

## ABSTRACT

### It Is Good: Theological Reflections on Celibacy and Sexual Life

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As western social mores concerning sexual life and order have changed with increased rapidity the church has seemed at a loss as to how to guide Christians to live lives of sexual wholeness and holiness. This has resulted, so my thesis argues, from the gradual loss of the witness of celibacy in the life of the church which has unmoored larger accounts of marriage and family life from 'thick' Christian theological foundations. To accomplish this argument, I first turn to the Christian past and the unique context in which early Christians developed their theologies of marital and family life alongside and in response to Roman and Jewish articulations of the family. This theology is contrasted with the reigning account of our own day, discussed in chapter two, where marriage, family, and sexual life have once again become paramount. Chapter three, the heart of the work, articulates a theology of celibacy in response to the realities described in chapter two with the goal of reimagining celibacy as a way of sexual life that not only speaks to singles within the church, but impacts the practice of marriage and family life in congregations and parishes. Chapter four concludes the work by addressing the nature of this impact on family life and larger forms of human relating.

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IT IS GOOD:  
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON CELIBACY AND SEXUAL LIFE

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Marriage in Antiquity: Romans, Jews, and Christians	5
Chapter Two: Where We Are and How We Got There	29
Chapter Three: Remembering and Reimagining Celibacy	53
Chapter Four: Celibacy, Marriage, and the Family	81
Bibliography	93

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## INTRODUCTION

The rise of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Rights movement within the church has been a gift insofar as it has called into question the assumptions of heteronormativity and the bias towards providing sexual teaching, thought, and guidance from a purely heterosexual point of view. It has failed, however, insofar as the contemporary debates on marriage in the church have simply sought to decenter heteronormativity in regards to who is given access to marriage, not in the assumption that genital sexual expression is de facto part of life. In other words, the LGBT push for access to marriage has forced Christians to recognize that the church is home to more than heterosexual individuals. However, it has failed to bring about equal recognition of and adequate theological response to individuals (gay and straight) who are not married. In other words: new questions and challenges have caused the church to reconsider its heteronormative assumption, but these questions and challenges have not caused the church to reconsider the normativity of marriage in Christian life or its tacit assumption of wider cultural values regarding sexual mores.

The work of this thesis arises out of this blindness to the reality of non-married Christians of all sexual orientations in the life of the church. It seeks to aid the church in reading the “signs of the times” (c.f. Matt. 16:3) and locating where it is in the history of thinking on marriage and sexual life while also providing the church suggestions on how the faithful today might learn from the ancient Christian practice of celibacy and how it can serve as a dynamic, life-giving mode of existence for contemporary followers of

Christ. By reclaiming a vision of celibacy for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians the church will be better able to speak a living word to women and men as they seek to live sexual lives in conformity with the Gospel and the call of Christ. Further, by reclaiming the fullness of Christian practice in regards to sexual life – celibacy and marriage – the church is better equipped to prayerfully, faithfully discern how best to answer questions of same-sex inclusion in the sacrament of marriage, as well as other questions of Christian sexual life which impinge upon the faithful of a variety of sexual orientations, such as sexual relations outside of marriage, childbearing and rearing, as well as divorce and remarriage. When the Body of Christ is freed from the assumptions of a hypersexual culture that assumes the be-all, end-all of marriage and sexual expression, freedom from which is accomplished, if only partially, through the reclamation of celibacy, it can more productively, more critically, and more faithfully attend to how the Spirit of God and not our *zeitgeist* is leading and speaking to the church. In short, when the church can speak rightly about celibacy it can speak rightly about marriage.

Chapter one will examine the practice of marriage in Roman and Jewish cultures before documenting the way in which the early Christians presented their own narrative of marriage grounded in the eschatological reality of Christ's work. In the hands of the early Christians marriage was transformed from an institution concerned with national and cultural propagation to a primarily ascetic institution.

The contrast between Roman, Jewish, and Christian narratives of marriage leads to chapter two which will provide readers with a broad and all-too brief account of how the church and western society has arrived at the popular understanding of marriage and coupling that understands the marital union as the “telos” of sexual life. It is an attempt to

read the signs of the times and discern the *zeitgeist* in which we live. Thus, special attention will be given to the Reformation – which witnessed a strong break with certain practices of celibacy and asceticism more generally, and the Enlightenment – which in many ways continued the developments first begun in the Reformation and has profoundly shaped and influenced the times in which the church find itself. This chapter’s position following the narration of Roman/Jewish marital ideologies in chapter one is strategic: placing these two narratives (antiquity and early modernity to the present) side by side I hope the reader will come to see the analogies between antique practices of marriage and contemporary concerns over marriage and sexual life. Though the church faces many challenges from wider culture in the area of sexual ordering, this is not a new position. Just as the fathers and mothers of the church negotiated a Christian response to the sexual ordering of antiquity, so too can contemporary Christians negotiate responses to our current predicaments.

Chapter one and two naturally lead to chapter three with its attempt to renew celibacy as a practice and discipline within the church with a thick theology grounded in both classical and contemporary thinkers. Attention is given to Gregory of Nyssa and his eschatological grounding of celibacy and the way in which celibacy subverts desire and popular understandings of the role of desire. Equally important will be a consideration of what it means to be called to celibacy or to possess the gift of celibacy, with a related exploration of the possibilities of liturgical witnessing to celibacy in the life of the church. In all, chapter three presents celibacy as a practice that recalls the church to its radical nature. The presence of celibates in the life of the church force the church to

remember that it is not of this world and, at its heart, proclaims a reality at variance with the world.

Finally, chapter four briefly sketches how the practice of celibacy as narrated in chapter three might impact the church's contemporary practice of and teaching concerning marriage and family life as well as larger human associations and relationships. It is only by challenging contemporary ways of thinking that the church will be able to speak a life-giving word of truth on matters sexual to a world hurting, suffering, and seeking for love. This chapter is necessitated by the very nature of celibacy itself, which is intimately bound up with considerations of marital sexuality and family.

Yet before any thought can be given to our contemporary situation and the possibilities of the future, we must look to the past and remember the world in which the earliest Christians articulated a radical way of life that challenge Jewish and Roman ideologies and proclaimed the in-breaking of a kingdom not of this world. Turning now to chapter one, we will explore the work of Christians living in a time that bears more than a passing resemblance to our own and seek resources and tools that might be adapted for the sake of the Gospel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century west.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Marriage in Antiquity: Romans, Jews, and Christians

#### *Introduction*

As is often the case, popular images of the pre-Christian Greco-Roman world owe far more to contemporary dramatic impulses and myths surrounding Greco-Roman sexual practices than accurate history. According to historian and theologian Peter Coleman much contemporary depictions of family and sexual life in the classical world “suggest a licentiousness and social disorder that owes more to our fantasies than the realities of domestic life in Greece and Rome.”<sup>1</sup> Oftentimes the supposed freedom and liberation of the pre-Christian world in matters sexual is contrasted with the repressive ethos of the Christian church and the Christianized world. However, this myth of a libertine sexual cultural repressed by Christian antipathy towards sex and the body does not stand up to scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> Though the mores of ancient Rome were certainly different than mores of the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage: From Ancient Times to the Third Millennium* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 49. The Showtime series *Spartacus* is a good example of this anachronistic depiction of sexual life in the pre-Christian world. Throughout the series gladiators, noblemen and women, slaves, and commoners are depicted as operating in a world that seems largely free from any guiding or overarching sexual mores.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 21.

nascent church it is nevertheless the case that the ancient Roman world, at least among the elites, was governed by strong codes of sexual conduct.

Sex was not something to be indiscriminately indulged but was, rather, a force to be harnessed and controlled,<sup>3</sup> in no small part because of the incredibly *social* nature of sexuality and the body as understood by the ancients – both Greco-Roman and Jewish. As Christianity grew and spread and interacted with the surrounding thought and practices regarding marriage, family, and sexual life it too adopted an outlook that reflected the social nature of those institutions. This chapter explores Christian thinking on marriage and family life as articulated by ancient Christian writers in their classical context. First, a fuller account of Roman and Jewish understandings of the family will be given before proceeding to Christian articulations of marriage and family in light of these surrounding understandings. The ascetic character of the Christian theology of marriage, which stands in contract to less ascetic and more socio-politically inclined ideologies of marriage found in Roman and Jewish cultures, will be highlighted.

### *The Roman Family*

The Roman family was of central importance to the life of the wider Roman Empire. It was the basic unity of society serving as a locus of economic, political, and cultural power under the head of the *paterfamilias*. The family was the basic means of

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 19–22.

wealth acquisition and management,<sup>4</sup> it was a means of solidifying and strengthening political power, and it contributed to the longevity and immortality of the Roman people. These considerations worked together to provide for an intricate and intersectional understanding of marriage. Betrothals, marriage contracts, and dowries – all organized between families before the wedding – ensured the interests of all involved were protected and provided for a measure of economic security to women and men entering into their public life.<sup>5</sup> It was entrance into this state that served as a milestone, perhaps *the* milestone, for entering adult life. Through marriage men gained an “independent” status from their families, while women, though merely transferred from the protection of their father to their husband, gained a level of respectability and, within the management of the home, responsibility and agency through marriage. As John Boswell has commented the woman “became [an] adult by virtue of her marriage” with much of the ceremony “symboliz[ing] the bride’s leaving girlhood behind and entering into matron status.”<sup>6</sup> Without marriage the woman – as opposed to the man – remained as a child.<sup>7</sup>

Marriage was the means by which the bodies of young Romans were drawn into the service of goals and aims of the Roman political vision. In and through marriage the bodies of women and men were conscripted into public service – used in war to increase the boundaries of the empire and used in bed to increase the subjects of the empire. Rattled as it was by the ever-present specter of death, reproduction loomed large in the

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<sup>4</sup> John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–35; 42–44; 48.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

ancient world as a matter of public concern. Women were tasked with bearing children to replace the dead, a daunting tasking when one considers that in order “[f]or the population of the Roman Empire to remain...stationary...each woman would have had to have produced an average of five children.”<sup>8</sup> Couples, therefore, could not be given the luxury of rampant, unregulated sexuality concerned only with pleasure. Instead, their bedding had to be far more civic minded: “If their little world was not to come to an end for lack of citizens,” says historian Peter Brown “they must reproduce it, every generation, by marriage, intercourse, and the begetting and rearing of children.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, after marriage, the bearing and raising of children naturally followed. Procreation was a central concern of marriage in the classical world, but not simply for the joy and reward of childrearing. It played a key role in providing for “legitimate children” to carry on family wealth and political power,<sup>10</sup> it was simply one’s “civic duty”<sup>11</sup> to not only provide heirs for one’s family, but future citizens of the Roman world. By marrying and begetting Roman children husband, wife, and family ensured the “communal

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<sup>8</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> John Witte Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*, Second (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 25.

