

The Creation Ordinance of Marriage

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When it is said that marriage is a “creation ordinance,” exegetical reflection points to a number of theological-doctrinal considerations that provide a framework for analysis. The activity of the Creator-God in establishing man in the form and status he did has continuing relevance to the sovereignty and authority of the Creator on the one hand, and the prerogatives of man on the other. No more important conceptual foundation informs theological construction than that of the Creator-creature distinction. “In the beginning God” establishes a theocentric orientation of biblically-consistent doctrinal constructs. And the initial explanatory statement that God made man in his own image establishes both the Lordship of God over all that he spoke into existence external to the Godhead and the responsibility of man to live under that Lordship to the glory of his Creator.

In his prelapsarian state our first parent, as he came to self-conscious awareness, knew that he was the creature of a Creator-God. Adam was the image of his maker in that he recognized himself to be a rational, immortal, spiritual, moral, and speaking person. Man thinks and speaks because God thinks and speaks. Man is moral because God is moral. When it is said that for Adam to *be* was to *know*, the implication is that Adam knew God and knew that he had been established in covenantal relation with God. Covenantal status, it is true, has been subject to a variety of interpretations. A difference of view at that point has to do with the question whether, as he came from the hands of his Creator, our first parent was in covenantal relation to God by virtue of his creation, or, to the contrary, that his covenantal status was something that had been conferred on him after his creation. Our conclusion on the point is that Adam was created as a covenant

person. That, it will be seen, influences our understanding of what lies ahead as to man's obligation to the law of God in general and, in our present case, the institution and the continuing relevance of marriage. For it is cognate with that covenantal status that there had been conferred on man, as an ineradicable aspect of his soulish character, a *sensus deitatis* from which it is impossible for man to escape. Moreover, when God "walked with Adam in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen 3:8) God communicated to him the substance and meaning of the law of God in terms of which Adam was to live. The statement of that body of law was republished in the Decalogue which, at a subsequent stage of God's administration of his covenant with man, God gave to Moses. But of paramount importance is the fact that in his prelapsarian state Adam knew God and lived in a manner consistent with the divine law and its mandates as they had been communicated to him.

But our first parent, by his treacherous assumption of autonomy, sinned against God. In that disastrous act, all of his posterity by ordinary generation were involved. Adam was their federal head. They sinned in him (Rom 5:12–21) and were all thereby reduced to a state of sin and misery (WSC, Q. 17). The catechism states the case clearly: "The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity, all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression" (WSC, Q. 16). The letter to the Romans contains eloquent testimony to the fact that "By one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom 5:12). By Adam's act, the initial relation of harmony between God and man was destroyed. Adam was cast out of the garden and was no longer qualified to partake of the sacrament of the tree of

life as he had been accustomed to do. Henceforth, all human aspiration and action was tarnished by the entailment of sin. That includes, as we shall go on to see, the matter of marriage.

In the light of the new state of affairs that existed as a result of Adam's fall, two questions arise. First, what is to be said of the character of life that the fallen progeny of Adam henceforth lived in the presence of, and under the eyes of, God; and second, what is to be said of the remarkable mercy of God in providing a way of reconciliation with himself? On the last-mentioned point, much is to be said of the gospel of grace that has provided redemption for sinners. We shall observe the relevance of that for our present subject of marriage at a later point. On the first-mentioned point, that of the form of life that Adam's fallen posterity now lived, two aspects of the reality involved will concern us immediately. First, what, more precisely, is to be understood as the range of law-requirements that God initially gave to man for his obedience; and second, what is the extent, and the reason for that extent, of man's continuing obligation to God under those requirements?

Creation ordinances

For our present purposes it is necessary to ask what we are to understand as certain ordinances that God set forth in his relation to our first parents in their initial created situation; and second, to what extent do the requirements of those ordinances continue to be obligatory and binding on every man now in his fallen state? An ordinance is a statement of an ordering of relations that structure a system of responsibility, obligation, and reward. What is now in view are certain *creation* ordinances which are referred to as

such because the obligations and responsibilities implicit in them were operative immediately in our first parents' created state. They did not wait for their institution until a later stage of God's administration of his covenant with men. The relevant obligations were operative immediately by reason of the fact of creation, and they did not wait for institution until God had established the process of redemption. It is sufficient to observe at this point three such ordinances: work, the Sabbath, and marriage. Our interest is in the third of those ordinances. Before looking at that in detail it is necessary to consider what is involved in each and all of the creation ordinances as such.

