preserve the children of Israel from the danger of involvement with foreign ideas and loyalties through marriage outside the fold of Israel.

So marriage was *both* secular *and* holy to the Lord. Sex had no powers, but it was important and could be holy. Divorce was allowed, but as a regrettable failure; the norm, applauded and honored, was lifelong fidelity and real conjugal love, and these were signs of God's favor and blessing.

At the same time and, as it were, side by side with this very practical view of sexual relationship, the prophets of Israel, as time went on, developed an understanding of the nature of the Lord's covenant with his people which they found it most suitable to express in terms of human love and marriage. The totally transcendent, asexual character of Yahweh was so profoundly rooted at the heart of Hebrew religious culture that it was possible to make such a comparison, and to elaborate and celebrate it without in any way weakening the sense of the divine otherness. In the period of the exile and after, when the covenant relationship could no longer be thought of as a promise of political domination, the bridal relationship of Yahweh and Israel became a way of understanding the vocation of the chosen people. They were the beloved, the one true "wife" among many other peoples, courted and cherished, repeatedly rescued from infidelity, forgiven, reconciled, and brought home to her rightful husband.

The purpose of such meditations was to make sense of the stormy and perplexing history of the people, to give them a conviction of being beloved, of having a purpose in their national existence in spite of all that defeats and disillusion could do. Yet to use such an image shows that the marriage relationship itself appeared to the Jewish people to be one of tremendous value, humanly and divinely. The tenderness, patience, endurance, and generosity which are attributed to this union of God with his people are evidence that such qualities were desired and admired in marriage. Human marriage was being recognized as a *means of holiness*, a way of God's love, not merely of genealogical necessity.

This sense of the human graciousness of the marriage relationship, informed and sanctified for God's purposes while never ceasing to be human, has stamped the Christian theology of marriage. It has suffered from many aberrations, as cultural changes seized on men's minds, but this constant and ordering theme was never wholly lost and reasserted itself steadily. When this theme is sounded, we recognize the Christian mind once more playing over its essential statement, which is incarnational. The word and wisdom of God is expressed in bodies and minds, historically existing in particular places and cultures, loving and begetting in the light of eternity. Yet all this is human and temporal—not eternal, not divine—but the love growing in this bodily life, and *only* in this bodily life, is of the stuff of eternal, divine life.

This delicate sense of the essential polarity of human life illumined by the incarnate wisdom is easy to distort. Over and over again the balance has been lost, and only painfully recovered. Christianity burst into its first self-knowledge with a strong sense of the God-bearing quality of human love. This is reflected not only in Paul's famous bridal metaphor of Christ and his beloved, the church (and this is a direct linear descent from the Jewish prophets on whose words he was reared) but much more importantly in the constant emphasis on the need for the nurturing of love between believers and toward all men, even the persecutors. Down to earth service, loyalty, joy in companionship, and mutual reverence of God's workers for each other; care of the sick, the insecure, and the lonely; hospitality and generous giving—these things were meant to be, and visibly were the marks of the heirs of the kingdom. In this context, married love found its position. It was not singled out but was part of the whole economy of Christian life. It presented moral and religious problems, and it seemed sometimes that it would be better to remain unwed and be without those particular problems—but nobody suggested it was tainted with evil. Yet within a few decades the fear of

the flesh, absorbed through contact with gnostic sects and writers, had gained so strong a hold on the spiritual consciousness of Christianity that it became easy to *except* sexual love from other kinds of love, and even to regard it with loathing because it was unequivocally bodily and pleasurable. The Fathers of the Church, though they were often saintly and courageous and loving men, produced a corpus of antisex and antiwoman literature which has provided those who regard Christianity as essentially antilife and joyless with all the ammunition they could possibly want.

Later, the Romance doctrines sought to establish the spiritual value of sexual love in the unpredictable godlike power of passion, especially unsatisfied and illicit passion, holding in contempt the bonds of domestic loyalties. At another extreme, canon law and the mentality it fostered tried to codify and control sex and marriage in terms of purely bodily acts and words, regarding emotions as outside its scope and even as tiresome irrelevancies. At times, procreation was regarded as the punishment laid on woman for being preeminently a "fleshly" creature, a view which made it possible to resist as immoral any attempts to make childbirth less than painful. Indeed, the whole history of Christian attitudes to women does not make pretty reading. To write about this as it deserves would unbalance the shape of this essay, but the reasons behind it, conscious and (above all) unconscious, need to be considered with very great care as we struggle to renew our understanding of Christian marriage.

