

For many generations American Christians have been accustomed to the blessing of living in a culture and under a political system that shared many of their basic values and assumptions about life. That blessing, however, has slowly given way to a new situation. We now find an ever-expanding gap has developed between American cultural ways and Christian ways. This gap is clearly manifested in the rapid shift in the understanding of the most foundational institution in any society. That foundational institution is marriage.

Contrary to all human experience, marriage is being redefined in western courts and cultures. The redefinition has taken place over the past several decades, silently and without much objection from most Christian circles. But the shift, if permitted, leaves us helpless in stemming from the tide that has grown from a few marginal voices into a seemingly unstoppable force.

**WHAT IS MARRIAGE?** Marriage is the union of a man and a woman who together establish a home for themselves, and any children born of their union. Where does that definition come from? Is it just one of many possible definitions? By what authority is it established?

Christians turn to the earliest chapters of the Bible, where we read that “for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” (Gen. 2:24) The pattern is universally affirmed, as marriage is acknowledged in all cultures. The account in Genesis is prior to any divisions into races and cultures, and its outline can be seen wherever one looks among the peoples of the world.

Marriage is the arrangement cultures have used to protect their succeeding generations, thus the future sustainability of the culture itself. Even though there is significant variety in different cultures, such as polygamist arrangements, the unit consisting of parents and children remains; and when the children become of age, they continue the traditions by forming families of their own. In almost every case, a cultural ceremony or ritual is performed which declares the union to be inviolable. Penalties are implied for those who either do not uphold their responsibility to spouse and children, and to those who pursue the spouse of another.

Biblical grounding for marriage begins even earlier in Genesis. When we seek God's perspective on human nature from the Bible, we learn a few things very quickly from the first two chapters of Genesis. Let's list them for simplicity and in order to refer to them at later points:

1. We are created in the image of God.
2. We are created male and female.
3. Man and woman are united by leaving parents and, at least in potential, creating offspring.

What we learn in these few simple statements from the opening chapters of the Bible is corroborated in many ways through human history and anthropology. All cultures have some way of recognizing and protecting the relationship between the parents and potential parents of the next generation; it is essential to the survival of the culture into the future, the protection and continuation of what they have made into a future beyond their own lifetime. In all cultures, a man has left father and mother to be united with his wife and create a family of their own. It is a creation-wide mandate to which the Bible gives voice.

With respect to the second statement, human psychology and physiology concur. There is difference between the way in which the image of God is exhibited by male and female. The male and female bodies are different; the brain chemistry is different, as science has repeatedly demonstrated. Yet these differences between male and female are complementary; and both male and female characteristics have their origin in God. Some conclusions follow from this. As designed, humans are to be God's image-bearers, that is, the icons of God. And since this image is born jointly by male and female, it is through their difference and in their combination that children born to them are to see God represented to them. It is how they learn of God, however imperfectly. This is an idea primitively stated in Adam's having a helper (better: complement) suitable for him; it is one more sophisticatedly stated by research that demonstrates that children of two-parent (male-female) households thrive better than those in other situations. It is the reason all cultures, with or without the Bible, with or without the research, have protected in some significant ways the relationship between man and woman. It's in our nature that we created to do so. What this demonstrates is that God's revealed designs for life are not arbitrary; they are for our good.

For Christians, the position is confirmed by Jesus, who referred to the creation of male and female and the union between them when answering a question about divorce (Matt. 19:4-6). It is given greater weight when the apostle Paul uses marriage as an analogy for the relationship between Christ and his church (Eph. 5:22-33). In this passage, the relationship is true of all marriages, not only Christian ones.

