

Sermon follow-up
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Quick sermon recap:

Marriage is to be celebrated and honored as a good gift of God. But sometimes the church has seen marriage as inferior to a life of celibacy. The church has not always upheld the Bible's high view of marriage because:

[a] The body has been denigrated as an inferior part of humanity. Under the influence of Greek (specifically, Platonic) thought, the body came to be seen as the bad part of human beings, and the soul as the good part. Because sex involves the body, and marriage involves sex, marriage must be second rate compared to a supposedly less bodily, celibate lifestyle. But in the biblical worldview, the body and soul are both equally good aspects of God's good creation. Body and soul are equally fallen in Adam and equally redeemed in Christ (who is God-in-a-body!). Throughout Scripture, the respective terms "flesh" and "soul" stand not just for *part* of a person, but for the *whole person*, seen from the outward or inward perspectives, respectively. (This also means that when the Bible says that in marriage the two become "one flesh" it really means they become "one person," or "one life," in a sense.) But once we have recovered the fundamental goodness of the body as a creation of God, we can begin to recover a biblical view of marriage and sexuality – which is exactly what the Reformers sought to do.

[b] Women were regarded as inferior to men. Whereas Scripture teaches that men and women share equally in the image of God, under the influence of pagan cultures, Christians sometimes viewed women as inferior to men in every respect. Indeed, women were viewed as the source of sin and as snares for men. A life without women would be better. Man-to-man companionship was exalted as the highest form of friendship and marriage was regarded as a necessary evil. Cross-gender friendship was not even a real possibility. Again, the Reformation sought to recover the biblical view. While preserving the differences between men and women in orientation and outlook, in roles and responsibilities, the Reformers nevertheless insisted that men and women are equal in their humanity. Maleness and femaleness represent two equally valid ways of being human.

That's not to say that these views about marriage, the body, and women were the uniform standard in the early and medieval church. But they were prominent trends. Thus, the Reformation was a much needed advance in these areas. The Reformers were definitely not modern egalitarians. They maintained the biblical, covenantal structure of marriage. But they also exalted the role and status of the woman and recovered the Bible's high view of marriage as an institution ordained by God for his glory and man's good.

Against this historic downgrading of marriage, in the Scriptures, we find that there are several reasons to celebrate marriage:

1. Marriage tells the story of creation. History begins and ends with a wedding (Adam and Eve in Genesis/the Marriage Supper of the Lamb in Revelation). Our marriages are

to be microcosms of the “romantic comedy” that stands at the heart of the story of the universe. Marriage must be good if it symbolizes something so grand. Our marriages are only the shadow, not the reality, but they are nevertheless glorious. As we strive to “live happily ever after,” we are giving the world a glimpse of where God is taking his creation in Christ.

2. Marriage satisfies created desires. Marriage blends different types of love – erotic love, affection, friendship, and familial love. As Puritan John Cotton said, “Women are creatures without which there is no comfortable living for men.” Marriage meets needs that cannot be met in any other way. Marriage is fulfilling in a way that no other human relationship can be.

3. Marriage is a pathway to wisdom. Men and women see the world differently. As they interface and interact, their different perspectives rub off on one another. Whose perspective is right – the man’s or the woman’s? Both are true – but neither is *the whole truth*. Thus, they need each other. As spouses grow in their understanding of each other, they are able to view the world in a multi-dimensional way and thus see nuances that they previously missed. This new versatility and multi-perspectivalism is what the Bible calls wisdom. You have learned to see more than one side of reality, more than one angle on things. To be wise is to be able to see all the simple and complex layers that make up a situation, and know how to act (or not act) accordingly. To be wise is to know when to take initiative and act in the world, and when to sit back and react. To be wise is to know when to focus on nurturing the person and when to focus on solving the problem. But to be wise, you need both masculine and feminine perspectives on the world. (This is not to say some kind of androgyny is the ideal. Indeed, there is no such thing as pure androgyny. When a man learns to see what his wife sees, he does not become feminine; he actually becomes more masculine. His masculinity becomes more and more sharply defined as he understands exactly how his wife is different from himself. When he incorporates her insights into his personality, he does so in a masculine way. By learning how his wife would respond to a given situation, he gains a richer view of the world and is able to act in the world with greater skill.)

In terms of recovering the ideal of a companionate marriage, no event was of greater significance than Martin Luther’s marriage to Katherine von Bora. It’s not just that a former monk married a former nun in a high profile relationship that was scandalous in the eyes of the Roman Church. Luther’s marriage to Katie (as he called her) became symbolic of the Reformation’s liberation of the Christian life, freeing people from the oppressive burdens that the medieval church had laid on their backs. Luther’s marriage signaled the dawn of a new era in history.

It’s not surprising that Luther’s enemies often accused him of living an indulgent, sensuous, antinomian life because he took a wife and openly declared his delight in marital love. His insistence on the goodness of marriage, sex, and family was truly radical in his time. But it was a major key in transforming the culture.

Luther often wrote about the wonders of married life: “A man is likely to wonder a great deal when he first gets married. Sitting at the table, he muses, ‘Not long ago, I was by myself, but now there are two of us.’ When he is bed and wakes up, he sees two pigtailed next to him – something he did not see there before.” Indeed.

