*Ethics of Sex* is a remarkable book in that it not only contains moral analysis of standard subjects like contraception and marriage, but also it addresses cutting-edge issues such as transgenderism and disorders of sexual development. What is more impressive, however, is the focus of this book—*Ethics of Sex* is biblically faithful, theologically sound, and above all, Christ-centered. While the authors responsibly draw from fields such as science and psychology, they constantly return to the cross, emphasizing themes such as forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. Christians across denomination lines will appreciate this book for its winsome style, pastoral tone, and Kingdom focus.

—David W. Jones, PhD, Professor of Christian Ethics, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Our freewheeling, libertine age has fallen abysmally short in its stewardship of one of God’s most precious, delightful, and mysterious gifts, our sexuality. In profound concord, yet without redundancy, the authors of these essays provide informed, convicted comment and godly counsel on a variety of topics often avoided in discussions of sexual ethics. They remind us as well that in their conjugal relationship, faithful wedded couples confess the Christ, who is coming for His Body and Holy Bride, even as those chaste and celibate in Christ also share in His love that will never end. Highly recommended to all, it should be included in every pastor’s and congregation’s library.

—Rev. Dr. Thomas V. Aadland, Dean of the Theological Faculty, Matongo Lutheran Theological College
While teaching at a Christian university for fourteen years, I continue to be amazed at how student attitudes are impacted by public opinion. Abortion used to trigger the most heated discussions in my classrooms. Now it seems that any critique of LGBTQ lifestyles receives the strongest push-back. Contraception, however, continues to produce the most bewildered looks. I believe *Ethics of Sex* provides two important elements for moral decision-making: pertinent facts about each issue and biblical ethical standards that ought to guide our conduct. I strongly endorse this book for use in ethics courses at high schools, colleges, and seminaries.

—**Rev. Kevin E. Voss, DVM, PhD, FCA, Associate Professor of Philosophy; Director, Concordia Center for Bioethics, Concordia University Wisconsin**

*Ethics of Sex* is a necessary resource to the Church; something that will help open dialogue around topics that are far too often ignored.

—**Rev. Bart Day, Executive Director, The Office of National Mission, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod**

The collection of essays in *Ethics of Sex* addresses the questions that our young people simply can’t help but ask, giving them the biblical and practical response that they both need and want, while not ignoring the science of the day. The world around us is certainly not shy to present its views. The Church must be at least equal to the task. What a complete joy this book will be for all who read and discuss its contents as we seek to proactively tackle together the issues that we face on topics related to marriage and sexuality in the years to come.

—**Rev. Marcus T. Zill, LCMS Director of Campus Ministry & LCMSU**
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“Ethics” in contemporary usage may have negative connotations. It is not that ethics are seen as unimportant or obsolete, but that they are something of a necessary evil. Ethics prohibit. Certain workplace behaviors are prohibited in order to maintain a pleasant, productive environment. Rules and laws exclude inappropriate, bad, or wicked behavior and sanction violations with punishments.

The ethics of sex today are viewed no differently. In fact, negative perspectives of ethics may be most intensified in the realm of sex. Michel Foucault observed that Western sexuality in general is defined by the restrictive coercion of prohibition. Such prohibition is purely negative, forbidding the exploration and expression of sexual desire that is outside of heterosexual monogamy. By consequence, a person is restricted so that he cannot express the sexual fullness that is his natural right. By restricting his sexuality, his very being and existence are restricted.1

Yet, Christians have always properly opposed such a restrictive way of thinking about ethics. To be sure, God forbids all kinds of thought, speech, and behavior in the Scriptures. However, these prohibitions are derivative from and supportive of what is true, good, proper, and fulfilling for human life. The Law of God is first of all His eternal good will, which includes His desire for human flourishing. This flourishing begins with salvation in Christ and always finds its vitality in it, while also including the life and activity of those who are saved in Christ.

Like all Christian ethics, then, sexual ethics are deeply and inherently positive in their expectation for human life. Prohibitions serve as a kind of limit that directs us back to the delight and richness of life lived in accordance with the will of God. It never goes without saying that, in this life, no person lives perfectly in accordance with the will of God. For times when we fall short, we are not left only with prohibitions, but with the mercy and salve of God’s great compassion in Christ. Receiving this great compas-

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INTRODUCTION

sion, we are renewed again to live as the Spirit strengthens us in the pattern of the divine life, in accordance with the flourishing God has set before us. Although our flourishing this side of heaven is never perfect, it is presented to us as a way of life in which we can delight while we remain here.

The essays in this volume offer an account of sexual ethics that embraces the positive and flourishing nature of sex. Many of the essays are adapted from topics at the “Taboo” National LCMS Campus Ministry Conference held at St. Louis University January 5–7, 2015. Both the title of this conference and some of the limits set forth in these essays highlight the prohibitive character of ethics. However, the prohibitive character serves to direct us back to a way of life in harmony with the Lord’s created order, an order that bears fruit in intimacy, compassion, love, and joy. Ultimately, these essays invite us to attend again to the way that Christ’s love for His Church works forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and new life, not only in the area of ethics, but in every way. Good sexual activity reflects Christ’s love for His Church; Christ’s love for His Church forgives sexual sin and restores us to the fellowship of the divine life reflected by sexual relations.

In “Male and Female Sex Differences,” Cynthia Lumley takes us not only through what it means to be created male and female but also through an overview of the physiological processes of sexual development. She recognizes that, in a fallen world, sexual development may not always manifest in a simply binary fashion, but that our sexual identity as male or female finds its healing and perfection in our baptismal identity in Christ.

