

## EDITORIAL

Last November's annual meeting of the ETS had a somewhat unusual topic, "Marriage and the Family." I say "unusual," because some would argue that marriage and family are primarily practical rather than academic topics. While some of the presentations at the conference were indeed more application-oriented in nature, even a quick perusal of the program will disabuse detractors of the notion that marriage and the family are unworthy of serious scholarly attention. The importance of exploring this topic academically and otherwise lies not only in the fact that marriage and the family are worthy of sustained theological reflection, but more importantly in the fact that human relationships are integrally related to the gospel and deeply affected by it. As I will seek to demonstrate further below, marriage and family are no mere second-order issues.

In recent years, North American evangelicalism has been paying increasing amounts of attention to the gospel and in particular to the centrality of the gospel. This, of course, is a good thing, and much needed. Organizations such as The Gospel Coalition and Together for the Gospel have risen to promote unity centered on the essentials of the gospel, living out the adage, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." By bringing serious-minded, mission-conscious individuals and churches together from various denominations that affirm the good news of forgiveness and salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ—as articulated, for example, by the apostle Paul in 1 Cor 15:3–4—we can make sure that when it comes to the mission of the church, the main thing remains the main thing. That "main thing," of course, is the gospel.

With regard to this gospel, it is my conviction that marriage and the family are at the same time *less* and *more* important than is often supposed. On the one hand, people sometimes overvalue marriage and family, in that an undue preoccupation with them can detract from the primacy of Jesus's call to discipleship. While thriving marriages and families are a vital part of human flourishing, they prove to be elusive when pursued as ends in and of themselves. Jesus taught that following him has ultimate priority, so when his call to discipleship comes into conflict with family relationships, they must be set aside, a radical point Jesus made repeatedly throughout his ministry. As he noted, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Discipleship means subordinating everything in our lives—including our marriages and families—to the one who is to be preeminent in all things (Col 1:18). In this regard, marriage and family are *less* important than some might think.

On the other hand, marital and familial ties are *more* important than might sometimes be realized. While the gospel is indeed at the center of the Christian faith, it is part of the larger fabric of life. The complex web of relationships sustained between the gospel and its various implications calls for wisdom and dis-

cernment. How can we make sure our lives are pervaded by the gospel—soaked in it—and live life to the fullest (John 10:10) rather than drawing our focus so narrowly that we get the core right but lose sight of the gospel’s rich and multi-faceted associations? In this regard, I would contend that marriage and the family, as well as singleness, are *more* important than is sometimes supposed. The reason for this, as Scripture tells us, is that God’s creation of man and woman for the purpose of bringing them together in lifelong union is at the heart of God’s mission for humanity: to be fruitful and multiply, and to fill the earth and subdue it as God’s vicegerents and image bearers (Gen 1:26–28). This mission, it should be noted, has never been rescinded. The Great Commission, given by Jesus after the resurrection, does not replace it but rather builds on it and includes it.

God’s original purpose for humanity sets the stage for the rest of Scripture. As my wife and I chronicle at some length in our book *God’s Design for Man and Woman*, in the OT historical books we see how the joint patterns of male leadership and male-female partnership are intricately interwoven in God’s plan. In the wisdom books, we learn that it is part of wisdom for people to live according to God’s design for man and woman and to enjoy life with the husband or wife God has given them. In the prophetic books, we see how marriage is used as a metaphor for God’s relationship with Israel and lifelong, faithful marriage continues to be upheld as the norm. Moving to the NT, Jesus, while prizing allegiance to him over all other relationships, validates the original parameters of marriage set forth by God (Matt 5:27–32; 19:3–9). Similarly, Paul, while emphasizing the validity of singleness for the Lord’s sake in 1 Corinthians 7, also encourages properly ordered and spiritually oriented relationships of marriage and family in the Lord’s service (Eph 5:22–6:4; Col 3:18–21; 1 Tim 3:2, 4–5, 12; 5:4, 8, 14; Titus 1:6).

What, then, is the relationship between God’s original mandate for humanity in Genesis and Jesus’s Great Commission for the church in the Gospels? Discussions on the relationship between the so-called “cultural mandate” and the Great Commission have often focused on the question of Christian involvement in the culture. What has comparatively received less attention is the relationship between God’s plan for man and woman as encapsulated in the creation mandate and the Great Commission. How, then, does being fruitful and filling and subduing the earth relate to making disciples of all the nations? As mentioned, the Great Commission does not abrogate God’s original purpose for creation but rather *includes* it and *extends* it.

