



## Marriage as a Christian Calling\*

ROBERT BENNE

Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia

Lord, to whom shall we go? —John 6:68

One would think that the world would begin to wake up. We are surrounded by plagues having to do with violations of God's covenantal structuring of human life. There are many sorts of those structures, many violations of them, and many evil repercussions that have fallen upon us. One of the most crucial of those covenantal structures is marriage, and it is one of the most threatened. Marriages are more fragile, sexual relations are increasingly detached from the marital bond, marriage is often viewed as a social convention one can take or leave, divorces and family break-ups abound, and both men and women seem increasingly willing to wink at the promises of fidelity and permanence made in the marriage vows.

The repercussions are clear: alienated parents and wounded children, large numbers of children born out of wedlock into impoverished conditions, widespread resort to abortion, and increasing incidence of venereal disease with attendant threats of sterility and even death. The cultural trends that have undermined the Christian notion of marriage are reaping their harvest.

In the face of all this Christians ought to have a renewed confidence in their teachings about and practice of Christian marriage. We all know many cases of successful Christian marriage that not only are loving, satisfying, productive, and admirable, but that avoid all the plagues listed above. Christian virtue in marriage is good for you. "Walking the way of the Lord" with regard to marriage carries with it real blessings. This does not mean that Christian marriage does not have its

\*Adapted from *Ordinary Saints* by Robert Benne, copyright © 1988 Fortress Press. Used by permission of Augsburg Fortress. For permission to reprint this material visit [www.augsburgfortress.org/copyrights](http://www.augsburgfortress.org/copyrights).

The quotes from the marriage vows are from the service of marriage in *The Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Lutheran Church in America, 1978).

strains, sorrows, and tragedies. No one is exempt from the chances and changes of life. But conformation with the Christian vision of marriage is precisely the means of sustaining a couple's journey through those chances and changes. God had something true and effective in mind when he created the "holy estate."

We as a Christian community need to turn our attention to articulating the meaning of Christian marriage for this age and to holding up unabashedly models that the Christian young can emulate. Such wholesome alternatives to the confused practice of the world will not only

embody the truth for its own sake, they will become increasingly attractive in a disintegrating world. Now is not the time to lose confidence in our ideals; now is the time to reaffirm them.

Even amid the confusion of the world, societies still promote stable, monogamous marriages as a social good. They know that marriage, as one of the “small platoons” of life, sustains the deepest and most fulfilling mutualities between partners. It also provides the best context for the birth and nurture of children. The ensuing family then becomes a “school” for shaping responsible and happy citizens and for performing many functions—e.g., caring for aged parents—that the broader society cannot perform as well.

This persisting tug toward covenantal existence is a demonstration of the underlying power of God’s intentions. Christians should recognize this and be able to honor good marriages wherever they are found as well as to support social policies that protect and strengthen marriage.

But as members of a Christian community we have deeper intentions than living up to even the best of cultural expectations. For Christians see marriage not only as a set of personal and social responsibilities, but as a calling. This calling is not for everyone—witness the calling to singleness of Jesus and Paul—but it is one that is central to sustaining and blessing the Christian community and its way of life. The Christian virtues of faith, love, and hope are what transform a set of personal and social responsibilities into a Christian calling.

## I. FAITH

It is important at the very onset to affirm that the central focus of Christian faith is the grace of God in Christ, which justifies and frees. It is through that gracious gift that we glimpse the heart of God and are able to view all of life as gift. The special grace of God in Christ awakens us through the Spirit to appropriate God’s common grace in all of life.

One of the effects of God’s liberating grace is the capacity to see a deeper dimension to life in the key places of responsibility we take on, such as marriage. The goodness of that life is received as gift, and the source of the gift is known, thanked, and joyfully obeyed.

Such is certainly true of marriage. Marriage is not seen simply as a useful social construct, as a haven in a heartless world, or as a context for fulfilling human relations, though it is all that. At a deeper level, marriage is a “holy estate,” a reflection of God’s covenant-making propensities. It is intended by God as a life-long covenant of fidelity, as a way of founding human community. When we live in accordance with those divine intentions, we become transparent to God’s will. We participate in his provident care for us and the creation.

The holy estate of marriage and its attendant family life, however, are not viewed only as locations of God’s sacred presence in general, they are locations where I, with all my particularity, may find a calling, a summons from God. In order to discern and decide about such a calling, several “moments” of reflection are useful.

