

The Original Marriage

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If you want a marriage that flourishes, you need to know what marriage is, where it comes from, and what it is meant to be. You need to know what a man is, what a woman is, how they are the same, and how they are different. A great way to begin learning these things is by looking at the first man, the first woman, and the original marriage, described in Genesis 2.

There the Bible says that God formed the first man, Adam, from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and Adam became a living being. The Lord put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

But something was missing. The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." God didn't make the ideal helper that instant. First Adam had to sort through various animals and birds and give each a name. Each animal was excellent in its own way. "But for Adam no suitable helper was found" among the animals. None imaged God as Adam did; none had a body and mind to match Adam's; none could produce offspring with him to fill and rule the earth.

So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. When Adam saw the woman, he knew that this wasn't just another animal for him to name. She was his own kind. She was just as human, just as much God's image, as he was. He exclaimed in delight, "This now is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

"For this reason," says Genesis, "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." Genesis adds, "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." Adam was magnificently masculine; Eve was fabulously feminine; both were happily human; and neither felt ashamed or inferior.

What Marriage Is (and Isn't)

The Bible's account of the original marriage in Genesis is God's pattern for every marriage. Jesus himself made it clear that to know the truth about marriage, we must start with the Creator's original design. So let's spell out some things that marriage is (and isn't), in light of God's original design.

First, God designed marriage as a *sexual* union, not just as a friendship or partnership. At times it's been suggested that sex was the forbidden fruit in paradise. But Genesis says otherwise. The one-flesh union of the original marriage was beautiful and wholesome. Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed. God blessed them with a mandate to multiply and have babies. The Bible says a wife's body belongs to her husband and a husband's body belongs to his wife, and Scripture commands them to give their bodies to each other regularly and satisfy each other's desires (1 Corinthians 7:3-5). An entire book of the Bible, the Song of Songs, celebrates the love between man and woman and their delight in each other's bodies. Sexual union has been vital to marriage ever since the original marriage.

Second, God designed marriage as a union *between humans*, not the union of a human with an animal. Sexual contact between humans and animals perverts God's design and is cursed in Scripture (Leviticus 18:23, Deuteronomy 27:21). Genesis says that no animal was suitable as a spouse for Adam. He needed someone who shared his humanity.

Third, God designed marriage as the union of *a man with a woman*, not the union of a man with a man or a woman with a woman. Homosexual activity perverts God's design; the Bible calls it "an abomination" (Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1:26-27). The original marriage was not a same-sex union. Jesus said, "At the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female'" (Matthew 19:4), and real marriage remains a union of male and female.

Fourth, God designed marriage as the union of *one* man and *one* woman, not union with many partners. Polygamy, having more than one wife, perverts God's design. A few notable men in the Old Testament had multiple wives, but it led to no good. The Lord put up with it for a time, but he never endorsed it. God brought one woman to Adam, not two or four or seven or twenty. This rules out polygamy in marriage. It also rules out promiscuity outside of marriage. The "one flesh" reality of the original marriage means that any temporary live-in relationship, any one-night stand, or even involvement with a prostitute, involves becoming "one with her in body" (1 Corinthians 6:16). It's not just a fun activity between people who can then go their own way. God designed sex for one man and one woman to become one in body and one in spirit through marriage (Malachi 2:15). Jesus, echoing Genesis, did not say that many become one flesh but that "the *two* will become one flesh."

Fifth, God designed marriage as the *lifelong* union of a man and a woman, not as a disposable relationship. Divorce perverts God's pattern of permanence. The Old Testament Law of Moses included some regulations for divorce proceedings, but did this mean God approved of divorce? No, the Lord said, "I hate divorce" (Malachi 2:16). Moses never approved or encouraged divorce. He only permitted it because people's hearts were hard. "But it was not this way from the beginning," insisted Jesus, pointing to the original marriage. "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." When a man is united to his wife, said Jesus, "they are no longer two but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (see Matthew 19:4-9).

In keeping with Jesus' teaching and the original marriage, the New Testament declares, "A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). It is wrong to use divorce as a way of trading in one spouse for another. If you and your spouse can't get along and feel you have to separate, God forbids you from simply writing off your spouse and then to look for someone you will like better. Either live with no partner at all, or else find a way to overcome the differences between you and your spouse and be reunited.

If your spouse abandons you or abuses you or becomes sexually involved with another person, they have broken the marriage covenant, and you are permitted to divorce and remarry. But divorce is always tragic, a last resort. The Creator of the original marriage does not permit you to abandon your marriage anytime you like. "What God has joined together, let man not separate."