<sup>11</sup> David G. Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church*, vol. 7, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.), 7. See also Boswell, 39.

immortality” of the Empire.<sup>12</sup> The family was the key to Roman immortality and the hope for eternal life.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Jewish Family*

Jewish understandings of the family before, during, and after the period of Christ’s ministry and early Christianity borrowed heavily from the surrounding culture, though as Judaism progressed a more thoroughly Jewish theology of marriage developed in midrash.<sup>14</sup> On the whole, Jewish understandings were not vastly different in outward form from other classic examples of family life.<sup>15</sup> According to Blu Greenberg, marriage was “from the very moment of origins of the Jewish people, marriage was considered to be the ideal state.”<sup>16</sup> Like Roman and other ‘pagan’ family structures, Jewish life was built around the household, consisting of “parents, grandparents, and widows, with the eldest son and wife and their children.”<sup>17</sup> The marriage which formed the household was

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<sup>12</sup> Witte Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> See, on this point, David M. Feldman, *Marital Relations, Birth Control, and Abortion in Jewish Law* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974). As the Talmud developed marriage gradually conceptualized more explicitly as a “mitzvah” or commandment.

<sup>15</sup> Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage: From Ancient Times to the Third Millennium*, 1–3.

<sup>16</sup> Blu Greenberg, “Marriage in the Jewish Tradition,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 22, no. 1 (1985): 3. Greenberg also provides a wonderful overview of Jewish Talmudic reflection and teaching on celibacy and marriage.

<sup>17</sup> Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage: From Ancient Times to the Third Millennium*, 3.

a political and economic arrangement among ancient Jews, thus “[m]arriage were arranged between families within the clan or tribe.”<sup>18</sup> However, marriage and family life were also endowed with explicitly theological and religious importance, indeed it has been commented that marriage and family life are “central to the theology of Judaism.”<sup>19</sup>

In was in the home that the stories, traditions, and practices that mark Jews as Jews, as the chosen people of God were enacted. Marriage and family were in many ways vessel of the covenant. Through the family lines of the Jewish people the covenant was continued and the promises of the covenant continually rehearsed and remembered. out. The covenant with Abraham demonstrates the ultimately familial focus of God’s work in and among the people of Israel:

I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.’ Then Abram fell on his face; and god said to him, ‘As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between men and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God (Gen. 17: 1-8)

God’s promises are to be made manifest in and through marriage and family; in the begetting of generations, in the multiplication of Jews God’s glory and faithfulness is made known. Fruitfulness is the manifestation in the lives of the Jewish people of God’s faithfulness and the fulfilment of his promises. Jews, in return, mark their sons with

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Greenberg, “Marriage in the Jewish Tradition,” 3.

circumcision (Gen. 17:9-14) as a physical promise of *their* faithfulness to God. The importance of family, tribe, and nation in the history and collective consciousness of the Jewish people, in Brent Water's words, "reflected the special status of a covenanted people serving God with single-hearted devotion" and their status as "the *people* (not a collection of autonomous individuals) of God"<sup>20</sup>

This Abrahamic covenant was supplemented later by the covenant with Moses and the Israelites in which God gave them the Torah which included laws on marriage and family life.<sup>21</sup> Marriage and family life were thus brought more explicitly into the covenant, eventually becoming a frequent metaphor and analogy of the relationship between God and Israel. In time marriage and family were transformed from simple areas of life under the rule of the covenant into images and icons of the covenant.<sup>22</sup> Jewish writers saw in the intimate union of husband and wife something analogous to the relationship between God and God's people. The prophet Hosea famously wed Gomer and his relationship served as an allegory of the tumultuous relationship that existed between God and Israel. Malachi, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah all similarly utilized the analogy.<sup>23</sup>

With promises of fruitfulness, nations, and kings, the formation of families and the raising up of children understandably take on a great importance. Not unlike the

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<sup>20</sup> Brent Waters, *The Family in Christian Social and Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>21</sup> Witte Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-42.

Roman understanding, the family is the carrier of the national hope and promise. It was marriage and the family “that carri[e]d the promises and the covenant, one generation at a time, toward their full completion and realization.”<sup>24</sup> Through defeats, exiles, and occupations the importance of maintaining “ethnic and religious identity” was intensified.<sup>25</sup> In the face of near constant threats from without to their physical and religious being, marriage and the family took on even greater importance as a site of resistance to attempts at eradication. “Marriage, parenthood, and the ‘traditional norms of Jewish life’ reinforced a patient expectation that God would restore Israel’s fortunes through a deliverer or Messiah”<sup>26</sup> Though concerns for personal happiness and companionship were not absent from ancient marriages in Judaism, marriage and family – as in ancient Rome – was the site of communal hope for the continuation of covenant people<sup>27</sup> though not for their own sake, but for the sake of the manifestation and mediation of God in and to the people of the world.

Given these realities marriage and family were matters of great importance for the communal life of ancient Jews and celibacy was rendered an abnormal lifestyle, though exceptions such as the Essene community do exist.<sup>28</sup> Explicit teachings on celibacy and

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<sup>24</sup> Greenberg, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Waters, *The Family in Christian Social and Political Thought*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> This caused procreation to take on a special importance in post-exilic Jewish life. Following the exile, procreation was key to the replenishment of the Israelites. See Peter Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage: From Ancient Times to the Third Millennium*, 81.

<sup>28</sup> Catherine P. Roth, “Introduction,” in *On Marriage and Family Life*, Reprint (Crestwood, N.Y: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), 9; Coleman, *Christian Attitudes*

its relationship to marriage, however, would only develop following the split between Judaism and Christianity and the development of the Talmud – perhaps in response to Christian emphasis upon the ‘angelic’ way of life. This ambivalence towards celibacy, however, is not difficult to understand. Jewish identity, tied as it was (and is) to the covenant between God and Israel and the promise of national and tribal continuity makes little (if any) sense of without a strong focus on marriage and family life.

### *A New Type of Family*

Classical culture – both Greco-Roman and Jewish – celebrated and affirmed marriage, children, and the family, situating them as foundations and cornerstones of identity and national wellbeing. It was in the midst of both these cultures and in dialogue with them that the nascent church developed its theology of marriage and the family. Yet an interesting feature of this theological development was the role celibacy and asceticism played. Though unmarried and single individuals were not unknown to Second-Temple Judaism and the Roman world,<sup>29</sup> they were anomalies, often standing outside of mainstream religious thought, with their singleness was not accounted for by the larger cultural ethic but, rather, undermined it.

In contrast, the church developed accounts of marriage that not only accommodated the practice of celibacy, but in many ways was dependent upon the undergirding ascetic logic of celibacy. Early Christian sermons and treatises reveal what

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*to Marriage: From Ancient Times to the Third Millennium*, 84–86; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 21–25.

<sup>29</sup> Radford Ruether, *Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family*, 21–25.

sounds to the modern ear as highly negative views towards the body, sexual desire, and the family leading many, including author Elizabeth Abbott to conclude that Christianity “[f]rom the outset...was sex-negative.”<sup>30</sup> Yet such a judgment is neither fair nor accurate; though negative attitudes towards sex were certainly present in the patristic writers (one thinks of Jerome), most fathers affirmed sexuality, marriage, and the family, but such affirmation arose out of a new context and in light of a new logic that rivaled the logics of the Roman Empire and, though indebted to it, nevertheless transcended the logic of the Jewish people. This is an eschatological logic grounded in the salvific work of Christ’s Life, Death, and Resurrection that, while affirming marriage, nonetheless gives shapes, form, and meaning to celibate life.

*Paul, New Creation, and the Celibate Living.*

The seventh chapter of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians has been called “the most important in the entire Bible for the question of marriage and related subjects.”<sup>31</sup> The statements on marriage and virginity contained in this text have exerted tremendous influence on the history of Christian sexual ethics – for good and ill. Written to a boisterous community of Christians in the city of Corinth, Paul’s letter provides a logic for Christian sexual ethics that, though never fully eradicated, has often been obscured in favor of other logics (or no logic at all). Yet 1 Corinthians provides a fertile ground for

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Abbott, *A History of Celibacy* (Cambridge, Mass: Da Capo, 2001), 49.

<sup>31</sup> Hering quoted in Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 53.

contemporary Christians seeking to reinvigorate, renegotiate, and retrieve a “thick” Christian narrative of sexual existence.