Luther talked very openly and in very earthy terms about all aspects of his relationship with Katie. He praised her incessantly: “My Katie is in all things so obliging and pleasing to me that I would not exchange my poverty for the riches of Croesus.” He called her “the Morning Star of Wittenberg” because she rose early to work and stayed up late in order to make their home a hospitable place, especially for theological students. Not only that, but Katie learned her husband’s evangelical doctrine – in her last words, she stated that her deepest desire was to “cling to Christ like a burr to a dress.” Luther wrote to her, “Katie, you have a God-fearing man who loves you. You are an empress; realize it and thank God for it.” Their marriage was a joyous one.

Luther was not shy in encouraging young men to go find wives of their own as soon as possible: “Whoever finds himself unsuited to the celibate life should see to it right away that he has something to do and work at; then let him strike out in God’s name and get married.” Luther would have agreed with the advice an older pastor once gave me: “Marry as early as possible and as often as necessary.” While Luther extolled the blessings and benefits of marriage, he was also a realist: “Each must be patient and helpful with the other, for things cannot always go smoothly.” “The first love is drunken. When the intoxication wears off, then comes the real marriage love...[S]incere love remains in the married life of the godly; but the godless are sorry they ever married.” The love between a husband and a wife is erotic, but much more: “Christian love should be a gushing, surging kind of love which overflows the inner heart like a fresh stream or brook that is always in motion and never dries up.” “Love indeed there is in Christian marriage, but it only a heightening of that Christian love which is enjoined towards all. We are told to love our neighbors. The wife is the nearest neighbor. She should therefore be the most beloved.”

Luther talked frequently and openly about the goodness of sex. While he admitted that in a fallen world “intercourse is never without sin,” he said that apart from the fall, “the love of bride and groom would have been the loveliest thing.” He went so far as to recommend how often couples should have sex in poetic terms: “Twice-a-week, hundred-four a year, should give neither cause to fear.”

In the sermon I talked about how the Puritans transformed the medieval view of marriage. No longer was marriage primarily about economics, or even children, but about love and companionship. This was the recovery of a biblical emphasis (Gen. 2:18) and put romantic love back into the marital relationship rather than locating it in adulterous “courtly” relationships. (You can read an entry on courtly love here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Courtly_love. Not all courtly love was “consummated” into full adultery. And some aspects of courtly love were borrowed from the Christian tradition, e.g., chivalry. When courtly love was reclaimed by the church, it led to an

unfortunate explosion in the cult of Mary. The problems with courtly love were not finally dealt with until the Reformation.)

It's interesting to note that the Anglican Book of Common Prayer (first edition, 1549) was something of a halfway, transitional document between the medieval and the Calvinistic/Puritan view. The BCP offered three reasons for God's ordination of Holy Matrimony:

Duely consideryng the causes for the whiche matrimonie was ordeined. One cause was the procreacion of children, to be brought up in the feare and nurture of the Lord, and prayse of God. Secondly it was ordeined for a remedie agaynst sinne, and to avoide fornicacion, that suche persones as bee maried, might live chastlie in matrimonie, and kepe themselves undefiled membres of Christes bodye. Thirdelye for the mutuall societie, helpe, and coumfort, that the one oughte to have of thother, both in prosperitie and adversitie.

Thus, the three reasons for marriage in BCP are [1] procreating children; [2] avoiding fornication; and [3] mutual society. The Puritans acknowledged these reasons, but reordered them, putting [3] in the prime place. Of course, the Puritans still emphasized procreation (Gen. 1:26-28) and avoiding fornication (1 Cor. 7:1ff), but companionship became foundational. The Puritans emphasized the rationale for the creation of the women in Genesis 2: the man was lonely and needed a best friend. The man *needs help* and the woman *needs to give help*. In other words, they were made for each other! The man has a calling to work in the world but cannot fulfill that calling on his own. He needs a woman in order to become all he's supposed to become. (Obviously, those who are gifted with a call to singleness are able to fulfill their vocation in a different way, as Paul indicates in 1 Cor. 7.)

Companionship, of course, included friendship as well sexual desire. As I said in the sermon, in marriage, there is to be a balance of eros with other forms of love. But there is no denying the centrality of eros/sex in marriage. In some ways, sex tends to overshadow everything else in marriage, and it cannot help but be that way. Sex is, as Peter Kreeft has put it, "an embodied out of body experience." In a sense, the Reformers who sought to recover the biblical view of marital sexuality were really doing nothing more than giving the church a long overdue reality check. The Puritans, in particular, were very straight forward in praising marital sexuality. They referred to sexual companionship in terms such as "due benevolence."

The focus on companionship has another implication. When husbands and wives become dads and moms, obviously they have an expanded calling. They work together to raise a family. They train their children so they can send them out into the world as agents of the kingdom. But at some point, once the children have grown up, their role as dad and mom recedes into the background. The parenting project is complete. But they remain husband and wife to one another. Thus, it is vital that spouses continue to pour themselves into one another even after they begin having children and undertake the task of raising them

together. Their station as husband and wife is larger than and foundational to their station as father and mother. There must be far more to their companionship than simply their common interest in the children. They have to continue cultivating and developing their marriage even after children enter the picture.