Christopher Mitchell in “What Is Marriage?” presents a theology of marriage based on sexual difference in creation, but also in view of marriage as a type of Christ’s love for His Church. The self-sacrificial love of Christ and the Church’s faithful reception of this love exemplify and characterize human marriage, and also become the way of forgiveness and healing when and where marriages struggle or fail. In view of this theology of marriage, David Kind demonstrates the scriptural opposition to polygamy in view of contemporary practices, such as polyamory and spouse swapping.

In view of the procreative character of sexual relations, Donna Harrison and Richard Stuckwisch address the question of contraception, the former from a scientific perspective, the latter from a theological and pastoral perspective. Harrison explores especially the physiological effects of artificial
contraception, raising concerns not only over the suppression of ovulation and restricting the possibility of conception but also over the hindering of the implantation of already conceived embryos in the uterus, leading to abortion. Stuckwisch presents the married life as one open to receiving children as gifts of God. Reminding us of the vocations of husband and wife, father and mother, he directs us to the joy we have in serving each other accordingly, and to trusting in the care and provision of our heavenly Father for the nurture of children.

Contemporary perspectives on sexual ethics have been shaped by sex education, and Matthew Rueger explains the way the Church’s acceptance of secular standards for sex education has injured modesty and the intimacy of sex. He challenges the conventional wisdom that detailed knowledge of sexual relations is important at an early age and suggests as an alternative that children learn from parents or parental figures what is needed as they develop, and not in a classroom setting that desensitizes children’s natural modesty.

Modern sex education has sometimes encouraged the view that masturbation is acceptable and can even be encouraged. Benjamin Mayes revisits the scriptural understanding of masturbation and offers pastoral suggestions for forgiveness, healing, and self-control.

Tom Eckstein and Robert Weise address the questions of homosexuality and transgenderism, respectively, giving a thorough account of the biblical teaching on these issues in view of sex as a reflection of Christ’s love for His Church. At the same time, recognizing the strong temptations of many in these areas, they offer pastoral encouragement and reorientation to the Scriptures for addressing questions along these lines.

The final chapter explores the theology of sex and its close relationship to love, especially as exemplified by Christ in His love for the Church. Treating foundational texts in Genesis 1–2, Song of Songs, Matthew 19, Ephesians 5, and elsewhere, the essay emphasizes the positive view of sex presented in Scripture as a contrast to the debilitating practices of satisfying mere sexual desire. The essay also draws on recent research in psychology and neurochemistry that complements the scriptural understanding.

Gifford A. Grobien
Commemoration of St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons
June 28, 2016
What is marriage? Answering that question on the basis of Scripture establishes a foundation for the theology and practice of sexual ethics. In short, marriage is a divine institution, a holy estate created by God to enflesh the great mystery of Christ’s union with His Bride and Body, the Church. This article will start with the protology, Christology, and eschatology of the marriage theme, drawing on passages from the beginning, “middle,” and end of Scripture, then turn to how marriage might be (or has been) called a sacrament, type, prophetic sign, and vocation. After considering divorce, a pastoral conclusion will be offered.

Even aside from Scripture, the natural knowledge of God, attested by the human conscience and general revelation in creation, supports what seems to be an almost universal recognition, not only by adherents of other religions but even by the most strident of pagans, that sexual intimacy transcends ordinary human activity and somehow involves the sacred, contact with the divine, even a mode of worship. Hence marriage is customarily conducted by some kind of representative of a higher authority in a place deemed hallowed (even if only by natural beauty) and with some manner of liturgy in a communal setting.

**Divine Institution**

Genesis 1 and 2 record the establishment of marriage by God, and even though those chapters take place before the fall into sin (ch. 3), marriage remains the divine institution depicted therein. In Genesis 1:26–28, in one of the first unmistakable revelations of the Trinity (“Let Us make . . . Our . . . Our”), God creates man as male and female and inaugurates marriage.

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1 Here and throughout this essay, unless otherwise stated, the author speaks of “marriage” as the exclusive (monogamous, faithful) lifelong union of one man and one woman, and refers to a “husband,” “wife,” or “spouse” in such a marriage.


3 In the sexualized pagan culture of modern America, this is evident in popular sacrilegious songs ranging from “Closer (to God)” by Nine Inch Nails (1994) to “Take Me to Church” by Hozier (2013).
as the means by which mankind will fulfill His mandate to propagate and subdue the earth. Then the close-up of that event in the Garden of Eden provided in the following chapter elaborates that the woman was built from the side of Adam, taken from his own flesh, and that in marriage the original unity is surpassed as the two become one flesh (2:22–24).

Immediately after the fall into sin, God issues the promise of salvation through the Seed to be born of the woman (3:15), and (marital) procreation will be the means of continuance for the Protevangelium until the advent of the (betrothed) Virgin Mary’s Son, who crushes Satan and redeems mankind from the curse.

Thus marriage cannot be confined to the order of creation (First Article of the Creed) or civil order (“left-hand kingdom”) since it serves a vital role in the accomplishment of God’s redemption, preservation, and extension of His Church (Second and Third Articles of the Creed; “right-hand kingdom”). This is evident when marriage is a means through which God brings about salvation.

The Great Sacramental Mystery

Ephesians 5 reveals the Christological basis and intent of marriage. The relationship between husbands and wives is (to be) patterned after that between Christ and His Church. Yet, Paul goes beyond saying that henceforth marriage is (to be) an imitation of the relationship Christ has now established with His Church through His sacrificial death and resurrection (in the order of redemption). He cites Genesis 2:24 in such a way as to intimate that in the order of creation, marriage was originally insti-

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4 The Trinity is the Father, Son, and Spirit in eternal union. Genesis 1–2 leaves open the possibility that the Tri-unity of the one God may, in some way, set the pattern for the unity of male and female in marriage. Thomas Winger, Ephesians: Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 618–19, plausibly explains the citation of Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:31 by noting that the Son left His heavenly Father and distanced Himself from His mother (the Virgin Mary) in order to cleave to His wife (the Church). Some other attempts, however, to develop analogies between marriage and the Trinity have strayed into heresy; see Mark W. Elliott, The Song of Songs and Christology in the Early Church [AD] 381–451 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), passim.