These facts about what marriage is (and isn't) are evident in Genesis and throughout the rest of the Bible. God's pattern cannot be reinvented without serious consequences. If you go against God's pattern, you're not just being immoral. You are fighting reality, and you cannot win. You cannot violate God's pattern and flourish. God designed marriage as the lifelong sexual union of one man and one woman.

Equal But Different

But what does it mean to be a man, or to be a woman? How are a man and a woman the same? How do they differ from each other? To answer such questions, you must know the Creator of male and female and depend on the owner's manual he provides—the Bible.

Let's first focus on what man and woman have in common. God created both man and woman in his own image, equal in dignity and value. God gave both man and woman a spiritual nature, a sharp mind, and a calling to work and accomplish things. God gave both man and woman the shared mandate to have children together and to take charge of the earth and its creatures.

Sometimes it's tempting to exaggerate differences and say, as one author does, "Men are from Mars, women are from Venus." But the Bible puts our feet firmly on earth. When Adam first saw Eve, he didn't say, "What planet did this come from?" He said, "This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." He knew he was looking at his other half. Not only were Adam and Eve from the same planet, they were even from the same body.

God made Adam from dust, but he didn't make Eve from a separate and independent bit of dust. He made Eve from a part of Adam. Where did God get the part of the man that he fashioned into the woman? Not from his head, as though she would be superior to him; and not from his feet, as though she would be inferior; but from his side, to be his companion and equal.

The interdependence of man and woman are clear in the two names which Adam gave his wife in Genesis. When he first saw her, he said, "She shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man" (2:23). Later, Adam gave his wife another name, Eve, meaning life-bearer, "because she would become the mother of all the living" (3:20). As "woman" she was originally taken out of man, but as "Eve" all men thereafter would be taken from her. The New Testament emphasizes the significance of this: "In the Lord, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God" (1 Corinthians 11:11-12).

It's clear, then, that there's a basic unity and equality in man and woman. But there are also differences in the way God made us, differences that shape our identity as male or female. Husband and wife are equal in dignity but have different roles. The husband is to take the lead and the woman is to support him. This was evident already in the original marriage.

God didn't create Adam and Eve at the same time. He created Adam first, before Eve. The New Testament repeats this fact when it calls for male leadership (1 Timothy 2:13). God placed Adam in the garden to take care of it, before Eve existed. She was to join and support him in work to which God had already called him. When God was about to create Eve, he didn't say, "I will make someone for Adam to help." He said, "I will make a helper suitable for him." When God made Eve, he didn't start from scratch and make her from dust, as he had when he formed the man. Instead, he formed her out of the man. The New Testament says that this has abiding significance, emphasizing, "Man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (1 Corinthians 11:8-9).

God invited Adam to eat fruit from any tree but one and warned him against disobedience even before Eve existed. How was she supposed to learn God's instructions? Adam was to teach her what God had taught him. The New Testament says this pattern from the original marriage still applies, telling women that if they have questions about the teachings of God's Word, "they should ask their own husbands at home" (1 Corinthians 14:35). This means, of course, that husbands today had better listen to God and know the Bible well enough to be able to answer questions.

When the man and the woman first met, she didn't name him. He named her and defined her in relation to himself. In the Bible, giving a name is an act of authority. When Adam named his wife, it showed his authority in relation to her.

In all these ways, the original marriage shows that the husband bears primary responsibility to lead his wife and family in a God-glorifying way. Mature maleness isn't about bullying or controlling, and mature femaleness isn't about being a cowering doormat. The curse of sin can twist relationships, but that's not how it was in the beginning. When Adam first met Eve, he didn't say, "Oh, good! At last I've got somebody to boss around!" He saw a marvel, who was part of himself, equal in dignity to himself, and whom he should treat as well as he would treat his own body.

In a context of equality and oneness, Adam in his manhood was to lead and have primary responsibility as the head of the marriage, while Eve in her womanhood was to gladly affirm and support Adam; and the two, united as one, were to image God, have children, and care for God's world. This was God's design for healthy marriage in Genesis, and in the New Testament it is God's design for healthy marriage among those who belong to Jesus.

Christ-Centered Marriage

Did God have any special reason for creating male and female this way? According to the Bible, God's ultimate reason for this, and for every aspect of creation, is to reveal something of Christ his Son. The Bible says, "All things were created by him and for him" (Colossians 1:16). This is especially true of the Lord's design for man and woman: it's meant to image the position of Christ within the being of God, and it's also meant to image the relationship of Jesus and his church.

How can human marriage image Christ's position in the Godhead? God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the marriage of humans made in God's image can show something of the relationship between God the Father and Christ the Son. God the Father and Christ are equal and forever united, yet the Father initiates and Christ responds. Marriage is designed to image this relationship. The Bible says, "The head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Corinthians 11:3). A healthy marriage images the headship within the very being of God. As God the Father and Christ are united and equal, with the Father leading and Christ responding, so husband and wife are meant to be united and equal, with the husband leading and the wife responding.

