

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

✘ ✘ ✘

April 15, 2005

✘ ✘ ✘

A Definition of Marriage

God instituted marriage as part of His original plan for humanity. Therefore, marriage is not a consequence of the Fall, but an aspect of the order that God declared to be “very good.” He planned it as a blessing for humanity, and a blessing it remains.

Both Jesus and Paul treated marriage as a creation ordinance. Answering different questions, both of them appealed to Genesis 2:24 as the basis for their teaching about marriage. Evidently this verse is pivotal for understanding the nature of marriage.

The verse is actually an editorial comment that Moses appended to the conclusion of his second creation account. It summarizes the teaching to be learned from God's creation of the woman for the man. Moses' summary statement is brief and direct: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh.” Among other things, this verse provides the biblical definition of marriage. This definition consists of three elements, corresponding to three clauses in the verse.

Prior to this definition, however, Moses offers an explanation. “Therefore,” he says, meaning that the definition he is about to offer arises out of the story he has just told. That story is set in the context of the creation accounts, in which God repeatedly declares that His creation is good.

One thing, however, is *not* good. God declares that it is not good for the man to be alone. He needs a companion who is like himself. God has Adam classify (name) the animals. This activity reveals that none of them is a suitable companion.

God then takes a rib from the man, fashions it into a woman, and presents the woman to the man. The man responds with a spontaneous outburst of high poetry (the first poem was a

love poem). From this presentation and response Moses draws a definition of marriage that consists of three elements.

The first element in this definition is *leaving*. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother," says Moses. It was assumed that a woman would leave her home and family to live with her husband, much as Rebecca did for Isaac. What Moses adds is that the man must also leave his father and mother. Father and mother are the two closest human relationships that a man experiences prior to marriage. For the man to leave his father and mother means that he willingly sets aside all prior relationships in favor of the one relationship to which he is about to commit himself. In other words, all other relationships are demoted in priority so that no other human relationship is allowed to compete with one's commitment to one's spouse.

Incidentally, this implies that people are not ready for marriage until they are ready to leave father and mother, and, by implication, to demote all other human relationships. People (especially men) who depend upon their friends for identity or their parents for livelihood are not in a position to marry. The first element in the definition of marriage is *leaving*.

The second element in Moses' definition of marriage is *cleaving*. "Therefore a man shall . . . cleave unto his wife. . . ." The notion of *cleaving* is often assumed to refer to the sexual relationship, but it does not. To *cleave* means to be *faithfully devoted*. In other words, the heart of marriage is an absolute commitment and devotion to one's spouse.

The cleaving corresponds inversely to the leaving. In marriage, we leave in order that we may cleave. We abandon our commitments to comrades, friends, and even parents, in order that we might be free to commit ourselves absolutely to one spouse.

This commitment or faithful devotion is the single greatest and most solemn obligation that one human can bear toward another. So utter is this commitment that the assuming of it constitutes a sworn oath. It is no accident that we solemnize marriage by taking vows. It is the vow or the oath that constitutes marriage.

This oath cannot be sworn in private. Rather, the marriage vow is a public declaration that this man and this woman are devoting themselves exclusively to one another and that they are no longer available to any other. The marriage vow must be taken in public. The oath must be sworn before witnesses.

Marriage is the fundamental unit of all human society. For this reason, civil governments have a legitimate interest in formalizing and recording marriages. The state is within its rights to issue marriage licenses and to authorize specific persons to exercise authority to solemnize marriages. Christians have a duty to honor such stipulations.

The vow is the center of marriage. Marriage is not established by love, but by commitment. The moment that the oath has been sworn, a marriage exists, and not before. The marriage is not complete, however, without one other element.

Moses specifies this third element in the definition of marriage: "and they shall be one flesh." Of course, this is a euphemism for sexual union. While sexual union does not *constitute* marriage, it does *consummate* marriage.

God's purpose in creating sex was not merely (or even primarily) to give humans a way to have babies. On the contrary, sexual union is intrinsic even to marriages in which child-

bearing is not possible. The intimacy of sexual union both reflects and seals the absolute commitment of the marriage oath. Under the marriage oath, sexual union is a holy and powerful instrument by means of which a husband and wife give themselves unreservedly to one another. Outside of marriage, however, sexual union is always a lie that promises more than it can deliver and therefore becomes an instrument by means of which the partners defraud one another.

The leaving and the cleaving (the swearing of the oath) are the basis of marital oneness; sexual union is its most intimate expression. But they are not the end or goal of marriage. They are rather the means by which God gives a man and a woman to one another so that they may complete one another in lifelong companionship.

Marriage is not incidental to God's plan. It is a creation ordinance, related to the making of male and female in God's own image, and pivotal to God's purpose in creation. It remains as one aspect of the primeval blessing and continues to be central to God's purpose for humanity.✘

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis | Contact Us
900 Forestview Ln N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 1-800-827-1043 | www.centalseminary.edu