

Relationships

Marriage vs Consenting Adults

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(This was a letter to someone many years ago. The names have been taken out.)

Thank you for coming to see me. I really enjoyed getting to know you. I came from a very poor Southern home, where we did not have air conditioning or a car until I was a senior in high school. My grandfather, with whom I lived until I was 11 along with my mother and grandmother, was an alcoholic. My dad died from cirrhosis of the liver, having drank himself to death. (I hardly knew him as my parents divorced when I was about two years old.) My wife is also from a divorced background. The minister who married Ruth and me said that the statistics were against us since both our parents had been through divorces, but that the grace of God would make the difference. Sometimes I give people this riddle: I have been married twice, never divorced, my first wife did not die, and I'm not a bigamist. The answer is that on our 25th wedding anniversary, my wife and I publicly renewed our vows and then took a cruise. Our son was the best man, and our daughter the maid of honor. I said all that to say this: the reason we have beaten the odds is not because we are better than others – indeed, we are not – but solely the grace of God. Let me briefly explain.

The basis for all human relationships is a vital relationship with Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The hope we have for any change is bound up in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I do not mean by that just Church attendance, though that is certainly critical, but one must have a vital relationship with God through

Christ. The institutional Church has been a failure the last 100 years, though the fault lies not with the Church *per se* but with the lack of the old Gospel that has been taught the last century. Since ministers tend not to take God and His Word seriously, neither do the people. They think that they can come and go to Church as they please and certainly do not have any accountability to God through His Church, which is false. The Reformed Episcopal Church is seeking to change that in her churches.

The main point of this letter is to emphasize how the Gospel applies to human relationships, *that our relationship with Him necessarily determines our human relationships*. More specifically, I shall discuss the relationship of marriage, though the biblical model could be applied to other relationships, such as work, government, and so on. A marriage is *conditioned* in Scripture as one male and one female committing themselves to one another for life by vows in the presence of the appropriate witnesses. The witnesses should include a representation of God (minister, or justice of the peace in a civil marriage) and of man (parents in the case of a first marriage and/or other witnesses). This relationship between the man and the woman is *based on* their commitment to the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is *sustained* by using the means of grace in the context of the Church, the *terms* are God's Word, especially the Ten Commandments, the *goal* is producing holiness in the lives, and its *fruit* is to continue the covenant through godly children. I shall briefly explain each of these.

This definition of marriage I have given is pretty much standard theology, and could be proved from various passages of Scripture, especially from Ephesians 5:22-33. Another way to say the same thing is that **marriage is a covenant**, an agreement between two heterosexual parties in which they commit themselves to one another for life. This is not the modern practice of consenting

adults, but is really the opposite. In my opinion, it is this point that has reaped much havoc in the lives of many, for perhaps they have not understood what constitutes a relationship, have never thought about it and assumed that what our culture does is normal and acceptable, or perhaps they do not care what constitutes a relationship, thinking they can easily get out if they decided they did not like it (for whatever reason).

The biblical view of marriage (or relationship) is not an experiment to see if the parties can get along nor a test of compatibility. At this point, our relationship with God is foremost and determinative. When one comes to God for forgiveness of sins, he comes just as he is, sins and all, trusting in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ for forgiveness of sins. Indeed, the only thing we can contribute to our relationship with God is our sins; He gives the grace based on what Jesus has done. The sinner surrenders unconditionally to Jesus, asking for His grace not only to forgive his sins but also to make him/her a better person. Similarly, when two people come to be married, they come just as they are, unconditionally surrendering themselves to one another, depending on the grace of God. The reason they know it will work is that God has promised His grace.

Such a relationship is not a compatibility test. Marriage is based on our spiritual marriage to Christ, and that is not a guess but what the Apostle Paul stated in Ephesians 5:22-33. When we consider that our human marriage is based on the divine marriage of Christ to His Church, notice the contrast of that to the consenting adults model of relationships. The consenting adults model says, "I am first; you exist to serve me; you must make me happy and if not then we shall part ways; love is not in my control, you control my love; if you are lovely then I can love you otherwise I will leave; I want the fruit of marriage (sex, money, and sometimes children)

without the commitment, we will experiment to see if our relationship will work and then consider marriage, etc.”

By contrast, God’s model is specifically stated to be based on Christ’s love for His Church (Ephesians 5) and is this: “You are first; I came through the Virgin Mary to die for you; I unconditionally love you; I have done everything to make the relationship work; love is in my control and I will always give it because it is not dependent on who you are but who I am, but I have chosen to love you; you do not have to perform for me to love you,” and so on. Christ’s love applied to the human relationship of marriage is like this from the man to his wife: “Based on Christ’s unconditional love for me, I extend the same to you; you do not have to perform for me to love you; I surrender all that I am to you and my time is yours; I will do all in my power to make you happy; love is in my control and I am always responsible to give it because it is not drawn passively out of me; you do not have to perform for me to love you; you do not have to give me your body before our public vows to prove your love to me,” and so on.