5 See Genesis 3:15; the patriarchal promises (Genesis 12:1–3; 18:18; 22:17–18; 26:3–4; 28:13–14); Romans 16:20; Galatians 3.

6 The Old Testament genealogies demonstrate that marriage preserved and enlarged the Old Testament Church until the advent of the Seed. Marriage also plays a role in the preservation and extension of the New Testament Church, perhaps most clearly as couples bear children, bring them to Holy Baptism, and raise them in the faith (often through Christian schools) to become the next generation of the Church’s members and leaders.

7 That God can and has accomplished salvation through marriage is a historical truth evident in Scripture, not an assertion that marriage itself is a sacrament or means through which God promises to bestow the forgiveness of sins. As scriptural examples, the marriage of a woman is key to the accomplishment of salvation in three Old Testament wisdom books. Through Ruth’s marriage she became a progenitor of the Son of David (Ruth 4:17; Matthew 1:5). Esther’s marriage to King Ahasuerus enabled her to persuade him to save the Judeans. In the Song of Songs, the Shulammite’s marriage to Solomon embodies the salvific love that is stronger than death and is “the flame of Yah” (8:6). In the New Testament, St. Paul may allude to such Old Testament passages, and certainly to Genesis 3:15, when, in his apostolic teaching about Christian women, he declares that the woman “will be saved through childbearing” (σωθήται διὰ τίς τεκνογονίας, 1 Timothy 2:15).
The relationship between husbands and wives is to be patterned after that between Christ and His Church.

Ephesians 5:21–33 is laden with sacramental language, most clearly the baptismal “washing of water with the Word” (Ephesians 5:26) made possible by His giving up of Himself for her (5:25). The context of His death, His feeding and nourishing of her (5:29) alludes to His giving of His flesh as true food and His blood as true drink (John 6:55). In Ephesians 5:22–27, Paul focuses on the wife and Church as “Bride.” This hints at partially realized eschatology. But in Ephesians 5:28–31, his emphasis is on the wife/Church as the “Body” of the husband/Christ. The transition to “body” facilitates his sacramental language in these verses, both for Baptism, in which the baptized is bodily washed with water as the Word is spoken, and for the Lord’s Supper, wherein the communicant receives the true body
and blood of Christ. It is through these Means of Grace (Word, Baptism, Supper) that the Church enters into her betrothal to Christ and is sustained as His Bride and Body until the wedding supper and consummation of the marriage upon the return of Christ (Revelation 19–22).

The Early Church Father Augustine drew on Ephesians 5:21–33 (also John 19:34–37 and possibly 1 John 5:6–8) to draw a sacramental comparison between the creation of Eve from Adam and the creation of the Church through the Sacraments of Christ. The Greek term μυστήριον, “mystery,” which Paul applies to the union between Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5:32, was commonly translated into Latin as sacramentum, and that probably facilitated Augustine’s association between the Sacraments and the marriage motif:

And since the Lord has enlightened us through the apostle, to show us what we were in search of, by this one sentence, “The two shall be one flesh; a great mystery concerning Christ and the Church;” [Ephesians 5:31–32] we are now permitted to seek Christ everywhere, and to drink wine from all the water-pots. Adam sleeps, that Eve may be formed [Genesis 2:21]; Christ dies, that the Church may be formed. When Adam sleeps, Eve is formed from his side; when Christ is dead, the spear pierces His side [John 19:34], that the mysteries [sacramenta, “Sacraments,” referring to the “blood” and “water” in John 19:34] may flow forth whereby the Church is formed.

13 For the Supper, see, e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:16–17; 11:23–27. The point above is supported by additional passages such as 1 Corinthians 6:9–20. There the basis for Christian sexual ethics is that the Christian has been “washed” (bodily in Baptism), “sanctified,” and “justified” (6:11); therefore “the body is not for sexual immorality” (6:13), but instead is “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (6:19). Through baptismal union with Christ and reception of His body and blood in the Supper, Christians are “members of Christ” in body and spirit (6:15–17). Sexual immorality severs that holy union by desecrating the body and uniting the flesh to an unlawful partner (6:9, 16, 18; note the quotation of Genesis 2:24 in 1 Corinthians 6:16).

14 This author is not sure which hermeneutical term might be best to characterize Augustine’s exegesis, and hence what term might be applied to marriage in his view. Perhaps an “analogy” is best for his method of figuration, although “typology” or marriage as a “sacrament” might also be possible.

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL CONSUMMATION

The first advent of Christ “fulfills” the promises latent in the Old Testament, including the sacramental (“one flesh,” Ephesians 5:31) union of Christ and His Church, which is the profound mystery embodied in Christian marriage. At His second advent, Christ “consummates” His relationship with His Church and brings to completion the purpose of Christian marriage. Revelation 19 envisions the wedding supper of the Lamb, and then in Revelation 21 the Church, the holy “Bride” (nunphē, 21:2), finally becomes Christ’s “wife” (21:9).

A central aspect of marriage, then, is the eschatological tension between the “now” (what we already have in Christ) and the “not yet” (fully realized only at the consummation). The Church is the virgin Bride now “betrothed” to Christ, but in the present era she risks forfeiting her place in the future marriage. Seductive dalliance in false doctrine and engagement in syncretistic worship lead to infidelity and adultery. With “divine jealousy” the apostle Paul betrothed the Church in Corinth “to one husband . . . as a pure virgin to Christ,” but feared that “as the serpent deceived Eve,” she might be seduced away from Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2–3). In the present era, then, the Church must guard her “virginity” (both her purity of faith and her sexual behavior), lest she be excluded from the marriage at Christ’s return. This is the main theme of the parable of the wedding (Matthew 22:1–14) and the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1–13), as they are applicable both to individual Christians and to the corporate Church.