Two common distortions of the biblical design for marriage are chauvinism and feminism. When a chauvinist man treats his wife as though she is a lesser being and not one with him, he images the false doctrine that Christ is inferior to the Father and not united with him as one God. When a feminist man does not lead at all and his feminist wife is not responsive to him as her head, they image the false doctrine that there is no distinction between the Father and Christ, that the two are interchangeable, and that the Father is not the head of Christ. But when a biblical husband and wife see themselves as equal and one with each other, with the husband gently leading and the wife joyfully responding, they image the truth about the Father and Christ in the holy Trinity. Their loving union offers a glimpse into the being of the God who created male and female in his own image.

Biblical marriage centers on Christ in another way as well: it images the relationship between Jesus and his church. The Bible says, "The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior" (Ephesians 5:23). From the

beginning, God designed marriage to picture the relationship that would someday come about between Christ and his church.

The Bible doesn't say the husband *ought* to be the head of the wife; it simply says he *is*. The man, being the head, will set the tone in the marriage and home, whether he wants to or not. It may be a good tone and a healthy home if he leads well, or it may be a bad tone and a weak home if he leads badly or not at all. In any case, the man sets the tone. Even if a man abandons his home, he still dominates the home by the very fact of his absence.

The man's headship is a fact, designed to picture Christ's headship. So every husband will send a message about Christ, whether he wants to or not. Douglas Wilson writes,

"Every marriage, everywhere in the world, is a picture of Christ and the church. Because of sin and rebellion, many of these pictures are slanderous lies concerning Christ. *But a husband can never stop talking about Christ and the church.* If he is obedient to God, he is preaching the truth; if he does not love his wife, he is speaking apostasy and lies—but he is always talking. If he deserts his wife, he is saying that this is the way Christ deserts his bride—a lie. If he is harsh with his wife and strikes her, he is saying that Christ is harsh with the church—another lie.

He represents the headship of Christ over the church, so if he does not lovingly provide for his wife and family, "he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8). He not only harms his wife, but he defames the Lord Jesus Christ, whose headship the husband is supposed to represent.

How should a husband act as head of his wife in order to show the truth about Christ, the head of the church? The Bible says, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church, for we are members of his body" (Ephesians 5:25-30). A Christ-like husband loves his wife, sacrifices for her, provides for her, leads her, builds her up, prizes her, and enjoys being one with her. He models his marriage on Christ's marriage to the church.

Wives, in turn, are to image the church's response to Christ. The Bible says, "Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (Ephesians 5:24). A wife's conduct toward her husband always says something about the church's response to Christ, either right or wrong. If a woman does not honor her husband and is not loving toward him, if she is independent and defiant toward him, she proclaims this as the church's response to Christ and thus attacks God's Word. A wife's behavior toward her husband either makes the Word of God more attractive or else makes it an object of contempt. Wives ought "to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God" (Titus 2:4-5).

Now, a woman's submission to her husband's headship does not mean she must submit to the headship of all men. In fact, as a godly woman flourishes in her marriage to a godly man, she will be strong, active, and fearless in her relationship to others, because she draws on her husband's strength. A woman does not become stronger and happier by having a nice, harmless husband who is weak and uninformed compared to her and whom she doesn't respect. A nice wimp is better than a nasty bully, but best of all is a man who boldly and biblically seeks to represent Christ to his wife. The stronger he is in Christ, the stronger she becomes. And the stronger she becomes, the more she helps him and makes him stronger still.

What God Has Joined Together

Already when God was establishing the original marriage, he was providing a portrait of Christ and his church. Adam's bride was taken from his side and was flesh of his flesh. In a sense, Christ's bride, the church received its being from Jesus' side, pierced on a cross for his people, and the church is flesh of his flesh. Adam got a bride by being put to sleep and raised up again. Christ got his bride, the church, by entering the sleep of death and rising again.

There is a beautiful unity and consistency in the Bible from beginning to end. Let's not violate this unity and separate what God has joined together. This happens when someone breaks up a marriage, but it also happens whenever we separate realities that belong together. If we treat creation as one idea, the Trinity as an entirely separate idea, the church's salvation through Christ as another separate idea, and male-female relations as yet another idea that's entirely separate from the rest, we are separating what God has joined together. All truth, all reality, is joined together in Christ. "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

How should you respond to all this? Believe the Bible. Take the original marriage as your pattern for what marriage is, and isn't. Repent of all sins which violate this pattern, asking God's pardon and power to change. Believe in the Lord Jesus as the second person of the Trinity and as the Savior and Head of his church, and make your marriage a picture of this.