One could go on listing the aberrations of Christians in relation to sex and marriage, and notice the heavy legacy of legalism that still burdens the Catholic tradition, and the equally harsh and inhuman effects in the Protestant one of a cult of domestic respectability and order as a test of Christian acceptability. To go into all this in a short essay is impossible, but it is important for two reasons to remember how easily and constantly Christians have drastically failed to assert the incarnational balance in the theology of marriage. One reason is that the errors show that we can never come to a "definitive" understanding of God's work in human sexuality, so the Christian mind and heart has constantly to renew its search for the proper balance, realizing the limitations of the human search yet confident that "the full stature of Christ" is somehow growing within and through all the failures and fresh starts. The other reason is that, over and over again, the mistakes were necessary, in the curious way in which such things work, because it was only by exaggerating, in good faith, some aspect of human sexuality that the real nature of that aspect could be fully seen, and later properly appreciated. For instance, the Romantic exaggeration of the value of passionate sexual feeling made it

possible, much later, to recognize the "converting" power of sexual love in *marriage* to deepen and strengthen the relationship. It also gave a clue to the reason *why* marriage has been regarded by some Christians as a sacrament and by others as a specially "honorable" state in God's eyes, since the spiritual illumination between two people, which can go with the experience of passion, has that cleansing and ennobling power that we recognize, by hindsight, as typical of the converting work of the spirit in mankind.

In the same way, the legalistic emphasis which still affects our attitudes to marital status began in an attempt to protect the institution of marriage from cynical manipulation by power-seeking dynasties and a land-hungry nobility, and to uphold the right of even the humblest to a stable marriage, safe from the lust of a capricious overlord. It protected women from casual abandonment and children from being bastardized when a new wife proved better endowed. The reliance on a "law" of marriage, couched in terms purely of bodily acts and words and leaving feelings out of account, has caused terrible abuses, yet it is now enabling us to realize that we do need this element of objective support for fidelity and continuity in marriage, since we have discovered, to our chagrin, that reliance on unbridled feeling can be even more tyrannical and cruel. The woman deserted in favor of a more "real" love, the children bewildered by loss of parents self-absorbed in search of "fulfillment," the embittered young people caught up in emotions whose strength they had never been taught to recognize until it was too late, are all sufferers from a lack of that sense of "norms" to be observed in sexual matters, which can harm when used alone, yet which are necessary when kept in proper balance.

The theology of marriage has lurched through the centuries, falling to one side or the other, rising to new insights and glories, learning and relearning, repenting and renewing itself. So where are we now?

Certainly not at the end of the road. We have to keep on relearning, but we do not have to go back and begin again. Christian marriage has a history, and it is *part* of us, part of our whole way of thinking and feeling, whether we feel it positively or negatively. And we can consciously learn from that history, indeed if we do not we shall join the ranks of those who "will not learn from history and therefore are destined to repeat it"—a depressing prospect indeed.

The institution of marriage is in a difficult situation, because in the West the old culture is visibly crumbling, and people no longer easily take for granted the institutions it created and maintained. The *moral consent* which makes a way of life generally acceptable has gone, or is under such stress that it cannot long survive. The ideals

of fidelity, virginity before marriage, and close family bonds grew to their peak of popular esteem in the last century, when the disruption of other kinds of close-knit communities by the industrial revolution had made family stability more important than ever before. No matter how often people failed to live up to them, the "moral consent" of society supported them in principle, and embodied the principles in law as far as possible.

The effect of a period of comparative affluence and increased state support for the needy has been to make the close-knit family less essential to society. With the collapse of the "moral consent" which gave marriage external support, the internal pressures found little resistance. Many sincere Christians now question, not only the harshness of past treatment of sexual and marital "offenders," but ask whether the ideals are worth anything positive at all. Cannot love be expressed sexually on a temporary basis, or with more than one person over a long period? Must children have just two "parents"? Is fidelity really a form of possessiveness?

These questions are sincerely asked, but very often the people who ask them fail to recognize the essential preconceptions which make it possible for them to talk in this way. For all such questions assume that the marriage relationship is a matter of emotional adjustment and development for the people concerned. This is a very "middle-class liberal" view, only possible for people who take economic and political security for granted and can envisage a life in which a great deal of mental and emotional energy can be spent on sorting out sexual feelings and finding the most satisfying combinations possible. The historical fact is that marriage is an arrangement of sexual and generational relationships which is intended to stabilize this aspect of life in order to allow people to get their living—to *survive*, in fact. There have been many marriage patterns, some including several wives or husbands, and in some cases comparatively easy divorce, but all the regulations of the most disparate forms tend toward creating a stable and accepted arrangement of relationships, within which people know who and what they are, and what is expected of them, thus freeing psychic energy for the labor of farming, ruling, making things, teaching, healing, organizing, and so on. A society which has for several decades deluded itself into assuming that it is *bound* to survive can feel able to ignore this necessity, and concentrate on emotional fulfillment in a way which was previously possible only for a tiny minority of economically privileged people.

