

**Marriage and God's purposes in the world**  
**I Corinthians 7:32 – 40**  
Fairview Presbyterian Church  
May 24, 2009

2 Peter 3:15 – 16 reads, <sup>15</sup>our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, <sup>16</sup>as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand....<sup>1</sup> I find this verse oddly comforting. It tells me, when I run across passages from Paul's letters difficult to understand, that I am in good company in my perplexity: the Apostle Peter found some of Paul's writings difficult to comprehend!

These verses from 2 Corinthians are tough to tackle. The manner of Paul's writing is very odd and the result is that there are three possible ways to interpret what he means. The problem is that none of the three options are completely satisfactory. The interpretation that I think makes the most sense on the face of things works until you realize that it *contradicts* what Paul explicitly said in verse 5 of the chapter. I admit defeat. I am not going to try and interpret this text. I cannot think of any strategy to satisfactorily preach on this passage. This is a passage more suited for a class discussion. Instead we will do a brief review and then explore several other Bible passages addressing the question of marriage.

First, in review, marriage is woven by God into creation.

**Marriage is woven by God into creation – Genesis 2:24**

<sup>24</sup> Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

It is my understanding that when the Secret Service trains its agents to identify counterfeit money it does so by focusing solely upon legitimate currency. The agents learn everything there is to know about authentic currency. By knowing the real thing, they are then equipped to identify the counterfeits.

The Bible understands a very high place for marriage in life. Genesis 1 tells the story of the creation and ordering of the cosmos, culminating in the creation of man, male and female. Genesis 2 tells the story of the ordering of human life in the world God has made. The highlight, the culmination, the crown in the ordering of life is the creation of Eve and her presentation to Adam as his wife. Marriage is the final creative act in the story of creation. This is the real thing as God intends it: <sup>24</sup> Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. This is the standard, the ideal: one man, one woman, holding fast to each other (i.e. lifelong) making love, making children.

Regrettably, the world we live in is not the ideal world of the Garden of Eden. We are not the men or women we ought to be. This fact led the folk at the Corinthian

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<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Bible : English standard version.* 2001 (2 Pe 3:15-16). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Church to ask Paul for guidance on how we are to glorify God as Christians in our sexual identities.

### **How do we glorify God in our sexuality? – 1 Corinthians 7:1**

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote:

The famous American preacher **Dwight D. Pentecost** was visiting England, joining the famous English preacher **Charles Spurgeon** at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Spurgeon and Pentecost agreed to share the sermon: Spurgeon would preach on the doctrine and Pentecost would provide the application. Fulfilling his assigned role, Pentecost railed strongly and unequivocally against the *sin* of smoking cigars. Spurgeon was well known for his love for cigars; during carriage rides from his home to the Tabernacle he liked to smoke a cigar in order to prepare his throat for preaching. Spurgeon rose and, before dismissing the congregation, said:

"Well, dear friends, you know that some men can do to the glory of God what to other men would be sin. And notwithstanding what brother Pentecost has said, I intend to smoke a good cigar to the glory of God before I go to bed to-night.

"If anybody can show me in the Bible the command, 'Thou shalt not smoke,' I am ready to keep it; but I haven't found it yet. I find ten commandments, and it's as much as I can do to keep them; and I've no desire to make them into eleven or twelve.<sup>2</sup>

*"I've no desire to make them into eleven or twelve."* Good advice that.

The key things to remember regarding Paul's answer to the Corinthian's question is to honor the boundaries God gives and enjoy the freedom he offers. No one should be ashamed of the desires, instincts, passions or physical body they have been given by God. Such things are not wrong. The goal is to use these things as God intends: to channel them properly, to glorify God in them. The biblical boundaries and freedom are clear in regards to our sexual identities: either celibacy in singleness or faithfulness in marriage.

### **Either celibacy in singleness – 1 Corinthians 7:7**

<sup>7</sup> I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

Paul promotes celibacy as a good thing, a preferred thing for those who have the ability to embrace it. There are those who choose to be celibate in order to serve God more fully: priests, monks, nuns and even the occasional Protestant. These folk take a vow of celibacy in order to have more time to devote to spiritual service. Celibacy is not a higher calling, but it is a distinct calling.

The other calling God provides is faithfulness in marriage.