Husbands should occasionally ask their wives, “Honey, do you think of yourself more as a wife or as a mother?” If the mother role begins to overshadow the wifely role, there will be long term problems. The motherly role should be *an aspect* of the wifely role; the wifely role is more basic and enduring. This is why it’s often said that the best thing a mom and dad can do for their children is love each other faithfully as husband and wife.

In the sermon I talked about how the medieval church not only discouraged marriage, but also discouraged sex between spouses in marriage. This shame over sex was completely contrary to biblical teaching (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:1ff). Thomas Aquinas taught that the “perfect” marriage would be one in which “both parties observe continency by vow.” He argued that “carnal copulation is not essential to marriage.” The Reformers disagreed. They argued that marriage is an intrinsically sexual relationship, and must be consummated as such. They defined marriage at least partially in terms of sexual union. They expected sexual relations between spouses to be “vigorous and frequent,” as one historian put it.

The medieval church revealed its embarrassment over sex in other ways. The church ordered marital abstinence on Sundays in memory of the resurrection, on Mondays in memory of the departed, on Thursdays in memory of Christ’s arrest, on Fridays in memory of Christ’s death, and on Saturdays in memory of the Virgin Mary. Obviously, that left a lot of married couples feeling guilty a lot of the time!

In a complete reversal of attitudes, a church in Puritan New England (First Church of Boston) excommunicated a man because he denied conjugal rights to his wife for an extended period of time!

Medieval superstitions about sex also played into the cult of the Virgin Mary. Obviously, it was believed that Mary had to remain a virgin since sex would have tainted the Mother of God. But this is contrary to biblical evidence (e.g., Mk. 3:32). Besides, if Mary did not give herself sexually to Joseph, she did not remain “immaculate,” but was flagrantly sinning against him and against God (cf. 1 Cor. 7:1ff). While some early Reformers continued to believe in the perpetual virginity of Mary, as the Reformation progressed, Protestants arrived at a more biblical understanding of Mary.

It is also obvious how these views of sex have played themselves out in the modern Roman Catholic Church, particularly in its view of birth control. This is not the place for an extended discussion of birth control, and certainly some forms and uses of birth control are objectionable from a biblical perspective because they destroy (or deny implantation to) a fertilized egg, or because their manner of use reflects a low view of children. The Bible is clear: children are a blessing, and married couples should welcome them into their homes in the name of Christ. Christian couples also need to remember that

God opens and closes the womb as he pleases. Our technology gives us an illusion of control and power that we do not *really* possess, and this technology has deeply impacted the way our culture views sex. (No one denies easy contraception was a major factor in the rise of the so-called “sexual revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s. Abortion, legalized again in 1973, is just another form of birth control as well.) We can appreciate the desire of the Roman Catholic Church to keep sex and procreation firmly linked, even if we disagree with their legalistic conclusions about the use of birth control. (See the discussion of Lauren Winner in *Real Sex*, 64ff.)

Contrary to the teaching of the Roman church, there is nothing wrong with sex simply for the sake of pleasure. Not every act of sex between a married couple has to be open to procreation in the same way and to the same degree. Sex has purposes that go beyond and lie outside of procreation. Sex cements a couple together. Sex is about communion, about deep oneness with one another. The physical oneness of sex ties together all the other forms of oneness a couple experiences in marriage – legal, emotional, economic, even Spiritual. The way a couple fits together physically symbolizes and reinforces all the other ways their lives fit together holistically. Thus, sex is a way of expressing and renewing commitment to one another. Indeed, it is a form of covenant renewal between spouses. (In terms of the gospel analogy in Eph. 5, the wedding = baptism and sex = communion. This again points out why sex with someone other than your spouse is wrong – there is no covenant to renew. Sex presupposes a marriage the same way communion presupposes baptism.)

Further, sex is a way of serving one another, as Paul argues in 1 Cor. 7. Sex is twisted when used for purposes of self-fulfillment or self-empowerment. Sex is designed for service. It is a form of self-donation. It is a form of self-sharing. (This is an aspect of why pornography and masturbation are wrong – they are forms of seeking sexual pleasure apart from self-giving, apart from the hard work of getting to know and love another person. At most, they offer false intimacy. There is no one to “share the moment with” because there is no sharing going on at all. It is a totally self-focused, self-absorbed use of sexuality. The result can only be intense loneliness.)

Sex is a way couple strengthen their commitment to one another. Sex is a way that couples minister to one another. And that ministry is an obligation; it something spouses *owe* one another. Indeed, that is why Paul looks at marital sex in terms of authority and justice in 1 Cor. 7. The husband and wife each have authority over the other – specifically over the body of the other. And while sex is a gift each gives to the other, it is also a right – a right each bestows upon the other when they enter into the marriage covenant. Thus, within marriage, each spouse’s sexuality belongs to the other. There is no sexual autonomy within marriage. Rather, there is mutuality. When you get married, your body is now your spouse’s and is to be used accordingly – and vice versa. That’s why Paul speaks in terms of not depriving the other of their due when talking about marital sexuality.