This eschatological tension is vital for sexual ethics. Since “the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:31), those who are

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Jesus states that after the resurrection the redeemed “neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Matthew 22:20; see also Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34–36). The earthly purpose of human marriage will have been completed and thus the institution shall end. Yet this does not imply that marriage and conjugal relations in this life are somehow sinful unless they serve the purpose of procreation (as held by some pietists).

Revelation 21:9 depicts the Church Triumphant as the glorious new Jerusalem who is “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (tēn nunphēn tēn gunaikai tou arniou). This is the only New Testament passage in which the Church is designated Christ’s “wife”; thus, the consummation takes place only at His return. Earlier throughout the New Testament, the Church is depicted as the betrothed Bride of Christ, awaiting the consummation.

This tension extends throughout the themes of the New Testament. Exegetes may refer to the “now” as proleptic, inaugurated, or realized eschatology, and the “not yet” as future eschatology.

Throughout the Scriptures, idolatry and other forms of apostasy are depicted as adultery. See, e.g., Ezekiel 16 and 23. This is both a spiritual and a physical description of pagan religions (ancient and modern) in which sexual immorality is practiced; thus the spiritual and the literal may overlap in Revelation 21:8; 22:15.

That the Church’s “virginity” involves both theological purity and sexual fidelity is evident in, e.g., 1 Corinthians 6:9–20. The baptized communicant believer must abstain from idolatry and sexual immorality.

In neither parable is there an explicit mention of a bride. How can a wedding take place without one? The implication is that those who attended in (baptismal) wedding garments (Matthew 22:1–14) and the vigilant virgins admitted to the wedding feast (25:1–13) constitute the Bride of Christ.
unmarried are called to lead a life of chastity, and the married are to live in exclusive fidelity until the end of natural life (ch. 7). The ever-present danger is that our sinful human nature will be seduced by the sexual enticements ubiquitous in our culture. Not only does promiscuity physically violate our union with Christ (6:9–20), it also robs the single of their virginity and destroys the holy bond of matrimony; it is the sole grounds allowed by Jesus for divorce (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). Christians, then, are called to live in this tension by mortifying the flesh while drawing new life from our baptismal death and resurrection with Christ (Romans 6) as we await His final deliverance (7:24–25) from our constant battle against sin (simul iustus et peccator, ch. 7).

The final chapter of Scripture, Revelation 22, draws together and completes many of these themes. The garden imagery of Eden returns, but the new “paradise” (Luke 23:43; Revelation 2:7) surpasses the original. The “water of life” therein (22:1, 17) recalls the “living waters” in the bridal garden imagery and marital consummation in Song of Songs 4:12–5:1. Jesus elaborates those waters for the marital situation of the woman by the well in John and further explicates the “rivers of living water” in terms of His glorification and the baptismal gift of the Spirit in John 7:37–39. The communal wedding banquet (Revelation 19:7–9) along with the eating from the tree of life (22:2, 14; cf. Genesis 2:9 and contrast Genesis 3:22–24) are the feast of which the Lord’s Supper is a present foretaste. It is no coincidence that Jesus was buried and raised in a garden, that the Virgin’s Son was laid in a virgin tomb (John 19:41), and that He was taken to be the gardener (20:15); where the first gardener (Genesis 2:8) failed, the second One triumphed (cf. Romans 5:12–21). The Scriptures end with eschatological yearning for the eternal bliss of this consummation: “The Spirit and the

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22 Romans 7 depicts the daily, ongoing battle against sin experienced by Paul (and every Christian) after his conversion; it does not simply portray Paul’s struggle prior to his conversion. See “Who Is the ‘I’ in Romans 7:14–25? Christian or Non-Christian?” in Michael Middendorf, Romans. Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 584–97.

23 “Completes” attempts to express the verbal idea of anakephalaiōsis in Ephesians 1:10, where God’s eternal goal is for all things be united and subsumed under the headship of Christ, to be accomplished at His return.

24 In the Song of Songs, marital intimacy is portrayed protologically as a return to the paradise of the Garden of Eden, and eschatologically as a proleptic enjoyment of the paradise to come; see “The Garden Paradise” in Mitchell, The Song of Songs, 263–74.

25 In the Song of Songs, the virgin bride with these waters is called the “garden locked … a spring locked, a fountain sealed” (Song of Songs 4:12). She has long been interpreted as a figure of the church as the virgin bride of Christ. See Mitchell, The Song of Songs, 837–40, 844–47, 868–73.


If this Christological, sacramental, ecclesiastical, and eschatological portrait of marriage holds water, then further questions may be asked to flesh out its implications for Christian ethics.

Is Marriage a Sacrament?

The preceding discussion raises the question of whether marriage should be called a sacrament. One simple definition in the Confessions is that “sacraments” are “rites which have the command of God and to which the promise of grace has been added” (Ap XIII 3).28 Marriage certainly was instituted by God (Genesis 1–2). It involves visible, physical participants—the husband and wife. Normally the pastor speaks the words, “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” and God Himself joins the couple together (Matthew 19:6).29 Marriage has also received God’s blessing and promise (Genesis 1:28). But one searches in vain for a divine promise that the forgiveness of sins is conferred on a husband and/or wife by virtue of being united in marriage, so marriage is not a sacrament as defined. In Ephesians 5:21–33, it is Christ’s love, not the husband’s, that saves. The redemptive love of Christ comes through the baptismal “washing of water with the Word” (5:26), not through the institution of marriage itself.