First, we observe that by reason that the ordinances in view are *creation* ordinances, they were given by God to man as man, by the Creator to the creature. The implication is twofold. First, that implies that the ordinances are therefore continuously binding and obligatory on man as man, or, that is, on every individual everywhere ~~and~~ at all times. Second, we can put that in theological doctrinal terms by saying that because the ordinances in view are *creation* ordinances, the interpretation of their import and extent is to be considered under the rubric of creation, not under that of redemption. We have said that the law, considered now particularly in its moral aspect, or the moral law. When that is said, we recognize, of course, that many aspects of the creation ordinance, in this case marriage, are interpretable by reference to the moral law that has continuing relevance to every man's life and conduct. That is because our Lord, by confirming and fulfilling the moral law, has assumed the ordinance of marriage into the wider ethical system that is established by his redemptive purpose and accomplishment. But while that is so, the creation ordinance that is here under comment, like that of the creation ordinance of the Sabbath, is not, in itself, to be understood as interpretable by redemptive

categories. That is saying that the obligation to conduct oneself in terms appropriate to honoring the ordinance as God gave it in creation does not, in itself, have redemptive significance.

The import of what has been said can be put in other terms. The moral law was given and clarified to Adam in his prelapsarian state. The divinely-prescribed laws of marriage, for example, were given to man as he existed in initial holy state. But the question follows as to whether those laws continue to bind, and, if so, why, now that man no longer exists in primeval holy state, but has fallen. We have answered that question in the affirmative, and our reason for doing so turns on the fact that they were, as has been said, given to man as man. Their existential relevance, therefore, continues to man as man.

To take the case of the creation ordinance of the Sabbath as an example, it is clear that by his own example God required one day in seven to be set aside from work for the explicit worship of God. Again, that is, the nature of the Sabbath and the necessity of sabbath-keeping did not wait for institution and explanation until the codification of the law under Moses. The requirements of sabbath worship were clear and clearly mandatory on all people from the beginning. When the requirements of the creation mandate of the Sabbath were incorporated by republication into the Mosaic decalogue there was a formal codification of the law, but that in no sense implied a statement of mandate that had not existed from the beginning.

So it is with the creation ordinance of marriage. That ordinance, we are saying, existed along with its mandated requirements at and from the beginning. That is clear in God's revealed statements of the terms on which he gave Eve to Adam, establishing

thereby a joint and intentionally harmonious mandate of cooperation between them in the mutual discharge of the total creation mandate.

For reasons that follow from what has been said, the creation ordinance of marriage incorporated laws of structure and conduct that have permanent and universal applicability. A clear understanding of that principle implies two things. The creation mandates, as has been said, did not wait until the more expansive clarification of the fact and processes of God's redemptive purposes. Moreover, as in the case of the mandate of the Sabbath, where the original creation mandate was restated with expanded explicitness and incorporated by our Lord into the redemptive complex, the creation ordinance of marriage was also given expanded articulation by the seventh of the ten commandments, which pointed to the purity that the marriage ordinance required and anticipated.

Another way of stating the significance and meaning of the creation ordinance, in this case marriage, is to say that the guarding and honoring of it are not to be understood as in any peculiar sense, or primarily, the property or responsibility of the church as the church. The mandates of the ordinance devolve on man as created, and not simply or only on man as redeemed. In short, given God's ordering of the form of human culture, the regulation of marriage falls primarily within the responsibilities of the state, not those of the church. But as will be seen, it is incumbent on the state as properly constituted that its responsibilities should be administered in a manner consistent with God's righteous laws. We shall return to that matter. It is sufficient to say at this point that it is all too clear that the state, in the present cultural and political climate, has in general evaded that responsibility. But it is not true to say that the church has no role to play in guarding the significance and meaning of marriage. At issue is the important fact that marriage under

the auspices of the church is to be regarded as a special case of the general principle of authorization by the state. That is clarified by the reality that marriage within the church should be available only to church members or professedly regenerate people.

