

“This is one of those books that you wish could be put into the hands of every married couple and those contemplating marriage...If the contents of this book were put into practice, society would become more stable and broken homes would be few and far between.”

—*The Gospel Witness*

“...one of the finest among the flood of such books flowing off the presses...The book [has] a theological depth and seriousness often lacking in non-Reformed books on this subject.”

—*Reformed Herald*

“A book that says many biblical things about sex, children, family, the mystery of marriage. Recommended for laypersons and preachers alike.”

—*The Reformed Journal*

“This book does faithfully reflect the teachings of God’s Word on marriage.”

—*The Banner*

“A pastor, husband, and father speaks of marriage and its relationships in terms that few want to hear today—even in the church.”

—*Moody*

“...there is much to be learned from this book for it touches upon much where the rubber hits the road in marriage. The chapters ‘The Christian Man as Husband’ and ‘The Christian Woman as

Wife' serve as excellent mirrors and may also serve the reader to discover where he or she fails in honouring the special God-designed role in marriage.”

—*Trowel and Sword*

“If ever there is a book which is vital reading for the church in our day, it is this one...This book is essential reading...and particularly should it be part of the staple diet offered to young people contemplating marriage...[This book] challenged my views on the vexed subject of divorce and remarriage...[it] also caused me to re-examine my whole attitude to marriage in general and my own marriage in particular, and to re-appraise my role as husband, lover and head of the family.”

—*British Reformed Journal*

“...Engelsma's book is ideal for any who has an interest in the subject...Ministers, elders, deacons, husbands, wives, parents, young people, and engaged couples, especially engaged couples, should read it. They will do so with life-long profit.”

—*The Tamar Reformed Witness*

“...Engelsma...presents a rich, biblically based view of marriage.”

—*New Oxford Review*

“...Engelsma...provides what may well be the clearest expression of God's heart on the matter of marriage in print today. In simple, readable form, the author sets out the biblical view of marriage.”

—Charles Crisimier III in the *Standard Bearer*

MARRIAGE

The Mystery of Christ and the Church

Third edition

David J. Engelsma



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To my father and mother
and to Ruth

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Preface to the Third Edition

*M*arriage, *the Mystery of Christ and the Church* was born not in the cool atmosphere of theological academia, but in the heat of the pastoral ministry.

Having just graduated from seminary and having just entered upon the pastoral ministry in my first congregation, with no special interest in marriage other than that I had recently married, I found myself, willy-nilly, in a cauldron of congregational discord regarding remarriage after divorce.

The very existence of the congregation seemed to be in jeopardy. To reject the remarriage by Christian discipline threatened the continuing existence of the congregation. To accept the remarriage bid fair to bring down on the church the wrath of God.

Some fifty years later, I keenly remember concluding, not without fear and trepidation, before the face of God in my study, “If we go down, we will go down with the word of God.”

The result was the series of sermons on marriage, divorce, and remarriage that basically became the content of the first part of this book.

The church did not “go down.” She endured the attack on her by Satan, which was also God’s trial of her faith. She emerged with clear, strong conviction concerning the truth of marriage, as did also her pastor.

That was some fifty years ago.

The passing of the years, and in them many struggles as a

minister with difficult marital circumstances attendant on a pastoral ministry, have not weakened my conviction in the slightest concerning the biblical truth of marriage that this book proclaims and defends.

Indeed, my conviction has become stronger.

Marriage, as an unutterably precious and potent ordinance of God, is lifelong. The reality that marriage was designed by the Creator to symbolize, namely, the covenant of God in Jesus Christ with the elect church, demands it. The Bible passages teach it. The stand of the early church confirms it. The Christian family pleads for it. The onlooking, adulterous world requires it, if only as a witness against the world, so that God may be just when he judges.

Strange as the word of this book must seem, not only to the ungodly, but also to the majority of evangelicals, Presbyterians, and Reformed today—a word of sexual purity, marital fidelity, and the keeping of one’s marriage vows to his or her own hurt and loss—it is a word that they almost desperately need to hear. This is the word of God on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, cutting through the babble—the *religious* babble—that is nothing more than the prostituting of holy marriage to the whims, wishes, and will of fornicating, adulterous men and women.

The book is strong medicine. Such medicine is required by the grievous marital sickness of our time. The church that fails to administer this medicine in our day is no servant of the great physician.

The second part of the book, although an integral part of the book’s advocacy of marriage as the mystery of Christ and the church, consists of a brief overview of the New Testament church’s doctrine of marriage, from soon after the apostles to the present day. Not without pain to the author, this part of the book

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necessarily includes sharp criticism of the Reformed tradition, going back to John Calvin.

