WHAT IS MARRIAGE, REALLY?

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What is Marriage, Really?

From Two Marriage Sermons On Hebrews 13:4 and Ephesians 5:22–33

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Foreword

As this brief work on marriage goes to press, the general acceptance of the uniqueness and desirability of a stateestablished and protected life-long union between a man and a woman seems to be in significant decline. Cohabitation apparently has become the norm as reportedly almost 75 percent of women under the age of thirty in the United States have lived with a partner outside of marriage. The average age of men and women who do get married continues to climb, in 2013 the numbers being 26.5 years for women and 28.5 for men-an all time high. The divorce rate, on the other hand, is down from an all time high of 50% in the 1980's but is still over 40%. Additionally, homosexual marriage continues to gain greater acceptance both socially and legally. The state of Minnesota, for example, recently joined 13 other states in opening marriage to homosexuals while the Supreme Court of the United States has struck down a California law prohibiting same-sex marriages. In Europe, 22 of 51 countries currently recognize some sort of same-sex partnership.

What has happened to marriage? Perhaps the simplest answer is that people have forgotten, or have never learned, what marriage truly is. Growing up in an age of cohabitation, divorce and homosexuality, how could they be expected to know? Somewhat surprisingly, in Martin Luther's day—the 16th century—the people of Europe found themselves struggling with the concept of marriage as well. At that time, the ideal life was seen to be a life without any type of sexual relations at all. The celibate life of the monk and the nun was lauded, while marriage was viewed as a life of sinful desire and lust. And back then, as now, children were an issue, with their birth not being heralded as good news, but simply as an outcome, a necessity of the marital life, and presenting another mouth to feed. Surprisingly, laws of inheritance and other social pressures presented cohabitation as a viable and desirable option then as now.

So the text of this work. It is a compilation of two sermons which Luther preached on marriage, one on Hebrews 13:4 and the other on Ephesians 5:22-33. That first appeared together as a single publication in 1536. Here Luther lays down three basic principles for a good and happy marriage. The first is to recognize that marriage is not created by man, but by God. A second is that marriage is meant for man's benefit, for his comfort and well-being. The third: Marriage takes place within the greater context of another marriage, that is, the marriage of Christ and his Church. The Afterword contains a detailed account of the publication history of this work, along with the social and theological context in which it should be understood.

Thanks are due to Nathan and Sheila Rinne, Sue Ulfeng, and my wife Kristi who read rough drafts of this work and offered many helpful suggestions for its improvement. Thanks also are due to the Confessional Lutheran Education Foundation for providing significant financial support toward its printing. Roxanne Johnson (formerly Nelson) once again did a wonderful job on the cover, and here special mention must also be given to Scott Krieger. He has worked tirelessly on all of the books of this series, selflessly embracing the tedium of obscurities such as callout box placement and header and footer format. Without his efforts, these works would have never made it to press, nor would the soon-to-be released electronic editions ever have been made available! For his continuing labors I am nothing but grateful and express my most humble and heartfelt thanks!

Paul Strawn

GOD'S GIFT TO US

I have often preached and written about the institution of marriage and the married life. Now I want to say a few things in its honor.

Marriage is one of the most necessary topics to be preached in the church. All Christians should know what marriage is.

Although marriage is the most common institution of human life, it is, in fact, the most honorThe church is Christ's holy people

able one. All other institutions exist and are sustained by marriage.

This is why the holy apostles write about marriage and diligently admonish us concerning marriage in their letters (e.g., in 1 Cor. 7; Eph. 5; Col. 3; 1 Peter 3). In Hebrews 13, for example, the Apostle Paul states:

Let marriage be held in honor by all, and the marriage bed be kept undefiled. Yet God will judge the fornicators and adulterers.

In this verse the apostle is not addressing all people everywhere. Instead, he is teaching baptized Christians what they are to think about marriage.

Christians should not think that marriage is insignificant. They should certainly not treat marriage in a superficial or shameful way. This is what the world does now and has always done.

But up until now, the same thing was happening within Christianity! Virginity was greatly praised as the ideal, while marriage was disparaged as utterly worthless! By doing such a thing, it was thought that somehow the world would be made chaste. Instead, the world has simply become filled with the disgrace of fornication.

Christians should not disparage marriage. Rather, they should learn to honor and praise marriage as a Christian and blessed institution of human life.

Christians should also keep the institution of marriage free from fornication and wickedness. This is what the apostle calls *holding marriage in honor and keeping the marriage bed undefiled*.

But what else is meant by these words? The first thing is that everyone should be convinced of the fact that God himself has ordained and established the institution of marriage and all similar institutions. So understandably the most-desired skill of married life is this: To learn to think of marriage according to the honor given it by God.

What is that honor? That God himself established the institution of marriage and speaks of it in his Word.

But marriage appears to be a common every-day experience. Each Christian thinks he can figure it out for himself.

Who needs a teacher for marriage? What Christian

does not know that the institution of marriage was established by God in the Garden of Eden? That marriage was confirmed by God outside of Eden? Moses tells us all about it in Genesis 1, 2 and 9!

Who needs a teacher for marriage?

I myself have read these passages frequently and have even memorized them. Still, this most-desired skill of married life I have not yet mastered. Even though I am an old doctor of theology, I must not be ashamed to learn about marriage daily.

The words of Scripture about marriage are learned quickly. There it states plainly that marriage is an institution established by God.

Yet the main thing here is this skill to which I am referring in my own marriage and all others: We should be certain, and not doubt that the institution of marriage has been created, ordained and established by God. In fact, we should consider this institution to be God's gift to mankind.

^{1.} What is the most common institution of human life?

- 2. Why do the apostles write about marriage?
- 3. What should Christians learn to do in view of marriage?
- 4. From what should the institution of marriage be kept free?
- 5. What honor does God give marriage?
- 6. In view of marriage, of what should the Christian be certain?