Another Pauline passage that addresses marriage from a different perspective confirms the preceding. In 1 Corinthians 7:14, St. Paul says that in a marriage of a believer to an unbeliever, the unbelieving spouse has been “sanctified” (hêgiastai, the perfect tense of hagiazō) by the believing spouse, so that even the children are “holy” (hagia), a possible allusion to infant Baptism.30 The apostle goes on to say that the believing spouse may yet “save” (sōzō, 1 Corinthians 7:16) the unbelieving partner. That hope for the future implies that the unbeliever is not already saved by virtue of the

27 The Song of Songs concludes with this same eschatological yearning for the Bridegroom to return (Song of Songs 8:13–14).
28 The definition in the 1991 LCMS Explanation (Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation [St. Louis: Concordia, 1986, 1991], 197) that a “sacrament is a sacred act instituted by God in which God Himself has joined His Word of promise to a visible element and by which He offers, gives, and seals the forgiveness of sins earned by Christ” is not a direct quote of the Confessions or Luther, but can be inferred from Luther’s explanations of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in his Small and Large Catechisms (SC IV 9–10; VI 7–8; LC IV 14, 17–19; V 8–11).
29 One can debate exactly when and how the couple is married. On the one hand, the oral pronouncement in the wedding ceremony is an efficacious speech act, as the pastor speaks on behalf of God. After this word, the couple may consummate the marriage with the blessing of God. Usually the state considers the couple legally married after the completion of the ceremony (along with the signing of the state-required documents). On the other hand, the one-flesh union does not take place until the consummation. It is best, then, to consider the marriage union to be accomplished through the ceremony and the consummation together, not by either apart from the other.
30 See the commentary on 1 Corinthians 7:12–16 by Gregory Lockwood, 1 Corinthians. Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000), 240–44.
state of being “sanctified” (7:14) through his or her marriage to a believer. Therefore, Paul’s statement that the unbeliever in the mixed marriage is “sanctified” (7:14) may mean that the marriage has God’s blessing and approval; that through the baptized Christian spouse, the sanctifying Word of the Gospel is present in the marriage; and/or that through the initiative of the Christian spouse the children may have been baptized into Christ.

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE IS A PUBLIC WITNESS TO THE WORLD OF GOD’S SALVATION IN CHRIST, OF WHAT IS, WHAT WAS, AND WHAT IS TO COME.

But Paul’s statement does not mean that the forgiveness of sins comes to the unbeliever through marriage itself. However, at some future time the unbeliever may be brought to faith in Christ and to Baptism by the power of the Holy Spirit, who works through the Gospel proclaimed by the Christian spouse, and then the presently unbelieving spouse would most assuredly receive the forgiveness of sins.31

The younger Luther did call marriage a sacrament in that he considered it a sign of “the union of the divine and human natures in Christ”:

[The doctors say] that it [marriage] is a sacrament. A sacrament is a sacred sign of something spiritual, holy, heavenly, and eternal, just as the water of baptism, when the priest pours it over the child, means that the holy, divine, eternal grace is poured into the soul and body of that child at the same time, and cleanses him from his original sin. This also means that the kingdom of God, which is an inestimable benefit, in fact immeasurably greater than the water which conveys this meaning, is within him. In the same way the estate of marriage is a sacrament. It is an outward and spiritual sign of the greatest, holiest, worthiest, and noblest thing that has ever existed or ever will exist: the union of the divine and human natures in Christ. The holy apostle Paul says that as man and wife united in the estate of matrimony are two in one flesh, so God and man are united in the one person Christ, and so Christ and Christendom are one body. It is indeed a wonderful sacrament, as Paul says [Ephesians 5:32]. . . . Is it not a wonderful thing that God is man and
that he gives himself to man and will be his, just as the husband gives himself to his wife and is hers? But if God is ours, then everything is ours.  

Writing this in 1519, Luther appeals more to the doctors of the Church than to Scripture itself. His description of Baptism as conveying the forgiveness only of “original sin” plus the concessions to works-righteousness in the surrounding context are further indications that not too much weight should rest on this early view.

In some places, the Lutheran Confessions allow for the inclusion of marriage among “sacraments,” but only under a more general definition of a sacrament as a rite instituted by God and accompanied by certain divine promises, not necessarily the forgiveness of sins. Thus Melanchthon, representing the Lutheran viewpoint, allowed that marriage “has the command of God as well as certain promises that pertain . . . to the bodily life. Therefore, whoever wishes to call it a sacrament should still distinguish it from the preceding ones, which are . . . testimonies of grace and the forgiveness of sins” (Ap XIII 14).

The Roman Catholic tradition counts seven sacraments, including matrimony, which are said to convey grace and salvation. Similarly, the Eastern Orthodox tradition also considers marriage to be a sacrament that conveys grace. However, the Roman tradition defines the sacramental nature of marriage as being of a different kind: “Two other sacraments, Holy Orders and Matrimony, are directed towards the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so,” That statement is to be applauded insofar as it emphasizes that Christian marriage is to be characterized by the selfless, sacrificial giving of oneself for the benefit of the other—as Paul says most directly to husbands in Ephesians 5:21–33. Most certainly, the Christian should be

32 “A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage” (1519), AE 44:10. Compare the discussion of this and other statements by Luther in Thompson, “Toward a Confessional Practice of Pre-Marriage Pastoral Care” (Logia 6/2 [Eastertide 1997]: 11–15). Luther denies that marriage should be called a sacrament in The Babylonian Captivity of the Church (1520), AE 36:94–95 (cited in Winger, Ephesians, 622 note 106). Johann Gerhard (1582–1637), “De conjugio,” Loc. cit. affirms that the personal union in Christ is a kind of marriage attested in Scripture. Gerhard also recognizes the marriage of husband and wife; the sacramental or mystical marriage of Christ and the corporate Church; the spiritual marriage of God and the soul of the individual believer; but rejects the idea in Roman canon law that a bishop is married to his church or diocese.