But the history of marriage doctrine and practice that constitutes the second part of the book also demonstrates that the truth of marriage proclaimed in the first part of the book is by no means lacking in strong support in the history of the church.

—DAVID J. ENGELSMA
Hudsonville, Michigan
November 2014

Preface to the Revised Edition

The main change in this revised edition—and a significant and lengthy change it is—is the addition of a new section consisting of a history of the church’s doctrine of marriage.

This is section two of the new edition and accounts for the added subtitle: *The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History*. The history will serve several purposes in connection with the gospel, or doctrine, of marriage that is the content of section one. First, it will demonstrate that the doctrine of marriage, divorce, and remarriage set forth in section one is not novel. It is, essentially, the doctrine that the early church taught for some one thousand years after the apostles.

Second, it will both acknowledge (regretfully) that the doctrine of marriage set forth in these pages differs from the teaching of the reformers and point out (again regretfully) the error of the reformers’ teaching.

Third, it will confront Protestants, especially those who are evangelical, Reformed, or Presbyterian, with the certain, appalling consequences of a doctrine of marriage that rejects the truth of a lifelong, indissoluble bond. This is the burden of the chapter “Contemporary Lawlessness.” No Christian can be at peace with what he or she sees taking place in the churches and in his or her own family at the end of the twentieth century. It is a scandal. Divorce with the remarriage that inevitably follows is hurtful to the people, especially the children. It is offensive to those outside

the churches. It dishonors the triune God and Father of Jesus Christ. What is worse is that the churches and their theologians are approving the scandal in the name of the triune God and Father of Jesus Christ.

Revision made possible minor, mostly grammatical and stylistic corrections and improvements in the original work: what now becomes section one. The content remains the same. For the most part, even those references that date the first printing of the book (1975) are retained. They do not detract from the instruction. At the very least, they show that a Reformed preacher has his eye on current events, as well as on the timeless, and always timely, word of God.

There is one exception. In the past twenty-odd years, I have come to see clearly that the reason for the wife's departing in 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 is the fornication of her husband. This bears heavily, of course, on the question whether the innocent party may remarry. Indeed, this understanding of the passage is decisive for the question. The observant reader will notice that this development is reflected in chapter 8.

The publisher thought it fitting that a new, revised edition come into the world in appropriate dress. Hence the fresh book design. New subheadings within chapters were supplied by the author.

My desire is that the Spirit of Christ will use the book to strengthen married saints, to instruct the younger generation, and to fight, indeed destroy, without compromise, the other mind on marriage in the churches.

—DAVID J. ENGELSMA
Grandville, Michigan
September 1998

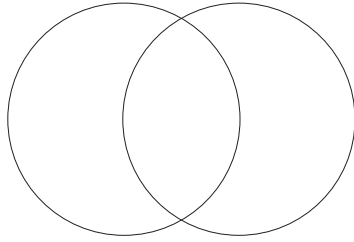
Preface to the First Edition

Before this book was published, it was preached. The contents of the book are, substantially, a series of sermons that were preached on marriage during my pastorate in Loveland, Colorado.

I am convinced that the one great need of God's people regarding marriage is a better knowledge of the word of God. Consequently, this book was born out of the needs of the congregation and out of the wrestlings of the pastorate. The sermons were preached with the practical purpose that the married and youth alike might know and honor God's institution of marriage. The book is published with the same desire. May God use it to glorify himself through a people faithful in marriage.

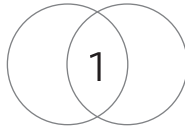
I express thanks to my wife, who encouraged me to prepare the material for publication and who did the typing—proving herself in this, too, a *help*.

—DAVID J. ENGELSMA
South Holland, Illinois
July 1974



Section One

THE BIBLICAL GOSPEL OF MARRIAGE



The Mystery of Marriage

For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall he joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. —Ephesians 5:31–32

The rampant godlessness of our society is indicated by the frequency and ease of divorce and remarriage. Our society makes a mockery of marriage and its vows of fidelity. The state is in the process of removing all legal restraints. We have come to take divorce for granted. It is almost as common as the marriage that preceded it. Nevertheless, the corruption of marriage takes its toll. A price is paid. This corrupting of marriage is the cause of fearful evils that even society cannot ignore or minimize. There is the bitter misery of soul that shatters those who have been unfaithful and that leads to drink, drugs, nervous breakdowns, and even suicide. There is the presence of a lawless breed of young people (with no race excluded), which seriously threatens the very existence of the state itself. The foundation of the state is the home, and the cornerstone of the home is the marriage relation of a man and his wife.