The responsibilities of the state

That having been said, it is relevant to consider the responsibilities of the state as it has been ordained by God for the purpose of secular government. We are cognizant of the fact that in his ordering of human society at large, and in his prescriptions for the various divisions of it, God has established three separable spheres of responsibility and accountability. They are the church, the state, and the family. Each of those three spheres maintains its own sovereignty, responsibility, and integrity. The proper government of the family deserves expanded discussion in the context of marriage, but it is in detail beyond our present purpose and intention. The responsibilities of the other two spheres, the church and the state, are more directly relevant to our present objectives.

It can be stated briefly in that connection that while the state does maintain its sovereign sphere of obligation and responsibilities it is, by reason of the fact that it has been ordained by God, nevertheless subject to the requirements of righteousness that God has laid down in his word. The correlative of that statement is that though man as fallen no longer enjoys a natural knowledge of God and his holiness, the obligations imposed on him in creation continue to have relevance and obligation. The state, that is, may be, in the outcome and on the basis of the principles of formation it has adopted, a godly state or a godless state. Those who have ascended to positions of authority in the state administration are called upon by the word of God to conduct the affairs of the state in

accordance with principles that God has laid down in his word. In that sense, while the institution of marriage is, as to its functioning, a civil institution, the state is obligated to institute the laws of its operation in accordance with the righteous law of God. In other words, each of the three spheres of government and authority, the church, the state, and the family, have been ordained by, and are responsible to conduct itself in accordance with, what God has declared as authoritative.

It is all too clear, of course, that in modern fact and experience those desiderata are not generally honored. The state, it is necessary to observe, is not generally formed and conducted in accordance with biblical principles. It establishes laws and it sets behavior norms that, on a minimal observation, offend those biblical criteria of organization and conduct. It is not necessary to rehearse at length the points at which the state offends in those respects. The favorable legislation of the norms of homosexual lifestyles, same-sex marriage, abortion, and discrimination against minority interests by the formation of voting district boundaries, are cases in point.

Again, in summary, while that has been said, it remains heavily incumbent on the state to interpret its responsibilities, considered now in relation to the regulation of marriage, in terms consistent with God's moral law. That is so, because while "the powers that be are ordained of God," (Rom 13:1) primarily for the preservation of godly social and cultural complexes, the state administration is properly to be conducted in clear recognition of the mandates of the revealed word that God has given. Properly conceived, that is, the state, in all its decisions, responsibilities, and policies, is to be guided by a godly administration. For such reasons, the administration of marriage by the state is to be guided by, and consistent with, the several desiderata contained in the

chapter of the *Savoy Declaration* that is now under discussion. In the state regulation, that is, the principles under review in chapter 25 of the *Savoy* are to provide guidance and are to be honored. The state, for example, errs if it provides marriage status and privileges to unions other than that of one man and one woman. That immediately brings into focus and, it follows, to condemnation, what we have referred to as forms of lifestyle experimentation that offend against biblical principle. The implication stands, also, that the state errs when it establishes guidelines for divorce that are not consistent with the biblical principles as they have been clearly stated, for example, by our Lord himself (Matt 19:7–9; 1 Cor 7:15).

It would appear that some theological opinions have amplified, and to some extent called in question, our judgment that marriage is, in its primary respects, a civil institution. Charles Hodge, in his *Systematic Theology*, observes first on “Marriage as a Divine Institution,” and then on “Marriage as a Civil Institution.”¹ Hodge concludes: “Marriage is a divine institution because founded on the nature of man as constituted by God.”² That, of course, is the very reason why we have allowed the focus of our thought to fall on the fact that marriage is to be considered, in the first place, as a creation ordinance. The laws of marriage, we have suggested, are to be understood as mandatory, therefore, on all individuals everywhere and at all times.

On marriage as a civil institution, however, Hodge observes that “As man’s being a servant of God and bound to make his word the rule of faith and practice . . . it is not inconsistent with the fact marriage is an ordinance of God, that it should be, in another aspect, a civil institution. It is so implicated in the social and civil relations of men that it

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London and Edinburgh: Nelson, 1873), 3:376–77.

