

Echoes From Eden – The Lost Glory

As we struggle to find the reasons for our alarming free-fall into sexual chaos, many would look for markers in our own history. Was it the point where we grew lax about divorce? Was it our access to birth control which allowed us to separate sexual activity from its natural consequence?

Others would go deeper, citing the impulse toward independence and individualism that was a celebrated undergirding of our nation's birth. Then there's the present reality that most people in the Western world no longer spend large portions of their mental, emotional and physical energies on matters of basic survival, but now have the leisure for introspection and experimentation that has not characterized the greater span of human history.

All of these factors are real and important, but in my estimation they don't reach back far enough. I would bid us return to the Garden, to the very ground out of which all human fallenness has grown and flowered.

We who know Christ are very familiar with the primary expressions of our separation from God: our pride and lusts and anger and doubts. We are also very conscious of the fallenness of our natural world, with its disasters and diseases and perpetual dyings. But I would suggest that there may be elements of our sexual fallenness that began there which are no longer clearly grasped even within the church. And because of this loss, our footing in our current cultural upheaval is often less than sure.

The Divine Hierarchy

To understand these lost elements, we actually need to step outside creation to the nature of the Trinity itself. Within the functioning of their relationship the Godhead expresses—with a perfection we can see only dimly—a mysterious and marvelous form of hierarchy that would eventually permeate the created order as well.

In the strict sense, a hierarchy requires three things: sameness, differentiation and connectedness. For example, we see little hierarchy between an apple and an alligator, for their sameness is minimal and their connectedness only incidental. Because most would agree that the Godhead represents complete connectedness, the questions that require our attention are the nature of their sameness and the nature of their differentiation.

With regard to sameness, many will point to Philippians 2:6, which (in the KJV) says Jesus, "being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God." I would propose that this rendering of the text is not conclusive. Another viable rendering is that of the ESV, which says, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped."

The image of robbery, or grasping, gives a picture not of ownership but of acquisition. Paul underscores the unity of "form" (*morphe*) shared by the Father and Son, but implies that there was a kind of equality (*isos*) that the Son chose *not* to reach out for (*harpazo*). This interpretation gains an important depth when we compare it to Lucifer's brazen aspiration in Isaiah 14:14, "I will be like the Most High."

As Paul points out, beyond this relinquishment of possible positional equality with the Father, the Son also endured the Incarnation, His other extreme humiliations, and His eventual sacrifice. It was because of the full range of His submissive obedience that He has been raised to a place of highest honor, second only to that of the Father (Philippians 2:9-11).

Perhaps a more accurate view of the sameness of the Father and Son can be found in Hebrews 1:3, where Christ is described as “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature.” This gives us an idea of their complete unity. When Jesus told Philip, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9), He was making a statement about the perfect accord of their natures and desires.

He went on to explain (14:10-11), “Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves.”

There is mystery here, but also revelation. Jesus’ unity with His father was a unity of will, of word, and of works. In fact, when the Pharisees directly accused Him of making Himself equal with God, Jesus’ response is emphatic: “I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me” (John 5:30).

This, I believe, displays the nature of divine hierarchy coexisting with divine unity. Those who might suggest that the hierarchical relationship only existed between the human Jesus and the Father have little support other than their presuppositions. Far more conclusive is Paul’s wonderful description of the culmination of cosmic history in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28.

Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For “He has put all things under His feet.” But when He says “all things are put under Him,” it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.

Human Hierarchies

I have spent time on the profound relationship within the Trinity to underscore an important truth, which is that relational ordering is not in itself evil or demeaning. A lot of what has happened in modern discourse is simply that such structures are rejected based on their abuses. One of the essential components of a hierarchy is that the relationship is characterized by authority and submission. Due to human fallenness, this can result in a monstrous display of selfishness and cruelty.

But it is not accidental that the potential for evil in this context is so extreme. We need to remember that counterfeits are by definition very close to that which is authentic. Behind the fallenness of broken hierarchy is the power of what God intended in this relationship. Quite simply, if selfishness is fully replaced by benevolence, then authority which has the capacity and desire to benefit the one under it reflects the very nature of God Himself.

