

EDITORIAL

The rapid erosion in recent years of the biblical understanding of marriage and gender identity in the West has been alarming. Believers are starkly confronted with the realization that living out God’s plan for marriage in today’s world is increasingly countercultural. Western civilization is in a steep moral decline. Parallels with ancient Roman culture, and Paul’s words in his letter to the Romans, are palpable.

“So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome,” the apostle writes. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes . . .” (Rom 1:16). As the apostle proceeds to point out, his proclamation of the gospel takes place against the dark backdrop of a rapidly degenerating culture: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (v. 18).

“Ignorance is no excuse,” the saying goes. But in this case, people aren’t ignorant of the Creator and his divine design: “For what can be known about God is plain to them . . . his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made” (vv. 19–20). While knowing God, people don’t honor him as such: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools” (v. 22).

According to Paul’s cultural analysis, all moral decay is rooted in creatures’ rebellion against their Creator. This rebellion, in turn, takes place despite the manifest revelation of God and his creative purposes. “His *invisible* attributes have been *clearly perceived* . . . *in the things that have been made.*” This renders humans who reject God’s revelation not only without excuse at the final judgment; it also causes them to be futile in their thinking and foolish in their choices and actions in the here and now.

Paul goes on to elaborate on the way in which God’s rebellious creatures “did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” but are “dishonoring their bodies” by indulging in “dishonorable passions.” His indictment of rebellious humanity, triggered by his reflection on first-century Greco-Roman society, issues in the threefold refrain, “God gave them up . . . God gave them up . . . God gave them up . . .”

“Therefore *God gave them up* in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen” (vv. 24–25).

And again: “For this reason *God gave them up* to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and

the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error” (vv. 26–27).

And again: “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, *God gave them up* to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ... Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them” (vv. 28, 32).

God’s fallen creatures pride themselves in their free choices and inalienable rights, asserting that they’re accountable to no one but themselves. But they are tragically mistaken. To the contrary, they are God’s creatures, accountable to him, and will be judged based on how they respond to the divine revelation they’ve received. Rather than furnishing triumphant proof of their freedom, people’s indulgence in sexual expression contrary to God’s design constitutes sobering testimony to what happens when God lets his rebellious creatures go their own way.

Not only do they “deserve to die” (i.e. are liable to eschatological judgment), they are “receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.” What is more, not content with rebelling against their Creator, these creatures are bent on goading others to join them in their rebellion. These ringleaders will not rest until they have swayed a sizeable portion of humanity to rise up against God’s design and replace it with their defiant shake-your-fist-in-God’s-face counterculture.

Paul, therefore, diagnoses his society as one that is in decline. He attests to the moral decay that is symptomatic of the world’s sinful rejection of God, a rejection that constitutes a futile effort to suppress God’s truth. He sees people living in moral darkness. Their thoughts are futile, their consciences seared, and they rationalize their sin. But God—the one and only God—is both Creator and Judge. Human freedom, abused as license to sin, has issued in bondage. Nevertheless, sinful humanity remains accountable to its Creator.

In our day, people have largely substituted self and the social construction of gender identity for the worship of God and the embrace of his divine design. They’ve rejected an external fixed standard and have chosen a subjective psychological frame of reference instead. Many refuse to bend their knees and submit to their Creator. A twisted notion of diversity reigns supreme and offers a smorgasbord of social and sexual options. A new pseudo-tolerance is increasingly aggressive, not only urging adherence to its relativistic morality but also pressing on to expose and prosecute vestiges of morality based on the notion of moral absolutes. In fact, as Albert Mohler has recently noted, the novel notion of “erotic liberty” is increasingly vying to push back full-orbed religious liberty.

But who we are as men and women is not ours to decide or negotiate. In this issue of the *Journal*, Russell Moore and Denny Burk bear eloquent witness to the beauty of marriage and the flawed justification of deviant sexual practice. In their prescient wisdom, the ETS executive committee decided on “Marriage” as the primary theme for the 2015 annual meeting. And prior to that meeting, the U.S. Supreme Court will have issued its verdict on same-sex marriage much like its Canadian counterpart did a decade ago. But ultimately the definition of marriage is not the Supreme Court’s to decide. It has already been determined by the Creator, and

the Court's decision is merely whether to issue a ruling in keeping with or contrary to his divine design.

For biblical Christians, the challenge remains to live out God's design for man and woman as a witness to his beauty, goodness, wisdom, and truth. Let's be realistic; we won't be able to save our culture. Jesus didn't pray for the world; he prayed for his followers *in* the world, desiring that they shine as beacons of love, unity, and truth. Christian marriage is deeply countercultural because at the root it is grounded in love for God and his created order rather than being based on false gospels like liberalism, humanism, and pluralism.

The notion is false that humans are free to reject their Creator with impunity and without fear of negative consequences. The tenet is false that human reasoning reigns supreme and relationships are a mere matter of social negotiation. The contention is false that diversity, or some other ideal concocted by "enlightened" humanity, is the highest self-evident virtue. In fact, all immorality is grounded in idolatry, the exchange of "the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man" (v. 23).

As the late Harold O. J. Brown (following the Russian-American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin) trenchantly observed, we live in a sensate culture that has largely left behind its ideational, spiritual moorings. Nothing short of a major revival will be able to return Western culture to its Christian, biblical foundation, yet many signs point to the West's exacerbating moral decline as, in the words of former Supreme Court justice candidate Robert Bork, society continues "slouching toward Gomorrah."

But for Christians, all is not gloom and doom. Far from it; those who love God and embrace his creation design can look forward to a bright and hopeful day. Truly, as the apostle Paul points out in one of his other letters, "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15:19). As Paul goes on to develop, however, we cherish the hope of a glorious bodily resurrection and of a day when all of creation will be subjected to the Son, and by the Son to the Father, "that God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

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