² *Idem*.

of necessity comes under the cognizance of the state. It is therefore a civil institution. . . . It is, and must be recognized and enforced by the state [and] it imposes civil obligations which the state has the right to enforce.”³ Hodge, however, appears to depart from our conclusion that the marriage ceremony is not to be understood as a service of the church, and that the participation of the church and its ministers in it are to be circumscribed in the manner suggested. For Hodge, marriage is a religious institution and is to be “religiously solemnized,”⁴ and “It is a degradation to make it a *mere* civil contract.”⁵ If Hodge, and the theological tradition that follows him were to claim that in our present socio-cultural context the marriage ceremony is always and necessarily to be considered a religious ceremony, or if, that is to say, the church must necessarily be involved in it, that, of course, dissents from the line of argument that has engaged us.

Divorce

It is worth digressing from our line of argument at this point to reflect on the matter of divorce. That is because the *Savoy Declaration of Faith*, which on most points follows closely the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, departs from the latter at several points. *Savoy* has provided the chapter, “Of Marriage,” which is currently under study. *Westminster*, however, has expanded its discussion at that point and provided a chapter titled “Of Marriage and Divorce.” *Savoy* does follow *Westminster* precisely as far as the end of the *Savoy* chapter. But at that point *Westminster* adds further restrictions on marriage. “The man may not marry any of his wife’s kindred nearer in blood than he may

³ Ibid., 3:378.

⁴ Ibid., Index volume, 36.

⁵ Ibid., 3:376, italics added.

of his own, nor the woman of the husband's kindred nearer in blood than of her own." Then on the question of divorce, *Westminster* follows the deliverances of Christ and holds that "Adultery or fornication . . . committed after a contract being detected before marriage gives the innocent party cause to dissolve the contract. In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead."⁶ That permissible action is, as said, lawful, but, it would seem, not necessary. It can be said that in the eyes of God an act of adultery in and of itself breaks the marriage as it had existed. Hence divorce regularizes a condition that then exists. But the necessity of divorce may be nullified by regret, repentance and forgiveness, and reconciliation. At the point referred to, *Westminster* is silent on the question whether the guilty party to a divorce may also remarry. We do not stay with that question at this time, except to say that wide differences have been held on the point within the church. A full treatment of the case can be found in Professor John Murray's book, *Divorce*.⁷

We can observe at this stage, however, on a point of admissible grounds for divorce as *Westminster* contemplates them. In doing so, the present discussion is bought very close, perhaps we should say dangerously close, to current practices in state administrations. The statement is made in *Westminster* that not only is adultery admissible grounds for divorce, but also "such willful desertion as can in no way be remedied by the church or civil magistrate." That further concession, as can be observed, can lead and, one fears, has led, to improper decisions by the church and, as will be argued in what follows, by the civil administrations.

⁶ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, XXIV:5.

⁷ John Murray, *Divorce* (Grand Rapids: Baker reprint, n.d.).

On the question of the viability of desertion as a ground for divorce, it would seem that biblical data, for example 1 Corinthians 7:15, would countenance divorce by desertion in a certain, but, as will be argued, a very specific situation. It is that situation that calls for definition. An innocent party may properly sue for divorce on the grounds of desertion when the deserting spouse leaves the marriage *because he or she forthrightly repudiates, and is no longer prepared to live with, the Christian belief and conduct of the other party.*

The literature on the point provides various opinions. John Murray provides a lengthy footnote that argues for the position we have just taken.⁸ Murray concludes that “It is cause for lament that within the circle of professing believers desertion has been regarded as sufficient grounds for divorce, and 1 Corinthians 7:15 has been wrested to do service in the defence of a cause that Paul never intended.” Chad Van Dixhoorn has taken a different position: “Is he [Paul at 1 Corinthians 7:15] limiting the ‘desertion grounds’ for divorce to desertion by an unbelieving spouse only? [That] opinion is difficult to accept simply because it is hard to imagine, in the parallel case, that the Scripture would limit the ‘adultery ground’ for divorce to adultery by an unbelieving spouse only.”⁹ Van Dixhoorn’s position, however, appears to take insufficient account of the separable grounds for divorce as our Lord has declared them.

In any event, it is clear that the biblical mandate gives the innocent party to a divorce the right of remarriage. But in recognition of what has been said, it is necessary to observe that “when spouses are divorced without proper cause they are still man and

⁸ John Murray, *Divorce* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, n.d.), 76–77.