New Testament scholar Richard B. Hays has claimed that the eschatological new creation is a key component in understanding Pauline ethical teaching. For Hays “Paul’s moral vision is intelligible only when his apocalyptic perspective kept clearly in mind: the church is to find its identity and vocation by recognizing its role within the cosmic drama of God’s reconciliation of the world to himself.”<sup>32</sup> According to Paul, the Christian community “stands at the juncture” between the old world ruled by sin and death and the new world ruled by God and inaugurated in the events of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.<sup>33</sup> The community, along with the rest of the world, must wait for the consummation of the cosmic order which will only fully be completed at the return of Christ; however, the church, contra the rest of the world, already participates in the redeemed order and “stands within the present age as a sign of what is to come, already prefiguring the redemption for which [the world] waits.”<sup>34</sup>

Paul’s sexual ethic derives from this commitment to the overlap and consists of “standard rabbinic sexual morality, some Stoic asceticism, what he knows of Jesus’ own teaching, and a pragmatic response to problems in his local church.”<sup>35</sup> This vision of “overlap” nuances the extreme positions present in the Corinthian community: neither

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<sup>32</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 19.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>35</sup> Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage: From Ancient Times to the Third Millennium*, 104.

affirming an over-realized eschatology rendering sexual norms and codes of conduct null nor requiring a stringent, universal ethic of renunciation.<sup>36</sup> Instead, Paul affirms marriage as a good and valid gift of God to the world, one that assists men and women in controlling their lustful desires.<sup>37</sup> For this reason Corinthian Christians might remain married, even to their unbelieving spouse. Nonetheless, the impending eschaton did provide a rationale for those who might consider celibate life. It was a mode of existence especially attuned to the immanent return of Christ,<sup>38</sup> it allowed followers of Christ to become “better prepared than...the married for the great travail that would precede the coming of Jesus.”<sup>39</sup>

Paul counsels both marriage and celibacy to his followers, though one is not ‘ontologically’ better than the other. Marriage is a good and holy union to enter into, designed to provide a respite from the sexual passions which torment women and men. Goodness and godliness are not thought by Paul to be absent from the marital union. Celibacy too is affirmed but as a gift given to only to a select few. It is a gift that allows the recipient to focus wholeheartedly on God and preparation for his return. Given the immanent return of Christ to his people, celibacy simply makes sense. Nonetheless, marriage still persists as a testament to God’s goodness and provision for his creation.

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<sup>36</sup> Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, note; Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage: From Ancient Times to the Third Millennium*, 106.

<sup>37</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 54–55. It is an interesting note to observe the absence of talk concerning children in Paul’s discussion of marriage given the focus on childbearing in Jewish life.

<sup>38</sup> Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, 109.

<sup>39</sup> Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 56.

Paul's treatment of sexual ethics in 1 Corinthians 7 casts a long shadow on the history of Christian sexual thinking. In his emphasis on marriage and family as *both* gifts and legitimate ways of life Paul laid the groundwork that other thinkers would build upon. In the remainder of the chapter two thinkers, Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom and their contribution to sexual ethics will be considered, with special focus on the ways in which celibacy and marriage together are understood.

*St. John Chrysostom*

St. John Chrysostom, sometime Patriarch of Constantinople, offers an early account of Christian sexual life. Though hardly systematized and contained in various sermons and treatises, Chrysostom's teaching presents a coherent vision of marriage and celibacy that is in keeping with much of Paul's thought and teaching. Indeed, John Chrysostom's homily on 1 Corinthians 7 provides a fertile ground to consider and reflection on the golden-mouthed orator's thoughts on Christian sexual life.

*Chrysostom on 1 Corinthians.* Chrysostom presents Paul's Corinthian teachings on marriage and virginity as two different means of gaining mastery over the self and conquering the passions that rule within us. Marriage and virginity are thus moved from a dichotomous relationship with the other, to a more harmonious relationship of mutual support, each with its share of goods and ills. Paul, says Chrysostom, "establishes rules for married life, but places his reply within the context of virginity...[a]s if he were

saying ‘if you are searching for the best and most lofty path, then do not take a woman at all. But if you want help and security in your weakness, look for a wife.’<sup>40</sup>

Following Paul, Chrysostom understands marriage as primarily a way to “guide men to the practice of self-control,<sup>41</sup> a means of guarding against temptations to sin and fornication. Through marriage, men and women come together and learn to control their desires for the sake of the other. In marriage, each spouse has conjugal rights over the other: the wife’s body is no longer hers, nor is the husband’s body any longer his. In marriage, the man and his wife are servants of one-another, giving their bodies up for the sake of the other.<sup>42</sup> They are “equally responsible for the honor of their marriage bed<sup>43</sup> and thus cannot exercise their sexual faculties without the consent of the other.<sup>44</sup>

Chrysostom’s oration turns marriage into a school for self-control because it necessitates that abstinence and continence within marriage be practiced mutually and with the consent of the other. “So, wife,” Chrysostom says, “if you want to abstain, even for a little while, get your husband’s permission first;<sup>45</sup> this ensures that the abstinence

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<sup>40</sup> Saint John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, trans. Catherine P. Roth and David Anderson, Reprint edition (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986), 25–26.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 26–27.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. Chrysostom does not explicitly command the same of husbands, but the emphasis he places on the equal conjugal rights possessed of women over their husbands leads me to believe he would require the same mutual agreement if husbands wished marital chastity for a season.

does not result in “great evils—adulteries, fornications and broken homes,”<sup>46</sup> while also ensuring that the abstinence arises from and results in harmony and love within the home. By practicing abstinence together man and woman together learn to control themselves and their passions by putting those (valid) sexual desires into their proper place. Marriage is a means of “reliev[ing] pain and sweat...before you utterly collapse,”<sup>47</sup> while also training women and men in greater asceticism which, according to Pauline logic, enables more focus on God and things divine.<sup>48</sup>

The good of marriage is, however, limited. Marriage is not all good, however. Though the married might gain pleasure from their union, it is only for a short season,<sup>49</sup> and while “we [are] directed to leave earthly cares behind us, [in marriage] you are more deeply sinking into them;”<sup>50</sup> marriage is a burden, a weight, and a source of anxiety over the things of the world.<sup>51</sup> Thus marriage, while offering a means of further growing in Christ, runs the risk of putting stumbling blocks before one’s path.

Chrysostom closes his homily with some thoughts on virginity. Through virginity one is better able to focus on the things of the Lord and “press forward toward the things yet to come;”<sup>52</sup> indeed, the ability to detach oneself from the affairs of the world and

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>48</sup> Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>50</sup> Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 40–41.

look, instead, to Christ is the defining characteristic of virginity. For Chrysostom the difference between a wife and a virgin is not one of sexual incontinence versus continence, but rather “attachment as opposed to detachment from worldly cares.”<sup>53</sup> For Chrysostom, as for Paul, virginity is certainly a better state of life, but not because of any inherent evil or ‘dirtiness’ associated with the body or with sexual relationships, but because of the practicalities that sex necessarily entails: “Sex is not evil,” Chrysostom states, “but it is a hindrance to someone who desires to devote all her strength to a life of prayer.”<sup>54</sup>

Sex is an act that involves the entire body, as well as soul. To speak as if sexual relationships, even those within the bonds of marriage, do not bring with them earthly and worldly entanglements is to deny the bodily reality of sex and the inherent meaning within our bodies and the actions our bodies perform. Paul says that we live in a world “groaning in labor pains” and we too “grown inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies;”<sup>55</sup> our bodies are caught up in the fallenness of the world, and while they participate in the redemption of the world wrought by Christ, they are still prone to be twisted through sin.

Chrysostom’s homily helps set Paul’s words within a larger pastoral and theological vision. Virginity is no longer a sentence under which we must suffer, the mark of a sexually stunted individual and marriage is no longer a Christianized path to (monogamous) sexual libertinism. Rather, both become paths graciously ordained by God

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Romans 8:22-23

to teach men and women self-control for the purpose of unburdening themselves of their passions and desires (sexual or otherwise) which would hinder them in their relationship with God. Both virginity and marriage are work; both are battles to bring our sexual/lustful selves into submission under God and his vision for our bodily lives; yet they are battles fought in different ways through different means, each with their own dangers and challenges. Further, God does not call all to one style of life or another, instead “each have his own special gift from God.”<sup>56</sup> Thus marriage is not about having sex, and virginity about *not* having sex, rather they are both about being transformed in the image and likeness of God, both about holiness. Chrysostom closes his homily by saying:

So whether we presently live in virginity, in our first marriage, or in our second, let us pursue holiness, that we may be counted worthy to see Him and to attain the Kingdom of Heaven, through the grace and love for mankind of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory, dominion, and honor, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen<sup>57</sup>

For the Golden-mouthed orator the purpose of sexual life – whether lived out in virginity or marriage – is our purification and transformation. The disciplining of sexual desire for the sake of better seeing and experiencing God is the true goal of marriage; engaging or abstaining from sexual activity can only make sense when that goal is kept in mind.

*Chrysostom on Children and Procreation.* Chrysostom’s reflections are not only limited to marriage, but touch upon childbearing as well. Marriage, he writes, was

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<sup>56</sup> Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, 29.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

instituted for “two purposes...to make us chaste, and to make us parents.”<sup>58</sup> Addressing the procreative function of marriage Chrysostom lists two purposes which procreation serves, the furtherance of humanity *biologically* as well as *spiritually* and *religiously*, before demonstrating the provisional character of these purposes specifically and the larger procreative purpose of marriage in general in light of Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

God commanded the first couple to “be fruitful and multiply,”<sup>59</sup> however, this was not a command uttered to all couples across time and space, enjoining them to bear children; rather, it was a unique command given to Adam and Eve as the original man and woman responsible for increasing their kind. Indeed, Chrysostom says that “the world is filled with our kind,” therefore we no longer have the same need to procreate in the way that our ancestors, especially the first man and woman, did;<sup>60</sup> furthermore, the practical, lived reality of married life reveals for St. John the provisional nature of the command to procreate: “Marriage does not always lead to childbearing,” says the saint, “[w]e have as witnesses all those who are married but childless.”<sup>61</sup>

But it was not only for the sake of biological preservation that man and woman were given the gift of procreation within marriage, it was also a means of thwarting death in the time before the promise of the resurrection.<sup>62</sup> “God gave the comfort of children”

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>59</sup> Gen. 1:28 NRSV

<sup>60</sup> Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, 85.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

to those who lived under sin, corruption, and death, “that each person might leave a memorial of his life...living images of the departed.”<sup>63</sup> Procreation thus served a religious and spiritual purpose. Birth allowed man and woman, fallen though they were, to imperfectly fulfill God’s command to “subdue” the earth.<sup>64</sup> In filling the earth with “living images” of man and woman—and, therefore, of God—procreation served as a *resistance* to death’s hold on humanity and corruption of God’s purposes. Childbearing and childrearing in the face of death proclaimed faith in the God who is the God of the living and who calls existence into being out of nothing. As long as dying and corrupted humanity could reproduce the memory of humankind and, thus, God’s relationship to mankind would not be lost.<sup>65</sup>

“Now,” the saint continues, “that resurrection is at our gates, and we do not speak of death, but advance toward another life better than the present, the desire for posterity is superfluous.”<sup>66</sup> Though procreation for the biological as well as spiritual preservation of the species was the primary purpose of marriage, in light of Christ’s redeeming work it is no longer needed. Not only is the earth now filled with men, women, and children, but it is no longer held under the rule of death. Christ has won eternal life in the resurrection for those who would follow him. Christ has perfectly accomplished what procreation pointed to: the final triumph of life over corruption, birth over death. Christians are now

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. This positive view of procreation is interestingly contrasted with the slightly darker view contained in Nyssen’s *On Virginity*.