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The evils that corrupt marriage also tend to infect the church. We are susceptible to the mentality and practices of the world. The thermometer of the growing coldness of the church can well be the extent to which she permits marriage to be defiled in her fellowship. For this reason it is necessary that the truth of marriage be preached in the congregation.

Even apart from the strong threat from the world, there are always hardships that trouble married people in the church. Some do not like the Reformed marriage form because it begins on such a gloomy note:

Whereas married persons are generally, by reason of sin, subject to many troubles and afflictions; to the end that you N. and N....may also be assured in your hearts of the certain assistance of God in your afflictions, hear therefore from the Word of God, how honorable the marriage state is, and that it is an institution of God, which is pleasing to Him.¹

However, for this very reason it is a good form. It is realistic, at a time when we are prone to be looking at marriage through rose-tinted glasses. There are “many troubles and afflictions” in marriage—the marriage of believers included. This is another reason we need to hear God’s word concerning marriage.

In addition marriage has been given an important place and function within the church by God. It has a positive, practical significance for the welfare of the congregation of Christ.

¹ Form for the Confirmation of Marriage before the Church, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 306.

Godly marriage and the godly home are the church's strongholds. To maintain these strongholds we must hear and obey God's word on marriage.

In light of these considerations, it is urgent that faithful preachers of the gospel bring God's word on marriage to God's people. It must be God's word that is proclaimed. We may not bring man's wisdom on marital matters to the church. We may not share with her the fine insights into marriage that we have obtained through our extensive experience. For regarding marriage also, the wisdom of men is foolishness with God. But by the grace of the Holy Spirit we must speak the word of God on marriage, as God has revealed it in the scriptures.

The Intimacy of Marriage

God calls marriage the mystery of Christ and the church: "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32).

In Ephesians 5:22–31 the apostle has been giving instruction about the mutual behavior of husbands and wives, taking as the pattern, or standard, the conduct of Christ with regard to the church and the conduct of the church with regard to Christ. One cannot help but notice that this beautiful description of marriage immediately follows the description of the dark and sordid wickedness of verses 3–12: fornication, uncleanness, filthiness, foolish talking, and things done in secret that are a shame even to mention. There the ugly perversion of marriage was exposed and condemned. Here, in contrast, the beautiful truth is displayed and exhorted. Paul has been telling wives and husbands how to live with each other in marriage. Wives are called to submit; husbands are called to love. The standard that he gives for this behavior is the relationship between Christ and the church. Wives must submit

“as the church is subject unto Christ” (v. 24). Husbands must love their wives “even as Christ also loved the church” (v. 25).

Then Paul begins to teach the closeness of man and woman in marriage, again as patterned by the closeness of Christ and the church. This closeness is mentioned in verse 28: “So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.” A man’s wife is part of himself. Therefore, for a man to hate his own wife is as strange as it is for him to hate his own flesh (v. 29). For this is what his wife is: she is part of his flesh. Immediately the apostle declares that this is the case according to the standard of Christ and the church. After he has written, “For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it,” he adds, “even as the Lord the church” (v. 29). The reason the Lord does not hate, but nourishes and cherishes the church is given in verse 30: “For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.” This is to say, we are part of him.

Right at this point Paul quotes from Genesis. Verse 31 of Ephesians 5 is a quotation, almost verbatim, of Genesis 2:24, which reads: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.” This text is the word spoken by God after he had created Eve and presented her to Adam and after Adam had named her. When Adam received his wife from God, he said, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen. 2:23). Then follow the words quoted by Paul in Ephesians 5:31. These are not words that Adam spoke at that occasion, but they are words that God inspired Moses to write down later as his own divine commentary on what had occurred, namely, the institution of marriage. That this is the proper view of Genesis 2:24 is proved by Jesus’ statement in Matthew 19:4–5 that the one who made man and

woman in the beginning said, “For this cause shall a man leave father and mother.”

God’s commentary on marriage teaches the amazing intimacy of the marriage bond. It is fitting that Paul should quote the text that teaches this intimacy of the marriage relationship at that point where he has asserted that a woman is part of a man, just as we are members of Christ’s body.

The intimacy of marriage is shown, first, by the fact that the marriage bond takes precedence over the relationship between parent and child. A man leaves his father and mother for his wife. The relation of parents and child is the closest natural blood tie. More is meant by leaving father and mother than merely getting out of their house. The bond of marriage supersedes the parent-child relationship. It should do this. A man must leave father and mother when he marries, and the same holds for a young woman. If a person fails to leave his parents, perhaps with the connivance of the parents, there will be trouble in the marriage. He is, as the saying goes, still “tied to mother’s apron strings.” Implied in this is the superiority of marriage over the parent-child relationship, particularly in its closeness, its intimacy. This is amazing. For the parent-child relation is strong and close. The child is the blood and flesh of the parents, whereas there is no blood tie between the man and his wife.

