

MAN, WOMAN, AND THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST: AN EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVE

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I am thankful to Pope Francis, Cardinal Müller, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for the opportunity to address you today. Poet Wendell Berry responded to the technological utopianism of naturalistic scientism with an observation that I believe frames the entire discussion of what it means to affirm the complementarity of man and woman in marriage. His observation was that any civilization must decide whether it will see persons as machines or as persons. If we are creatures, he argued, then we have meaning and purpose and dignity, but with all of that we have limits. If we see ourselves as machines, then we will believe the Faustian myth of our own limitless power and our ability to reshape even what it means to be human.

This is, it seems to me, the question at the heart of the controversies every culture faces about the meaning of marriage and of sexuality. Are we created, as both the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus of Nazareth put it, “male and female” from the beginning, or are these categories arbitrary and self-willed? Do our bodies, and our sexes, and our generational connectedness represent something of who were are designed to be, and thus place both limits on our ability to recreate ourselves and responsibilities for those who will come after us?

Those of us at this gathering have many differences. We come from different countries, sometimes with tensions between those countries. We hold to different religions, sometimes with great divergences there on what we believe about God and about the meaning of life. But all of us in this room share at least one thing in common. We did not spring into existence out of nothing, but each one of us can trace his or her origins back to a man and a woman, a mother and a father. We recognize that marriage and family is a matter of public importance, not just of our various theologically and ecclesially distinctive communities, since marriage is embedded in the creation order and is a means of human flourishing, not just the arena of individual human desires and appetites. We recognize that marriage, and the sexual difference on which it is built, is grounded in a natural order bearing rights and responsibilities that was not crafted by any human state, and cannot thus be redefined by any human state. It is no accident that questions of marriage and of family bring such heated debate since our consciences, and our very being, testify that these matters are of critical importance for how we shall live.

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As an evangelical Christian, I come to this discussion with motivations about the common good and human flourishing, but beyond these merely natural goods to an even deeper concern for what I believe to be the purpose of the entire cosmos: the gospel of Jesus Christ. All of us must stand together on conserving the truth of marriage as a complementary union of man and woman. But I would add that with that there is a distinctively Christian urgency for why the Christian churches must bear witness to these things.

The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus that the alpha and omega of the universe is personal, that the pattern and goal of the universe is summed up in what he called “the mystery of Christ” (Eph 1:10). One key aspect of this unveiled mystery is that the family structure is not an arbitrary expression of nature or of the will of God. Marriage and family are instead archetypes, icons of God’s purpose for the universe. When the apostle appealed to the Genesis 2 account that the creation order explains why a man leaves father and mother, to cleave to his wife, that they become one flesh, he wrote of something that every human being can see, even without divine revelation. After all, human cultures have died out for a variety of reasons, but no human culture has died out because the people therein forgot to have sexual intercourse. The drive toward marital unity is powerful, so powerful that it can feel as wild as fire. In Paul’s Christian theology, this universal truth is because the one-flesh union points beyond itself to the union of Christ and his church.

In our perspective, the mystery of the gospel explains to us why it was “not good” for the man to be alone, and why Adam wasn’t designed to subdivide like an amoeba. He needed someone like him—none of the beasts of the field were “fit” for him. And yet he needed someone different from him. Fitted together, they form an organic union, as a head with a body. Humanity, then, in the image of God is created both male and female, male and female identities that correspond to one another and fulfill one another. We are not created as “spouse A” and “spouse B,” but as man and as woman, and in marriage as husband and as wife, in parenting as mother and as father. Masculinity and femininity are not aspects of the fallen order to be overcome, but are instead part of what God declared from the beginning to be “very good” (Gen 1:31).

A man is created to be other-directed, to pour himself out for his family. Headship in God’s design is not Pharaoh-like tyranny but Christlike sacrifice. Jesus said of his church, in its original twelve foundation stones, that he did not call them servants but friends (John 15:15). The relationship between a husband and a wife is not that of a business model or a corporate organizational chart but is instead an organic unity. The more a husband and a wife are sanctified together in the Word, the more they—like a nervous system and a body—move and operate together smoothly, effortlessly, holistically. They are one-flesh, cooperation through complementarity. And in their lives together, as in the life of Christ and his church, this love is life-giving including, when God wills, issuing in a new generation.