<sup>64</sup> Gen. 1:28 NRSV

<sup>65</sup> Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, 85. Revisited paragraph, could be stated much better. I know what I want to say, just not *how* I want to say it.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

called to “a nobler childbirth...by spiritual labor”<sup>67</sup> that perfectly proclaims Christ’s new reign over creation.

Given Christ’s relativizing of the original procreative purposes of marriage “there remains only one reason or marriage, to avoid fornication.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore St. John counsels that “[w]e should seek a wife for this reason only, in order to avoid sin, to be freed from all immorality. To this end every marriage should be set up so that it may work together with us for chastity.”<sup>69</sup> Marriage has been transformed from an institution primarily concerned, in Chrysostom’s understanding, with biological as well as spiritual and religious perpetuation of humanity to a quasi-monastic<sup>70</sup> institution primarily concerned with the spiritual formation of husband and wife, as well as children. It exists “[i]n order that we may avoid fornication, retrain our desire, practice chastity, and be well pleasing to God by being satisfied with our own wife: this is the gift of marriage, this is its fruit, this is its profit.”<sup>71</sup> In these comments John Chrysostom undermines the procreative logic undergirding much of Roman and Jewish thinking and reveals the basic difference between classical understandings of sexual ethics and the Christian understanding. In much of the ancient world marriage and childbearing, as has been discussed above, exists as a political institution and practice. The alternative praxis of the Christian church

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<sup>67</sup> Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, 86. A similar idea is expressed in Nyssen’s *On Virginity*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 69–70.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

centered on celibacy and asceticism in marriage proclaimed an alternative politics, the politics of Jesus and the Resurrection. Chrysostom's narration brings married and family life, as well as celibacy, under the logical sign of Christ's resurrection.

*The Icon of Marriage.* Marriage—in both its procreative and ascetical functions—serves as an icon of God's activity in the world and His plan of salvation and restoration of creation. Before Christ, marriage pointed towards immortality and everlasting life, in the interim between his ascension and his return marriage serves as an icon of Christ's continued presence and redemptive work in creation.<sup>72</sup> In discussing the iconographic nature of marriage Chrysostom moves from his practical explication of marriage to his more highly theological. This is one of the strengths of his articulation of marriage: it grounds itself in a practical understanding of the marital relationship and reveals the deeper theological meaning contained *within* those practical understandings of marriage. For Chrysostom, there is no dichotomy between the practical and theological in marriage.

Chrysostom, in many of his homilies and sermons, offers reflections on the meaning of Paul's enigmatic comments in Ephesians regarding the marriage of husband and wife and the mystery of Christ and his church.<sup>73</sup> It is in these comments that Chrysostom most clearly elucidates his high theology of marriage and its iconographic nature. "As the bridegroom leaves his father and comes to his bride, so Christ left His Father's throne and came to His bride. He did not summon us on high, but Himself came to us. For this reason when Paul said, 'This is a great mystery,' he added, 'I understand it

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 77, 79.

<sup>73</sup> Ephesians 5:31-32 NRSV

in relation to Christ and the church.”<sup>74</sup> The departure of man and woman from their familial houses and their uniting into “one flesh” serves as an icon of Christ’s own emptying of himself and creation of the Church for the purpose of our redemption.<sup>75</sup>

In coming together, man and woman image the emptying of Christ by giving up their wills and their bodies to the other.<sup>76</sup> In marriage, the wills of man and woman are trained away from selfishness towards selflessness; they learn to submit not only their desires to one person within the bond of marriage, but also their entire beings. Further, in coming together in the bond of marriage man and woman image Christ’s union with the church and our inspiration into His body. Just as woman was created from the side of man and united to him so too the church has been created from the side of Christ and united to Him.<sup>77</sup> This “spiritual intercourse,” enacted through baptism and the Eucharist, like the physical intercourse of man and woman knits Christ and his church into one.<sup>78</sup>

Chrysostom here discloses the profundity and beauty of his theology: the genesis of our desire was the genesis of marriage,<sup>79</sup> and God, in His wisdom, did not merely allow marriage to exist as a simple solution to a problem, but caught marriage up in his redemptive plan; God took what was instituted as a result of our sinful desires and used it

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<sup>74</sup> Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, 96.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 51; Philippians 2:7.

<sup>76</sup> Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, 61-62; 86-87

<sup>77</sup> Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, 93-94.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 77, 51.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 85. Though Chrysostom uses the term generic term ‘desire,’ it is obvious from the context that this is lustful/sinful desire.

as an image of his redeeming work. Thus, a man and his wife in their simple act of *being* married, in the performing of the constitutive acts of marriage image the central dogmatic truths of Christianity; indeed, marriage embodies the entire Christian narrative: creation (by calling to mind Adam and Even), fall (by mitigate effects of the fall on our desires), redemption (by imaging Christ's act of leaving his Heavenly home and becoming united in one flesh with his church), and consummation (by imaging the final, heavenly marriage of the Lamb).

### *Conclusion*

This chapter has attempted to ground early Christian marital and family theology in the context of the wider Roman and Jewish contexts in which the early church developed. Whereas Romans and Jews emphasized the family's larger social and political role in furthering the Empire and in continuing the the People of God, Christians articulated a vision of family grounded on the eschatological reality of God in Christ. Christ's life, death, and resurrection transformed and transfigured how marriage and family life were to be lived out. No longer conscripted for the sake of the Empire or the People, marriage now served as school of ascetic disciplining where sexual desires might be trained and the wills of men and women made to submit to the other in imitation of Christ. Marriage has been transformed into an ascetic school for Christians, its meaning derived no longer for its social or biological function, but from the reality of the new creation inaugurated in Christ.

The ascetic view of marriage was grounded in the eschatological reality attested to by Christians and accompanied and nurtured, in part, by celibacy and the witness celibates offered the church and the wider world. As the church moved away from the

eschatological passion that animated it and, in particular, as celibacy as a unique manifestation of the eschatological commitment became more domesticated in and through the clergy and religious orders Christian marriage began to look more and more like Roman and Jewish versions of marriage, concerned chiefly with issues of the state and social ordering and, eventually, personal fulfilment. Chapter two now turns to this history, starting at the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation and the changes to marriage and family wrought during the fracturing of the western church.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Where We Are and How We Got There

#### *Introduction*

As narrated in chapter one Christian visions of marriage in antiquity had a decidedly ascetic character, supported in no small part by the larger eschatological commitments of the early church as well as the presence of vowed celibate men and women within the Christian community. The celibate witness of these men and women contributed to theological reflection and articulation that held profound influence on the shape of marriage and family life in the church. Early church sexual theology was marked by a profound entanglement of celibacy, marriage, and asceticism. To speak of one was necessarily to speak of the other. In considering the theology behind celibacy, early Christians had to reflect upon the implications of celibacy upon marriage providing a fruitful, yet challenging account of Christian sexual life.

Sadly, this legacy would not last. As the eschatological passion of early Christians began to wane which, combined with the institutionalization of celibacy in the west gradually undid the deep relationship between marriage and celibate life. As the differences between the married and the celibate became more pronounced so too did the conceptions of marriage and celibacy until the decisive break of the Reformation where, for Protestants, celibacy was relegated to the margins of Christian life. This chapter attempts to narrate this break as well as the resulting history through the Enlightenment

and on to our current context and the unique issues of sexual life and ordering we face that, it will be shown, may be attributed to certain attitudes and impulses first adopted during the Reformation era. What will become apparent is that the marginalization of celibates and the forgetting of the Christian grammar of celibacy which this thesis is concerned with have been long-term, ongoing processes in the life of the church.

### *The Myth of the “Traditional” Marriage*

Popular culture’s dim view of celibacy is tied deeply both to its romantic, sentimental views of marriage and widespread fixation on sexual wholeness and fulfilment. These commitments arose out of the seismic shifts in the understanding and practice of marriage begun in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation and continuing through to the Enlightenment of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and beyond. Though marriage had changed and evolved beforehand, it was during these three centuries that marriage’s evolution had direct impact on current cultural practices and understandings of celibacy.

