

Holy Matrimony: A Christological Model

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Marriage is a natural order that is good in itself but is not as such holy. It becomes holy when it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer (I Tim 4:3-5; Apol XXIII.30-31). The Christian rite of marriage makes ordinary marriage holy matrimony. It turns a natural estate into a holy estate. Thus in the benediction that concludes the LCMS rite for Holy Matrimony the newly married couple is not just blessed but also sanctified, so that they can live together in holy love. Christian marriage therefore needs to be kept holy and free from sexual pollution and defilement that desecrate its holiness (1 Thess 4:3-7; Heb 13:4).

The foundation for that holy order is provided by the relationship between Christ the heavenly bridegroom and his holy bride the church. This view of marriage as a holy estate adds something vital to all other views which are all equally open to abuse by the frustrating struggle for sexual power. St Paul actually offers this as a solution to the perennial battle of the sexes in Ephesians 5:22-33. He presupposes that the experience of disappointment and hurt in marriage sets up a vicious, passive-aggressive cycle in which husbands withdraw into undemonstrative silence and wives treat them with disrespect by nagging them. For sex to work well as mutual self-giving husbands need to give themselves wholeheartedly and demonstrably in love to their wives. But most men find it hard to offer themselves to their wives like that, for fear of manipulation and rejection or the threat of loss of sexual power and control that undermines their masculinity and virility. They are simply too unsure of themselves to give of themselves simply, freely, and reliably. For sex to work well for them in marriage, wives need to

have reliable husbands who take responsibility for their welfare and their marriage, emotionally steady husbands who actually show that they love them and cherish them, faithful husbands who exercise spiritual headship. With such husbands they can relax physically and surrender emotional control because they feel sexually safe and beautiful, cherished and cared for.

But when husbands become withdrawn and cold and sexually insensitive, their wives become dissatisfied and disillusioned and increasingly critical of their husbands. They lose respect for their husbands, despise them, and hit back at them by putting them down in private and, even worse, shaming them publically. Since this undermines the confidence of their husbands, they compensate by emotional withdrawal or chauvinist self-assertion. That in turn produces a domineering and insubordinate wife. It creates a vicious circle that turns marriage into a battlefield, the fabled battle of the sexes. It invites Satan into the bedroom and allows him to mess with them sexually and spiritually.

In Eph 5:22-33 Paul offers an antidote to that malady for those who are Christians and therefore open to sexual liberation through Jesus Christ in the holy matrimony. Two key terms in this passage need to be clarified to forestall misunderstanding and its misapplication. Subordination means fitting in with the God-given order of marriage, like the stance of a woman in ball room dancing or the role of a player in a football team, an order in which the husband is the head and both husband and wife are coordinated with each organically. Headship describes responsible, self-sacrificial leadership that coordinates the operation of the marriage as a cooperative partnership, like the working of the body with its many parts.

In the holy order of marriage a wife and a husband are both equally ruled by Christ, since they are both equally members of his body. Christ does not dominate the church; he rules the church by loving her and giving himself for her so as to unite her with himself in baptism and to share his status and glory as God's Son with all its members. They receive their status and worth and beauty from him. So in holy matrimony the rule of power is replaced by the rule of self-giving love.

By the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit husbands are taught and empowered to give themselves graciously and demonstrably, in word and deed, to their wives, just as Christ gives himself to them. They nourish their wives by meeting their need for physical tenderness and considerate affection and by cherishing them as God's gift to them and fellow saints with them (1 Pet 3:7). They take pride in their wives, just as Christ takes pride of the church and glories in the church as his lovely bride. They regard them appreciatively as Christ regards them, beautiful and holy, without spot, wrinkle, or any blemish. Most of all they exercise their holy headship by praying for their wives.

By the guidance and direction of Holy Spirit wives are taught and empowered to love their husbands with due respect for them and in willing subordination to them. This is not the fearful submission of slaves to their master or oppressed people to a tyrant but the happy bodily self-entrustment of a lover to her beloved, like the church to Christ. By that kind of respectful subordination of a Christian wife to the spiritual headship of her Christian husband both husband and wife are freed from the need for self-assertion and struggle for sexual power in their marriage.

This Christological basis for holy matrimony takes a married couple out of themselves and beyond themselves. It does not provide them with an ideal, human form of marriage for them to emulate. Rather the ideal model for marriage is found outside marriage in the union of Christ the heavenly bridegroom with his holy bride. It is received as a gift from him, something granted to them as their marriage is sanctified daily by the word of God and prayer and weekly by their participation in the divine service. And that is a great mystery which is open to all Christian couples. It is experienced by them, more and more fully, as they, by faith, are drawn together into Christ and share in his holy love.