Interestingly, Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor. 7 is contrary to both modern and pre-modern views of sex. It is contrary to the pre-modern view, in which the man had sexual rights

and the woman did not. Paul says there is a basic equality within marriage, and the husband has a responsibility to his wife every bit as great as hers to him. The wife has the same authority over his sexuality that he has over hers. That kind of equity was radical in Paul's day. But Paul's teaching also counters the modern "it's my body, and I can do what I want to with it" attitude. Paul says that when you get married you surrender yourself – body and all – to your spouse. Your sexuality is not merely for your own pleasure, but for the enjoyment of the other. Your focus should be on giving pleasure, not taking it. The sacredness of sex is found precisely here – marital sex is the best created analogy we have of the self-giving love that characterizes the life of the Trinity. In the Trinity each is for the other, each owes himself to the other. And so it is in marriage. But of course, as you give yourself away to your spouse, you find get everything back, and then some.

So sex is not *solely* for purposes of procreation. And that means that the traditional anti-birth control argument is flawed. That being said, a great deal of the power, mystery, and glory of sex is found in its procreative dimension. Sex is creational – and in that sense mirrors on a creaturely level the creative power of God. Sex brings new physical and spiritual life into the world. In that sense, sex not only *builds* community between a husband and wife, but has the potential to *expand* community in the world.

Sex is life-giving, even life-creating. The two become one with the potential to create a third. As Rob Bell points out, when a couple "makes love" they actually have the potential to make "somebody else." Sex has consequences – "Sex is loaded with potential... Who knows what sex could create? Who knows *who* sex could create?...[T]here is always the possibility that human history will be significantly altered by what this man and this women are about to do." God gave sex in order that couples might *share* life and *give* life.

Given that the offspring of a Christian marriage are included by promise within God's covenant, we can also talk about sex as a kingdom-building act. Thus, procreation fits into the "missional" purpose of marriage we have addressed earlier. Marriage is a partnership for the sake of advancing God's kingdom, and having and raising children is a huge aspect of that. Married couples should view the discipling of their children as one the key ways their marriage serves the common good and growth of the kingdom. As we have children and receive them in Christ's name, we are enlarging the sphere of the kingdom in the world.

All that leads us back to birth control. Christian couples need to make wise decisions about birth control based on biblical principles and the best information available to them. If God wanted us to know that birth control was *categorically* wrong, he would have told us so in his Word. The Bible is a big book and there is not one word that would prohibit the responsible use of birth control, provided a couple is acting in faith and remains (in principle) open to the gift of children should God will it. There is no biblical obligation to have as many kids as possible and there may be valid reasons for limiting the number of children a couple has, particularly during certain seasons of life.

At the same time, there *is* a biblical responsibility to “be fruitful and multiply” – though the specifics of that will have to be worked out by each couple on a case-by-case basis. Christian couples should be aware of the fact that culture we live in – which culture influences us in all kinds of ways – is not a good measuring stick. Our culture tends to put the individual self ahead of others, and often views children as an intrusion into one’s life plans, an economic burden, a hassle to care for, etc. Christians cannot share this attitude. Children are not “tacked on” to marriage. Rather, they are integral to very design of marriage. Indeed, they are of the essence of the marriage relationship and one of its greatest blessings. In the words of Luther, “Children are the sweetest fruits of marriage; they tie and strengthen the bonds of love.”

If God withholds the gift of children, the couple should remember that their married life can still be very fulfilling and can still build the kingdom in a variety of ways. Likewise, singles have numerous opportunities to build the kingdom, many of which are not open to married people because of their other commitments. Single people are part of the family of God and play a vital role in growing and maturing that family, even apart from physical procreation. Thus, Paul called Timothy “my son” because he was his father in the faith.

As I said, the sermon was largely made of ideas I took from other sources and stitched together. Some sermon footnotes:

1. The history I recounted can be found in bits and pieces in various places. The impact of the Reformation on family life cannot be overestimated. The medieval era probably had more bright spots than I indicated in the sermon, and certainly marital affection and companionship were not altogether rare. Sometimes the church was better in practice than she was in theory. But the cultural and theological climate – not to mention economic and health hardships -- made it very difficult for family life to thrive. The Reformation set the family free to take shape along more fully biblical, covenantal lines.

Here are some sources:

Justin Taylor’s “Martin Luther’s Reform of Marriage,” ch. 10 in *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor. Most of the Luther quotations I gave come from this survey of Luther’s thinking on marriage. Taylor says, “Part of Luther’s legacy is that he reintroduced love as an essential element of marriage. He wasn’t the first to do so, and obviously there were couples at that time who loved each other deeply. But Luther was at the forefront of advocating marital love and making it the norm for entering into marriage and thriving within marriage.”

See also the book *Luther on the Christian Home* by William Lazareth, as well as Roland Bainton’s biography, *Here I Stand*.