Stephanie Coontz, in her book *Marriage, a History*, notes that it is “a dearly held cultural ideal...that marriage should be based on intense, profound love,”<sup>1</sup> this ideal, however, has been missing from most societies for thousands of years. Instead, marriage stood as a mark “of adulthood and respectability as well as the main source of social security, medical care, and unemployment insurance;” it was, before all else, a primarily socio-economic institution, concerned with the practical realities of nations, communities, and families. For women, especially, the economic importance of marriage during this

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 15.

time cannot be understated. For most women it was in the context of married and family life that they found and secured economic and material stability. The concerns of marriage transcended the individual, subjective concerns of husbands and wives. Love was certainly not precluded in this arrangement, but marriage “was too vital an...institution to be entered into solely on the basis of something as irrational as love.”<sup>2</sup>

### *The Protestant Reformation: Decline of Celibacy*

The collective effort of Protestant Reformers across the continent was focused on many areas of church doctrine and practice, including marriage, family life and celibacy. At the time of the Reformation clerical celibacy and monastic virginity<sup>3</sup> were heavily entrenched in the official teachings of the Catholic Church alongside popular, though not necessarily *official*, views of marriage and sexuality that saw most, if not all sexual desire, even in marriage, as sinful and originating to the fall of humanity. Steven Ozment has written that “Protestant commentators closely associated the prejudice against marriage and family [during the Reformation period] with exaggerated clerical ideals of virginity and celibacy and the religious culture these ideals nourished.”<sup>4</sup> In response, Reformers attacked celibacy as it was popularly *practiced*, characterizing it as a means of skirting the responsibilities inherent in marital commitments, a claim given credence by

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 106: It was “[n]ot until 1139 [that] canon law completely forbid clerical marriage.” Monastic celibacy, of course, had been a church practice since the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Harvard University Press, 1983), 1.

the fact that many “clergy openly had sexual amours and...many lived publicly in concubinage.” Though these sexual misdeeds were officially condemned by the Church, the lay Christians of Europe had “awkwardly adjusted” to such practices as realities.<sup>5</sup>

According to Charles Coleman it is in this context and in light of the abuses of the vow of chastity by everyone from parish priests to cardinals to popes that the Reformers began imagining and articulating a new understanding of marriage and celibacy in Christian life. “The Reformers,” he writes, “were together responsible for a decisive change in the perspective of marriage.”<sup>6</sup> Where for centuries the Catholic Church had held that celibacy was a better and higher calling the Reformers sought to move away from views of Christian sexual ordering that seemed a “total mismatch” to the actual realities of sexual life.<sup>7</sup> Though they continued to affirm virginity as a calling of God “they pushed it to the periphery of human experience,”<sup>8</sup> rejecting any imposition of celibacy on women and men, such as was done in the priesthood and monastic orders.<sup>9</sup>

Jane Strohl has written that for Luther in particular “[i]f God favors a person with the [charism of chastity] there is reason for rejoicing” because of the freedom it gives for the worship of God. “Luther insists,” however, “that one cannot by one’s own efforts generate such a calling; it comes only a divine gift and quite rarely at that.”<sup>10</sup> This

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>6</sup> Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Marriage: From Ancient Times to the Third Millennium*, 176.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

rejection of chosen celibacy and the ambivalence with which the Reformers (but especially Luther) viewed the project of celibate life arose not *solely* in response to abuses, but comes as a direct corollary to certain theological positions of the Reformers, as Patrik Hagman has demonstrated. According to Hagman certain dualities present in John Calvin and Martin Luther's theologies also shift the Reformers away from an appreciation and affirmation of celibacy and asceticism more broadly.

Read and understood through the lenses of the corrupt Catholic Church the Reformers viewed ascetic practices as exemplified in the monastic orders – including but not limited to celibacy – as “external” practices that practitioners undertook in an attempt to gain heavenly merit. Calvin condemns superstitious faith that placed “the substance of piety in external observances,”<sup>11</sup> while Martin Luther (under the influence of a somewhat mistaken student of Aquinas) viewed the “monastic life [as] concerned with achieving the remittance of sins by ‘works,’” a part of “the monk’s misguided quest for salvation.”<sup>12</sup> Where many ascetics saw their asceticism as a way of becoming more aware of their own sinfulness and, by exposing this sinfulness, a way of life conducive to moral growth, formation, and self-control, Luther saw asceticism as attempting what fundamentally cannot be attempted: the overcoming of a sinful nature.<sup>13</sup> The issue, for Luther, lies in the fact that asceticism is a set of external practices that attempts to shape and form the inner

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<sup>10</sup> Jane E Strohl, “Luther’s New View on Marriage, Sexuality and the Family,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 76 (2009): 160.

<sup>11</sup> Patrik Hagman, “The End of Asceticism: Luther, Modernity and How Asceticism Stopped Making Sense,” *Political Theology* 14, no. 2 (April 2013): 176.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

life of the Christian. This is fundamentally backwards. “Faith is for Luther,” writes Hagman, “completely an ‘inner’ phenomenon and the external is secondary at best.”<sup>14</sup> Ascetic practices, then, are robbed of their logic because they are simply “attempts to replace this inner faith with works.”<sup>15</sup>

The severing of inner faith and outer works helps reveal the importance Luther and other Reformers would place on marriage and other ‘this worldly’ institutions. For Luther “only faith is of value” in the heavenly kingdom because “it is the only thing humans can and should offer God.”<sup>16</sup> No practices – celibacy, fasting, prayer, etc. – can help one in the realm of the heavenly, acts and actions, then, take on their primary importance in the kingdom of the world. Here it matters that they act “in accordance with their callings for the good of the neighbor.”<sup>17</sup> Given the world in which Luther and the Reformers lived it is little wonder than they shirked off celibacy in addition to other forms of asceticism given that these practices were often (in correctly) identified with regards to their role in the process of salvation. Celibacy was no longer a theologically thick practice, it had no role in and of itself in the formation of the soul. For Luther it now became simply one option among many, a way of life one might choose according to one’s “situation.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 182.

As Luther's dichotomous faith moved him away from an appreciation of asceticism, a new appreciation of the 'this-worldly' institutions of marriage and family was being discovered. In contrast to much of Christian history dating back to Scripture, the Reformers argued that marriage was a better, higher institution than celibacy. According to Luther, Calvin, and their ilk marriage was an institution that "stabilized both individuals and society as a whole," by serving as a means of personal sanctification and social transformation. It was "the cradle of citizenship, extending its values and example into the world around it."<sup>19</sup> As the Reformation spread through Europe its followers closed monasteries and staged "escapes and rescues of cloistered nuns," including Katharina Von Bora, the future Mrs. Luther.<sup>20</sup>

Reformation changes were not only relegated to the status of marriage versus celibacy in society, but also affected the way in which the relationship between spouses was viewed. Where medieval writings had often utilized *love* as a term in reference to the relationships between a man or woman and Jesus, or to describe affections between members of one's community, as the 16<sup>th</sup> century progressed onward, more and more often terms such *love* were used in reference to marriage and the relationship between a husband and wife.<sup>21</sup> The nature of this love is different, of course, from the impassioned love of popular romance. This love was not based on physical attraction or emotional feeling (though these were not precluded), but, rather, a willingness to sacrifice within the

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<sup>19</sup> Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, 7-9. This language of marriage 'building block' and foundational unit of society has continued into modernity, in both Protestant and, interestingly, Catholic circles.

<sup>20</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 132-133.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-135

marriage. The question was not “‘Do I desire and want this persons?’ but ‘Do I find this person honorable and companionable?’”<sup>22</sup> What mattered was not the modern concern with love *before* marriage but, instead, whether a man and woman “could *learn to love* [each other].”<sup>23</sup>

Despite impressive changes wrought by the Reformation, including the increased focus on the status of the relationship between spouses, marriage was still a social institution and more people than *just* the spouses had a say in marriage. Luther, along with many of the Reformers, supported the right of a family to veto a marriage and look suspiciously on so-called “clandestine” marriages.<sup>24</sup> Laws across Europe were decreed and/or tightened on a variety of issues relating to marriage, from the above-mentioned “clandestine” unions made by personal vows and sealed through consummation to the age at which one could marry to civil penalties concerning sex outside of marriage.<sup>25</sup> Thus, while celebration of marital love increased it could no-more be the sole concern of a marriage during and after the Reformation than before.

### *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Love*

It was only with the dawn of the Enlightenment and the seismic cultural changes it wrought that prearranged marriage were largely abandoned, and “the notion of free

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<sup>22</sup> Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 135, 136.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 137

choice and marriage for love triumph[ed] as a cultural ideal.”<sup>26</sup> This triumph was the product of Reformation-era seeds come-to-fruit and reflected larger Enlightenment ideas that questioned traditional ways of conceiving social arrangements, including marriage. As the Enlightenment progressed it provided a space for marriage to be transformed from a public institution, sanctioned by the church and state and oriented towards the life of one’s community and society into “a private agreement with public consequences.”<sup>27</sup> Where at the beginning of the Enlightenment marriage was seen as religious, natural, social, and contractual by the end many it conceived of as chiefly, perhaps solely, a contractual relationship.<sup>28</sup> Philosophers and thinkers of the Enlightenment period helped create the gap between marriage religiously conceived and secularly or civilly conceived.

Far from being a political arrangement concerning itself primarily with economic matters and wellbeing, marriage now became a “refuge” from the economic, political, and communal commitments of the individual. In marriage and family life individuals (generally men) found a respite from the demands of the world and a site where their needs for intimacy and emotional support could be met.<sup>29</sup> The community that marriage concerned itself was no longer *primarily* the wider community of a local town, city, or

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 7; 146.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 147

<sup>28</sup> John Witte Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*, Second (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 291; 306.

<sup>29</sup> Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 146

wider society; rather, marriage's primary community was the community constituted by the members of a family.