As we know, there are a number of clearly defined hierarchies in the realm of human experience. These include parent/child, commanding officer/soldier, government/citizen and employer/employee. Less common today but fully understood in biblical times were the paradigms of king/subject and master/slave.

In each of these contexts, the one who holds the higher role is free to choose how he will engage those below him. Even in our fallenness, we sometimes come to realize that benefitting those under us also benefits ourselves. But out of the destructive perversity characteristic of the demonic mindset, we can be deluded into thinking it to be a “zero-sum game,” that is, that benefitting the one below me necessarily costs me in that same measure.

Thus when our culture—having abandoned a belief in the reality and ramifications of inborn human depravity—insists that the damages are inherent in the hierarchy itself, it must necessarily choose to level out the inequities of status. While this may “feel” wise and good, there is little evidence that such a strategy is either doable or effectual.

For example, decreeing equal empowerment to everyone quickly runs into the problem that not everyone has equal strength. And under this arrangement, the weak are *more* likely to be harmed than when it is understood and accepted that they need protection by those who are physically or positionally stronger.

And even among those who share similar strengths, it remains a necessary thing in close relationships for someone’s leadership to prevail. The idea that leadership can be passed back and forth might work “on paper,” but fails in any ongoing implementation. After a few competitive rounds, a leader will—explicitly or tacitly—be determined.

This brings us to the modern pragmatic approach, where leadership is decided by ability and/or motivation. He or she who is most competent and engaged in a certain arena is granted authority therein. This sort of “modified hierarchy” is rarely deemed to be disturbing, especially in marriage. I would contend, however, that it is within this very matrix that the seed of our sexual demise lies.

Masculinity and Femininity

So far we’ve argued that there is value to ordered hierarchies, which in their perfected state fully benefit both those in authority and those under authority. But there is another patterning in God’s design which overlays this one with added richness and beauty, and that is the relationship between masculinity and femininity.

In one sense it’s understandable that this dynamic is more veiled than simple hierarchies, for it will not reach its perfected state until our history ends and Christ is fully united with His bride. But we have many points of revelation that allow us insight into its nature. One interesting one in Scripture can be found in Proverbs 8, where wisdom is presented as being feminine.

Far from being helpless and inert, wisdom operates with power and grace as she influences those under her dominion. But in verse 22 we come to realize that she is the “possession” of her Lord. She acts on His behalf, not her own. We also are given a wonderful picture of their teamwork in verses

27-29. “When He established the heavens, I was there....when He marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside Him, like a master workman.”

Yet it is in the next few words that we find the most important hints of the wonderful interplay between masculinity and femininity. “And I was daily His delight, rejoicing before Him always, rejoicing in His inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.” Masculinity is delighted by femininity, and in large part this is due to her delight in what he has accomplished. This is key. The hierarchy must prevail, not only in authority but also in honor. His honor transcends hers. But as he is fully honored, she is fully blessed and satisfied.

It’s not accidental that this is the place where modern sensibilities are the most strained. Before addressing them, however, we should consider another arena of revelation regarding masculinity and femininity provided to us in the Scriptures, that of the relationship between Christ and His church as it presently exists.

In Jesus we see the primary qualities of perfected masculinity. He is a strong and confident leader. He provides protection and provision for those under His care. He is tireless in His commitment to the tasks He has been given by the One in authority over Him. He suffers without complaint. He seeks justice and righteousness in every context He engages. And of course He sacrifices Himself for the benefit of those He loves.

We as His church are called to perfected femininity. We are to joyfully follow our Leader, embracing His judgments over our own. We are to gratefully receive His protection and provision. We are to obey His instructions, yielding our preferences to His. And we are to become as beautiful and fruitful as possible, not for our own honor and glory, but for His.

Perhaps it is becoming evident that masculinity and femininity not only are mutually enhancing, but in large part are mutually dependent. Leadership needs followers, and followers depend on leadership. Protection and provision flow best when those in need deliberately accept that which is offered. And the honor earned by masculinity in these contexts cannot exist apart from its being acknowledged, verbally expressed, and experientially lived out by femininity.