If I may make an observation, women are very sensitive to commitment. They tend rightly and innately **to define love as commitment**, and this in turn gives them tremendous security (Ephesians 5 again). Security has little to do with finances. Without this they feel unloved, something to be used for a while and then discarded, regardless of a man’s words to the contrary. (Actions speak to the real intention.) This is one reason why the consenting adults model is wrong; namely, the commitment is reserved for later, if she is worthy. Christ did not do this with His Church. He gave Himself freely, completely, unconditionally, and without reservation to His Church, to die for her, to raise Himself from the dead for her, to love her without conditions. But one enters this relationship with Him by a covenant, not by trying Him out first,

and this covenant is in baptism in His Church by vows in the presence of witnesses, in unconditionally surrendering to Him. After one enters His covenant the Church, only then can he/she have Holy Communion. The analogy would be that only after one has made the marriage covenant by vows can he/she have the communion of sexual union.

When we came to Christ for forgiveness of sins, we came unconditionally. He loved us not because we were lovely, not because His love was drawn out of Him by some irresistible force, but because He *chose* to love us by vow in the covenant of grace. In the consenting adults model, love is an emotion that someone else elicits from us; we are passive and “fall in and out of love” according to how the other person treats us. The biblical model says that by the grace of God *I will* love you, and we *will* make this relationship work. We can see that true love need not be tested to see if it is compatible by observing that we had no choice in our parents or siblings, and yet we make these relationships work. We love our parents. How much more should we make a relationship work in which we have a choice! The biblical model says that we are in control of our love. Indeed, we are so much in control of our love that we can even love our enemies, as the Lord commanded us (Matthew 5:44).

Therefore, for one to say I have to leave this relationship because I’m not happy anymore is to engage in selfishness, to give an excuse for a lack of commitment and for not wanting responsibility to love unconditionally. It is a total misunderstanding of the nature of love. Marriage is a commitment whereby the vowing partners voluntarily limit their freedom for the benefits they will receive and for the glory of God. They are not “wedded” to the idea that freedom means no responsibility but that true freedom is enslavement. Just as freedom from our sins comes from enslavement to the Lord

by an unconditional surrender to Him, so true freedom in marriage derives from enslavement to our spouse, only doing good for him/her. A commitment easily made is easily broken, but one done according to God's Word and through public vows is to be taken seriously.

One keeps himself faithful to his wife by honoring his vows. If his love wanes (it should not since it is being sustained by the grace of God), he is still obligated to honor his vows. He has vowed to God to be faithful, and marriage is God's institution, not mankind's, and the terms are His, not ours to remake as one wishes. The Lord Himself stated: "What *God* has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:6). God will hold us accountable for *His* vows that we made.

But someone will object that he/she did not agree to such stringent terms in his vows that he/she took, but that is to assume that marriage belongs to man, that it is his institution to remake as he/she wishes. Regardless of the particular words spoken, the institution is God's, and once the vows are said, one is bound by His definition of marriage.

It is conceivable that a couple could mock God with vows that specifically deny true commitment, such as, "We will not commit ourselves to one another except for sex," or some other farce. Or they may take private vows with no one present but themselves, thus deliberately avoiding any accountability. In both cases God would not recognize that a marriage has taken place.

Let us now consider that marriage is *sustained* by using the means of grace in the context of the Church, and that the *terms* are God's Word, especially the Ten Commandments. The means of grace include attending worship together at the same Church, praying together, reading the Bible together, making frequent use of the sacraments, and especially subjecting ourselves to the authority of

God in the institution of His Church. In America, we like to pretend that we are autonomous individuals, “masters of our own fates and captains of our own souls,” as Henley put it in his horrible poem *Invictus*. If God agreed with us, He would not have given us so many restraints in His various covenants, such as family, Church, employment, and government. The robust individualism that has characterized so much of the USA is rebellion against God. As Robert Bork has so eloquently stated in his piercing book, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, modern radical individualism (and egalitarianism) is destroying what used to be a Christian culture. Thus when I say “in the context of the Church,” I mean that we consciously submit to the authority of God’s Church, knowing that such submission is really submission to Him.

The *terms* of all covenants, whether by atheists or by Christians, are the Ten Commandments. Indeed, since this is God’s world and He created it, the only moral law that exists is His. Any moral “law” enacted by man, whether the Congress or by a particular church, is either an application of God’s law or an act of rebellion. Satan told Eve in the Garden that if she ate the fruit (we do not know what kind of fruit it was) that she would be like God “knowing good and evil.” The Hebrew word for “knowing” (remember, I teach Hebrew in seminary) in this passage means “determining.” In other words, the lie of the ages has been that man is “free” to determine his own so-called “values.” (“Values” really do not exist. God has sovereignly imposed His Ten Commandments on the world, not His Ten Suggestions.) Man is allegedly free to make up his own moral code as he pleases, thus being a law-giver and like God. But of course that was Satan’s lie.

