

Marriage as a Natural Order

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Marriage is not just a personal, emotional sexual relationship between two persons. It is a state of being, a natural estate, part of the natural order which transmits and fosters human life. As such it houses a man and woman and makes them husband and wife. It provides them with the proper context for their full sexual development as complementary persons who, together, become one flesh as a result of the sexual union.

By marriage I participate in a given order which is biological and social, the estate of matrimony. Just as a plant needs the right environment to flourish and reach its full potential, so a couple needs a place where they can be at home with each other bodily in the natural world, produce children in physical safety, and grow together in a fruitful bodily symbiosis. Thus marriage is part of the given ecological order in which every living creature has its niche and its part to play in the web of life, the natural order created by God as described in Genesis 1. There marriage is envisaged as part of God's cosmic order, the order that sustains all life on earth, an order in which animals and humans are given the power to reproduce by sexual intercourse. There marriage with its union of a man and a woman made in God's image stands under God's life-giving blessing at the apex of the ordered world that God has created. In this view marriage relates two persons of the opposite sex with each other in three ways: bodily in the biological order, personally in two separate families as part of the social order, and communally in the political order.

What then is marriage from this ecological point of view? It is the way of life by which we participate in a given order of being, like adulthood or parenthood, an dynamic order that carries us along as we go along with it and fit in with it, like ball room dancing with a partner to the rhythm of music. This order not only coordinates sexual activity but helps to establish a dynamic, complementary relationship with different roles and responsibilities all directed toward a common goal of sexual companionship and sexual reproduction. By providing freedom within set limits and space for the growth in an ordered sexual relationship, it creates a balance between engagement and disengagement, intimacy and self-possession, union and separation, interdependence and independence. It sets times and seasons for consolidation, change, and development in tandem with each other. Above all else, it is not an order for control but for blessing, an order for the reception, transmission, and nurture of human life on earth.

This order provides rewards and benefits, satisfaction and fulfilment, peace and good health to those who fit in with it and play their given part in it according to their natural social location and its given responsibilities. It benefits those who do not violate and pollute it sexually. They are enriched by it and promote it as they give of themselves appropriately to their spouse in the stages and seasons of their union. In it they can truly become one flesh, a true husband or wife with each other. This order stage-manages the course of their convivial relationship in its gradual, organic development over the course of time.

The order of marriage also exacts penalties and detriments, dissatisfaction and frustration, conflict and ill health on those who flout it and twist it to get what they want from it. It turns on those who pollute it sexually. Displaced from it, they wither and dry

up. They become sexually disappointed as they refuse to submit to its requirements.

What's more, the pollution spreads further than the couple. It disrupts their families, their society, and even their environment, as is described most graphically in Leviticus 18:5, 24-29 where God declares that the violation of his life-giving sexual ordinances not only pollutes the people who live in a land but the land itself.

We would do well to present marriage as a life-giving, life-sustaining natural order to a generation that is captivated by ecological order and afraid of ecological chaos. Like the natural environment, marriage needs to be kept fresh and green and clean for human life to flourish on earth. For me the best summary of this view of marriage is given in the German Lutheran congregational catechism: ***Marriage is a life environment (Lebensraum) for a man and a woman, which is willed and given by God... It is a pattern of life (Lebensform) which gives support and shape (Halt und Gestalt) to their common life and love...It provides a safe place (Geborgenheit) and creates its own magnetic field (Kraftfeld). Its order (Ordnung) cannot simply be equated with the love between a man and a woman, yet it does shield their love. In it husband and wife are not only united with each other but are also at home (zu Hause) in their marriage. Marriage is in itself an order (Ordnung) in which bodily values come into their own as they are inextricably interwoven with spiritual values*** (Horst Reller, Herman Müller, & Martin Voigt, *Evangelischer Gemeindekatechismus*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1979, 247).

This conviction that marriage is part of the natural order for human life on earth is nothing new. It is a common, ancient view which was not just derived from the Scriptures. Thus in arguing for the marriage of priests Melancthon combines the

philosophy of Aristotle with Biblical theology when he claims: “the union of male and female is a matter of natural law. For where nature is not changed it is necessary for that order with which God has endowed nature to remain; it cannot be changed by human laws...it is an order divinely stamped on nature” (Apol XIII § 9, 12). That does not just apply to the marriage of priests, but also to its extension to same sex couples. It will not work as they wish because it violates the natural order.