Eden’s Reversal

The third primary way we can understand masculinity and femininity comes of course through our own experience of these as we relate to each other as men and women. No one denies the power of these interactions, nor their potential for delight and fulfillment. But as we know so well, our fallenness has brought to the mix great perplexities and problems. So let us turn our attention now to the familiar story which played out in that ancient Garden.

Our enemy was supremely cunning with his enticements. It had never occurred to Eve to be discontent with the plentiful provision she enjoyed. Adam had never had his leadership challenged. In addition, they were both oblivious to the astonishing privilege they had been given in their intimate communion with God.

But like the serpent himself, sin slithered into their choices, and creation fell groaning into the chaos in which we still live. And the divine pattern of masculinity and femininity was in some ways chief among the casualties.

Consider what changed. Humanity failed to honor God's position of authority, believing that their understanding of what would benefit them was superior to His. Eve became an initiator and Adam "heeded" the voice of his wife—which God specifically identified as the first sin (Genesis 3:17). In the resulting curses, Eve's daughters would desire to have dominion over their husbands, and Adam's sons would be compelled to rule rather than lead (3:16). Moreover, men would henceforth find their tasks as protectors and providers to be far more challenging, inclining them to shirk these responsibilities.

All of these new realities directly conspired against the proper relating of masculinity and femininity, prompting future generations to test various redefinitions in their effort to accommodate the brokenness. Two general trends emerged. One was harsh patriarchy, where men used force to impose their authority on women. The other was manipulative matriarchy, where women used their own means to wrest leadership from men.

This latter course is actually more common in modern times, in the sense that fallen men have become content to cede both leadership and responsibility to women. To understand why this is so, we should consider one more aspect of the Garden drama. When Eve and Adam decided to taste the forbidden fruit, they did so in response to their attractions and in direct contradiction to their assignments. Their hearts prevailed over their heads. Desire dominated truth.

For a long season of human history after Eden, truth was allowed to battle against desire, with varying degrees of success. In recent times, however, our enemy has persuaded us that truth has been disqualified from the game. No longer is there a right way to live that is externally established and which requires our recognition and conformity. In its place, our attractions and desires—as various and malleable as they are—have been given practically full rein.

The Marriage Muddle

Nowhere has this new set of rules been more evident—and more problematic—than in the context of marriage and family. The inversion of roles was almost inevitable from the beginning. Women, who by their nature as proper recipients of male protection desired security for themselves and their children, realized that protection was missing and quickly replaced it with their own survival methods. Men, who by their nature are proper recipients of female honor, realized when that honor was missing that they must seek it somewhere else.

The advent of feminism contributed another lie to the mix, which was that women's unhappiness was the result of their being deprived of the opportunities men enjoyed. Their incremental entry into those places where men were previously honored has had enormous social consequences.

For the women themselves, they were progressively torn from roles which—by God's design and through longstanding human history—have proven to be their finest and most satisfying places of worth. Nurturing and bringing comfort, joy and beauty to those around them comes relatively easily for a woman. Bearing the responsibilities and physical stresses of governing and protecting and challenging manual labor—while there are some women who can accomplish these—exact a strong toll from most women who are nonetheless being told by their society to pursue these things.

And as women enter those occupations wherein men previously competed and validated their masculinity, the men eventually leave. They intuitively understand that to compete with a woman is problematic: if they lose they lose, and if they win they lose. The real-life places left in our culture where men can test and confirm their strength and worth are fast disappearing, replaced by the vast and enticing smorgasbord of virtual and fantasy arenas.

With spiraling intensity, women now find themselves less secure and more called upon to deal with the practical matters of life, and men—who are seeing manhood disparaged at every turn—have in large part yielded those to them. Small wonder that boys who desire to become men have no idea what it is they seek.

These social patterns are of course replicated in the homes. Men who have been raised by strong mothers marry strong wives, with a minimal sense of their own responsibilities. Women become hardened and self-protective, controlling their families however they will. But before we try to assign the greater blame, we should realize that both men and women are victims of a distortion that is even larger than their own sin natures.

You see, the enemy who lured Eve into following her attractions and Adam into surrendering his leadership deliberately intended to remove from human experience the divine masculine/feminine paradigm. If men aren't masculine, we lose our sense of the masculine majesty of God. If women become independent and self-determining, we lose our concept of the feminine glories to which the church is called.