First, it is important to be as clear as possible about oneself, one’s prospective partner, and the nature of the relationship between the two. A thorough reflection on each partner’s personal strengths and weaknesses and understandings of and expectations for marriage is very helpful. It is possible that one or both partners are unfit for the high calling of marriage. Each should make sure that their mutualities are of the firmer sort, grounded in solid friendship rather than fervent romantic longings, though those too have their place. Certainly the couple should be

clear about the specific nature of Christian marriage. This whole exercise in clarity cannot be adequately carried off without the competent counseling of a Christian pastor or wise person. The nurture and guidance of the Christian community is indispensable.

Expanded awareness is a second step. Those wishing to enter marriage as a Christian calling should be fully aware of centrifugal, often destructive, pressures they will meet in our modern world. They will be living in a world that celebrates an ethic of self-enhancement at the expense of marital sacrifice and compromise, that winks at infidelity, and whose practice of life-long commitment is faulty, to say the least.

Moreover, they should be aware of the tendency of the modern world constantly to revise the Christian doctrine of marriage to make it less “restrictive” and “exclusive” and to make family life less time-consuming and disciplined. Hiding beneath these “liberating” impulses is a general enshrinement of self-enhancement as a dominant motif. Many moderns think “you can have it all.” It is not true. Couples cannot have flourishing marriage and family life if they give in to the pressures of the imperial self. Such a capitulation only means conflict, strife, and eventual breakup.

Conversely, persons entering marriage should be aware of the help available to them. Churches as well as secular social agencies are directing their attention to the preservation of marriages. We seem to be waking up to the crucial significance of stable marriage and family life.

Third, once a couple is clear about themselves and the firmness of their mutualities, and aware of the threats and possibilities of the wider world, it is time to respond to their calling to married life by disciplined attachment. That is, they announce their willingness to commit themselves to a specifically Christian form of marriage. They respond to the call to be formed into the Christian vision of marriage. This Christian form can be discussed under three rubrics—the context, time frame, and substance of the marriage vow. First, let us look at the context. Far from being limited to a private vow between two persons, as our individualistic culture seems to maintain, Christian promise-making in marriage has many contexts, all of which are important. There is, of course, the interpersonal nature of the vow wherein each promises: “I take you to be my wife/husband from this day forward...” Even preceding that, however, is the *intrapersonal* nature of the promise. I promise myself that I take the other in faithfulness. Even before I make a

promise to another, I agree to bind myself to that vow. Without that first step, promise-making does not make sense.

Beyond the intra- and interpersonal nature of marriage vows, the context broadens. Promises are made before family and friends, who witness its solemnity and vow to support the couple in their life together. Further, the vow is made in the context of the church—the pastor symbolizing that context. Vows are made to conform to this particular community’s understanding of marriage. That understanding has been blessed by Jesus “who gladdened the wedding at Cana in Galilee.”

Further, the state has an interest in assuring proper and stable marriage, so it gives the church the capacity to make the vows legally binding. Thus, the couple’s promises are made and affirmed in the legal context of the state.

The context of vows broaden even further when the couple commits themselves to a “holy estate.” The divinely given structure of marriage provides a solid referent for the vows. The church’s understanding simply reflects this prior structure. The structure is an order of creation and preservation. And grounding that order, as well as witnessing the vows, is God the creator. Christians promise before God.

These ever-widening contexts bestow a powerful social quality on Christian marriage. It renders pale and insufficient current practices of “living together,” which lack the seriousness of public vows. Christian promises reverberate far beyond the couple alone. They reestablish the couple within an ongoing community that finally claims divine sanction for its practice.

The time frame of Christian marriage vows embraces a past, present, and future. The institution of marriage, within which Christians commit themselves to one another, was created from the beginning by the Lord God, “who created our first parents and established them in marriage.” This foundation extends throughout history to the present time, and provides the precedent which we reduplicate in our lives.