In light of all this, the terms for any covenant, whether the government, an employer, a church, or especially marriage, is God’s holy Law. As the Apostle Paul stated by the Holy Spirit,

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are *all* summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:8-10).

Here we have a *definition of what love is*. It is basically *volitional* (thus we control it), being obedient to God's Law regarding others. It is not an emotion that controls us, but a choice that we control. If one loves his wife according to these commands, she will not normally leave him. In other words, he does not commit adultery but gives himself to her alone; he does not steal but provides for her; he does not tell others about their problems who are not part of the proper covenants (especially he does not tell all his "friends"); he does not torture his soul with covetousness; and he does for others what he would want them to do for him (within the limits of how Scripture defines that); he puts God first and does not worship false gods such as money, job, friends, and so on. The other commandments from the Ten are implied. Such is love. One can usually tell what the real god in a person's life is by observing what he loves to spend his time doing. What one does, not what one says, reveals his true god.

Another way to define love is that it gives itself for the other person self-sacrificially, unconditionally, continually, overlooking his/her faults, seeking only to do good. **This necessarily involves an enormous time commitment**, without which it is not possible to love biblically at all. It is especially common for the man after marriage to take the relationship for granted, and then spend his free time with his friends, leaving the wife alone. Then he comes home

and wants sex, wondering why she is not responsive. Love without a time commitment is quickly compromised.

The *goal* of marriage is holiness of life, which means being ever more conformed to the moral character of Christ. This is a slow and painful process, but the godly husband seeks such in his wife and children. The only way to obtain this is by using the means of grace mentioned above. God has made the husband the head of the family, and he must exercise this responsibility by leading the family in worship by taking them to Church, not sending them; by reading the Bible at home, not by leaving that to the preacher only; by teaching his children about God, not leaving that to the Church only; and especially by being an example himself.

Finally, the *fruit* of marriage is having sexual union that produces children. This is an enormous responsibility. One of the worst sins of our culture is the irresponsible attitudes towards sex and then nullifying the product of such a union by abortion. (God can forgive abortion if the person repents, confessing such to Him, asking for the cleansing blood of Christ.) The parties must not want the fruit of sexual union without the permanent commitment and especially without the responsibility that such commitment entails, such as rearing children. But having children in God's covenant of marriage is one of the greatest blessings that God has given us.

Everything we have said so far leads to the conclusion that premarital sex is sinful. We must not partake of the holy communion of marriage without first entering the binding union and commitment by vows. In the analogy of Christ and the Church, we cannot have Holy Communion with Christ until we have been baptized, cannot have His fellowship and love in His Church until we have made a binding commitment to Him. If we can take our relationship with Him casually, then we can take our relationships with the opposite sex casually. If we can know God outside the marriage

covenant in the Church, we can have casual relations with others outside the human marriage covenant. Furthermore, God specifically legislates against those who have sex outside the marriage commitment.

If a man finds a young woman who is a virgin, who is not betrothed, and he seizes her and lies with her, and they are found out, then the man who lay with her shall give to the young woman's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife because he has humbled her; he shall not be permitted to divorce her all his days (Deut. 22:28-29).

Observe that she is not his wife by virtue of the sex they had, and observe that it is consensual sex since the text says "they are found out" (rape demanded the death penalty). The principle is that if they looked at the relationship casually as consenting adults then God required that they consider the relationship so seriously that now no divorce was allowed. Again, God states regarding sex before and after marriage:

Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge (Hebrews 13:4).

From this passage, on the one hand we see not only is sex in marriage "undefiled," which means not sinful but righteous, but on the other hand that God will judge "fornicators" and "adulterers." Obviously, an "adulterer" is one who is married who has sex with someone who is not his/her spouse, which means that a "fornicator" must be someone who has sex while unmarried. And those are the consistent meanings of the words "adulterer" and "fornicator" in Scripture, the two words being used about 90 times.

In conclusion, what sustains godly married couples is not some mystical magic or spark or chemistry, all of which are virtually undefinable, but their commitment to God, to His Word, to His vows,

to using the means of grace in the context of the Church, and to obedience to God's terms of the marriage covenant, the Ten Commandments. The "spark" will be there, but it is the caboose and not the engine. The engine is their commitment to God and His vows in their marriage covenant. Indeed, the vows are His.

So what constitutes a marriage relationship? It is an unconditional commitment of one male and one female to one another for life in a covenant by vows in the presence of the appropriate witnesses, depending on the grace of God in Christ in His Church to make the relationship work.