33 AE 44:12–14.

34 By “the preceding ones” Melanchthon refers to “baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and absolution” (Ap XIII 4).

35 Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§ 774–76.


37 Catechism of the Catholic Church, § 1534
concerned for the salvation of the spouse and the children. But to ascribe to the institution of marriage itself the ability to “contribute . . . to . . . salvation” exceeds what can be supported by the Scriptures and distorts the biblical doctrine of justification.38

More satisfactory than sacrament, in this author’s opinion, is the hermeneutical terminology that marriage may serve as a type or a prophetic sign of the salvific relationship between God and His people, and specifically that of Christ and His Church. Most readily applicable is vocation.

IS MARRIAGE A TYPE?

While sacrament is inadvisable for reasons given above, the broader category of typology is helpful, and some biblical scholars speak of types as sacramental. That is to say, biblical types are salutary works of God that have a physical dimension or element accompanied by interpretive words. Old Testament types are commonly identified as persons and offices (e.g., prophet, priest, king), places (the Promised Land; Jerusalem), events (the exodus), and institutions (the temple and its worship) that prefigured and are fulfilled in the incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that will be consummated upon His return.39 Marriage fits well in this framework.

A type is a miniature “working model,” imperfect and yet efficacious for a divine purpose, of what was or is to come, and/or of what is above. Scripture refers to “horizontal types,” which function diachronically in history, relating the past to the present and toward the future.40 Marriage serves in this way as a sacred institution established by divine words spoken over people at creation, reenacted throughout human history, instantiated now in Christian marriages and the betrothal of Christ to His Church, to be consummated at the eschaton. Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, visibly came (Matthew 9:15; John 3:29); the Church is betrothed now, awaiting His return. What is more, these realities are visibly typified by the one-flesh unions of Christian couples. As they live in loving fidelity, they enact what God intended and what He has and will restore in Christ. Christian

40 See, e.g., Adam as a type of Christ in Romans 5:14; Old Testament events that serve as types for the Church in 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11; and Baptism as the saving “antitype” of the Noahic flood in 1 Peter 3:21.
marriage is a public witness to the world of God’s salvation in Christ, of what is, what was, and what is to come.

Is Marriage a Prophetic Sign?

Old Testament prophets often acted out dramatizations that signified their divine messages. For some, their marriages were intended to portray the dynamics of God’s own relationship with His people, either in judgment or in grace, in which case they prophesied the union of Christ and His Church. Each situation was unique. For Isaiah, the repetition of Hebrew terminology might suggest that the child naturally conceived and born by his wife (Isaiah 8:3–4) could be a sign of the future virgin birth of Immanuel (7:14; 9:6–7). More clearly developed is the symbolism of Ezekiel’s marriage: his delightful wife signifies the delightful Jerusalem temple and dies to portend the Babylonians’ destruction of the sanctuary. The prophet is told not to mourn his wife as a sign to the Israelites that the temple’s judgment was just (Ezekiel 24:15–27). Three chapters (Hosea 1–3) are devoted to the marriage of Hosea and Gomer, a prostitute whose whoredom dramatizes that of Israel, and their three children bear names prophesying the divine judgment of the apostate people. Yet, instead of divorcing her, God then instructs Hosea to redeem her and keep her as his wife to signify that God will once again betroth to Himself a people forever and call them His own (Hosea 2:19–23; see Romans 9:25–26). A literal marriage laden with Gospel motifs is that of Solomon in the Song of Songs; see also the messianic royal marriage in Psalm 45.

One married Roman Catholic theologian references Old Testament prophetic dramas to contend that marriage is

HOLY MATRIMONY IS THEN RIGHTLY CALLED A SIGN, AN EVANGELICAL WITNESS TO THE WORLD OF THE FIDELITY, LOVE, AND FORGIVENESS THAT CHARACTERIZES CHRIST’S ATTACHMENT TO HIS CHURCH.

a religious, prophetic symbol, proclaiming, revealing and celebrating in the human world the communion between

41 See, e.g., Jeremiah 19 and Ezekiel 4–5.
42 She is called hanebi’ah, “the prophetess,” in Isaiah 8:3 not because she prophesied but because of her union to the prophet. The Hebrew vocabulary from 7:14, repeated in 8:3, includes the feminine verbs “conceive” and “give birth,” the noun “son,” and the formula for naming, “to call his name.” In any case, Isaiah’s sons and their names had prophetic significance: “Behold, I and the children Yahweh gave to me for signs and portents in Israel” (8:18; cf. also 7:3).
God and God’s people. . . . Lived within this context of grace, lived within faith . . . marriage appears as a two-tiered reality. On one tier, it signifies the mutually covenanted love of this man and this woman. . . . On another, more profound level, it proclaims, makes explicit and celebrates the intimate communion of life and love and grace . . . between Christ and Christ’s people, the Church.43

The Catechism of the Catholic Church declares that “by their own faithfulness” Christian spouses “can be witnesses to God’s faithful love.”44 That marriage is a “witness,” as the spouses faithfully show love, is in keeping with passages such as 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5:21–33, and avoids the claim that marriage itself is a means through which spouses receive God’s love. The Catechism also uses the terms image and sign: “Since God created . . . man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man.”45 As for John 2:1–11, which narrates Jesus’ first “sign” at the wedding in Cana, the Church “sees in it the confirmation of the goodness of marriage and the proclamation that thenceforth marriage will be an efficacious sign of Christ’s presence.”46

On the one hand, it would be tenuous to suppose all marriages have the same prophetic significance as those in Scripture. Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea received verbal revelations of how and why they were to interact with their wives as they did as part of their preaching to Israel. On the other hand, we certainly may affirm that a pastor who combines sound doctrine with a vibrant and healthy marriage will be a model of faithfulness, both to the congregation he serves and to the unbelieving world. His marriage will help confirm his sincerity and the genuineness of the Christian faith he preaches. More broadly, every Christian marriage, insofar as the spous-
es live by grace, serves as a prophetic sign that portends the present betrothal between Christ and His Church, and that joyfully yearns for the consummation at Christ’s second coming. Holy matrimony is then rightly called a sign, an evangelical witness to the world of the fidelity, love, and forgiveness that characterizes Christ’s attachment to His Church. A marriage that lasts attests that “love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7).