### **Or faithfulness in marriage – 1 Corinthians 7:2**

each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.spurgeon.org/misc/cigars.htm>

In chapter 24, section 2, the **Westminster Confession** of faith summarizes God's purpose in marriage: *Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife, for the increase of mankind with legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness.* Christianity elevates the ordinary. The Christian faith does not require the *Twelve Labors of Hercules* in order to please God. We are not required to eliminate or deny our passions and desires. Rather, we are called to use them to the glory of God. God is glorified in married sex. Sexual intimacy was invented by God. Husband and wife glorify God in the intimacy of the marriage bed.

This leads to our next point. Sexual intimacy is a form of knowledge.

### **Sexual intimacy is a form of knowledge – Genesis 4:1**

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain

It is common in the Bible to use the word *to know* as a reference to sexual intimacy. Engaging in sex entails learning new things about oneself, one's body, your spouse and your spouse's body. In married sexual intimacy we meet the sexual other. Men and women are different. That is a very good thing. Sexual knowledge in marriage bears fruit, literally (the arrival of children) and figuratively (deepened understanding between husband and wife).

There are surprising social and personal benefits in marriage.

Marriage promotes the physical and emotional health of men and women. Married adults have longer lives, less illness, greater happiness, and lower levels of depression and substance abuse than cohabiting and single adults....The norms of adult maturity and fidelity associated with marriage encourage men and women to avoid unhealthy or risky behaviors, from promiscuous sex to heavy alcohol use. The increased wealth and economic stability that come from being married enable married men and women to seek better medical care. The emotional support furnished by most marriages reduces stress, and the stress hormones, that often cause ill health and mental illness.<sup>3</sup>

These benefits of marriage derive in part because in marriage we meet and learn from the sexual other. Men and women complement one another. Heterosexual intimacy in marriage is fruitful. It is the sexual differentness of husband and wife that enable these social and personal benefits in marriage. When Eve is presented to Adam, the Bible records the first human sentence. It is poetry. "*This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.*" The arrival of Eve sparks Adam's creativity. There is something good in the challenge of learning to know your spouse. Thomas Moore writes,

Each marriage is a laboratory for the soul and in each marriage lies the deeper laboratory of sex, the holy of holies where passion, union, difference, pleasures, difficulties, and even work achieve their necessary balances. Sex doesn't have to be perfect or done in any particular way as long as it lies at the heart of a

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<sup>3</sup> Marriage and the Public Good: Ten Principles, The Witherspoon Institute, Princeton, NJ, 2008, p. 26-28

marriage. It does the soul's task of mediating between worlds, between the daily concerns of living and the eternal concerns of meaning and the heart.<sup>4</sup>

The sexual difference between husband and wife, man and woman, also helps explain why children are more likely to thrive and less likely to engage in harmful activities if they grow up in stable, married, mom and dad households. Yes, it is possible to be successful as a single parent. But it is harder. There are some things that dad more naturally and easily communicates to the children, just as there are some things that are more naturally picked up and learned from mom. Men and women bring different strengths to the child rearing task.

The fact of our sexual differentness in marriage is a given. The Bible also gives men a specific instruction of responsibility in this matter. It tells men: husband, study your wife.

### **Husband, study your wife – 1 Peter 3:7**

<sup>7</sup> Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way

A man walking along a California beach found a washed up bottle and when he picked it he was surprised to see a genie pop out of it. "I will fulfill any one wish you make," the genie told the man.

The man thought for a moment and then replied, "I have always wanted to visit Hawaii, but am afraid to fly. I want you to build for me a roadway from California to Hawaii, so that I can drive myself there."

Now it happened that this was a very up-to-date, fan-of-Al Gore, green, environmental genie. The genie berated the man for making such an environmentally detrimental request, telling him that he would not grant it because of its wastefulness. Make another request he instructed. The man thought for a moment, and then said, "I know, I want the ability to understand women."

The genie looked at him. "*So, do you wish two-lanes or four-lanes for your highway?*"

In a previous sermon I mentioned that men are simple creatures. We are. The opposite is true as well. Women are complex. A woman's hormonal cycles and emotional needs are more complex and broad than those of a man. Statistically, women are more likely to face depression and mental illness: there is simply more going on inside a woman and so more ways things can go wrong. Eve was not made in the same way as Adam. She was made from living flesh, taken from Adam's side. She was not taken from Adam's foot that he might trample upon her. She was not taken from Adam's head, to rule over him. She was taken from his side. She is his companion, his equal.