And to the degree that we make sacred our human desirings and eliminate external standards of truth and righteousness, we become vulnerable to our enemy's greatest deception, which is that we are properly our own gods, able to define our lives however we wish without consequence. Thus we arrive today with the explosion of sexual opinions and options, with few barriers left standing and none immune to collapse.

Is Restoration Possible?

Finding ourselves here, the question that must be asked is this: can the glory of masculinity and femininity be recovered? While the full implementation of God's design will only be possible when creation is made new, nevertheless I believe we should press toward it—as individuals and as a church community—to the extent that we are able. The changes that will be required, however, are not merely structural or behavioral, but entail a profound shift in our understanding of how God intended sexuality to operate.

One key insight that might guide us is the realization that both masculine and feminine inclinations are accessible to both men and women. One simple reason for this is that we as humans stand in the middle of a hierarchy. Women are in a real sense masculine in relationship to their young children. Men of course are called and destined, as members of Christ's church, to be feminine in relationship to Him. In other words, one view of masculinity and femininity sees them as simply components of relationship that determine the flow of leadership and responsibility.

However, there are other significant aspects of our human manhood and womanhood that reside in their outward expressions—for example, our physical appearance, our patterns of thinking, and the ways we engage our world. A healthy understanding of masculinity and femininity delights in these

differences, and our contemporary impulse to erase such differentiated expressions is strongly indicative of both our sexual brokenness and the underlying agenda of our enemy.

Thus we see another reason why our attractions should not be given precedence over our genetic gender assignments. Attractions are complex, impacted by such things as hormone balances, childhood experiences, cultural pressures, and of course the infiltration of our sin nature. While they are powerful in themselves, we nonetheless are able to make the determination of whether or not to let them dominate our choices.

We take a significant step away from such domination when we come to realize that our sexuality and the marriage it is intended to produce are not primarily for our personal benefit. Adam and Eve were given clear assignments from God to rule over creation and to multiply the human race. And as we've seen, their sexuality was also intended to provide a preview of the glorious relationship which will be fully revealed at the other end of human history.

As we examine some ways to push back the brokenness, at least in our own lives, we must be reminded that just as the Fall was spiritual in nature, so our restoration will require supernatural grace. While it's true that those unbelievers who choose to conform their lives to God's design will benefit from that choice, ultimately the deep neediness we experience will never be fully satisfied apart from God's provision.

Recovering Femininity

Because our enemy has distorted our vision of what God intended for our sexuality through a complex strategy of interwoven lies, recovering a clear picture is challenging. As I mentioned earlier, one misstep we need to avoid is the idea that the solution lies *simply* in changed behaviors or adjusted roles. Godly femininity is a heart attitude that can find expression in a variety of ways.

As a foundational statement, true femininity thrives when it is strongly connected to masculinity as its complement and completer. To the extent that masculinity is stunted or inhibited, femininity also becomes deficient. Thus women, and especially wives, need to make those choices which allow men to establish themselves as leaders and protectors. When those roles are usurped, both sexes are diminished.

In the context of the relationship between humans and Christ, we understand that we are feminine in relationship to perfect masculinity. But quite obviously that perfection is not found in human men, so to say women should defer to men's wisdom or choices without question is unrealistic. My understanding of the better pattern to follow in our fallen existence is for men to bear the weight of final choices in matters that impact the group in question (i.e. family, church, or community). Women, because they have complementary giftings and perceptions, then become counselors to the men.

Scripture gives us some instances of where this was done properly—and where it was not. We've already mentioned Adam who “heeded” the voice of Eve, accepting her counsel over against the clear instruction of God. Another instance is Abram in Genesis 16:2, who “heeded” Sarai's counsel to produce offspring through Hagar. We should note that in both situations the men disregarded God's authority, reversing as it were the proper hierarchy.

But compare the time when David listened to Abigail and did not kill the men in her family (1 Samuel 25:35). He clearly believed God Himself was speaking through this woman (verse 34), which was confirmed by God's subsequent judgment of Nabal.