Leland Ryken's *Worldly Saints*, ch. 3, gives a fine account of the shift in family life as it took place in Puritan England (and New England). See also Edmund Morgan's classic, *The Puritan Family* and Steve Ozment's *When Fathers Ruled*.

Also of interest is the new book *Sex, Marriage, and Family in John Calvin's Geneva, vol. 1: Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage*, by John Witte, Jr. and Robert M. Kingdon. This book is a highly specialized study of primary documents, but contains a lot of interesting material along the way. This work shows how the Reformation's leading city reworked medieval canon law into a new, more biblically shaped tradition. The book teaches all kinds of interesting things, e.g., how the Genevan church and city council dealt with fornication and adultery, how they regulated engagements (limiting them to 6 weeks!), how they dealt with arranged marriages and secret marriages, etc.

2. In the sermon I mentioned that when the Bible describes marital life, and especially marital sex, it almost always turns to poetry. Only the poetic medium can express the wonder and mystery of "the two becoming one flesh." Marriage, and marital sex, are just too weighty to be dealt with in clinical prose. This is the Peter Leithart article I quoted from: <http://www.leithart.com/archives/001345.php>. Here's another snippet:

Sex and wisdom are closely intertwined in the OT. Wisdom and Folly are both pictured throughout the early chapters of Proverbs as women – one honorable and blessed, the other seductive and ultimately deadly. Further, the Song of Songs is included among the wisdom books. In some way, skill in living and skill in love-making are connected.

From there Peter moves into a discussion of the multi-layered mystery of sex and sexuality:

Sex is a mystery. Sex is a mystery because masculinity and femininity are elusive qualities. Sexual desire is a mystery, so spontaneous and powerful that we might almost forgive ancient pagans for thinking of sex as a goddess, a divine power. Sexual intercourse is a mystery of mutual indwelling that points to the mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity. In what follows, I don't pretend to unravel the mystery of sex; I only intend to examine a few of its dimensions.

First, being male or female is a fundamental aspect of our created identity. God created man male and female, and these differences are not superficially biological or genetic, but go to the roots of our beings. Women are not men with breasts; women are female, down to the depths of their personalities. This is why sexual confusion is such a profound social and cultural problem. If a man doesn't have some inkling of what manhood is, he has no inkling of who he is. Skill in living requires some degree of self-knowledge, and that means some knowledge of what it

means to be male or female. This is not to say that bodily differences are indifferent. It is rather to say that the physical differences of men and women are aspects of sexual difference deeper and broader than our physical differences. The fact that our identity is always sexually-specific identity is a constant reminder that our bodies are ourselves. Our bodies are so much a part of us that we are not fully redeemed until our bodies are renewed. Even now, our participation in the resurrection life of Jesus is a bodily participation in which we are to present the "members of our bodies" as instruments of righteousness to God (Rom 6).

Second, the story of the creation of Eve in Genesis 2 gives us a profound insight into sexual desire. Adam was created singly, then divided into two beings, which were then called to be reunited in "one flesh." Sexual desire is a desire for unity, wholeness, and not merely a desire for pleasure. When sexual desire is reduced to a desire for sexual pleasure, it becomes mechanical. The lover becomes a mere means to scratch where I itch, rather than another human being with whom I share personal intimacy.

Third, sex is an intense form of personal intimacy, and thus our skill as lovers is related to our capacity of intimacy and personal communion with others. Along these lines, Eugene Peterson has made some intriguing comments about the relationship of sex, salvation, and prayer. Salvation, Peterson remarks, brings with it "a whole series of commands by which we are ordered into live, whole, healthy relationships with God and other persons." This is the condition that Scripture describes with the word "peace" (shalom), a condition of harmonious order between persons and between God and persons. Sin estranges and distances (Gen 3), and God delivered us from sin so that we can become good lovers.

Peterson also notes that prayer and sex "are both aspects of a single, created thing: a capacity for intimacy." He goes on: "All horizontal relationships between other persons, when they achieve any degree of intimacy at all, are aspects of sexuality. All vertical relationships with persons of the Godhead, when there is any degree of intimacy at all, involve prayer. And since there are never instances of merely horizontal relationship and never any solely vertical relationships – we are created in both directions; there are

no one-dimensional beings – both sexuality and prayer (or either sexuality or prayer) can be used to explore and develop personal relationships of intimacy. Either, used thus, involves the other. When we develop and express our love to another person we are using the same words and actions and emotions that also are used to develop and express our love for God; and vice versa." Mystics knew what they were about when they used erotically-charged language to describe their yearning (as members of the bride of Christ) for God; those celibate monks who read the Song of Songs as an allegory were not (or not necessarily) frightened of passion, but knew that there is a created analogy between our passion for union with God and our passion for union with another person.

Fourth, sex is only one aspect of a larger union that marriage aspires to. We are not to be "one flesh" in bed and "two-at-war" outside of bed (and of course, not "two-at-war" in bed, either). The one-flesh relationship in sex is supposed to symbolize and manifest the unity of our lives together. A truly fulfilled sex life is more than giving each other pleasure in bed. A truly fulfilled sex life involves striving toward unity in diversity in every aspect of a marriage.