⁹ Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014), 331, n.1.

wife in the sight of God.”¹⁰ It follows that remarriage in such a case involves adultery. The present-day instances of multiple marriages accordingly cast a highly questionable light on the proprieties of the parties involved. “The church cannot recognize as proper many of the divorce decrees that are granted by the state and therefore cannot grant the legitimacy of the remarriage of parties who have been divorced on an unscriptural ground.”¹¹

At this stage, then, it is possible and necessary to comment on the practices related to divorce as it is administered by the state or civil authorities. As far as the biblical data are concerned, though both marriage and divorce are matters which reside primarily in hands of the state and not the church, the state, according to the word of God, is to administer divorce only on grounds that the Scripture itself mandates. That means that the state errs in granting divorce on such other grounds as simple desertion, or assumed psychological discontent or disagreement or incompatibility, or, as has become widely used by the state at the present time, divorce and dissolution of marriage on no legitimate grounds at all but simply by mutual consent. The point is made at present because of obvious widespread errors on this matter by state authorities and administrations.

Further implications

The statements we have made to this point, focusing now on the status of marriage as such, have further implications. It follows that marriage is not to be considered a sacrament of the church, as certain forms of ecclesiastical dogma and practice claim.

¹⁰ Murray, *op. cit.*, 99.

¹¹ Murray, *op. cit.*, 107.

Those denominations, therefore, that make the wedding service an occasion for the serving of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, for example the Lutheran church, are seriously in error. Further, the conduct of a marriage service is not properly to be regarded as a worship service of the church. When a marriage ceremony is conducted in the church as a particular instance of the more general principle of state authorization, the orientation and focus of thought lies primarily on the parties to the marriage. In such a special case, the word of God may be preached as appropriate, but it would seem that in such instances the wider desiderata of a worship service are not present. That is because the focus of thought is on the particular people involved and not firstly and primarily on God.

The question follows as to what is to be the stated policy and attitude of the church to the marriage ceremony. Our Lord, of course, confirmed the sanctity both of marriage and the marriage ceremony by his attendance at a wedding at which he performed his first miracle of changing the water into wine. And it is an open question in that connection whether the parties to the wedding were or were not godly people. In the present-day complex, the relevant question is whether the parties to the marriage are or are not professing Christians and church members.

It would seem that it would be improper for the church to conduct a wedding ceremony for those who are not professing Christians and members of the church. A principal reason for that conclusion has to do with the possible form of the ceremony itself and, in particular, the nature of the vows or oaths that are sworn by the participants at that time. When the chapter of the *Savoy* on "Lawful Oaths and Vows" was considered by this conference, attention was drawn to the fact that, as the *Savoy* stated it, "The name

of God only is that by which men ought to swear.” It was observed at that time that God himself swore by his own name, and that the statement just made is calling on men to swear by the same name as God himself swore.¹² But the problem has to be addressed that the unregenerate person does not *know* the name of God, and if he does not *know* the name of God how can he *swear* by the name of God? If, on any occasion, he purports to do so, is he not in danger of breaking the third commandment against taking the name of God in vain? The relevance of that problem to a marriage ceremony conducted in the church is that the church thereby, and in particular the officiating church minister, are making themselves parties to the error of the wedding participants. That issue points to the suggestion that the services of the church should not be extended, for purposes of marriage ceremonies, to non-Christian people. That conclusion follows again from the previously stated fact that in the social and culture differentiation of the church from the world as God has established it, marriage is a function of the state and not of the church.

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What we have said regarding the distinction between the church and the world or, in other terms, between the holy and the profane, goes to the further point of asking whether a minister of the church should, in fact, perform a wedding ceremony for non-Christian people. There is reason to conclude against such a procedure. Certainly, the church should not perform a marriage ceremony between a member of the church and a non-member, or, that is, between a regenerate and an unregenerate person. The scriptural data that preclude marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian are clear and are well known.