The current debates over marriage, over whether children need mothers and fathers, over whether sexual expression should be bound by the covenantal reality of the male-female one-flesh union, assume a very different reading of the universe,

one that assumes an entirely different understanding of human ecology. Western culture now celebrates casual sexuality, cohabitation, no-fault divorce, family re-definition, and abortion rights as parts of a sexual revolution that can tear down old patriarchal systems. But the Sexual Revolution is not liberation at all, but simply the imposition of a different sort of patriarchy. The Sexual Revolution empowers men to pursue a Darwinian fantasy of the predatory alpha-male, rooted in the values of power, prestige, and personal pleasure. Does anyone really believe these things will empower women or children? We see the wreckage of sexuality as self-expression all around us, and we will see more yet. And the stakes are not merely social or cultural but profoundly spiritual.

Every culture has recognized that there is something about sexuality that is more than merely the firing of nerve endings, but there is something mysterious here, the joining of selves. In the evangelical Christian perspective, this is because there is no such thing as a casual sexual encounter at all, when we are speaking in spiritual terms. The apostle Paul warned that the sexually immoral person sins not just against another but “against his own body” (1 Cor 6:18). He compared the spiritual union formed between Christ and the believer with the union brought about in the sexual act. Even one who is “joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her,” he wrote, citing Genesis. The sexual act, mysteriously, forms a real and personal union. Immorality is not merely “naughtiness,” but it a sermon, a sermon preaching a different gospel. This is why attempts to “free” sexuality from marriage as the union of a man and a woman do not lead, ultimately, to the sort of liberation they promise. And therein is our challenge, and our opportunity, for the future.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus encountered a Samaritan woman by Jacob’s Well. The account immediately follows his encounter with a religious leader named Nicodemus. The contrasts could not be more striking. Nicodemus was a son of Israel, while the woman was of despised Samaria. Nicodemus was a moral exemplar, or else he wouldn’t have held the teaching office. The woman was a moral wreck of indiscretions. Nicodemus came at night. She came at noonday. Jesus encountered both with the gospel, a gospel that is filled, as John put it, with both “truth and grace” (John 1:18). This woman wanted to speak of many issues, from biblical arguments about Jacob to theological arguments about temple worship, but Jesus said to her, remarkably, “Go get your husband and come here” (John 4:16). Both parts of that sentence are necessary. Some would suggest that Jesus should not address the question of her marital status, of her sexual immorality. He should, they would say, reach her “where she is.” But Jesus recognized that this indeed was “where she is.” Without addressing the issue of sin, he could not address the invitation to mercy. The gospel, he told us, comes to sinners only, not to the righteous.

Many would tell us that contemporary people will not hear us if we contradict the assumptions of the sexual revolution. We ought to conceal, or at least avoid, the conversation of what we believe about the definition of marriage, about the limits of human sexuality, about the created and good nature of gender, and speak instead in more generic spiritual terms. We have heard this before, and indeed we hear it in every generation. Our ancestors were told that modern people could not accept the miraculous claims of the ancient church creeds, and that if we were to

reach them “where they are,” we should emphasize the ethical content of the Scriptures—the “Golden Rule”—and deemphasize the scandal of such things as virgin births and empty tombs and second comings. The churches that followed this path are now deader than Henry VIII. It turns out that people who don’t want Christianity don’t want almost-Christianity. More importantly, those churches that altered their message adopted what Presbyterian theologian J. Gresham Machen rightly identified as a different religion. The stakes are just as high now. To jettison or to minimize a Christian sexual ethic is to abandon the message Jesus handed to us, and we have no authority to do this. Moreover, to do so is to abandon our love for our neighbors. We cannot offer the world the half-gospel of a surgical-strike targeted universalism, which exempts from God’s judgment those sins we fear are too fashionable to address.