Fifth, sex and marriage are inseparable, or should be, from obligations toward a wider community. We have sex in private, but sex is never simply a private affair. Wendell Berry makes this point in some reflections on *The Merchant of Venice*: "Lovers must not, like usurers, live for themselves alone. They must finally turn from their gaze at one another back toward the community. If they had only themselves to consider, lovers would not need to marry, but they must think of others and of other things. They say their vows to the community as much as to one another, and the community gathers around them to hear and to wish them well, on their behalf and on its own. It gathers around them because it understands how necessary, how joyful, and how fearful this joining is. These lovers, pledging themselves to one another 'until death,' are giving themselves away, and they are joined by this as no law or contract could ever join them. Lovers, then, 'die' into their union with one another as a soul 'dies' into its union with God. And so here, at the very heart of community life, we find not something to sell as in the public market but this momentous giving. If the community cannot protect this giving, it can protect

nothing – and our time is proving that this is so." Modern economies, he suggests, exist to guard "the private exploitation of the public wealth and health," but he advocates an economy that "exists for the protection of gifts, beginning with the 'giving in marriage.'" Marriage is the proper location for sex because "this joining of two who know, love, and trust one another brings them in the same breath into the freedom of sexual consent and into the fullest earthly realization of the image of God. From their joining, other living souls come into being, and with them great responsibilities that are unending, fearful, and joyful. The marriage of two lovers joins them to one another, to forebears, to descendants, to the community, to Heaven and earth." Sex is thus never isolated from larger communal concerns, and as soon as it becomes a merely private issue it is corrupted.

Thus, you can see why poetry (especially sung poetry) is the appropriate language for the mystery of marriage and marital sexuality.

In the sermon I also mentioned that Ephesians 5:22-33 is a kind of love poem about Christ and the church. Here's Markus Barth's take (quoted by Peter Leithart here: <http://www.leithart.com/archives/print/002719.php>):

The vision of love described by Paul is *sui generis*. Though Christ's love includes features found in many a strong, wise and devoted man's love, there is something unique in his love: this lover has the will, the power, and the success to make his bride perfect. He loves his beloved only for her own sake. He seeks no other or higher reward than her alone. His love, incorporated in his bride, is an end in itself. The Messiah has set out and will not rest until she appears before himself glorious and free of any defect....

The way in which the Messiah looks upon the church is not that of a girl-watcher, a Victorian chaperon, or a doctor, a judge, an artist after he has completed a piece of work. His 'vision' consists of 'seeing to it' that all becomes 'very good.' He does not 'look on a woman with a lustful eye' . . . , but it the eminent example of what it means to be led by a 'sound [lit. single] eye'.... [Paul] gives a testimony to the high esteem in which the church is held by God and Christ, and to the manner in which Christ makes this esteem distinct from a romantic illusion. In their own way these verses describe nothing else but what in another Pauline passage is called 'justification of the ungodly.'

This is exactly right: Christ loves his bride for who she will become – which is exactly what spouses must do with one another. He sees her in the present in light of who she

will be at the last day. He loves her not only for who she is in the right now, but for who she will be in future glory. His love transforms her.

Barth is onto something when he regards Ephesians 5:22ff as a love poem celebrating the mystery of the gospel – which mystery is dimly shadowed in our earthly marriages. Indeed, I would suggest that our marriages should become living poems, or living love songs, that show forth the beauty of the gospel to the world.

Finally, Doug Wilson has some short but helpful thoughts on the Song of Solomon as love poetry in *Reforming Marriage*, 85ff.

3. The discussion of marriage as a means to greater wisdom has several sources.

Jim Jordan pointed out to me that Proverbs depicts the pursuit of wisdom in terms of courtship, which in turn shows that wisdom is gained by both men and women as they interact with one another in a godly way. The son in Proverbs is confronted with two archetypes – Lady Wisdom and Harlot Folly. The course of the man’s life will depend on which female archetype he pursues to make his queen.

But this gender symbolism in Proverbs is more than mere symbolism. It depicts what actually happens as a man pursues, marries, and learns to live with a wife. If he does so in faith and humility, he will be moving to ever greater wisdom. As he learns how she works, what makes her tick, how she sees things, he will come to greater insights about himself and the world at large.

Tim Keller has made similar points about marriage and wisdom. Keller points out that marriage enriches your outlook on life in two ways – along gender lines and along temperament lines.

First, Keller points that there are a variety of temperaments. Traditionally, these are known as melancholy, sanguine, choleric, and phlegmatic. Simplistically defined, these are the different temperamental dispositions:

Melancholy – The world is a dangerous place, so wait and see what happens

Sanguine – The world is a friendly place, so take initiative

Choleric – The world is a dangerous place, but take initiative anyway

Phlegmatic – The world is a friendly place, but you should still wait and see what happens

Which temperament is most true? Which gives the most accurate perspective on the world? Each one has its place. Sometimes it best to act in the world. Other times you should wait and *react*. The world is God’s good creation and the arena in which his redemptive grace is at work – so it is a friendly place. At the same time, the world is fallen and remains a spiritual battlefield – so it is a dangerous place as well. Each temperament has valid insight into the condition of things.