The reason this arrangement becomes so challenging for women is because their innate need to find security for themselves and their children has strong emotional power. In addition, women have a sense of domestic and social order which often appears to be of much less concern to men. The instinctive response of most women is this: if the men won't pick up the load, somebody has to.

Along with this disparity of willingness, another strong assumption in our society is that tasks should be allotted to whomever is most competent. Surely, we argue, God has gifted women in many ways, and those giftings imply His sanctioning of their use. This is where the biblical truth that man's ways and God's ways often collide (Isaiah 55:8) comes to bear on a very tangible circumstance.

We see a number of instances in Scripture where aptitude is not a consideration for assignment. For example, no doubt there were many Levite men who would have been superb warriors, but God chose instead to give them what were often mundane ritual duties. We even read of a certain Levite in Numbers 16, a man named Korah, who aspired to use his strong leadership skills in a role not approved by God and brought on himself dramatic judgment.

It's evident that authentic femininity is a hard-wrought virtue, weighing against many of a woman's natural inclinations. For this reason Christianity alone provides her with the strength and wisdom she needs to attain it. Quite specifically, a woman must gain the measure of faith which enables her to rest in the knowledge that God is her ultimate source of provision and protection and comfort—with or without the cooperation of her earthly husband or the other authorities in her life.

In the same way, she also needs to learn to yield up the brokenness of her circumstances to God. This may appear—and feel—like a posture of passivity or resignation, but in fact it requires great faith and courage to walk through life letting go of her instinct to fix and control. Only as she authentically knows and relies on Christ is this walk possible. To be sure, He will give her points of input and activity along the way, but these are His to determine and are never to be the product of her own impatience or fear.

Recovering Masculinity

Not surprisingly, the recovery of masculinity for men is different from the challenges women face, but in the end it requires a similar measure of faith and knowledge of God. Only when a man fully grasps in his mind and heart the honor and glory that are his by virtue of being God's accepted son can he withstand the insidious flood of disparagement and rejection our enemy has intentionally poured in his direction.

It is not accidental that men are instinctively driven to prove their significance and sufficiency, for their call is to represent God in this world. It was hard enough when society had something of a grasp on this, but today the opposite view is in full sway. The dragons men now must battle come in all forms, sometimes including the attitudes of their own wives and children, but almost ubiquitously present in modern media, legislation, and cultural patterns.

As we mentioned earlier, the recourse for most modern men is to move the battlefield to an electronic screen, where he can defeat monsters and aliens with great displays of virtual courage, where his sports team can conquer gloriously on his behalf, and where the beautiful woman he hopes to win offers no resistance at all.

Given this environment, can manhood as God intended it ever be recovered? It will, in my estimation, require powerful, powerful miracles to free today's men from the habits and addictions they now acquire at very early ages. But a few thoughts may be of benefit.

Perhaps the most helpful reorientation of Christian thinking with regard to manhood will come through an understanding that glory is a man's appointed destiny. We are so prone to emphasize a man's call to what is termed "servant leadership," all the while chiding him for shirking the responsibilities that are his. (As a simple example, compare the accolades women receive on Mother's Day to the instructive tones of most Father's Day sermons.)

While it is true that husbands are to consider the wellbeing of their family above their own comfort or convenience, they are actually serving God as the One who best understands what that wellbeing entails. This then stands opposed to the unconscious but common pattern where a man focuses on keeping his family happy—and thereby inverts the hierarchy.

Consider the story in John 13 where Christ washed the feet of His disciples. It is true that He took on the role of a servant, humbling Himself to meet a basic need of His followers. However, we should notice that these men never asked Jesus to serve them—Peter in fact was quite resistant. As their leader, Christ understood that they needed to see humility modeled. But it was His decision, His initiative, based on instructions from His Father.

Against this posture of humility to which men are called there is a balancing position of honor. Men need to discover the authentic glory of manhood. It is not to be found in complacent compliance, or in selfish domination, or even in success through competitive achievements. Real value is based not on performance of any sort, but on recognizing and embracing one's position in the divine order. Very often human pride is the "flip side" of insecurity, a lost sense of value. When this is the case, the antidote to pride is not humiliation but revelation.

