

The Future of Marriage

A Systematic Theology of Marriage

Everything we have considered about marriage falls into place when we think of marriage in an eschatological perspective. From a biblical point of view, the notion of covenant is, at the very least, a lofty ideal. If marriages always had to be covenants all the time, people would often feel like failures. Yet, from an eschatological perspective, a marriage covenant is a goal toward which marriage strives. Marriages are not guaranteed covenants but they may become covenants through commitment and effort. Likewise, charity within marriage is sometimes difficult to realize, but even when spouses miss the mark, the goal of self-giving love remains as a corrective and a challenge to try again.

Sacraments, as the Catholic Church teaches, are signs of grace. The grace of sacraments is witnessed in their effects. What is the effect of the sacrament of marriage, and when does the sacrament take place? From an eschatological perspective, the sacrament of marriage is always in the process of becoming and of gracing spouses with its hopes and possibilities and blessings. The union of a couple, indeed the consummation of a couple, happens over a committed lifetime of two people intending to become fully one while learning how in their oneness to be most authentically themselves. Their indissolubility as a wedded couple deepens as their marriage more and more becomes covenant and sacrament.

Throughout life people strive to find dignity, to understand the value of all human life, and to enact love as a requirement of authentic justice. Those who achieve a character marked by these qualities are rare and sublime, and for all but true prophets, these qualities exceed most of us much of the time. Nevertheless, dignity and justice for all persons remain the criteria that define goodness and excellent human society, even while they evade our grasp. From an eschatological perspective, people can and should strive toward dignity, honoring ourselves and others and forgiving one another our shames. Within marriage a couple can struggle to be a domestic church, even as they debate the boundaries and competing needs that exist in the tension between societal and familial obligations.

From an eschatological perspective, even marriage failure can be forgiven. Sometimes human beings fail, even while striving toward a noble goal, and even when strengthened by grace. Christians can find solace in the notion that Christ came to save sinners, that is, imperfect people who are in process. Catholics can take solace in the Church's own pilgrim journey, as it strives in all-too-human form to become the vanguard for kingdom values on earth. In an eschatological perspective, self-righteousness is replaced by the humble acknowledgment that all people can do better. A marriage undertaken in good faith may lack the requisite eschatological vision to sustain it into a fully realized union of persons, but forgiveness and reconciliation remain as healing balms that enable former spouses and their children to move on.

In conclusion, an eschatological perspective on marriage is a human perspective just as it is a theological perspective. From a theological perspective, it is concerned with the ultimate goals and purpose of marriage: what marriage is to be, what it is to do, how it will define the total story and final value of two human lives. From a human perspective, it is concerned with the process of living and becoming as we actually exist; that is, in the tension of already-but-not-yet, already married but always becoming married in new and fuller dimensions. An eschatological perspective on marriage reminds us that process and progress are essential to experiencing not only permanence but also transcendent purpose in the journey together.



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From many accounts, marriage is in crisis. Poverty threatens families throughout the world, and the most vulnerable families are those in which marriage is not even present, that is, single-parent households. Teenage pregnancy is rising and becoming more socially acceptable, even while it puts children and their children at risk. It is increasingly common for couples to choose to live together before marriage, which statistically puts them at higher risk of divorce after marriage. The combined figures for divorces among first and second marriages results in a twenty-first century divorce rate of nearly fifty percent in the United States. Couples marry later in life than ever before, and many cohabiting couples choose not to marry. Culturally relaxed attitudes toward pre-marital, extra-marital, and non-marital sex suggest that people will delay marriage, if they marry at all. One in four households is unsafe due to domestic violence.

Changing economic realities give couples, and particularly women, more freedom in marriage than ever before. People no longer have to stay in bad marriages because of financial need. Moreover, changing understandings of personhood, driven by new studies in gender, psychology, biology, and philosophy, have uprooted the traditional, patriarchal model of family life. Men and women eschew classic moulds and expectations of family life, even while they search for meaningful, functional, and ever-evasive alternatives. Non-traditional models of family life are explored, particularly by same-sex couples seeking legal marriage as both an option and a legal right.

All this change has resulted in an upheaval of marriage and its dependability as a social reality. People ask themselves why they should marry, especially when marriage so often appears to be a liability to personal freedom, safety, and happiness. Persons denied marriage, such as same-sex couples, see the inability to marry legally as discrimination, as they view marriage as the ultimate gateway to full social recognition and participation.

In helping to negotiate such questions and crises facing contemporary marriages, it is helpful to remember that the future of marriage as a function of society may also be viewed from an eschatological perspective. Thinking of marriage in this way invites a number of questions about the long-term goals and purposes of marriage today and into the future. What role does marriage play in societal human flourishing? What role does marriage play in the realization of social justice, human dignity, authentic charity, and freedom within society as a whole? One's view of the good of marriage and laws that surround marriage should be formed in relationship to an understanding of marriage as it relates to the common welfare. Is marriage an integral part of society? Should it be? How should it be? Why? Does it reflect the values of the kingdom of God? Can I define my understanding of these values and place marriage within them? Consider the following questions, based on the above discussion:

- How does the openness or restriction of marriage licenses benefit society? How do both options reflect kingdom values, charity, dignity, justice?
- What does it take to make a covenant? How do covenants build up society? Whose covenants build up society? Do some covenants not build up society at all?
- How do laws define and enforce punishment for domestic violence? Is combating domestic violence a priority of your state? Why or why not?
- How does access to or restriction from legal divorce bolster good marriage?
- How do custody and child support laws contribute to the common welfare?
- What access to reproductive technologies is appropriate? How do these technologies affect marriage?
- How difficult or easy is it in your state to adopt? How does this reflect your state's view of marriage and family?



- How difficult or easy is it in your state to obtain an abortion? What laws surround it? Who has abortions? Why do people report having abortions?

The point of this text is to establish a theological foundation for thinking about marriage, not to settle all questions. It is up to you, the student, to think through these issues from a theological point of view. I would argue that unreflective marriage benefits no one. The passion of sexual attraction wears off over time, and the daily tasks of laundry, dishes, work, and diapers can become boring if not hated. Hostility, frustration, and a general sense of “I could have done better” can lead people into marital decline, complete with feelings of powerlessness and suffocation.

On the other hand, reflective marriage, seen from an eschatological perspective, is a gift and opportunity. Such a marriage is lived deliberately and is attached to the deepest sense of one’s purpose and personal value. Marriage that strives to be covenant and sacrament, marriage that strives to realize dignity and justice, marriage that manifests itself in charity and holy union, marriage that transmits life to children and kin and neighbor is a prophetic stance against all the worst in society and an affirmation of all that is possible in human relationships. Such a marriage represents the possibility of the real becoming the ideal.

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