The biblical data state that “God created man in his own image . . . male and

¹² *Savoy Declaration of Faith*, XXIII:2.

female created he them” (Gen 1:27), and “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” (Gen 2:18). The “good” that is there in view could not be accomplished if Adam were left standing alone. The necessity of the “good” that was projected by God’s creating a helpmate for Adam is not to be understood as addressing primarily any social or psychological need that Adam possessed or might possess. What is at issue is the purpose and objective for which Adam was created. That, in short, is summarized in the terms of what has been frequently referred to as the “creation mandate.” That is clearly stated as “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it and have dominion . . .” (Gen 1:28). It was in order that that mandate could be fulfilled and the projected outcomes realized that Adam was in need of a helpmate. That was, moreover, not simply because of the possibility that, with a helpmate, the procreation of offspring would be possible and that the mandate to “be fruitful and multiply” would be fulfilled. More was at issue. By the creation of Eve, God established one who would be a partner to Adam, in the fullest sense and on the most comprehensive levels, in his God-given tasks of understanding and developing the resources of the world or, that is, in following out the creation mandate. All questions of conjugal rights and privileges within a marriage, therefore, as well as all considerations of mutual assistance and companionship, are to be considered within the scope of, and under the rubric of, the initially-stated obligation of the creation mandate and dominion responsibility.

It is of interest that Adam in his created state was endowed with the offices of prophet, priest, and king. The essence of the prophetic office is that of explanation, and in the discharge of that office Adam was to investigate, understand, and explain the

environment which, as he came to self-conscious awareness, he saw laid out before him. He was to discharge the office of priest by dedicating back to God the results of his discoveries and explanations, aiming thereby to discharge all of his official responsibilities to the glory of God from whose hands he had come. And he was to discharge the office of king by ruling as God's vicegerent over all of reality as he discovered and understood it. When, then, it is said that Eve was created as a helpmate for Adam, it was to the objective that she should be of help to Adam, as a knowledgeable and intelligent assistant, in his work of realizing the goals that have just been described. It is not clear whether that is adequately contemplated in the statement in the chapter of the *Savoy* at present under study when it states that "Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife."

That in the marriage relation the wife, or, as God has said, a helpmate, is to be of assistance in every sphere of the husband's career responsibilities, even if that assistance is mainly that of encouragement, is, of course, clear in what has just been said. But that relationship of responsibilities bears forcibly on the underlying decision to form a marriage union. A man's choice of a wife, for example, must be made as a decision based on a whole-souled realization of mutual capacities of mind as well as emotion. In the case of Christian marriage, for example, whereas it is true on the basis of biblical data that the husband is to guide and expand the horizons of awareness and understanding of the wife, a real compatibility of intellect is to be desired. The greatest severity of loneliness that an individual whose sensitivities to God, his word, and his desiderata for life have been awakened can experience is that induced by a loneliness of intellectual horizon. It is at the same time true that, as may well be the case, the wife possesses a capacity of mind

superior to that of the husband. That would place her under difficulties that she should avoid. She must be careful in such a case to avoid the possibility that she may tend, as a result, to ignore or prevent the husband's necessary role of leadership. Certainly, she should avoid every possibility of causing her husband embarrassment in public. She must accord deference to her husband in all situations.

The facts to which we have just referred point, however, to wider implications that are discoverable in the revealed purpose of God with respect to the world. Involved in what we have said is that, in the created structure of the world, God had in view first, a declared and covenantal purpose and objective that was to be disclosed in widening terms as history progressed. At the same time, God held in view an ordered conception of the means by which those higher and more expanded purposes were to be realized. That conception is clear in the statement that achieving the objective of the glory of God was to hinge on the collaboration between created beings, illustrated at present in the relation of husband and wife. Here we see the complementary relations between actors in the human drama that are to be productive of the ends that God has contemplated and ordained. But again, the fact that God has in ways such as those ordained the means to the end of which his stated purposes are eloquent may be expanded further. In that further expansion, the union and complementary relations that marriage envisages serve as pointers to wider social and cultural relations.

