

The Theology of Marriage

The Vow

Marriage is defined by the vow exchanged by a couple. This essence of marriage is seen whether the definition comes through philosophy, theology, sociology, or law. The vow conveys a commitment to be open, honest and flexible in growing together. The couple agrees to “live together in the covenant of marriage” (Book of Common Prayer, pg. 424) through all possible events (“for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death”; BCP, pg. 427). The seriousness of this is not only conveyed by fidelity until death, but also by the phrase, “This is my solemn vow”.

The depth of the commitment conveyed by the vow is one that requires adequate thought, the ceremony noting, “Therefore, marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God.” (BCP, pg. 423)

The Purposes of Marriage

What are those purposes? The ceremony notes, “The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God’s will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord.” (BCP, pg. 423) So, there are three purposes: joy, comfort, and children. The first two are clearly primary, as it notes children may not necessarily be possible.

A further understanding of what brings joy and comfort is added in the prayers for the couple during the ceremony, hoping that husband and wife can be “a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity, a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy.” To allow someone to be “a strength in need” implies trust, and to be “a counselor in perplexity” implies openness and flexibility to the loving advice from the other. This also speaks to the advice being “loving”, not controlling, the intent being to help the person grow, to become all that they were meant to be, not to be molded into what their spouse thinks they should be.

Scriptural support for this rests upon a few key texts.

1. **Genesis 2:**
 - a. Verse 18: God says that “it is not good for man to be alone”.
 - b. Verse 23: The man is so happy, noting, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”.
 - c. Verse 24: The ultimate goal is intimacy: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”

The Theology of Marriage

2. **Song of Songs**: The core of this text goes back to the early days of the reign of Solomon, but its significance is describing the tender love between Yahweh and his people in the metaphor of the love between a man and a woman. It describes true devotion in contrast to the fertility rites in pagan temples mimicking the actions of Baal and Astarte.
3. **Matthew**:
 - a. 5:27-30: Now we hear of a higher standard, where the bond between husband and wife is so strong, so complete, that to even lust after another woman is considered adultery.
 - b. 19:1-11: Therefore, divorce cannot be considered “for any reason whatever” as in the days of Moses when the hearts of men were “hard”, the only reason being “marital unfaithfulness”. (See also Mark 10:1-12)

The fourth purpose of marriage is a sacramental one, namely, that marriage “signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church” (BCP, pg. 423). When you think about it, the Church, the Body of Christ, needs Christ to be “a strength in need” and “a counselor in perplexity”. And, the more years that process has been evolving, the more love is felt by the Church for Christ, and more love between a husband and wife. The more a couple love each other, the clearer is their vision of the love God has for them. To gaze into the eyes of your spouse is to gaze into the eyes of God. To feel the love of your spouse is to feel the love of Christ for you.

Therefore, the theology of marriage is not saying that reflection upon the love of a couple gives the observer an intellectual awareness of God, but rather that it gives a more complete awareness of God: intellectual, emotional, and spiritual.

Again, scripture speaks of this window into the understanding of God and his love for us, the primary text being **Ephesians 5**:

- a. 25-27: Evolution of Self through Marriage: “Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”
- b. 28-32: Being One: “In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church – for we are members of his body. ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

A Bumpy Ride

However, the theology of marriage does not imply an ideal, smooth process of growth. The relationship between God and mankind has been bumpy to say the least. Think of the lessons from scripture:

- The disobedience and defiance of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden,

The Theology of Marriage

- The Jews at the base of Mount Sinai breaking the commandments Moses is receiving at the top of the Mount,
- The adultery of David,
- The vanity of Solomon,
- The idolatry of Israel and Judah, railed against by the prophets,
- The paranoia of Herod the Great in trying to kill the Messiah by slaughtering the innocent infants of Bethlehem,
- The weakness and lust of Herod Antipas in beheading John the Baptist to appease Herodias and lure Salome,
- The spiritual blindness and jealousy of Caiaphas in seeking the death of Jesus,
- The spiritual confusion of the Corinthians in letting class distinctions sully the equality of the agape,
- And thousands of more examples sprinkled throughout the bible.

Couples have their own struggles throughout the journeys of the lives.