In this new environment, in which “the pursuit of happiness [was] a legitimate goal” many thinkers advocated entering marriage for love.<sup>30</sup> Coontz, quoting historian Jeffrey Watts, notes that “although the sixteenth-century Reformation had already ‘enhanced the dignity of married life by denying the superiority of celibacy,’ the eighteenth century-century Enlightenment ‘exalted marriage even further by making love the most important criterion in choosing a spouse.’”<sup>31</sup> Yet the push towards marrying for love was not without detractors. The new emphasis on love, affection, and marital intimacy in entering and maintaining marriage marked a move to the individualization of marriage. Love, affection, and marital intimacy are subjective qualities that can only be known *in* the marriage by the parties of a marriage. This was a break with centuries of precedent and many commentators “worried that the unprecedented idea of basing marriage on love would produce rampant individualism.”<sup>32</sup> If marriage was an institution expected “to be the best and happiest experience” of women and men’s lives, what would become of marriages when “things went ‘for worse rather than ‘for better’”?<sup>33</sup> Indeed, it is not unrelated to shifts in views towards romance and love that 18<sup>th</sup> century calls for the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 150.

legalization and liberalization of divorce mounted, with many nations enacting laws naming “incompatibility” as a valid grounds for separation by the end of the century.<sup>34</sup>

Though marriage and family life underwent an incredible change in the Enlightenment, a diversity of practice in regards to marriage was still present. Marriage for love was a possibility for relatively few – generally the wealthy and well-to-do. For the lower-classes marriage necessarily remained an institution intimately bound up with economic concerns. It was only in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that working-class individuals and families were finally able to adopt the love-based view of marriage which originated in the Enlightenment.<sup>35</sup>

#### *The 20<sup>th</sup> Century: the “New” Traditional Marriage*

The process of marital sentimentalization, meaning the understanding of marriage as a relationship built primarily on romantic notions and emotional intimacy, reached its zenith and, in many ways, adopted the form which we are most familiar with in the Victorian era of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> through early-20<sup>th</sup> century. In this ear “marriage harbored all the hopes for romantic love, intimacy, personal fulfillment, and mutual happiness that were to be expressed more openly and urgently during the early [20<sup>th</sup>] century.”<sup>36</sup> During the Victorian era matrimonial love was re-conceptualized from something which

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 150-151

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 147

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 177-178

developed *after* marriage, into a prerequisite *for* marriage, romance became the goal of courtship and marriage.<sup>37</sup>

The stresses were mitigated, in general, for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, it seemed that marriage had weathered and overcome these shifts when it entered its “golden age” in the long postwar period ranging from the late 1940s to the early 1960s.<sup>38</sup> The marriage of this period is the idealized and idolized “traditional marriage” of our collective cultural memory. Marriages of this period were the culmination of the long transition, begun at the Reformation, from the socio-economic marital model to the “male protector love-based marital model.”<sup>39</sup> Thanks to the post-war economic boom, more people than in any other era of history were able to live out the “romanticized dream” of the West,<sup>40</sup> with “95 percent of all persons” across Europe and North America marrying.<sup>41</sup> Matrimony signaled one’s entrance into adulthood; indeed, it *was* one’s entrance into adulthood.<sup>42</sup> Marriage the primary means by which an individual’s need for intimacy, companionship, and fulfillment was met.<sup>43</sup> In this period marriage reached its triumph over singleness and celibacy.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 178

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 225

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 228

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 231

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 227

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 230; 233.

As the popularity and social expansiveness of marriage increased, singleness was increasingly viewed in pathological terms. According to a mid-century survey 80 percent of Americans believed that those who “preferred to remain single [were] ‘sick,’ ‘neurotic,’ or ‘immoral.’”<sup>44</sup> For women, spinsterhood or becoming an “old maid” was a real fear in this period,<sup>45</sup> with medical professions, the media, and society all held that a woman who failed to find pleasure and meaning in “homemaking” suffered from “serious psychological problems.” Things were no better for men who might choose ‘bachelorhood’ over married life. They were seen as possessing a wide variety of psychological disorders from narcissism to deviancy.<sup>46</sup>

### *Revolution and Fall*

The “Golden Age” of marriage begun after World War II was a short-lived period of marital prosperity. As rates of marital dissatisfaction rose changes in divorce law were enacted. Many men craved release from the “conformity” of married life, while women, spurred on and empowered by the women’s liberation movement, desired greater meaning;<sup>47</sup> “laughable” fault-divorce proceedings gave way to legalized no-fault divorce in the 1970s and helped precipitate the rise in divorces cases during 70s and 80s.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 230

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 227

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 251–252.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 252.

In 1960 the introduction of the pill into popular circulation help precipitate an even more radical change in marital and family practices than divorce. Now, women were able to control their sexual lives in a new, powerful way. With the advent of the pill women gained a measure of freedom *within* marriage and sexual relationships that enabled a much wider span of freedom *outside* of marriage and sexual relationships.<sup>49</sup> The widespread use of the pill allowed couples to engage in a rethinking of marriage itself. Freedom from the fear of unplanned pregnancy and the power to prolong periods of childlessness freed couples “to reexamine their own relationships more carefully.”<sup>50</sup>

By the 1970s society had undergone an incredible amount of change in a very short period of time. In the span of 20 years surveys found waning support “for conformity to social roles and a much greater focus on self-fulfillment, intimacy, fairness, and emotional gratification;” but growing acceptance of a variety of non-traditional lifestyles, including singleness. Indeed, in contrast to the 1950s, by the close of the 70s only a quarter of Americans held that the single-by-choice were “‘sick,’ ‘neurotic,’ or ‘immoral’”<sup>51</sup> However, by this time singleness could not be understood as the same thing as sexual abstinence. While singleness might be understood as a foregoing of marriage or committed romantic relationships it need not be understood as a foregoing of sex per se.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 255

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 258

*Where We Stand Now*

For the past forty years the United States and much of the West has continued down the path of the 60s and 70s. While the mid-twentieth century saw the spread of no fault divorce laws, the 80s into the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw increased acceptance of out-of-wedlock births, premarital cohabitation, and later-in-life marriages.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, today policies promoting family well being and responsible parenthood are more likely to be effective at stabilizing the family unit rather than any push for marriage. The reality witnessed to by many industrialized nations is that marriage is no longer needed for social and familial stability.<sup>53</sup>

It is not surprising that in this culture of sexual self-fulfillment, with romantic commitments largely divorced for social, religious, and economic concerns and commitments, gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals would demand their right to fulfilment and self-expression. Few can be shocked at gay and lesbian couples who demand access to and participation in that institution which for contemporary Americans has become a means of outwardly expressing inward emotions. As Michael Bradley comments current debates over same-sex marriage are “simply the next logical step in a process that has been in play for centuries now.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 258; 270-271

<sup>53</sup> “Politicians Push Marriage, but That’s Not What Would Help Children - The New York Times,” accessed April 14, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/23/business/for-the-sake-of-the-children-not-marriage-but-help.html?emc=edit\\_th\\_20160323&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=20271556](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/23/business/for-the-sake-of-the-children-not-marriage-but-help.html?emc=edit_th_20160323&nl=todaysheadlines&nid=20271556).

<sup>54</sup> Michael Bradley, “Bridge Building - Ethika Politika,” *Ethika Politika*, July 15, 2013, <https://ethikapolitika.org/2013/07/15/bridge-building/>.

Debates over LGBT inclusion and same-sex marriage, as well as other non-traditional sexual arrangements are not new developments, but merely the logical outworking of the sexual trajectory of the Western world. The effect of the emotional-emphasis placed upon marriage and the way in which it has influenced reasoning regarding same-sex inclusion in marriage is nowhere more apparent than in the Supreme Court ruling establishing the right of same-sex couples to marry. At the end of his majority opinion U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer says:

No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of *love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family*. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death. It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.<sup>55</sup>

Same-sex marriage is merely the latest manifestation of the centuries-long expansion of personal-fulfilment and happiness as grounds and glue of marriage.

The 'rub' between cultural understandings of marriage and ecclesial understandings of marriage, such as we are seeing now in the West, may be traced back to the 1960s and the resistance of many churches, especially churches of the U.S. Mainline, towards the 'radical' movements of the period. Churches were (not inaccurately) perceived as the guardian of "traditional" understandings of marriage and sexuality and, indeed, the church *was* the guardian of those "traditional" understandings, but it seems as though the church has now arrived late to the party of the 60s. Currently,

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<sup>55</sup> Obergefell v. Hodges, 576 U.S. \_\_\_\_ (2015)

all mainline churches are in protracted struggles over the issues of sexuality, marriage, and LGBT inclusion.

*Romance, The Church, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

The above narrative bears out philosopher John Haldane's belief that, in Western society, we have adopted the idea that "[s]exual attraction and love are determinants of human happiness and should be consummated where sincerely felt," this idea reveals, for the philosopher, the way in which we are "addicted to sexualization and sentimentality."<sup>56</sup> Current debates regarding the Sacramental/ecclesial recognition of non-heterosexual marriages, as well as the recognition of non-marital sexual relationships have arisen, as they have in wider society, from ecclesial commitments to certain notions of romance, marriage, and personal fulfillment. According to Jonathan Grant, in his book *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age*, romance is a powerful influence on the modern man or woman in his or her quest for 'authenticity' and 'integrity;' many are "[c]aptured by the tantalizing idea that personal integrity calls for freedom and ongoing choice, [and] see commitment as a barrier to achieving that freedom."<sup>57</sup> This emphasis on freedom and choice marries well with the romantic emphases on "feeling, sensuality, and intuition as the deepest and most important parts of human identity, the places where we experience real meaning."

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<sup>56</sup> John Haldane, "Against Erotic Entitlements," *First Things*, accessed October 22, 2015, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/04/against-erotic-entitlements>.

<sup>57</sup> Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 30.

Romantic partnerships are, therefore, the primary means for and location of self-actualization and expression.<sup>58</sup>

The church and its members have not escaped the culture of authenticity and self-actualization with its emphasis on romance and romantic fulfillment as the ‘normal’ mode of life. This is seen in the all-too ready adoption by the church of the myth of “soul mate salvation.”<sup>59</sup> In the “soul mate salvation” myth marriage becomes less about the *commitment* that binds two men and women together and more about the *recognition* of two halves becoming a whole. It is the public acknowledgement that “the one...the single human being that God has fashioned into perfect compatibility with all of our needs and longings” has entered the beloved’s life.<sup>60</sup> This myth makes life-long celibacy difficult to conceive of. In the myth celibacy is the state between entrance to puberty and entrance to marriage; it names not a positive disposition and ordering of sexual life towards something, but, rather, the denial of something (sex) until marriage.