That, now, can be put in fairly straightforward terms. We spoke at the beginning of God's salvific and covenantal-redemptive purposes in the creation of the world. The mystery stands before us that in the determinate council of the Godhead before the foundation of the world a plan was conceived whereby God would redeem and bring to

reconciliation with himself a numbered host of people from among Adam and his fallen posterity. That, the Scriptures eloquently declare, was to be effected by the coming into the world of the Second Person of the Godhead who, having taken a sinless human nature into union with his divine nature, would meet and discharge, as the substitute for his people, all of the necessities of their redemption. Though the contemplation and exposition of those relations demand careful study as they are envisaged in the *Savoy* chapter, we leave unsaid at this point all that is implicit there regarding, first, the significance of the marriage relation for those who are the beneficiaries of the redemption contemplated, and second, the detailed admonitions relative to the nature of the marriage union. Our interest at this point lies, rather, in the nature of the relations between the church and the world of which the marriage relation is a highly significant element. That relation can now be seen as both an intimation of what is involved in social and cultural structures and a means of the practical realization of it.

The church and the world

Marriage, we have seen, is a creation ordinance. The range of its meaning is to be considered under categories of creation, not those of redemption. We have seen, further, that the terms of the ordinance of marriage are, as is the case in each of the creation ordinances, obligatory on all people at all time. That important fact is itself to be interpreted to state that the marriage union between a man and a woman is at all times subject to what God has ordained. That is so in a crucially significant respect. It exists as obligations on those who are God's redeemed people and members of the church, and, notably, those who are not. The relevant biblical reference is to "those whom God hath

joined together” (Matt 19:6). That was so at the beginning. That means that all marriage unions, whether or not they are between Christian people or between persons who, in the world apart from the church, have no regard at all to the law and mandates of God, are subject to what God has decreed in establishing the marriage covenant. The same mandates of indissolubility apply to every marriage, of those outside the church as well as those within it. In short, every marriage union, however and wherever established, is to be understood as an indissoluble union in the eyes of God. It follows from what has been said that godless people of the world, who may have no regard at all for God’s stated laws, are nevertheless themselves, in a marriage relationship, standing in obligation to the law of God.

That, of course, is no different from the comprehensive statement that all men everywhere are subject to the laws of life and conduct that God has laid down. If, in a godless marriage, no regard has been had to the fact that a union of a character ordained by God has occurred, nevertheless obligations to the law of God have thereby been established. What is being said is no different from the statement that all men will be judged in due course as to whether they have consciously and deliberately lived in accordance with the laws of God. Some will stand at the last day as unrighteous, with an eternal destiny of perdition before them. Others will stand before God as righteous by virtue of the forensic righteousness of Christ that has been placed to their account. The crucial point at this stage, and in relation to the laws of God’s instituted ordinance of marriage, is that those who proceed to establish such a union in ignorance of what they are doing in the eyes of God, are nevertheless responsible to God. That is nothing more than the conclusion that ignorance is not an alleviation of guilt.

Conclusion

The starting point of our discussion has been the fact that marriage was instituted by God as a creation ordinance. J. I. Packer, in a very valuable chapter titled “Marriage and Family in Puritan Thought” in his *A Quest for Godliness* states that the Puritans went for their understanding and doctrine of marriage “to Genesis for its instruction, to Ephesians for its full meaning, to Leviticus for its hygiene, to Proverbs for its management, to several New Testament books for its ethic, and to Esther, Ruth and the Song of Songs for illustration and exhibition of the ideal.”¹³ Conjugal love and intimacy is an important part of God’s ordination of the marriage relation, and as Packer has wisely contemplated, a necessary aspect of the “ideal.” Joel Beeke has written a series of four posts on “The Puritans on Marital Love” in which he quotes from Henry Smith (1560–1591): “Unless there is a joining of hearts and a knitting of affections together, it is not marriage in deed, but in show and name, and they shall dwell in a house like two poisons in a stomach, and one shall ever be sick of another.”¹⁴

We have spoken of the office of a wife as a helpmate for the husband. The Puritan Richard Baxter spells out part of the meaning of that concept in arguing that husbands and wives have the responsibility “especially to be helpers of each other’s salvation; to stir up each other to faith, love, obedience, and good works; to warn and help each other against sin and all temptations; to join in God’s worship in the family and in private; to prepare each other for the approach of death, and comfort each other in the hopes of life

¹³ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 263.