Jesus, of course, combines all the best features of the temperaments in his perfected human personality. Thus, he defies any classification or categorization. He is Wisdom incarnated. He always knew exactly what to do.

Most of the time we lack the wisdom to see the full complexity of a given situation. We aren't insightful or versatile enough to take it all in. As a result, we have to fall back on stereotyped responses. But in marriage we have the chance to learn another perspective and thus attain greater insights into life.

Since you will likely marry someone with at least a slightly different temperament, your marriage gives you an opportunity to see the world through the eyes of a different personality. As a result, you grow in wisdom. You get another set of eyes. You see things you never saw before.

Second, Keller points out that men and women tend to see the world differently. In marriage, you learn to view the world the way the other gender views the world. Again, the result is wisdom. I described this at length in the sermon and won't repeat it here.

Keller deals with these issues in his sermon series "Marriage as Ministry Power."

Finally, Tom Smail's book *Like Father, Like Son*, while corrupted with a good bit of egalitarian garbage, has a number of very helpful insights. Smail is particularly strong on the question of freedom and identity. But he also has some helpful things to say about gender relationships. Peter Leithart's review (<http://www.leithart.com/archives/002723.php>) provides a good summary:

Written for a general Christian readership, it [Smail's book] reflects a thorough familiarity with both traditional and contemporary work on the Trinity, and applies Trinitarian patterns to human life in interesting ways. His chapter on "Gendered Image" shows an unfortunate skittishness about feminism, endorses ordination of women, and doesn't deal with all the relevant biblical texts; but even that chapter has its virtues, as he explains that men are created to initiate and to work while women are created to cultivate relationships. Each is modified and matured by contact with the other, but each retains his and her own calling: "The man is to be responsive as he remains faithful to his distinctive calling to image the initiating love of the Father; the woman is to be proactive as she remains faithful to her distinctive calling to image the responsive love of the Son." Appealing to perichoretic categories, he writes that "in their inter-relating with women, men, in their distinctive calling to initiating work in the world, are inducted into the realm of empathetic attentiveness to the other which male humanity needs for its completion but which is the distinctive calling and gift of women. In their inter-relating

with men, women, in their distinctive calling to that responsive relationality, are inducted into the realm of initiation and authority which female humanity needs for its completion but which is the distinctive gift and calling of men." This comes to fullest expression in marriage, but also in relations of sons to mothers, daughters to fathers, brothers to sisters, and so on.

Each gender is "modified and matured by contact with other, but each retains his and her own calling" – exactly! Smail is right in emphasizing men as initiators and women as relaters, who then rub off on each other in order to reshape each other and complete each other. There is much here of value.

Since we read Proverbs 5 last Sunday, it might be useful to briefly pay the text a closer look. Peter Leithart provides an overview of the imagery and its meaning/application (<http://www.leithart.com/archives/001345.php>):

As Waltke says, Solomon uses virtually exhausts the Hebrew vocabulary for water sources (vv. 15-16): cisterns, wells, springs, streams of water. What is he referring to? Waltke suggests that the imagery is mainly imagery of refreshment. Quoting another commentator, he says, "The image suggests cool, limpid refreshment for hot desires, which are slaked by 'drinking,' that is, lovemaking." The woman is thus being portrayed as the source of refreshing waters, and the son's desire is satisfied by sex in the way thirst is satisfied by cold water. Solomon's connection between drink and sex is significant. Scripture frequently connects food and sex (several times in Song of Songs), and this points to the fact that both involve "one flesh" relationships. When we both eat from the same roast, or the same table, we are "one" through that common meal. Obviously, another connection is the connection of sexual desire and hunger, as well as the analogy between the multi-sensory pleasures derived from eating a well-prepared meal and the pleasures of sex.

Solomon's exhortation is to "drink water from your own cistern." The imagery of verse 16 is somewhat puzzling; it reads, "Should your springs overflow?" and the question expects a negative answer. The "spring" is sometimes seen as a symbol of a man's sexual potency, and that is sometimes connected with the promise of descendants. But the imagery seems to be simply an extension of the exhortation of verse 15; the "springs" refer to water-sources other than "your own cistern." The contrast throughout is between finding satisfaction for one's thirst from one's

private cistern, and finding satisfaction from water-sources in the open square. One commentator says: "The whole allegory rests on the matter of private versus common property: one's own cistern (v. 15) as against the springs and channels of water in the open squares (v. 16); the water that belongs to you alone (v. 17) in opposition to those in open places that are property of foreigners." Solomon is saying, When you are hot with desire, look in only one place to satisfy your thirst – to your own fountain, cistern, and well, your wife.

Our culture is full of public cisterns, where sexual satisfaction is offered apart from the inhibitions of marriage and family. One of the key features of modern culture, in fact, has been the liberation of sex from all the traditional ties and boundaries that used to surround it with an aura of sanctity. "Water" is offered on the Internet, and in pornographic magazines. Sexually liberated women are (ironically enough) willing to accommodate themselves to the traditionally male sexual preference for anonymous, uncommitted sex. For slightly more money, you can find "water" on many streetcorners in every major city in the US. Adultery is still scandalous for a politician, and sometimes discouraged; but it is not seen as an inherent evil. If, perchance, sex should result in pregnancy, we have options there too.