For this reason, men must exert themselves in a deliberate endeavor to regain their true connectedness to Christ, their head, from whom the powers and glories of masculinity flow (1 Corinthians 11:3). This process will require what may be one of the most drastic upheavals of all time, and will take a determination and resilience that will strain the strongest men among us. So much of our enemy's strategy is so deeply imbedded in our cultural assumptions that even recognizing the problem is a major challenge.

As an example of this inversion, consider the nature of work and play. Historically, men engaged in recreational activities as an occasional time of refreshment so they might be better able to carry out their "real life" work. For many men today, entertainment is their "real life," and work is seen as necessary in large part because it provides the means for their play.

Another significant obstacle to the reestablishment of manhood is our modern concept of women's rights and roles. It is likely that these ideas will continue to prevail in our culture, making the possibility of a widespread shift toward a healthy masculine presence quite remote. But on the

individual level, and in pockets of society where Christ's presence and power is felt, it isn't impossible.

And with all my heart I hope to see this happen. Along with a groaning creation, I wait "with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (Romans 8:19). Not only is my redeemed femininity significantly dependent on the presence of redeemed masculinity, not only are the families of this world reeling under the brokenness of its absence, but most of all the majesty of God Himself has been violated, as men who look and act and think like women—and women who look and act and think like men—diminish and defile the beauty and glory they were originally created to represent.

Recovering Marriage

While many of our enemy's tactics are subtle and elusive, his frontal attack on marriage and the family is obvious to anyone who considers it. The components of his assault are everywhere. Promiscuity, pornography, cohabitation, free-wheeling divorce, spousal abuse, and the incessant glamorization of sexual independence have created a massive force against which especially the younger generation has little or no defense.

Even in "intact" families the challenges are legion. The inversion of the hierarchy we've been discussing, modern philosophies of child-rearing and education that can produce difficult and dysfunctional children, frequent mobility that makes community a rare thing, and now the pervasive infusion of electronic distractions have all but eliminated healthy family functioning and togetherness.

It should be apparent that the starting place for marital recovery is the reconnection of the head of the family to his own head, Christ. While the wife can also bring health to the marriage through her devotion to Christ and honoring of her husband, 1 Peter 3:1 indicates that a husband who has chosen to disobey God only "may be won" by her conduct. There is no guarantee.

But as we've seen throughout this discussion, the problem may lie to some extent in our misplaced understanding of what God intended marriage to accomplish. Most marriage books and seminars explicitly focus on the question of how God might heal the marriage. We look to Christ as a model for husbanding, which He is. Women find other models in Scripture to guide them, which is also appropriate. However, what would it mean to shift the center of our conversation away from how God benefits us, and consider how our marriages benefit Him?

As indicated earlier, a man's primary goal should be to obey and respect and please his own "head," Christ, and in this way he will demonstrate not only to his wife but to the world around him what proper submission and honor look like. And to the extent that his relationship with Christ is strengthened and perfected, that healing will flow down into the marriage and family as well.

At the same time, men will have to make some very hard choices. Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians 13:10 about "putting away" the trappings of childhood. That verb, *katargeo*, is strong and decisive, translated elsewhere as "abolish" or "destroy." Few modern men have even known another man who has accomplished what Paul describes. But perhaps our times are now calling for that rare courage and commitment to reappear.

If the destiny of creation is that “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14), then I believe a key aspect of that glory will be found in the perfected relationship of masculinity and femininity in human families and communities. Although prophecies such as these are descriptive of a future season in history, for us to set this vision as our guiding standard is vital, and perpetually lowering the bar is a concession the church must intentionally reject.

Regarding Singles

Along that line I want to bring up one other trend in contemporary church teaching which I believe subtly diminishes the value of marriage, and that is our assessment of the single lifestyle. I am very aware that singlehood is not simply a problem generated by selfishness or irresponsibility, but rather is the direct fallout of the anti-marriage environment that feminism and other social forces have created. Nevertheless, I am not comfortable with the frequent message I hear from church leaders which has begun to affirm singlehood as an option for God’s people that has a validity equal to marriage.