The second way God stresses the closeness of the bond of marriage is his use of the word translated as “joined” in Genesis 2:24 and Ephesians 5:31. Literally the word means “to be glued to someone, to stick closely to someone.” It is expressive of the closest possible relationship. A man is glued to his wife so that he sticks to her.

It is especially the declaration “and they shall be one flesh” (Gen. 2:24) that shows the amazing intimacy of marriage. Here is

the astounding thing. Paul recognized this as he looked at Genesis 2:24. He wanted to make sure that we see this also. Therefore, under the guidance of the Spirit, he made a change in the text as he quoted it. In Genesis the word *two* does not appear; we read only, "And they shall be one flesh." What is implicit in the text in Genesis, Paul makes explicit by inserting the word "two": "And they two shall be one flesh." Thus he emphasizes that the intimacy of marriage is such that two become one. It is not even the closeness of two glued closely together, for even in this case there are still two. In marriage there are no longer two, but one. This was Jesus' analysis in Matthew 19:6: "Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh."

It is misunderstanding of the phrase "they two shall be one flesh" to limit it to the bodily oneness of the sexual relationship. This interpretation is mistaken on two counts. First, "one flesh" refers to more than oneness of body. Second, the sexual relationship in marriage not only involves oneness of body but also oneness of soul. "One flesh" refers to the becoming one of the entire nature of the man and the woman. There is oneness of bodies and souls, of thinking and desiring, of hopes and disappointments, of labors and goals. There is oneness of the whole of earthly life; the husband and wife share one life.

When we have said all this, we have still not explained the intimacy of marriage exhaustively. In the end, the reality of the oneness of marriage is incomprehensible. Marriage is mysterious. Just as we do not comprehend the conception of a child, or life itself, so we do not comprehend that two are "no more twain, but one flesh." The inspired writer therefore says in amazement, "There be three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not...and the way of a man with a maid" (Prov. 30:18-19). The reason for the mysterious depths of marriage is

that in marriage God is at work. It is not the case that in marriage a man joins himself to his wife. Rather, he is joined to his wife by another. That other is God. The glue of marriage is God's glue, as the act of applying it is God's act. This is why, as we will see, only God can, and only God may, dissolve the marriage bond. Consequently, a marriage ceremony is a solemn occasion. The solemnity is this: God is making two into one flesh. The deliberate attack upon the solemnity of marriage on the part of some young people today, by marrying barefooted, in slovenly attire, and to the strains of frivolous folk tunes, is part of the general war against marriage as an institution of God.

There are at hand evidences of the amazing intimacy of marriage. One such evidence is the misery of those who separate themselves from their mates, probably in order to unite themselves with others. Even the world notices their "guilt feelings" and their "mental distress." Another indication of the intimacy of marriage is the unique, incommunicable sorrow and pain of the widower or the widow at the death of wife or husband. They simply cannot describe their grief. How does one describe what it is to die in part, but still to go on living?

Marriage as Symbol

In reference now to marriage, particularly from the viewpoint of the amazing intimacy of marriage, Paul says, "This is a great mystery" (Eph. 5:32). He calls marriage a mystery; he calls it a great mystery. We usually designate a *mystery* as something we cannot figure out. Accordingly, we would understand this statement of the apostle to mean that the marriage of a man and a woman has depths that we cannot plumb. However, in scripture the word *mystery* has a distinct meaning. Mystery is God's eternal plan of salvation that is hidden and secret and that man cannot find out

or even imagine. But God has now revealed it in Jesus Christ by the gospel so that we who believe can and do know the mystery. The usage of scripture makes this meaning of mystery clear: “It is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 13:11). Ephesians 1:9 reads, “Having made known unto us the mystery of his will.” A great mystery, therefore, is not a very deep problem, something that is exceedingly puzzling, but it is the salvation of God, which is very marvelous and wonderful.

“But,” someone will object, “the marriage of a man and a woman is not the great salvation of God. And this is what Paul is talking about, for he says, ‘This is a great mystery’” (Eph. 5:32). Our reply is that Paul is not talking about the marriage of a man and a woman, for he goes on to say, “but I speak concerning Christ and the church.” Nevertheless, as he speaks concerning Christ and the church, he still has human marriage in mind. For human marriage is a sign, a divinely ordained symbol, of the relationship of Christ and the church. The underlying reality of marriage is the union of Christ and the church. The fundamental significance of marriage is that it pictures the marriage of Christ and his bride, the church.