The Great Commission *includes* the creation mandate in that it makes it possible for man and woman once again to fulfill the creation mandate by functioning as God’s worshipers and vicegerents. Sin, while not eradicating the image of God in humans or the Creator-creature relationship, did and does render humankind unable to function fully in the way God originally intended, save for God’s subsequent redemptive intervention. The *imago Dei*, in which the creation mandate is grounded, has been seriously marred. Without God’s redemptive intervention, men and women can of course still marry and have families, but their ability and desire to fulfill the creation mandate in the sense God intended have been capsized. The Great

Commission results in the gospel of Christ transforming men and women, enabling them to fulfill God's original purpose for them.

In addition, however, the Great Commission *extends* the creation mandate. This is because regenerated men and women fill the earth with God-oriented worshipers and vicegerents not only through Christian marriage and Christian families, but also by making disciples of all the nations. Indeed, this latter activity is possible for all of Christ's followers, not only those who are married and have children, so that every Christian can contribute toward filling the earth with worshipers of the true and living God. Ideally, these dimensions cohere, so that as spouses we should cherish our husband or wife and as parents make disciples of our children, while at the same time engaging in mission beyond the scope of our own natural family.

In one sense, human family is a God-ordained metaphor pointing to something greater: the spiritual relationship between a fatherly Creator and his image-bearing human sons and daughters (cf. Adam as God's son in Luke 2:38; note as well how God created man in his image and likeness [Gen 1:26-27], and then Adam is said to have fathered a son in his image and likeness [Gen 5:3]). All men and women are alienated from the Father until through Christ he makes them part of his family again by adoption (cf. Gal 4:4-7; Rom 8:29). As in Jesus's parable of the Prodigal Son, God with open arms welcomes repentant sinners back into the father's house to be part of his family once again. Now, in Christ, the second Adam, redeemed humanity is enabled to fill the earth with vicegerents and worshipers, both through Christian marriage and family, and through evangelizing the nations. In this vein, then, it is not only God's original purpose for creating man and woman, but also the Great Commission that is all about family, about the kind of spiritual intimacy that is characteristic first and foremost of family ties—husband and wife, father and mother, brother and sister, parent and child. Redemption in Christ forms the biblical-theological bridge between God's original purpose for humanity and his mission for redeemed humanity.

What is more, the Great Commission's call to disciple-making entails not only leading people to affirm the core content of the gospel but to teach people to observe *all* that Jesus has commanded them (Matt 28:20). This, too, supports the notion that the gospel encompasses all of life, and all of Jesus's teachings on a variety of subjects, not merely the core content of the message of salvation in him. The canvas of our new life in Christ is thus considerably broader, richer, and more colorful than a narrow, reductionistic conception of the gospel would reveal. Jesus taught his followers many things—we should do the same. His kingdom is vast and envelops many things in the world that God created for his glory and our enjoyment. There is a danger in focusing too much on the gospel, narrowly conceived, and in compartmentalizing life with the result that important related dimensions—such as marriage and family—fade too far from view. To emphasize the centrality of the gospel for its salvific purpose and reduce it to a bare-bones minimum neglects the complex, interrelated texture of all of life. As with so many things, this is a matter of balance and of keeping things in proper proportion and perspective.

While a person can be saved without knowing what the Bible teaches on marriage and the family, they cannot get very far once they are saved before they en-

counter the fact that everything they are called to do in their short life on earth is as men or women. Again, as I develop in my book *God, Marriage, and Family* (with David Jones), this is true whether or not they are married either in that they are not yet married but one day will be or have the gift of singleness. A short editorial is insufficient to address the complexities of the issues involved; this would call for a much more detailed exegetical, theological, even philosophical, treatment. That said, recovering the creation mandate as implicit in the Great Commission could have significant implications for how we conceive of and carry out mission and discipleship. I will be content to have established this simple point: marriage and the family may not be the gospel—the primary means of salvation—but they are the God-given context in which most persons the world over are called to live out the gospel, for human flourishing and for God’s greater glory, and as such deserve significant and sustained attention.

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