I would note first that this perspective is largely promoted by those who are themselves married. I believe very few of them would consider that their ministry would be as effective if they were unmarried. While I entirely support the admirable compassion for singles and the desire to affirm their worth as children of God (which of course is no less than that of those who are married), the general suggestion that church community is a fully sufficient substitute for a family is, in my estimation, lacking.

Yes, by all means, Christian community is vital, especially for those who—for reasons often well beyond their control—are not married. But to assert that singleness *by God’s design* has the same status and sufficiency as marriage is another matter. Consider what Scripture teaches. In Matthew 19:4-5, Jesus is very clear. “Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘*For this reason* a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’?” We are male and female precisely because we are to marry.

Most people point to Paul as the primary proponent of the single lifestyle. It is true that he considered singleness to be wise in view of the “present distress” (1 Corinthians 7:26). He also understood that God had given him special grace for the challenges of his calling. But even though at one point he wished “all men were even as myself” regarding an ability to control their passions (7:7), we certainly can’t construe that to mean he is against marriage itself.

On the contrary, he later noted that he and Barnabas had chosen not to take along believing wives, even though it would have been their right, but instead were willing to “endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:12). He understood that the loneliness of celibacy was something to be endured, rather than something equivalent (let alone superior) to marriage.

Our culture, inspired and cheered on by our enemy, has worked very hard—and with tragic success—to put young people on a track away from godly marriage. However, God has placed those desires deep in their hearts—not just sexual longings, but an instinctive sense that they were made for strong masculinity and femininity, for raising children, and for a personal, committed relationship that would foreshadow their future relationship with Christ Himself.

So while we must have great compassion and grace for those who struggle to marry—and for those who struggle to stay married—in our sexually poisoned culture, the solution is not to redefine what they have been made for, but rather to encourage them to seek the supernatural healing and restoration Christ offers to them and to us all.

The Miracle of Christian Redemption

While I am obviously strongly advocating marriage, once again I need to make something very clear. I am not saying that people are to simply disregard their attractions, marry just for the sake of marrying, stay in bad marriages, or even take on certain roles in marriage, *as though those things in themselves will provide solutions*. What I am trying to do is to encourage us to recognize that patterns of sexual brokenness are strong indications—echoes, if you will—of the fall of humanity from God’s design for men and women that He intended to be the expression of perfected masculinity and femininity.

In other words, our attention needs to be directed first to the redemptive solution that is present *only* in our fully restored relationship with Christ. To be honest, few Christians have a clear awareness of what Christian redemption actually entails. We freely and casually use biblical words while all too often emptying them of their radical and supernatural meaning. In this section I’m going to focus on one central Christian concept: the nature of love.

As we know, love is a word with a vast array of meanings and applications. I have found it useful, however, to divide it into two basic expressions. Consider these words of Jesus. “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31).

I believe it is arguable that if we are to love God with ALL of our faculties, then the love which we have for ourselves and for our neighbor is likely to be a different sort of love. Carry that thought to another famous “love” section of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 13, where love is described as being patient, kind, not self-seeking, and able to bear and endure all things.

What we have, as I see it, is love which flows out of two very different sources and which produces two very different (although equally valid) results. One of these loves I will call responsive or “because-of” love. This love is generated by the attractiveness and desirability of its object. When we reach the point where God is the recipient of *all* our responsive love, it is because we have discovered Him to be the most attractive and desirable Being in the universe.

The other love can be called initiating or “in-spite-of” love. Essentially this is the love described in 1 Corinthians 13. Notice that there is no mention of the nature of the object of that love (other than a hint that this person has undesirable characteristics that must be endured). This love has its source strictly in the heart of the one who is doing the loving, and it intends to produce benefits in the one who is being loved.

When this grid is applied to Christ’s two commandments, we can see that the self-and-neighbor love is of the second sort. We love ourselves—and are called to love our neighbor—by desiring the good

of the object of that love regardless of whether it is deserved. By contrast, we love God both because of the beauty and strength of who He is and also because of the vast benefits He brings to us.

Marriage Redeemed

While it's easy to see that we fall short of living out both of these loves perfectly, nonetheless Christ has placed before us a picture of what is intended in the hierarchical flow of relationships. In a certain way, initiating love reveals itself as masculine, divesting itself for the benefit of the feminine. Feminine love is then responsive, receiving with gratitude the masculine love, flourishing in its benefits, and returning honor to the one who has blessed her.