The union of truth and grace is the same biblical tension from which a thousand heresies have sprung. The gospel tells us that God is both “just and the justifier of the One who has faith in Jesus” (Rom 3:26). The gospel tells us that left to ourselves all of us are cut off from the life of God, that we all fall short of the glory of God. The gospel tells us that our only hope is to be joined to another, to be hidden in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, crucified for sinners and raised by the power of God, received through faith. There are always “almost gospels” that seek to circumvent either God’s justice or God’s mercy.

On the one side, there’s the airy antinomianism of those who would seek good news apart from the law and righteousness of God. But such a gospel, severed from the justice of God, is not gospel at all. Indeed, this view suggests that we can approach God without repentance, that we can approach Jesus as vehicle to heaven but not as Lord, that we can continue in sin that grace may abound (Rom 6:1). The biblical response couldn’t be much stronger: “God forbid!” On the other side, there is the equally perilous temptation to emphasize the righteousness of God without the invitation to mercy. The Christian gospel tells us that there is life offered to any repentant sinner, and with that life there is a household of belonging, with brothers and sisters, and a place at the table of a joyous wedding feast. That’s why Jesus said to the woman both “Go get your husband” *and* “come here.” So must we.

Jesus intentionally went to Samaria. His disciples James and John wanted, elsewhere in the Gospel of John, to vaporize the villages there with fire from heaven. But Jesus spoke of water, of living water that could quench thirst forever. Thirst is a type of desperation, the sort of language the Psalmist uses for the longing for God, as for water on a desert land. We live in a culture obsessed with sex, sex abstracted from covenant, from fidelity, from transcendent moral norms, but beyond this obsession there seems to be a cry for something more. In the search for sexual excitement, men and women are not really looking for biochemical sensations or the responses of nerve endings. They are searching desperately not just for mere sex, but for that to which sex points—something they know exists but they just cannot identify. They are thirsting. As novelist Frederick Buechner put it, “Lust is the craving for salt of someone who is dying of thirst.” The Sexual Revolution cannot keep its promises. People are looking for a cosmic mystery, for a love that is

stronger than death. They cannot articulate it, and perhaps would be horrified to know it, but they are looking for God. The Sexual Revolution leads to the burned-over boredom of sex shorn of mystery, of relationship shorn of covenant. The question for us, as we pass through the Samaria of Sexual Revolution, is whether we have water for Samaria, or if we only have fire. In the wake of the disappointment sexual libertarianism brings, there must be a new word about more permanent things, such as the joy of marriage as a permanent, conjugal, one-flesh reality between a man and woman. We must keep lit the way to the old paths.

This means that we must both articulate and embody a vision for marriage. We cannot capitulate on these issues because we can't. To dispense with marriage is to dispense with a mystery that points to the gospel itself. But we must also create cultures where manhood is defined, not by cultural stereotypes, but by an other-directed, self-sacrificial leadership on behalf of one's family and one's community. We must create cultures where women are valued not for their sexual availability and attractiveness to men but for the sort of fidelity and courage that the Apostle Peter wrote of as that of a "daughter of Sarah" (1 Pet 3:6). We must work for the common good, in contrast with the sexually libertarian carnivals around us, to speak of the meaning of men and women, of mothers and fathers, of sex and life. We must stand against the will-to-power that reduces children to commodities to be manufactured and as nuisances to be destroyed. And, as we do so, we should speak publically of what's at stake. Our neighbors of no religion and of different religions do not recognize a call to gospel mystery. Marriage is a common grace, and we should speak, on their own terms, of why jettisoning normative marriage and family is harmful. But, as a Christian, I am compelled to speak also of the conviction of the church that what is disrupted when we move beyond the creation design of marriage and family is not just human flourishing but also the picture of the very mystery that defines the existence of the people of God—the gospel of Jesus Christ. With this conviction, we stand and speak not with clenched fists or with wringing hands, but with the open hearts of those who have a message and a mission. And, as we do so, we will remind the world that we are not mere machines of flesh, but rather, we are creatures, accountable to nature and to nature's God. We must do so with the confidence of those who know that on the other side of our culture wars, there's a sexual counter-revolution waiting to be born—again.