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Credenda Agenda, Volume 13, no. 1, p. 3.

This aspect of our sexual differences lays a particular responsibility upon husbands. Peter tells husbands to live with your wives in an understanding way. It reads literally “*according to knowledge.*” A husband has a biblical responsibility to seek to understand his wife. In every area of household obedience to biblical teaching, the husband is expected to take the lead, to provide the initiative. Husband, your wife is a complex creature. You have a thick skull. Living with your wife in an understanding way requires sustained effort and study. Put some effort into understanding your wife’s emotional needs, perspective, and feelings. Show some wisdom and selflessness. In the movie **Heartbreak Ridge**, Clint Eastwood plays a gunnery sergeant so tough he can *spit concertina wire*. He is also trying to rebuild his marriage. His wife tells him that he doesn’t understand her. Over the course of the movie we see him reading various Women’s Magazines in an attempt to deepen his understanding of his wife.

The initiative is yours, husband. At the same time, to husband and wife, the Bible teaches us to put our partner’s needs ahead of our own.

### **Husband and wife: put your partner’s needs ahead of your own – Philippians 2:4**

<sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others

What this verse means is that each spouse should be selflessly seeking to satisfy the needs of their partner. Men and women have different levels of sexual desire. A man’s sexual needs are generally higher than a woman’s. Wives, put your partner’s needs above your own. Men, realize that your wife’s desires are typically not as often as yours, put your partner’s needs above your own. A man who is studying his wife will learn this truth, and live with his wife in knowledge. While this verse is certainly applicable to the marriage bed, it means much more.

Our home should be a place of strength and renewal, a place of safety, nurture and encouragement. Our home is the particular place in our lives where we ought to live as we ought. Our homes become this when the members of the household learn to look out for the needs of the others in the household more than they do so for themselves. Beware of thinking that your home is the place where you can get away with being mean, short-tempered or simply indifferent to your other family members. Home is not a place where you have the *right* not to care or to be mean and ornery. Husbands, always treat your wives with courtesy. Wives, always show respect toward your husband. Children, listen to the guidance provided by mom and dad. Learn to express gratitude to your parents for how they have sacrificed on your behalf and for their efforts to bring you into honorable adulthood. Parents encourage your children and seek to understand their hopes and dreams.

In this series we have explored a number of facets of the biblical teaching on marriage. Paul lists one key concern for those who are currently unmarried, marry in the Lord, he writes.

### **To the unmarried: marry in the Lord -- 1 Corinthians 7:39**

she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.

The **Westminster Confession** declares “*It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry, but Christians are to marry in the Lord.*” What happens in a marriage? Two people, a husband and wife, merge their lives together. They move into the same house or apartment. They set a single household budget, checking account, savings and investment. They establish new patterns for meals, leisure, work and time with friends. This is a challenging task. Every couple has stories of the adjustments, compromises and sacrifices made in marriage. Men and women are different, so our sexual differences are a given in marriage. At the same time, the scope and sweep of the required adjustments in marriage can be limited or increased depending upon our choice of a marriage partner. We can group human identity according to all sorts of categories: class, ethnicity, race, nationality, education, family background, culture, politics, and so on. The closer your spouse’s background is to your background on these various categories, the easier the marriage adjustment. Having lived eleven years outside the United States, Lois Ann and I have known many successful cross-cultural and cross-national marriages. It is possible to build a successful marriage across any of these social divides, but doing so requires more work and effort.

You may have noted that the one thing I have left out of this list is religion. Paul is saying that religion is a non-negotiable. Christians are to *marry in the Lord*, meaning they are to marry only other Christians. If you have a choice about the marriage, choose someone who shares your faith. Does this mean that **Presbyterians** should only marry other Presbyterians? No. But if you marry a **Nazarene**, or a **Mennonite**, or a **Lutheran**, there will be religious issues to work out together. The Westminster Confession teaches that Protestants should not marry a Catholic. Certainly a Protestant who marries a Catholic will face an even greater challenge, for there are significant differences between Protestant and Catholic faiths. At the same time, this is one place where I disagree with the Westminster Confession. Protestant or Catholic, we are still *in the Lord*.