It is important to realize that apart from God's empowerment, we as humans are only capable of "because-of" love. We are drawn to and honor those persons (or objects or ideas) that offer something of value to us. While some of our actions might appear to have "in-spite-of" qualities, the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 13 indicate that actions which are not the product of God's supernatural love have no ultimate benefit.

However, once the love of God enters a marriage relationship, there exists a radical new capacity for masculinity and femininity to be expressed. A man who is not desperate for affirmation from his wife—because he is secure in his worth to God—will have more grace to care for her regardless of her response to him. A woman who understands that God is her true provider and protector will have much more patience with her husband's deficiencies in those areas.

Considering this from another angle, both husbands and wives can potentially see in their spouse a mix of godliness and fallenness. To the godly qualities we are able to respond with "because-of" love, for that is in fact a part of how we show our love to God. Where there is fallenness, the power of God's "in-spite-of" love enables us to patiently endure and to give without thought of return—and this becomes part of the way God is expressing His love to our spouse.

What results is the reality that when God's supernatural love is present, any marriage can endure. Moreover, while marriages usually begin with a mix of attraction and idealism and hope, they can be sustained when none of these remain. And to the extent the redemptive power of Christ becomes the "life blood" of a marriage—or of any relationship—the world will be given a picture of what God intended His creation to display.

The Lost Glory

We don't know much about the season when Adam and Eve walked with God, enjoying with complete satisfaction both His companionship and the beauties and delights of the Garden He had given them. For this reason it is hard for us to adequately envision the glory that was lost in the fall. But there is a sense in which our world only fell "half-way." In other words, we have been left with extensive hints of both heaven and hell, wisely provided so we would have some ability to comprehend both

What I have come to appreciate deeply is the great intentionality of God in His design of our history. Far from being the product of random chance, or even the consequence of a creation left to devise its own destiny, I am persuaded that every component of existence is working together for the manifestation of a glory that was only begun in Eden.

We have such a propensity to view all questions and all proposed answers from the standpoint of their impact on ourselves, and for this reason we miss the key to unlocking the great mysteries of life. That key is simply the choice to center our thinking not on ourselves, but on the God who in fact is the center. When we ask how a thing or event might benefit Him, great vistas of insight and understanding become available to us.

Supreme in this process is the revelation of God's nature as love. What we often fail to recognize is that love is most fully manifested in some context of need or against the backdrop of its absence. Adam and Eve no doubt loved God for His beauty and generosity and wisdom, but because they lacked "the knowledge of good and evil," their love was limited and incomplete.

We understandably strain to comprehend the reason for God's permitting sin to plunge creation into semi-darkness, yet what we have gained is the ability to experience His love in much greater measure. Because we grieve, we can know Him as comforter. Out of our lacking we can discover His protection and provision. In our loneliness we can find Him to be the unfailing friend. And it is only as we grasp our poverty of spirit that we come to know Him as God and thereby enter the kingdom of heaven.

But beyond what we ourselves have learned, there is a sense in which God is using human history to demonstrate His nature to others beyond us—those heavenly hosts who populate eternity. By creating beings who are more like Him than any other, by allowing them to exercise some sort of freedom in the Garden, by leaving them to discover across the millennia the potential of their creative abilities for good or for ill, and by patiently enduring their continually rebellious hearts—in all these things, God has chosen to stage a supreme drama in which He is the ultimate hero.

And so this is love: "the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:5-6). No more intensive or complete display of love has ever been—or ever could be—devised. On the contrary, our minds and hearts still only feebly grasp what happened in those unspeakable hours upon which the entirety of history has pivoted. But to the extent we are given eyes to see and ears to hear, God's love made tangible becomes the strongest force in our lives, gloriously overpowering our lesser attractions and desires.

Which brings us back to our manhood and womanhood, and what they mean—not to us, but to Him. We now, as individuals, must choose. Will we embrace with grace and humility and patience and joy our sexual assignments, no matter the cost? Or will we instead be swept along with the torrent of cultural chaos which is even now setting the stage for Christ's final glorious return?

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