**MISSING THE MARK:** The God-ordained meaning of marriage was described above. There are, of course, other accountings of human life in the world. And the alternatives are offered with varying degrees of compatibility or agreement and disagreement with the biblical-theological model sketched above. As thinking beings or, if one must say it, rational animals, we can think of other ways. And it is our right to do so. That may seem like an odd thing to affirm, but it follows from our being made in the image of God. We can think and draw conclusions, but our conclusions can be mistaken; and they do not in any way change what is really the case, the way things were from the beginning. But to the extent that these alternative conclusions differ from the created order, they miss the mark. And they miss the mark with consequences following in their train. While this is true for all deviations (and there are many we could discuss), we are focusing on the specific matter of referring to marriage as another kind of union.

Many people have come to think of the essence of marriage as the love that has developed between two people. This is a good starting point, but it is not sufficient. It is not sufficient because it does not include, at least on the surface, a desire to represent God by the union of the differences between male and female, a union open to, even if not always resulting in, offspring. Note that this does not argue that other relationships, including homosexual relationships, cannot be loving relationships. As candidates for marriage, however, other relationships miss the mark; they cannot represent by their union the image of God, nor can they bear offspring.

Missing the mark is the essence of sin. When we miss the mark, we are caught in the consequences that follow from living in a way out of keeping with the goodness planned by the Creator. We are not talking at this point about culpability or personal responsibility; we are talking about living in ways that miss the intention of the One who made us, whether those ways are personally chosen or are the ways that have been handed to us, such as through culture. We all too quickly jump from the idea of sin to personal worthlessness and devaluation. At this point, that's not what's at stake here. When we miss the mark, we bring consequences on ourselves and on those we

influence, as individuals and as societies who establish those alternative ways. And when ways and patterns of life that are sinful become entrenched in the thinking of a culture there will be significant harm to many people as a result.

**WHAT MARRIAGE IS NOT:** Virtually every couple seeking a solemnizing of their marriage counseling has been asked why they desire to be married. Invariably, the answer is that the two individuals love each other and make each other happy; therefore, they want to spend the rest of their lives together. To be sure, romantic love is a strong and highly desirable force in maintaining a marriage. But it is not the essence of marriage, nor is it a sufficient reason for entering into marriage.

Failure to appreciate the true essence of marriage has led to several destructive consequences. For one, if love, particularly romantic love, is understood as the primary element in a marriage, it is too easily assumed that the marriage is no longer binding if that love has dissipated. It has also placed the burden of creating and maintaining personal happiness upon one's spouse. Christians have carried these assumptions as well as non-Christians, as evidenced by the similar rates at which believing couples divorce when compared to non-believing couples. Our society has suffered untold consequences in the maladjustment and incomplete emotional development of the children of divorce. Divorce is nonetheless defended as the responsible choice—because the love that supposedly creates the marriage is no longer present, nor is it recoverable.

Redefining marriage as essentially a loving relationship has also opened the possibility of any two (or more?) people who love one another to claim the status of a married couple. When this happens, marriage is no longer about the procreation and raising of children and continuation of the culture, nor about becoming the living representation of Christ and the church. Instead, it has become a matter of one's personal rights and the pursuit of happiness.

**MARRIAGE, RIGHTS, AND LAWS:** Most of the discussion about same sex “marriage” has centered on the notion of rights. It is claimed that these couples have the right to marry, a right that is granted by the government. There are several things about which to be concerned within this claim and in the assumptions behind it.

First of all, everyone has the God-given right to enter into a true marriage, i.e., the union between a man and a woman. It is not true that persons who identify themselves as homosexual do not have the same rights in this regard as persons who identify as heterosexual; the former are as free to marry a person of the opposite sex as are the latter. What they do not have the right to do is to redefine the meaning of marriage grounded in creation. No one has that supposed right, and that includes all who have changed the definition into the pursuit of personal happiness.

Secondly, one must ask about the interests of government in this matter. Most of the world's governments, though not all of them, have laws protecting marriage and family. They have the laws because it is in the interest of society to provide for its own continuation through the protection of each succeeding generation of children. In our own context, it is the reason for taxation policies that recognize the needs of families, for laws regulating divorce, for providing adoption and foster care guidelines for those instances in which marriages fail. Marriage then becomes a legal status bestowed by a governing body, accompanied by whatever benefits deemed appropriate. It is with the continuation of society in mind that such benefits are granted.