¹⁴ Joel R. Beeke, “The Puritans on Marital Love,” Post #1.

eternal.”¹⁵

An interesting citation from Beeke’s posts, quoting from the Puritan William Whately, impresses one as sage advice: “A husband must do his best to see that no one knows his wife’s faults but himself and God. He should be unwilling to voice them to anyone but God, to pray that she may be pardoned and reformed from them. Likewise, a wife must do her best to keep her husband’s struggles and sins to herself as matters of prayer and not gossip. Neither spouse should be surprised by the sins of the other, for each of them is well aware of their own sins. Can it be helpful to uncover faults in public and fling mud in each other’s face? Will this help a husband reform or a wife to repent? And which is more displayed in such a case, the spouse’s faults and weaknesses or the gossip’s unkindness, indiscretion, backbiting, and folly? Does not the family dog behave better than this when it barks at strangers but not at members of the family?”¹⁶

A question remains. We have not expanded at length on the many points of detail contained in chapter 25 of the *Savoy* that are addressed in other papers at this conference. We began by observing that the Creator-creature distinction is to be understood in a particular, and particularly important, way in the fact that marriage is a creation ordinance. But it had to be noted at the beginning that our first parents fell from their initial state of holiness and righteousness by their sin against God. It is sufficient recall at this concluding stage that Adam’s sin was his false assertion of autonomy against God. It is that that demands recall, as it throws its light on the final question we address.

Why is it, we have to ask, that all that has been said about the continuing mandates of the creation ordinance of marriage makes so little impact on the social

¹⁵ Ibid., Post #2.

¹⁶ Ibid., Post #3.

consciousness and receives so little recognition in our contemporary culture? Why is it so blatantly clear that our socio-cultural determinants have so little respect for God's truth incorporated in the biblically mandated requirements of godly marriage? The answer, of course, is that we live in an essentially godless age. The underlying realities that determine that fact are the bequest that accrues to us by the entailment of Adam's sin.

We stated at the beginning that the essence of Adam's sin was his false assertion of autonomy against God. Adam was confronted by contrary claims of God and Satan. It is not necessary to rehearse the details. But at that critical decision-point Adam decided that he would not agree with either claim presented to him, simply on the grounds of the identity of the one making the proposal. Neither God nor Satan would determine the outcome. Adam would decide for himself. And that was the assertion of autonomy. The sequel was, of course, that in his imagined autonomy Adam had made a complete capitulation to Satan. At that point he became the dupe of the devil.

All that is to be said of our first parents' being, knowledge, and ethic from that point on is that it was the complete contrary of what described their initial state. For all people since Adam, for all of his posterity by ordinary generation, their status and conduct are determined by the bequest of Adam's fall. The assumed autonomy of everyman at the present time, the autonomy that prevents his seeing or knowing in any true sense the demands of the righteous law of God, is precisely what was involved in the perfidious act that brought sin into the world. Its implications reside on the levels of man's true identity or essential being, his knowledge and possibilities of knowing, and, it follows, his ethic.

We are interested in man's being, knowing, and behavior, or ontology,

epistemology, and ethics. We have stated that his being is what it is by reason of the darkness of capitulation to Satan. As to man's knowledge and the possibilities of knowing, we have to look at the criteria that are relevant at that point. In essence, it has to be said that at the fall, as the implications of that have continued in the human condition, man lost the true criteria of truth and validity in knowledge that characterized his initial state. Henceforth, man finds his criteria of truth and validity, not in the disclosure that God has made, but within his own assumedly sovereign and autonomous mind, or in the cultural complex that surrounds him. Similarly, the natural man finds his criteria of right behavior within himself as autonomously determined, or again, within the dictates of surrounding culture.

When we reflected at the beginning on the creation ordinance of marriage we saw that because marriage is a creation ordinance the demands and requirements of that ordinance remain obligatory on all people at all times. But at the present time, the criteria for the right conduct that honors those mandates have evaporated in the human mind. They have evaporated or become meaningless for the reasons we have adduced. Man has become the slave of Satan and sin, and proprieties of behavior are thereby rendered necessarily godless.

But that is not all that is to be said. We return to our opening argument that God has set forth in his Son a way of reconciliation with himself, and those who are the beneficiaries of the salvation that God has provided have an enlightened understanding of what he has decreed as mandatory on all levels of being, knowledge, and behavior. Let us give all diligence, then, to understand what God has provided, that in all things and all situations, and particularly in the marriage relation, we may live to his glory.