Between the Son of God in our flesh, Jesus, and the church, there is the most intimate relationship—so intimate in nature that the two become one. This is the amazing salvation that God planned from eternity and makes known in the gospel. This union of Christ and the church is spoken of in the preceding verses in Ephesians 5. Verse 23 calls Christ the church’s head, and it calls the church his body. Verse 30 says that we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. This is also taught elsewhere in the New Testament. In John 17 Christ prays for the unity of the church, which is, first, our oneness with Christ: “I in them” (v. 23). Paul declares in Galatians 2:20 that “Christ liveth

in me.” Ephesians 3:17 points out that the realization of salvation is “that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.” In this way we are “filled with all the fulness of God” (v. 19). Colossians 1:26–27 is very plain when it says that the mystery hid from ages, but now made manifest to the saints, is “Christ in you.” The union of Christ and the church takes place when we are regenerated by the Spirit. The sign of this union is baptism, for we are baptized into Christ. We experience this union in faith.

There was a foreshadowing of this great mystery in the Old Testament, which presents the relationship between Jehovah and Israel as a marriage. Jehovah was Israel’s husband, and Israel was his wife. Her spiritual faithlessness was adultery (Ezek. 16). Her future perfection is described as betrothal to Jehovah and marriage (Hosea 2). The Song of Solomon vividly sets forth the relationship between Christ and the church in terms of the ecstatic love of marriage. Psalm 45 prophesies the marriage of Christ the king, who is God himself, to a Gentile woman. The Old Testament foretells the mystery of the union of Christ and the church and describes that union as a marriage.

Marriage is a fitting symbol of the relationship between Christ and the church. The woman was not made first, but second. She was made for Adam, and not Adam for her. So also in the counsel of God, not the church, but Christ is first. Christ does not exist for the church, but the church exists for the sake of Christ, to serve and to praise him forever. In the beginning the woman had her origin from the man. Similarly, the church has her origin from Christ. By his atoning blood and by his Spirit and Word, he has created her. Because of the woman’s creation from the man and for the man, she can sustain the intimate relation to him that she has as wife. Genesis 2:24, which speaks of the amazing intimacy of marriage, begins with the word “therefore.” It bases the intimacy

of marriage on the preparation of the woman, as that preparation is recorded in verses 21–23. The same thing is true of the church. The church can be Christ's bride because God has fitted her for Christ in his eternal counsel and because God has formed her by Christ's own Spirit. Finally, marriage is an intimate union. In marriage man is male and female (Gen. 1:27); the two are one. In the mystery of salvation, Christ is the head, and the church is the body. The two are one.

A High Doctrine of Marriage

Since we see marriage as the mystery of Christ and the church, we have a high estimation of marriage: not of my marriage or your marriage or even believers' marriages, but of the institution of marriage. Any estimation of marriage that lacks this regard for it as the God-ordained symbol of Christ and the church is too low. Some in the world may still claim to honor marriage, but lacking this regard they dishonor it. Inevitably, every kind of corruption must ensue.

We are called to regulate our marriages according to the standard of Christ and the church. This is Paul's teaching in Ephesians 5.

It is this that will make for true happiness in marriage. But happiness is not the main thing. In fact, adherence to God's standard for marriage will mean severe affliction for some. Some are eunuchs for the kingdom's sake (Matt. 19:12). The main thing is that we remain faithful to God and to his law governing the institution of marriage.

As a result of our high estimation of marriage, we are convicted daily of our great sinfulness in the matter of our marriages. We are unable to flatter ourselves because we treat our wives or husbands as well as, or better than, most people treat their mates.

The question by which we are judged is, "Did you today behave toward your wife as Christ behaves toward his church?" Or as wives, the question must be faced, "Did you live with your husband as the church is called to live with Christ?" Thus our high estimation of marriage has the effect that we confess our sins and shortcomings in marriage and that we repent.

At the same time the marriage of Christ and the church provides us with a goal toward which we press in our marriages. We strive to pattern our marriages after it. We struggle to reflect in our earthly marriages the heavenly one between Christ, the bridegroom, and the church, his bride. This is the glory and beauty of marriage.

Only believing children of God can accomplish this. Only they know and care about marriage as the symbol of the union of Christ and the church. Only they have Christ dwelling within them so that they are able to fulfill their calling in marriage, whether by loving their wives or by submitting to their husbands. Only they respond, willingly and joyfully, to the word of Jesus Christ: magnify me and the great mystery of my marriage with my people in your marriages.