It is worth emphasizing this sociological fact, because it helps to "place" some of the discussions at present developing about the Christian notion of marriage. There is no doubt that the institutional forms of marriage are changing, as they often have before, because

cultural changes require it. There is no doubt, also, that we are not in a position to direct the outcome of the changes, nor even to predict them with any accuracy. What we can do is to avoid being jostled into false positions based on insufficiently examined premises, and at the same time we can try to understand the essential theological insights by which Christians have to try to understand, interpret, and modify whatever sexual patterns emerge in a particular society.

This is not easy, because there is a natural tendency to mix up essentials with what is familiar and traditional, so that both are treated as equally unalterable or else both are rejected when customs change, the trouble being that no one distinguishes what *is* essential.

Can we ever do so? We can to some extent, provided we can accept the notion that there is no perfect form of marriage, but only better or worse attempts to find, cherish, and develop within the secular reality those limits and images and experiences which belong, here and now, to the kingdom of God. The Jewish religious genius managed to take the marriage customs common to the surrounding tribes and discover and develop in them that sense of the transcendent love within the human which has become an essential Christian insight.

The same thing has to be done with the sexual chaos in which we flounder. It consists of remnants (quite large ones) of inherited forms of marriage; a genuine longing for deeper and more human sexual relationships; a lot of wishful thinking, some experimental pattern of marriage (both quite hopeful-looking ones and totally unrealistic ones); and a large element of uncertainty about *any* kind of overt personal commitment, sometimes amounting to a sort of phobia.

How on earth can we make theological sense of all this? I think we are bound to make many mistakes, but we can avoid the really disastrous ones by trying hard not to treat marriage as an isolated experience. The essential thing seems to be indicated, for instance, by St. Paul's use of the phrase "in the Lord." To him, the living of daily life and relationship, for a Christian, took place "in the Lord." For a generation expecting the imminent return of Christ, the questions of social and political responsibility which plague modern Christians did not arise. The given social order, including its marriage customs, was accepted, unless aspects of it were clearly contrary to the way preached by the apostles. Certain things, such as prostitution, were felt to be incompatible with faith in Jesus, though there were arguments even about these. Other things, it was felt, could be lived in faith; even slavery, for the status of master and slave became, in a sense, irrelevant, since both were brothers "in the Lord."

It was "in the Lord" that men and women must marry and rear

children, buy, sell, labor, and exercise hospitality. How did Paul and others distinguish what could become "in the Lord" and what could not?

I think it was, and is, partly through careful theological reasoning (Paul does plenty of that) and partly through that "communal sense" of the feel of life in the Christian way, to which there are no short cuts. Just as theology cannot be separated from the historical circumstances surrounding its development, so what we might call "Christian sensitivity" can only grow with and on the *actions* of the Christian life. The one defines and reinforces the other. Paul's Christians struggled, not always successfully, to follow Christ in the chaotic social and religious situation of the Roman Mediterranean at a peak of the Empire's political power but when it was already disintegrating from within—a situation not unlike our own. As they struggled, they reflected, and analyzed and applied what they learned. Paul, writing to the Romans, told them to "*prove* what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." And they were to do this by giving themselves, body and mind, to God, and so be "not conformed to this world but transformed by the renewal of your minds." And this renewal is to appear in everyday matters and virtues, in brotherly affection, patience in bad times, hospitality, sympathy for the sorrowful or the joyful, obedience to proper authority, paying just debts—all this oddly assorted collection to be done because, ultimately, love demands it.

Thus, living "in the Lord" clarifies the mind and renews the spirit, and again the understanding gained helps to distinguish the right way to live "in the Lord."

This is because Christianity is about incarnation, and man's bodily self is not merely intellectual, but also a mixture of feelings, instincts, inherited customs, economic conditions, physical conditioning, learned motivations, and spiritual aspirations which are always to a great extent inarticulate.

If we are to discover and cherish in our uncertain situation those strong bonds with the incarnate Lord which are the toughness of Christian marriage, we shall have to adopt Paul's methods. It is only by attempting, however clumsily, to live "in the Lord" in *every* aspect of life that our power of spiritual discernment (truly a gift of the spirit) can grow, and can make sense of the apparently conflicting demands in the area of sexuality.