Maturity and wisdom in life are reflected in our lives as we learn to think clearly and see farther down the road. For example, when driving a car, a teenager may have faster reaction time making driving adjustments, but my almost forty years of driving experience means that I can see and comprehend what is happening on the roadway around me earlier. It is this ability to see farther down the road that leads me to make this next application of this point. In today’s multicultural world, young people in high school and college, and young adults in the work force, will meet folk from all sorts of non-Christian religions: **Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Wiccan, Sikh, Shinto** and so on. To those who are unmarried, Paul’s counsel is to determine not to date anyone who does not come from a Christian background. Christians are to marry in the Lord. Why date someone whom you know is not a suitable marriage partner? Doing so only sets yourself up for disappointment or disobedience later. If a person is not a suitable marriage partner, then he or she is not a suitable date either.

Finally, I want to conclude by talking briefly about what happens in a marriage ceremony.

## What happens in a marriage ceremony? – Genesis 2:24

<sup>24</sup> Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

What happens on the day of a Christian wedding? Typically, getting to the wedding day involves a great deal of planning and preparation. Ceremonies are one way in which we mark important moments or achievements in life. For the average person, the pre-wedding planning and preparations, the wedding service proper and the subsequent celebrations combine together to create the single most complex ceremony of their life. Because of the importance and centrality of marriage, we invest a lot of time, planning, effort and money in the marriage ceremony and its peripheral rituals. I have noticed in recent years a trend towards long engagements; couple's approach me about officiating at their wedding one and a half or two years ahead. I do not think this is a good thing, for it seems to be driven primarily by issues of finances. Once a couple is engaged, the wedding should occur as soon as is practical.

The pivot point of the ceremonies of marriage is the wedding service in the church, before God, family and friends. In a Presbyterian wedding service, after everyone is present in the sanctuary and standing where they are supposed to be standing, the pastor begins the worship service – for that is what a wedding is in its essence – declaring,

Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders will have labored in vain. This is the house of God, the sanctuary of the people of the Covenant. Come into the Lord's presence with praise and thanksgiving.

This will be followed by a **Prayer of Approach**. The congregation is then seated and the pastor then declares **The Statement of the Gift of Marriage**. This is the theological center of the wedding ceremony. It declares the reasons why we do what we do in marriage. Here it is, in its entirety.

We have gathered in the presence of God  
to give thanks for the gift of marriage,  
and rejoice in the joining together of  
*Andy and Jenny* ,

We want to surround them with our prayers,  
to give thanks for them and to ask God's blessing upon them in the future,  
so that they may be strengthened for their new life together  
and nurtured in their love for God.

God created us male and female,  
and gave us marriage  
so that husband and wife may help and comfort each other,  
living faithfully together

in plenty and in want,  
in joy and in sorrow,  
in sickness and in health,  
throughout all their days.

God gave us marriage  
for the full expression of the love between a man and a woman.  
In marriage a woman and a man belong to each other,  
and with affection and tenderness  
freely give themselves to each other.

God gave us marriage  
for the well-being of human society,  
for the ordering of family life,  
and for the birth and nurture of children.

God gave us marriage as a holy mystery  
in which a man and a woman are joined together,  
and become one,  
just as Christ is one with the church.

In marriage, husband and wife are called to a new way of life,  
created, ordered, and blessed by God.  
It is to be lived prayerfully,  
and in joyful obedience to Christ.

We rejoice that marriage is given by God,  
blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ,  
and sustained by the Holy Spirit.  
Therefore, let marriage be held in honor among all.

The service continues incorporating the parts you know: the giving of the bride; scripture readings; prayers; homily; vows; the exchange of rings; concluding with the declaration of the marriage. The couple are now husband and wife. A new family has been formed. God's purposes have been fulfilled.

**Say "Amen!" Somebody.**

<sup>32</sup> I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. <sup>33</sup> But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, <sup>34</sup> and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. <sup>35</sup> I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

<sup>36</sup> If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. <sup>37</sup> But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. <sup>38</sup> So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

<sup>39</sup> A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. <sup>40</sup> Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.