However, because of the change in the definition of marriage, the interest of the government in preserving marriage becomes unclear. Persons who have chosen not to marry as defined in creation have wanted the status and benefits granted to couples in marriages that do honor the creation intent of God. If marriage is simply a means of pursuing personal happiness and having a loving relationship, it may be that governments have reasons for sanctioning other kinds of relationships; perhaps it is a necessary step in the context of a broken world. But any such relationships or unions should not be understood as holy matrimony, whatever they may be called.

**Questions, Implications, and Challenges:** There are several issues that call for serious thinking and praying. Christian living and ministry in today's world cannot ignore what is happening in a culture that is not centered in God's design for life. Some of these are listed below.

1. We are people of God, called to know the truth that sets us free. We must take every thought captive to Christ, which means we must measure all ideas from the perspective of the biblical narrative.

2. We are people of God, called to be ministers of a new and better covenant, one of grace. It is not our task to condemn those caught in sinful ways, but to demonstrate the love of God by coming alongside those who have been caught up in destructive ways of thinking about life in this world.
3. We must be prepared to be marginalized when our message is unpopular with the ways of this world. It is untrue that disagreement with the world's narrative means hatred of those who live by that false narrative; it is untrue that tolerance requires agreement. Yet the untruthfulness of these ideas will have to be demonstrated by our conduct if they are to be dispelled.
4. Churches should be prepared to minister to persons in same-sex relationships, who are legally married in their own eyes and in the eyes of the world. We must be welcoming toward the persons, even though not affirming of the relationships. Only if such persons become disruptive and divisive should they be asked to leave after due warning and attempts at conciliation.
5. We must maintain our distinction from the world in terms of what marriage is. We solemnize marriages that follow God's creation intent; we refuse to grant the sanction of the church upon other kinds of relationships. We may find it wise to withdraw from participating in state-sanctioned "marriages" at all. This might be a drastic measure but will need to be carefully considered.

**The Remaining Questions:** This position has not addressed the issue of homosexuality itself. Nor has it spoken about how we should respond to monogamous relationships between practicing homosexual couples. Regarding the first of these, the biblical story is clear and consistent in regarding homosexual behavior as sin. Attempts to mitigate or blunt their force fail on exegetical grounds and/or introduce a hermeneutic that would render consistent biblical interpretation pointless, if not impossible.

Regarding the second, we must ask where and how we speak the prophetic word about homosexuality. Should it be quietly within the bounds of the church, or should we speak as much and as civilly as possible to the wider communities of which we are part? One thought must be kept in mind as we consider what to say and to whom.

Specifically, the spiritual, physical, emotional, and psychological health of people for whom Christ came to this world is at stake. If we love people, we must be concerned about their fate. The presently reigning cultural story is one of individual rights and

pursuits of happiness without any boundaries drawn by a loving Creator. It is a culture that claims to be based on science; but when science points to conclusions at odds with the desired ways, it is strangely muted. Science clearly points to the health-compromising effects of male homosexual practices; yet these data are rarely, if ever, told as part of the story of individually defined happiness. The church should be diligent in using scientific data to underscore the fact that it is not arbitrary prejudice that leads the church to speak against homosexual behavior; it is the word of a loving Creator whose designs and purposes for human life are never arbitrary. Our desire to keep young people from falling into a devastating way of life—one encouraged upon them by a false cultural narrative—will not allow us to remain silent.

There is every reason for us as the church of Jesus Christ to hold firm on our understanding of marriage as God's gift to a man and a woman. There will be accusations of fear and hate cast against Christians. Our response must be a demonstration of the love of God for all persons. We must also be willing to work toward a better understanding of the people with whom we disagree. We have nothing to fear from objective scientific findings; they will not change the way God has designed us. God so loved the world—the God-defying, rebellious world—that He gave His son on its behalf. This love must also guide us through the Holy Spirit sent to work in us and through us.