- Choosing spouse over parents in the early years of the marriage,
- Resisting affairs by seeing love as a quality instead of a quantity,
- Working cooperatively in deciding whether to have children, when to have children, and how to raise children,
- Growing to understand more deeply what really matters when looks fade, when jobs are lost, or when a serious illness strikes,
- Helping each other to realize that who they are growing to be is more important than what wealth or status that they have attained,
- Seeing retirement as another opportunity to grow instead of a loss of productivity and usefulness, and
- Understanding that dying is a process of growing rather than a reality from which to flee.

The Need for Support

Those and other transition points serve as challenges that can either move a couple closer together or break them apart. Just as no man is an island, so too no couple can function well in a vacuum, the wedding ceremony itself asking the family and friends present, “Will all of you witnessing these promises do all in your power to uphold these two persons in their marriage?” (BCP, pg. 425) As our society has weakened the ties of extended families, and as it has focused in communities upon the individual family instead of the communal family, essentially a “me” instead of “we” orientation, then the couple of today are often left more alone than they should be. Is it any wonder then that the divorce rate has skyrocketed?

Preparation for Marriage

To begin to reverse the trend towards divorce is to begin at the beginning, that is, to help couples to better prepare for marriage. This does not doubt the ability of couples to make wise decisions, but rather recognizes the need to help couples help themselves, to make

The Theology of Marriage

them more aware of the process into which they are entering, and to give them better skills with which to grow.

The Process

To attain a better understanding of the process can be done by gaining a better understanding of the marital vow. The vow is not to be seen a boring, stagnant, legal commitment, but rather as a creative, breathing, growing covenant. Some of the ways in which people have looked upon marriage make that confusing, for instance, saying that it is time for a person to “settle down” or “grow up” and “be responsible”, and even describing one’s spouse as “a ball and chain”, implying that marriage involves a loss of freedom instead of expanding one’s freedom.

Another way of looking at it is that the marital vow is a protective bubble, keeping interference out and intensity in, allowing the couple to grow to new and ever higher levels of intimacy. Think about it. When a person has an affair, they water down the intensity and power of their marital relationship through the introduction of a third party.

One of the clearest examples to guide us in this process is given by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. Corinth was an industrial and shipbuilding center in southern Greece, which Homer had deemed “wealthy”, and which, due to its architecture and cultivation of the arts, Cicero had called “the light of all Greece”. Nonetheless, it was not exactly the moral center of Greece, and was so notorious for its debauchery and licentiousness that to be called “a Corinthian girl” was tantamount to being called a prostitute, and to “live like a Corinthian” was to lead a dissolute life. In the Christian community which he had founded in 51 AD, the lack of love had spread even to the Eucharist, where some would bring plenty of food and wine, while others went hungry.

Hence, Paul wanted to teach them what true love really was, devoting a portion of his first letter to this purpose (**I Corinthians 13**). Some of its attributes are:

1. **Patient**: What matters is more that a person genuinely wishes to grow rather than the speed by which they grow. For instance, men have trouble sharing their feelings. Women are often giants by comparison, and so should not use their rulers to judge the improvement of their husbands. To double his ability to share emotions may still only amount to a fraction of her ability, but, if he is really trying, then she should be patient.
2. **Kind**: What gets a spouse in trouble is usually not **what** they say, but **how** they say it. Helping one another grow should be done with kindness, not a sarcastic put down or a condescending lecture. The goal is intimacy, not victory. Your spouse wants a lover, not a teacher.
3. **Does Not Envy**: Of course, to love someone else, you must first love yourself. If you are envious of others, or if you are tooting your own horn to impress others, then you really do not like yourself very much. So, why did your spouse marry you? Because they were stupid? No, because they saw something in you that you

The Theology of Marriage

may not have seen, and so let your spouse mirror back to you the wonder of your soul, helping you to love yourself more and envy others less.

4. **Keeps No Record of Wrongs**: Arguments between spouses often involve beating the other over the head with a litany of past sins. Arguments become a tug of war to see who will win. But if one spouse wins, the couple loses. As I said above, the goal is intimacy, not victory!
5. **Forgiveness**: If intimacy is to be achieved, and if patience is to be maintained in this process of growth, then forgiveness for the inevitable mistake or sin is essential. Remember, forgiveness is based less on the largesse of the forgiver and more on the potential for change of the person being forgiven. You chose your spouse due to their inner ability to grow. So, why not trust in your own judgment?