Solomon's solution to the temptations that public cisterns offer is to push his son back to the private cistern. Why drink water from a cistern that has already been used by others (v. 17)? Why get drunk on passion for a strange woman? (v. 20). Changing the image from water to wine, he encourages his son to be "intoxicated" with his own wife (v. 19), whose love is "better than wine" (Song of Songs 1:2). "Satisfy" in verse 19 means "drink one's fill" or "saturate," and thus continues the imagery of the woman as a source of refreshing drink.

Solomon ends this exhortation with a reminder that nothing is hidden from God. Secret sexual sins are not secret to God (v. 21). And God will ensure that those who follow the strange woman are captured and held fast in the cords of their sins. Sexual sin is folly ultimately because, no matter how vital and invigorating it may feel, it is an enemy of life.

A few more notes on this text. While it is certainly true that the water sources represent the man's wife to him, some of the imagery seems to be gender specific. Some commentators believe the well and cistern represent the wife and the fountain represents the man. (If you think about these images long enough, you may be able to figure out why these symbols are used specifically for male and female sexuality, respectively. Solomon is being "anatomically correct.") A man's "fountain" is blessed only as he rejoices in his wife (5:18). He should not allow his fountain to flow freely in the streets, but preserve it only for her (5:17). Likewise, her well and cistern are for him alone to drink from (5:15).

Thus, the passage shows that both the man and the woman are thirsty. Both are called upon to satisfy their thirst only with one another. (On the myths of female sexual desire, see Winner's *Real Sex*, 90ff.) The book of Proverbs runs counter to both traditional and contemporary pseudo-wisdom about sexuality. Proverbs teaches us not to be ashamed of sexual desire, but to focus it and discipline it and reserve it solely for one's spouse. There is no anxiety or squeamishness about sex in Proverbs – but neither is there any permissiveness. Sexual desire is a mighty rushing river, but must be kept within its marital banks, lest it wreak destruction.

Proverbs also teaches us that while the man and women both desire sex, they approach it differently. After all, he is "fountain" and she is the "well." He was built for giving and her for receiving. These differences in approach to sexuality play out in a variety of ways in married life – but respecting the differences is one of the best ways to learn about each other. As C. J. Maheny has said, "Men, you have to learn to touch your wife's mind and heart before you touch her body." Couples that really grow in their marriage and their joy in one another learn how to respect, enjoy, and appreciate their differences. Don't rely on your spouse to be a mind-reader – instead learn to communicate!

Finally, since the sermon mentioned Proverbs 30:18-19 in passing, I should say a few more things about this remarkable text. I confess to not fully understanding the paired analogies that Agur (or Solomon, as the one who assembled his wise sayings) uses. But it is clear that Agur believes marital romance and love surpass anything else in the creation in both beauty and mystery. Agur is amazed at the whole process of interaction between the man and the woman – from courtship through consummation.

Verse 20, then, is very jarring. The wise man turns from his awe at the beauty of marital intercourse to the grotesqueness of adultery. Speaking of the adulteress, he says, "She eats and wipes her mouth." Whereas sex within marriage is graceful like an eagle in flight, sex outside of marriage is like eating with your mouth open. It's disgusting. It's reduces awe to mere appetite. And it is based on a lie – "I have done no wickedness." Tim Keller points out that the basic lie of sex outside of marriage is that sex is a commodity to be consumed rather than a gift to be given. This is the lie of the "sexual revolution" – we have commodified sexual relationships. But commodified relationships are always self-serving because getting your needs met is more important than preserving the relationship. You may get to "know" the checkout person at the grocery store, but if

you found better prices or selection elsewhere, you wouldn't shop there anymore. As Keller says, sex belongs not to a commodified relationship, but to a committed relationship. And that total commitment is what we call "marriage."

To commodify sexual relationships is to abstract sex from the person. But you should never give your body to someone else without giving your total self and receiving the other person's total self. There is a sense, after all, in which your body is your total self. But that total self-giving requires a marriage covenant. Otherwise, each of you is holding something back from the other. You want the *pleasure* the other can provide, but you don't want the *person* because having the person would entangle you.

C. S. Lewis makes this same point in *The Four Loves*: "We use a most unfortunate idiom when we say, of a lustful man prowling the streets, that he 'wants a woman.' Strictly speaking, a woman is just what he does not want. He wants a pleasure for which a woman happens to be the necessary piece of apparatus. How much he cares about the woman as such may be gauged by his attitude to her five minutes after fruition (one does not keep the carton after one has smoked the cigarettes)."

The litmus test for a couple that is sleeping together is very easy: Simply ask them why they aren't yet married. It suddenly becomes obvious that no matter how much they "care" about each other, no matter how much they profess "love" for each other, they don't really want to be covenantally committed to each other. And that means they are simply using one another for self-serving ends. It isn't love at all, at least not in a biblical sense. It's a lie.