The theology of marriage is about bodies, not only because sex is (among other things) bodily, but because all Christian theology is bodily. For example, there is a tendency among some Christians to feel that if people state an intention of spiritual love and loyalty in a

marriage relationship, then what they have stated is *the case*, and what they do with their bodies will fit in with what they have stated. Man is not made like that. The actions of the body *pull* the spiritual, essential person, and commit the person *by those actions*, regardless of what the mind decides and pronounces. St. Paul is quite clear about this, and bases on it his condemnation of prostitution, heavy drinking, service of idols, and so on. The aim is wholeness, not just because that is a beautiful ideal but because to fail to seek integrity is to begin a process of disintegration, which is what we can see happening to many well-intentioned people at present. This is not a merely metaphysical conclusion, anyone can see it who takes a cool look at the state of discussion and experiment in the area of sexual morality.

It cannot be said too often that the Christian revelation is about the whole human person, in both private and communal aspects. What the Christian theology of marriage tries to do is, not impose abstractly formulated precepts but to *discover*—by thought, by faithfulness, by prayer, and by brotherly and sisterly communication—how sexual and family relationships can be seen to reveal the glory of the Lord. Within the pattern of a given society, it is the Christian's task to judge and distinguish by means of that "sensitivity" of faith which I described earlier. It is necessary to reject what impedes the development of the capacity for glory, yet to observe and cherish every sign of grace and truth in however unlikely a setting. We must assist and try to develop it further, yet not necessarily accept that, because when grace flashes out of a given situation, the *whole* situation is sanctified. This nicety of spiritual judgment, this balance of love and humility with a certain toughness of spiritual insight, is necessary for true theological development.

Theology cannot be conducted in an intellectual laboratory. Theology is an intellectual work, but its task is to try to articulate the complexities of God's love affair with human minds and bodies and spirits—all these, and all together. Those who wrestle to make sense of marriage "in the Lord" in this chaotic period of Western history have to begin, perhaps, with the sense of worship, as that word was formerly used in the marriage rite. To worship the glory of God in men and women trying to grow together and to God is to become awe-fully aware of their needs if they are to achieve, not just their fulfillment, now, but their hard, long-term, socially situated growth into full freedom and love. This is inseparable from their social and economic situation, so the theology of marriage can never be concerned purely with individual meanings. The couple finds its Christian meaning within the community, and the community's self-

awareness as God's beloved is expressed in the devotion of individual couples—to each other, to their children, and to others—in new attempts to create life styles that make sense for a hard future.

The bedrock of Christian theology is incarnate love, and incarnate means *fleshed*, not just in a particular human body but in humankind—historical, limited, emotional, instinctual *and* rational. It is this whole thing that reaches toward God, by the power of God within it—Emmanuel. Part of this yearning is expressed in sexual relationships and the patterns by which they are stabilized and given a chance to deepen and grow. But all love—sexual love too—is hard and demanding and painful, and only grows that way, as Christ did. This is a hard time in which to love, and those concerned to illumine the ways of God to man have to be very sensitive, very humble, very patient, and sometimes very angry.

## chapter 20

### IS PATRIARCHY OBSOLETE?

*Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse*

The principal arguments against the ordination of women to the priesthood are that Jesus was a man, and that since the priest represents him at the Eucharist, the priest must also be a man. Further, Jesus chose only men to be his disciples, which is taken to underline the necessity of an exclusively male priesthood. Some cite further that the old Hebrew priesthood was limited to men. In addition, the New Testament refers to God as Father, and nearly all theological language, particularly in the last few hundred years, speaks to and about God as male. The nearly two thousand years of tradition during which only men have been eligible for the priesthood are also brought in as evidence for this view. While the acceptance of women as deacons on the same footing with men was opposed in some quarters (since in the Roman Catholic Church diaconate, presbyterate, and episcopate are held to be all one sacrament), it seems to be the idea of a woman either celebrating the Eucharist or exercising authority which arouses the most resistance.

Let us begin by considering the symbolism of the Eucharist to see whether there are reasons why women should not celebrate it. Throughout the centuries innumerable meditations and theological treatises have been written on the meaning of the symbolic use of bread and wine. The religious use of these symbols long antedates the Christian era, and occurs outside the Jewish and Christian traditions. Psychological and theological terms are both useful in trying to understand the rich significance of symbols; in fact, when properly understood, those two vocabularies are often difficult to distinguish.

The principal meanings may be summarized as follows: as nature, the bread and wine represent the typical food of humankind, the fruits of the earth. Bread is our physical means of survival; wine represents the spiritual. In order to produce these substances from nature's raw materials, human knowledge and ingenuity have been