Scripture can also ascribe a prophetic significance to singleness, celibacy, and the foregoing of children, as for Jeremiah and Paul. God mandated Jeremiah to remain celibate and childless to portend the impending judgment that would destroy the world order in which God’s people lived (Jeremiah 16:2), the fall of Jerusalem (587 BC) and exile to Babylon. Paul’s celibacy apparently was by choice, not by divine command (1 Corinthians 7:7–9), and through him God provides an explanation of the prophetic significance of a celibate life chosen by Christians who have the gift of continence (7:29–35). Celibacy is a sign that the present world is passing away (7:31) and the Christian’s hope is for “the life of the world to come” (Nicene Creed), where marriage will have passed away.

Marriage as a Vocation

Marriage certainly is a vocation or calling in life to which the Gospel applies. “God who created man out of love also calls him to love—the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.” Each believer is to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19; 22:39), and this begins with the closest “neighbors,” those who are fellow members of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10) and heirs of the grace of life (wives in 1 Peter 3:7). A joyful Christian marriage is likely to provide both spouses with an abundance of exuberant love that spills over into all of their other vocations in life.

The Lutheran tradition considers marriage a holy estate instituted by the Creator upon which His favor rests as Christian spouses live in love and fidelity, but also a vocation that is not intrinsically superior or inferior to

47 An excellent practical and pastoral treatment of this topic is given by Peter Kurowski, The Lifelines of Love (Pleasant Word, A Division of WinePress Publishing, 2007).
49 The term vocation, derived from Latin, reflects the Greek vocabulary of “call” and “calling” (kaleō, klēīs) as in 1 Corinthians 7:15–24, in a context where the apostle speaks of the divine callings of singleness and marriage. Cf. Gene Edward Veith Jr. and Mary J. Moerbe, Family Vocation (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).
50 Catechism of the Catholic Church, § 1604; emphasis added.
other stations in life. That is a predominant theme in Luther’s discussions of marriage.\textsuperscript{51} Similarly, in the Lutheran Confessions, the theme of Apology XXIII, “The Marriage of Priests,” is that the Word of God, received in faith, hallows the marriage relationship, as indeed it hallows the entirety of the Christian’s life of faith:

Marriage is pure in believers because it is sanctified by the Word of God, that is, it is a matter that the Word of God permits and approves, as Scripture testifies abundantly. For Christ calls marriage a divine union when he says [Matthew 19:6], “What God has joined together . . .” And Paul says about marriage, foods, and similar things [1 Timothy 4:5] that they are “sanctified by God’s Word and by prayer,” that is, through the Word, by which the conscience is made certain that God approves, and through prayer, that is, through faith, which uses marriage with thanksgiving as a gift of God. . . . In every human creature a good work of a particular calling ought to follow faith. This work pleases God on account of faith.\textsuperscript{52}

What about Divorce?

As sinners living in a broken world, Christians too may suffer a host of failed relationships, such as the inability to find a suitable spouse, infertility, infidelity, and widowhood, just to mention some. The Torah of Moses includes provisions designed to restrict divorce and protect women from abuse, but the “hardness of heart” that remains even among God’s people still causes it.\textsuperscript{53} God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), yet permits it in some circumstances (Matthew 19:9; 1 Corinthians 7:15), although Christians may nevertheless find themselves divorced outside of those circumstances and against their will.

On the one hand, we must not minimize the evil of rending asunder what God has joined together (Matthew 19:6). Throughout Scripture, there is a correlation between sexual infidelity, idolatry, and “divorce” from

\textsuperscript{51} See, for example, “A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage” (1519; AE 44:7–14); the section on marriage in The Babylonian Captivity of the Church (1520; AE 36:92–100); and “The Estate of Marriage” (1522; AE 45:17–49).

\textsuperscript{52} Ap XXIII 28–30, 32.

\textsuperscript{53} See Jeffrey Gibbs, Matthew 11:2–20:34, 949–53, commenting on Matthew 19:3–9. Contrary to Pharisaic and modern misconceptions of the Torah, it does not command or sanction divorce. Rather, it allows for divorce in case of infidelity and furnishes a number of protections for women (e.g., Exodus 20:17; 21:3–10; 22:16; Leviticus 18:8, 14–20; Deuteronomy 20:7; 22:13–19, 25–30; 24:1–4). The Torah was “countercultural” since it opposed ancient Near Eastern cultures that sanctioned infidelity and spousal abuse.
God. If marriage embodies the mutual love of Jesus Christ and His Church, then divorce exhibits a deficiency or absence of Christian faith and love.

On the other hand, God has provided plenary forgiveness in Christ, the ever-faithful Bridegroom (cf. 2 Timothy 2:13), for the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15) and all manner of sins. The biblical marriage paradigm includes abundant provision for pardon and restoration to full participation in the marital love of Christ for His Church. Once again, Hosea 1–3 illustrates this as a human marriage simultaneously signifies the marital relationship of God and His people.