Skills

The best example of this coping would be skills in communication, for if a couple does not continue to talk at depth about who they are and how they are facing continual challenges, then the creative vow that defines their covenant with each other begins to erode. How often have you heard a couple sadly stating that “we grew apart”? They grew apart because they were apart, not together talking.

Various books teach various **Communication Skills**, but here are a few for couples to consider.

DO

1. **PAY ATTENTION**: Give the other your full attention. Sit relatively close to your fiancé / lover to model physically what you are attempting to achieve psychologically and spiritually, and maintain eye contact. Do not try and talk while watching television, playing computer games, or even cooking dinner.
2. **OBSERVE THE NON-VERBAL**: If the other cries, pouts, or looks away, ask why. Do not drone on and ignore an obvious sign that something is wrong.
3. **PARAPHRASE**: After your spouse speaks, then summarize / paraphrase / give the essence of what they said. If you get it wrong, then have your spouse say it again, and you paraphrase it again, until your spouse says, “Yes, that’s it”. While this sounds like pouring glue all over the process of communication, it forces you to identify the core issue before responding, thereby avoiding the danger of addressing the all-too-obvious, but not central, surface issue.

DON'T

1. **INTERRUPT**: If you are interrupting, then you are not listening. You are being defensive. Put aside you to listen to the other.
2. **MIND READ**: You can ask how someone is feeling, but you cannot tell them how they are feeling. Even if you are married for 100 years and are right 100% of the time, it is still an insult to tell your spouse how he or she is feeling.
3. **NAME CALLING**: While we no longer call each other “fatso” or “four eyes”, we do “push each other’s buttons”, meaning that we attack what is important to

The Theology of Marriage

the other (such as one's career) to hurt their feelings and win the argument. But going for the jugular vein only destroys trust, and the purpose of communication is not to win, but to be one.

4. **POSTPONE FOR TOO LONG:** Remember the old saying, "Don't go to bed mad"? Well, while we cannot always do that, it is wise to express instead of suppress our feelings. Instead, many couples hold what is bothering them inside, only to explode in anger at a later point. To face **what** is bothering you **when** it is bothering you will make you nervous, but your anxiety will be your friend, helping you to carefully say what is on your mind instead of cutting someone off at the knees.
5. **TIT FOR TAT:** Arguments peppered with "Oh yeah, well you did this or that!" only confuse the couple as to what is really the key issue. Remember, your goal is empathy, to truly understand and feel what the other is really saying. Defensiveness will only blind you to the issue at hand, and throwing too many balls in the air will confuse both of you. This is not an argument in a court of law where you are trying to stack the deck to win. The goal here is not to win, but to understand. If one of you wins, you both lose!

SUGGESTED READINGS:

- Baer, Greg, Real Love in Marriage: The Truth About Finding Genuine Happiness Now and Forever, New York, Gotham Books, 2006.
- Bloom, Linda and Charlie, 101 Things I Wish I Knew When I Got Married, Novato, CA, New World Library, 2004.
- Fortel, Mort, Marriage Fitness: 4 Steps to Building & Maintaining Phenomenal Love, Baltimore, MD, Marriage Max, 2004.
- Halford, W. Kim, Brief Therapy for Couples: Helping Partners Help Themselves, New York, Guilford Press, 2003.
- Isaacson, Cliff and Meg Schneider, The Good-for-You Marriage: How a Better Marriage Can Improve Your Health, Prolong Your Life, and Ensure Your Happiness, Avon, MA, Adams Media, 2008.
- Larson, Jeffrey H., The Great Marriage Tune-Up Book, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2003.
- Mikulincer, Mario, and Gail S. Goodman, Eds., Dynamics of Romantic Love: Attachment, Caregiving and Sex, New York, Guilford Press, 2006.
- Stimpson, Peter K., Map to Happiness: Straightforward Advice on Everyday Issues, New York, iUniverse, 2008.

The Rev. Peter K. Stimpson
Trinity Counseling Service
22 Stockton Street
Princeton, New Jersey 08540
609-924-0060
Pks_tcs@msn.com

The Theology of Marriage

www.trinitycounseling.org