Authors Christine A. Colón and Bonnie E. Field have explored the ways in which the contemporary church has forgotten and, in many cases, shunned celibacy and celibates. They argue, in part, that the church is increasingly adopting secularized perspectives on sex and marriage. “[F]or many Christians,” they write, “the idea of reserving sexual activity for marriage has...become unfortunately outdated: a relic of a moral code that must be revised to keep up with the times.”<sup>61</sup> According to Colón and

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 30-31; 34.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>61</sup> Colón and Field, *Singled Out.*, 87.

Field “[r]ather than being seen as a wonderful opportunity to serve God, celibacy is seen repeatedly not only as a second best, but also as a guarantee of an unfulfilled, miserable life.”<sup>62</sup>

Colón and Field argue that along with larger culture, many in the church seem to be adopting a view that “individuals can’t say no to sex; they can only say wait.”<sup>63</sup> Many in the church have bought into a post-Freud, post-Kinsey cultural narrative in which “sexual satisfaction bec[omes] the sign of a normal, healthy person.” Indeed, sex becomes, in the words of Alfred Kinsey the means whereby men “become ‘alert, energetic, vivacious, spontaneous, physically active, socially extrovert, and/or aggressive individuals in the population.” Sex, then, is the key to a happy, well-adjusted normal life.<sup>64</sup> Given these compelling narratives, it is little wonder that men and women bought into them. Adopted by those in the church, then, celibacy is an unrealistic option and suspicious choice, a command that, while perhaps possible and suitable for those possessing low libidos,<sup>65</sup> is near impossible for the ‘red blooded’ American man and woman.

Additionally, widespread belief in marriage as “God’s primary institution on earth,”<sup>66</sup> a belief nurtured across ecclesial lines by the furor and passion with which

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<sup>62</sup> Christine Colon and Bonnie Field, *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today’s Church [eBook]* (Brazos Press, 2009), 139.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>65</sup> Tim LaHaye qtd in *Ibid.*, 88

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

marriage is defended – by both ‘traditionalists’ and ‘progressives.’ With this view, the church is becomes, in essence, a “support system” for the family,<sup>67</sup> and in turn, the family becomes the thing that binds the community of the church together. The church is a site for family activities and family formation, it is held together by the shared struggles of married life and child-rearing, not the shared baptism that includes all – old and young, married and single.<sup>68</sup> In these environments, singles receive a message that they don’t – and can’t – belong.

### *Reimagining and Reinvigorating*

It would seem that the logic underpinning the civil right to marry is the same logic underpinning the church’s conception of marriage; in Michael Bradley’s view this is the view that “marriage...is simply the pinnacle of meaningful relationships [and that] anything short of marriage is necessarily sub-optimal.”<sup>69</sup> As civil society has enlarged the right to marry, many look to the church to follow suit. When it fails to change adequately or fast enough, or to even countenance change it appears to many from without and within to be an institution lacking compassion. To hold up marriage (consciously or subconsciously) as the end towards all sexual life points, yet to deny marriage to certain individuals whose orientations preclude them from entering into (and fulfilling the duties

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Bradley, “Bridge Building,” *Ethika Politika*, July 15, 2013, <https://ethikapolitika.org/2013/07/15/bridge-building/>.

of) a heterosexual union would seem to abandon those individuals to a “sexual wilderness.” And indeed this is the case.

Contemporary debates on marriage have revealed a profound poverty in the way in which the church speak of sexual life for the Christian. In the midst of extended discussions on the place of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals in the church a profound blind-spot has been revealed: the church lacks a sexual, marital, and familial theology that makes sense of women and men who are not married. Michael Bradley’s insight is compelling: a culture such as our which as “blurred” the separate but not necessarily opposed desires for sexual pleasure and emotional intimacy<sup>70</sup> necessitates the affirmation of marriage as the highest and sole means of living a sexual life of integrity. Dylan Pahman builds off Bradley by claiming that the high esteem with which we treat marriage necessitates a diminishment of celibacy.<sup>71</sup> If marriage is the end towards which our sexual existence tends, then to devote oneself to celibacy is to stunt one’s sexual existence in some way. “The presumption (often tacitly assumed and contrary to what is explicitly taught) is that one’s *telos* as a human being cannot be achieved apart from marriage (and, of course, sex).”<sup>72</sup>

Conservatives and liberals alike can buy into this view of sexual life – it is common ground many partisans do not realize they have. Singles – LGBT and straight – have been pushed to the fringes of the church, receiving little in the way of theological

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Dylan Pahman, “Losing Our Virginitly: Collateral Damage of the Marriage Debate” July 16, 2013, <https://ethikapolitika.org/2013/07/16/losing-our-virginity-collateral-damage-of-the-marriage-debate/>.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

sustenance for their sexual lives, meanwhile the church has lost out on the valuable witness celibates offer to the church. Katelyn Beaty writing in *Christianity Today* reveals certain of the effects of celibate marginalization:

[S]o long as marriage ascends into the eschelons of existential imperative – you must have *this* in order to be a complete human being – then my singleness is a problem. It is no long a unique witness to the kingdom, where people ‘will neither marry nor are given in marriage.’ It no longer reveals that the water of baptism is thicker than blood – that an entire generation of Christians could be single, and still God would renew his church. Instead, it becomes a second class existence.<sup>73</sup>

As Christians (often with noble intentions) seek sacramental sanction of same-sex unions they implicitly affirm the larger culture narrative of marriage as the end of human sexual ordering. In doing so they aid in the gradual erasure of robust Christian celibacy in the life of the church.<sup>74</sup> In demanding a place in the life of the church the LGBT rights movement has provided Christians an impetus to return to the depths of the Christian tradition in order to reimagine and reinvigorate sexual theology.

### *Conclusion*

Throughout the five-hundred-year transformation of marriage documented above the church was not an idle bystander. It was shaped by the shifts in understandings of marriage and celibacy, just as it contributed to those shifts. As documented above, Reformation attitudes towards celibacy ensured that the churches of the Protestant tradition were birthed with negative dispositions towards the celibate life, dispositions

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<sup>73</sup> Katelyn Beaty, “Same-Sex Marriage and the Single Christian,” *ChristianityToday.com*, July 2013, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/july-web-only/same-sex-marriage-and-single-christian.html>.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

that continued unabated for the most part, despite some exceptions.<sup>75</sup> By and large, however, churches have been content to adopt and accommodate changing cultural understandings of marriage that make a fulfilling life *without* a sexual partner difficult to imagine.

In this context, then, it is difficult both to have meaningful, prayerful conversations regarding how best to minister women and men struggling to live lives of sexual integrity and discern *if* and *how* God might be leading the church with regards to these questions. If it is a foregone conclusion that marriage is the key to happiness, self-realization, fulfilment, and intimacy and that to deny marriage is to prevent an individual from achieving their full potential as a person then the church has only one, logical, faithful response to anyone with any sexual desire: they should embrace their sexual desire and marry.<sup>76</sup> However, such a response is disingenuous at best. To merely follow through on the logic of the culture in which one is embedded is *not* discernment. If the church is to be a faithful witness to Christ and a bearer of the Good News, then it must attempt to speak *to* the culture in which it finds itself, not merely *out of* the culture. To speak a living word to women and men the church must ensure that it is presenting a robust vision of Christian sexual life and practice; under current acquiescence to cultural norms, it is not.

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<sup>75</sup> i.e., the celibacy of several high-profile members of the Oxford movement.

<sup>76</sup> Of course, the same culture that values sexual expression and looks askance at any demand or requirement of continence or sexual denial is quick to require the denial and disavowal of certain forms of sexual desire, such as pedophilia. On the issue of “cultural contradictions” in regards to sexual life see Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 29-53.

Having established in this chapter *how* the West arrived at current understandings of marriage and the way in which that understanding influenced contemporary Christian views on marriage and celibacy, the next chapter will turn to a recovery of celibacy as a means to reclaiming a Christian narrative of sexual life that might speak into the cultural realities outlined in this chapter. This will be accomplished by first beginning with a consideration of Gregory of Nyssa and his treatise *On Virginity*, before reflecting on more contemporary insights and observations that help reclaim celibacy as a robust mode of sexual life intimately concerned with the proclamation of God's work in the world.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Remembering and Reimagining Celibacy

#### *Introduction*

The current position in which the church finds herself, as narrated in chapter two, should harken back the situation in which the church found herself in its nascent years in the Roman Empire. Currently, Christians are tasked with articulating a sexual theology in the midst of a culture that produces many conflicting messages about conjugal life but, at base, celebrates conjugal life as the normative mode of human existence and views abstention from sexual expression with derision at best or suspicion at worst.<sup>1</sup> This context has made the careful, prayerful discernment of how best to address certain issues of sexual life – from homosexuality to divorce and remarriage – difficult. Indeed, bias in favor of married life and romantic coupling has often made any attempt by the church to practice ascetic discipline seem unfair and cruel – with celibacy in many cases the most unfair and cruelest thing of all.

This chapter seeks to remedy that view and begin the process of rewriting the accounts of marriage, family, and sexual life that many Christians today accept as timeless but which chapter two has shown to be based on rather recent history. To this

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<sup>1</sup> See on this count Garry Wills, “The Scourge of Celibacy,” *The Boston Globe*, March 24, 2002, [http://archive.boston.com/globe/spotlight/abuse/stories/032402\\_magazine.htm](http://archive.boston.com/globe/spotlight/abuse/stories/032402_magazine.htm).

end, chapter three is concerned primarily with celibacy and the theology underpinning celibacy as a discipline and practice of the church. This chapter will attempt to articulate an account of celibacy that at once rescues contemporary accounts of marriage from an over-reliance on personal fulfillment and/or biological-social support and opens a way for a return to and reimagining of a theology of marriage and family in the vein articulated by John Chrysostom. As will be shown, celibacy provides the church an alternative mode of sexual life to marriage that, contrary to popular belief, does not deny the eroticism of the body and the nature of sexual desire, but attempts to place it in its proper relation to the human desire for God.