By vowing to enter this tradition in the present, a Christian couple makes a sharp break with their earlier lives by entering into this new covenant. Their lives are radically altered. Their vows indicate a powerful rite of passage. After this moment loyalties are rearranged, financial responsibilities change, a new home is founded, and the “two become one.” Traditionally, this moment of transition opens the way for sexual relations. This is properly so, for it marks the moment of public commitment and validation, and it is fitting that access to the most intimate of exchanges be given at that time. Just as priests do not baptize or marry, judges do not render decisions, and presidents do not take formal power until vows are made and validated, so new privileges—as well as responsibilities—come with the vows.

Religious and secular communities alike mark this important rite of passage with all sorts of celebrative customs and ceremonies. Bachelor parties, showers, new clothing, dinners, toasts, and dances are a few of the most obvious ways that this powerful change of status is affirmed. When this rite—with its attendant sharp change in privileges and responsibilities—wanes in importance, as it seems to be doing in the present day, it is a worrisome sign that the vows are also being taken more lightly.

Finally, marriage vows have a future dimension. There are solemn intentions

toward a permanent bond. “I promise to be faithful to you until death parts us.” We are to “find delight in each other and grow in holy love until life’s end.”

At the moment of marriage, the partners themselves as well as their mutualities are immature. The vows of permanence are assurances that the partners will give each other and their relationship the time to grow and flourish. They further recognize the intentions of God that what God puts together no one should ever put asunder.

This leads us to the substance of the vows. They are characterized by faithful love—fidelity. Fidelity in marriage is to be modeled after God’s faithfulness to his people and Jesus’ love for others. As such there is a powerful element of unconditionedness to it. Married love is to remain constant in the “joys and sorrows that all the years may bring.” Fidelity includes commitment to the other’s good, even amid all the changes that each shall undergo. It includes the willingness to forgive and begin anew, so that the instabilities inevitable in all human

relationships can be weathered. It means affirmation and acceptance of the partner as partner, no matter what the judgments of the world are with regard to life in the world. It obviously means fidelity in sexual matters so that the deepest intimacies are never violated by moving them outside the bond. It means the willingness to become dependent on the other—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It means enduring partnership in the bearing and nurture of children and in a broader service to the world.

Faithful love is not without costs. Sacrifice is very much a part of marriage. Both partners sacrifice their eros-wanderings, the priority of friends and parents, perhaps parts of their careers, and certainly the radical self-determination that is so much extolled by our culture. But the cost is small compared to the benefits.

Life under the bond of faithful love is not all heavy and serious. Indeed, it is within the comfort and security of fidelity that spontaneities can flourish. Frontiers of sexual play can be explored. Personal quirks can become the occasion for delight. Recreative moments—having a holiday together, having a fine dinner out or in, enjoying sports together—can multiply under the canopy of faithful love. Moreover, the trust associated with faithful love allows a great deal of individual latitude to pursue interests not necessarily shared by the partner, so long as those interests do not threaten the bond.

These elements of Christian marriage—its context, time frame, and substance—are what Christians commit themselves to in disciplined attachment. They respond to the call of God to participate in a Christian way in a crucial place of responsibility—marriage. Their Christian faith becomes concrete in precisely this calling.

The fourth phase of fitting one's own particularity with a specific sphere of God's ordering of creation is what might be termed "disciplined detachment." That is a strange, but unfortunately necessary, category to employ in relation to marriage and family life. It refers to separation and divorce. As a last resort and as the lesser of evils, divorce can be justified. When mutualities have completely broken down and the interactions between partners become seriously destructive, the possibility of divorce looms. But even before such negativities develop, and certainly before any separation or divorce is contemplated, Christian partners are obligated to seek

the best counseling and guidance available. One would hope that among those offering their services, Christian practitioners of excellence would be available.

At any rate, when all recourse has been exhausted and every effort has been made to restore the marriage to health, and there is still destructive disharmony, divorce becomes not only a possibility but a tragic necessity. But it is just that. Both partners must be fully aware of the participation in failure and fault. With sober repentance, the forgiveness and new beginning possible through God's grace in Christ can be theirs. Through that grace, new lives can arise out of sin and chaos. New beginnings can be made on the other side of disciplined detachment from a bad marriage.

## II. LOVE

We have already said much about the roles of *agape* love in Christian marriage. It permeates the whole of our understanding. Indeed, a good marriage and family life provide the

most palpable experiences of human *agape* love in our historical existence. They are elementary republics of love.