Gomer’s harlotry was grounds for divorce, but Hosea, acting on the divine command, redeems her and reclaims her as his wife (3:2–3) as a prophetic sign of what God will do for His harlot people (2:1–23). The same truth is portrayed prophetically (verbally, absent an actual human marriage) in Jeremiah 2–3. Since Yahweh’s “wife” has gone awhoring, he asks (3:1), “A man divorces his wife and she goes from with him and becomes [the wife of] another man, will he return to her again?”

God sent Israel away with a certificate of divorce (Jeremiah 3:8), yet, astonishingly, He promises to restore the people as His own (3:14–18). Ezekiel 16 and 23 are notoriously explicit sexual allegories of the harlotries of Yahweh’s wife that have severed her marriage covenant, and yet the first concludes with an even more shocking great reversal: the Gospel promise that not only Israel but even her “sisters” Sodom and Gomorrah (!) shall be restored and given to her as her daughters when Yahweh establishes an everlasting covenant and makes atonement (16:53–63).

Christ’s interaction with the Samaritan woman in John 4 serves as a paradigm for the forgiveness and restoration of those who have endured broken marriages. The marriage theme of Christ the Bridegroom now

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54 Many biblical passages associate sexual immorality with idolatry and exclusion from the people of God. See, e.g., the golden calf incident in Exodus 32 and its ecclesiastical application in 1 Corinthians 10:1–13; the worship of Baal of Peor in Numbers 25 (Psalm 106:28); and New Testament texts such as Acts 15:20, 29; Colossians 3:5; Jude 7; Revelation 2:20–21; 21:8. “Antonymous Texts with Adulterous Language” in Mitchell, The Song of Songs, 62–64, cites in particular Ezekiel 16 and 23; Hosea; and Babylon the harlot in Revelation 17–19.


56 The Old Testament paradigm differs somewhat from that of the New (see the “betrothal” theme above under “The Great Sacramental Mystery” and “The Eschatological Consummation” above). The Old Testament picture is that Yahweh “married” Israel by the exodus redemption and subsequently she was His “wife” (see Jeremiah 2:2; Ezekiel 16:8–10; also the Jewish Midrash on the Song of Songs, Shir HaShirim Rabhah), not simply His betrothed bride.

57 If the Hebrew of Hosea 1:2 (“woman/’wife of harlotries”) suggests that Gomer had already been involved in prostitution, then Hosea’s initial action of marrying her is an additional sign of the forgiving love of the God who “marries” Himself to sinners. Cf. Romans 5:6–10.

58 Thus the Old Testament prophecy is not just verbal; the prophetic Word is attached to physical elements, people, in a way that might be called sacramental.
come for His Bride is a subtext throughout chapters 2–4 of this Gospel, each time associated with the baptismal image of water, and it resurfaces in 4:7–18.\(^{59}\) This woman’s admission of five previous husbands may allude to the five heathen nations who, with their false gods, inhabited Samaria after God punished the Northern Kingdom of Israel for her adulteries (1 Kings 17). Her current lack of a husband (true Bridegroom) is apropos for an adherent of the syncretistic Samaritan religion. Jesus, however, in effect, extends to her an invitation to marriage.\(^{60}\) This discourse in John 4 also looks forward to Jesus’ words at the Feast of Tabernacles that foretell of living water that will flow from His side (7:37–39) and to the death of Jesus, when Jesus hands over the Spirit (19:30), and water and blood flow from His side (19:34).\(^{61}\) The wedding supper of the Lamb is by invitation only (Revelation 19:7–9). God graciously extends this invitation to all through the bridal washing of Baptism and until the consummation He sustains His betrothed through the sacramental foretaste of this feast.

**Conclusion**

The Christological, sacramental, ecclesiastical, and eschatological contours of Christian marriage explored above may be summarized by affirming that it is a holy estate, created by God to enflesh the great mystery of Christ’s union with His Bride and Body, the Church, who is now His betrothed Bride, called to live in exclusive fidelity to Him as she awaits His return, when she will become “the wife of the Lamb” (Revelation 21:9). This conception is no novelty, for it underlies the Lutheran marriage liturgy: “Marriage is an honorable estate instituted and blessed by God in Paradise, before humanity’s fall into sin. In marriage we see a picture of the communion between Christ and His bride, the Church.”\(^{62}\)

Fittingly, the closing benediction recalls Eden and, by way of reference to the end of natural life, encourages the couple to live in anticipation of the eschaton:

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59 At the wedding in Cana (John 2:1–11), an abundance of water was turned into wine, and John 3:29 is in the context of baptizing with water (3:22–26). See Weinrich, John 1:1–7:1, 489–92.
60 William Weinrich, John 1:1–7:1, p. 492: “When the woman says about the ‘living water’ (Jn 4:10), ‘Give me this water’ (Jn 4:15), Jesus invites the woman to the true marriage between God and his people. This marriage will be celebrated and characterized by the eschatological worship ‘in Spirit and Truth’ (Jn 4:23–24).”
62 “Holy Matrimony” in Lutheran Service Book: Agenda (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 65; emphasis added. This pastoral address is well supported by the rite’s traditional Epistle Reading from Ephesians 5. The Christological, sacramental, and ecclesiastical aspects of marriage are implicitly affirmed by the rubrics (p. 64) for the marriage rite to be incorporated into the Divine Service with Holy Communion.
The almighty and gracious God abundantly grant you His favor and sanctify and bless you with the blessing given to Adam and Eve in Paradise, that you may please Him in both body and soul and live together in holy love until your life’s end.63

The Church displays the plenary forgiveness of sins showered by the Bridegroom upon all baptized and communicant members of His Body by conducting this same wedding liturgy for the remarriage of those divorced and for all who purify themselves in hopeful expectation of the Bridegroom’s return no matter what sins may lie in their past (1 John 3:2–3; cf. 1:8–9).

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63 Lutheran Service Book: Agenda, 69.