As Christian character is nurtured toward *agape* love, certain important enrichments of marriage become possible. One is the element of unconditionedness that *agape* contributes. The mutualities of other kinds of human love—erotic, pragmatic, even those of friendship—are unstable because of our involvement in finitude and sin. Partners change with time, they unintentionally and intentionally violate each other and their relationship, and they have rough edges that never are completely ironed out and thereby become sources of discontent. *Agape* provides the capacities for steadfastness and reconciliation that can overcome the turbulence caused by the disruptions of mutualities that are bound to occur. *Agape* disposes each partner to repent, initiate forgiveness, and work at building up the bond that simply cannot be free of problems.

Such unconditionedness, when operating mutually between two Christian partners, provides the most obvious, sustained reflection of divine love we have. In Christian marriage each partner can experience unconditional acceptance. From such a haven many tragedies can be borne, and much energy can be generated to contribute to the service of the world.

Another “enrichment” of *agape* love is its summons to universality. Because Christian marriage can be so good, it can also be the object of idolatry. Partners can hold so fast to each other and their families that they close their eyes and hearts to the rest of the world. *Agape* struggles against this closure. It insists that there are other beings in the world. All are beloved of God with the same kind of love we receive in Christ. Therefore, our own love cannot be limited to our spouse and family, the most likely recipients of that love. Families strong in love must share it with the world, usually through their efforts in other callings but sometimes directly in person-to-person service when occasions call for it.

It is important to emphasize that *agape* invites and receives the partner into mutual relations, not ones characterized by an unhealthy dependence. Such mutuality tends toward equality, not the kind of mathematical equality so dear to so many moderns, but a kind of complementarity to which each partner assents out of equal dignity and strength. There may be asymmetry between the partners in many roles and functions, and yet they may enjoy a high degree of equality.

Finally, *agape* love summons Christians to a particular concern for the vulnerable. Again, families strong in love are particularly able to welcome the stranger, whether that stranger is a foreign student, an elderly parent, a lonely neighbor, an orphan, a handicapped child, or even a “difficult” child of their own.

One strong family in my acquaintance had a severely handicapped child. After the inevitable pain of working through such an untoward happening, the young father told me: “We have come to the conclusion that if God wanted to choose just the right family for a child as wounded as Matthew, we are it! We can care for him.”

Thus, as in other areas of life, Christian love serves to restore, enrich, broaden, and focus our ordinary earthly loves. It transforms the love inherent in an order of creation into a more enduring and expansive form of being together.

### III. HOPE

As we are made transparent by the Spirit to the intentions of God's love for the world, our flaws are also illuminated. The facts of our continuing separation from God and from our spouse and family are also made clear. The longed-for perfection in marriage and family life does not appear. Our sin and finitude show up in this most intimate place of responsibility. Indeed, for some Christians marriage has ended in divorce and for others it may be a burden for the rest of their lives. Even for those with the strongest marriages, the struggle with sin goes on.

The good news of hope is that our salvation is finally not dependent on our performance in marriage and family life. Our acceptance by God is dependent on his free grace in Christ, not our work. This is a source of firm hope for several reasons. First, we are freed from placing ultimate trust in a "successful" marriage and family life. This gives us the needed distance from both that prevents the wrong kinds of expectations of any kind of human connection. We need not frantically grasp at perfection and thereby fail to receive the blessings given with grateful hearts. Second, we are assured of the daily forgiveness by God that enables us to pick up our lives and live every day anew amid our flawed marriages and families. That gives us the needed hope to continue. We can move into the future.

Finally, because we know both our achievements and our failures in married life together, we hope for a time of completion. Our marriage vows include the supplication that we might "grow in holy love until life's end." Further, they express the hope that "the joy that begins now will be brought to perfection in the life to come," and that we "may at length celebrate with Christ the marriage feast which has no end."

There may be no giving and taking in marriage in heaven, but certainly those bonds of faithful love that have been shaped on earth as a sign of the kingdom will not be lost in the fulfillment of that kingdom. As with all approximations of the kingdom, the bonds of marriage and family life will be drawn toward perfection by the good power of God in his time. All the fragile, flawed, and interrupted relations of earth will find their permanence and completion in heaven. In this we can hope.

So, we have faith, love, and hope. According to the measure we have been given by the Spirit, marriage and family life become transparent to God's presence and will. Shored up and supported by the Christian community in its various forms, they become a calling central to the Christian life.