*Grounding Celibacy: Gregory of Nyssa and the Eschatological Witness*

Society at large, and Christians within society, seems to have adopted two narratives of marriage, at odds with one-another in pure form, yet often existing side-by-side in an amalgamated shape. The first narrative emphasizes the personal character of marriage and the family as a private sphere, a retreat from the world. Marriage constituted on romantic interest, emotional and physical attraction, and the potential for the relationship to be a site of personal growth, betterment, security, and the like. Children, should the couple choose to have them, symbolize the love of the husband and wife and serve as further sources of personal satisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The economic realities of childbearing, specifically the way in which many take staving off the begetting of children ‘until the right [economic] time’ raises interesting questions regarding how we view children in modern capitalistic society. The ability of certain populations (typically white and affluent) to avoid procreation until they are adequately prepared, it may be argued, reflects a view of children as quasi-commodities, ‘things’ taken on to fulfil the desire of individuals. This is not to deny legitimate reasons for not having children or delaying entry into parenthood, it is merely an observation on

The alternative view, again often amalgamated with the first, rarely rejects the role of romance, emotion, and attraction in a marriage, but will often emphasize the larger social function of marriage and the family. The stability of the family unit and its role in stabilizing and constituting society is emphasized: children are had not only to fulfill personal desires, but as a means of contributing to the larger good. The family in this understanding is primarily a bridging of private and public, it exists in both worlds and serves both. These views pose serious problems for the Christian and the church. The first risks dangerously collapsing marriage, family, and sexual life into mere subjectivity, institutions and actions that find their meaning only in the one given to them by man or woman. The second narrative, meanwhile, risks overemphasizing the human role in social and biological continuity and rooting women and men too firmly in the status quo of earthly existence. This narrative, in many popular forms, emphasizes marriage as a fundamentally procreative undertaking, oriented towards children and the raising of family.

Recalling the church from its overreliance on these narratives requires a reaffirmation of celibacy in Christian and ecclesial life. Yet such a reaffirmation will not come easily; as David H. Jensen has written, contemporary society and, it may be assumed, many Christians within society see celibates “as aberrations, strange, sexually frustrated, infantile, and even maladjusted.” Many have imbibed the narrative of “Protestant polemics” that see celibacy as “an unnatural development in church history

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the way in which children and other relationships are seen as subject to subjective whim and will.

that led to the undervaluing of marriage and the forced stunting of the sexual drive.”<sup>3</sup> Many churches will thus hear a renewed call for celibacy as nothing more than a call to return to sexual repression and stunted sexuality nurtured by misogyny and heterosexism. In more precise terms a push for celibacy might be viewed as a means of resisting the influence of feminism and the Gay Rights Movement on the life of the church. This view, though understandable, relies on notions of celibacy that spring from a failure to appreciate its theological grounding in the life and witness of Christ and the early church. This grounding is eschatological and is articulated best, perhaps, by the 4<sup>th</sup> century Cappadocian father Gregory of Nyssa.

Nyssen offers an account of virginity firmly grounded in the eschatological nature of Christian life. For Nyssen virginity first names a quality characterized by incorruptibility, holiness, purity, and the lack of passion<sup>4</sup> found within the Trinity itself. It is an aspect of the Persons of the Trinity and may be seen in their relations with each other and humanity. Chapter two of Gregory’s *On Virginity* provides an illustration:

[I]t is a paradox to find virginity in a Father who has a Son whom He has begotten without passion, and virginity is comprehended together with the only-begotten God who is the giver of incorruptibility, since it shone forth with the purity and absence of passion in His begetting. And again, the Son, conceived through virginity, is an equal paradox. In the same way, one perceives it in the natural and incorruptible purity of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David H. Jensen, *God, Desire, and a Theology of Human Sexuality* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 111.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, “On Virginity,” in *Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, vol. 58, *The Fathers of the Church* (The Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 9–10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

The purity of virginity, then, has its source in the Triune life. From that life, it is poured out on humankind. Nyssen links a common designation for virgins as “the ‘incorrupt’” to the reality that God alone is incorruptible.<sup>6</sup> Concepts like ‘virginity,’ ‘purity,’ etc., only gain their meaning, according to Nyssen’s logic, insofar as they reflect and participate in God’s own virginity, purity, etc. With this in mind Gregory may suggest “if the achieving of this revered virginity means becoming blameless and holy,” adjectives that can only be applied to humans insofar as they resemble the source of blamelessness and holiness, then those who become partakers of “the pure mysteries of virginity become themselves partakers of the glory of God...[participating] in his purity and incorruptibility.”<sup>7</sup> This may seem a striking claim, but it is played out within the Biblical story, as Nyssa illustrates.

Gregory’s understanding of virginity and its metaphysical/ontological reality is most clearly illustrated by Christ’s entrance into the world through the virgin birth which concretely displays the incorruptibility and virginity of the Triune life. As the “source of incorruptibility” it is fitting that Christ enter the world through a virgin conception and birth<sup>8</sup> thereby revealing that purity and virginity enable God to enter into human life and continue to enable God to enter into the lives of men and women. Mary participated in the life of God by bearing the physical presence of God, this was made possible because of her virginity and purity, not only of body but also of Spirit; similarly, virginity and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 11.

purity enable men and women to bear the spiritual presence of God within them.<sup>9</sup> God possess virginity as an “exceptional and peculiar” aspect of his nature,<sup>10</sup> and it is through the virginity of Mary that God entered the world physically, and it is still through virginity and purity that God is borne within the world today in the spirits of pure men and women.

The soul of the virgin man or woman not only makes God present in our day and time, but lifts the man or woman up from this sinful, fallen existence into the Triune life; indeed, it is only through the purity of virginity that one can properly see and perceive and participate in God’s life.<sup>11</sup> In shunning marriage and the evils and distractions naturally associate with marriage,<sup>12</sup> the virgin soul is free to contemplate and devote itself to God,<sup>13</sup> contemplating him and “look[ing] up to the divine and blessed pleasures...transfer[ring] its power to love from the body to the intelligible and immaterial contemplation of the beautiful.”<sup>14</sup> Being freed then from the lowly passions of our sinful nature

our desire would go up to where perception does not reach, so that we would not admire the beauty of the sky or the rays of light or any other beautiful appearance, but, through the beauty seen in all these, we would be led to a desire for that beauty of which the heavens tell the glory and the firmament of all creation proclaims the knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. See chapters 3 and 4 for Nyssa’s comments on the evils that affect marriage.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 28.

Thus enlightened and “purified through the power of the Spirit,” submitting to God and his purity, the virgin man or woman “will be formed according to its participation in and reflection of the prototypical beauty” and through this “participation and reflection” to be restored to our original nature<sup>16</sup> as creatures free of passion, possessing the good and beautiful simply and naturally,<sup>17</sup> and dwelling in relationship with God.

Just as virginity enables the man or woman to contemplate and participate in the divine life of beauty, so too does virginity enable the man or woman to participate in the everlasting life of the Trinity. According to Nyssa marriage, especially its physical sign of the procreation of children, is always and forever marked and shadowed by grief and death.<sup>18</sup> The procreation of children is, for Nyssa, “an embarking upon death” marking the start of corruption in a human life and continuing death’s reign over creation.<sup>19</sup> Through virginity, however, man and woman are able to “bring about a cancellation of death by preventing it from advancing further...setting themselves up as a kind of boundary stone between life and death” and giving birth, instead, to incorruptible spiritual offspring.<sup>20</sup> Virgins, filled with the life-giving presence of the Trinity and purified of passions and evils, give birth to “wisdom and justice and holiness and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 11; 41; 42-43.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 15; 16; 22; 48-49.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 48, 50

redemption,”<sup>21</sup> which testify to the future eschatological blessedness that all faithful Christians will one day enjoy.<sup>22</sup> Like Chrysostom before him, Gregory’s interpretation of childbearing and childbirth undermines Roman and Jewish logics of cultural immortality centered on the physical propagation and continuation of the tribe or nation. Nyssen’s affirmation of virginity and his articulation of virginity’s unique spiritual power proclaims a new political reality that rivals the political power of Imperial Rome.

Gregory’s virginity is not simply a ‘layover’ state between puberty and marriage concerned exclusively with sex or the lack thereof; rather it is a way of being human<sup>23</sup> in the world that not only testifies to and makes God’s work in Christ known to the world, but one that enables men and women to move beyond the confines of fallen, mortal life to the contemplation of the God and participation in his Trinitarian life. Gregory’s articulation of celibacy is grounded in the very life of the Trinity itself and manifests and proclaims the work of Christ in the created order.

This eschatological grounding is the well from which celibates must draw to make their vocation more than just the naming of a lack or absence of sex. For the celibate – and the church that proclaims celibacy – to forget the eschatological underpinning of the vocation is to forget the rationale of celibacy as the current state (or lack thereof) of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 50. In an interesting piece of gendered subversion, Nyssa claims further that through this virgin birthing “[i]t is possible for everyone to become a mother” because Christ proclaims that “the one doing my will is my brother and my sister and my mother.”

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, “On Virginity,” in *Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, vol. 58, *The Fathers of the Church* (The Catholic University of America Press, 1999). Gregory will argue, in fact, the way by which we truly become human.

ecclesial discussions concerning non-married individuals makes clear. As the eschatological fervor of the early Christians subsided celibacy gradually lost its urgency and other-worldly tethering and, as a result, much of its powerful substance. As Stanley Hauerwas puts it “when the eschatological context for the intelligibility of singleness is lost, corrupting alternative explanations are often difficult to resist,”<sup>24</sup> these alternatives are the dry, barren views of celibates and celibacy many Christians (and most protestants) hold. Concurrently, marriage gradually resumed much of the status it held in Jewish and Roman life. In this moment of intense questioning within and without the church on matters sexual, Christians have an opportunity to return to the tradition and discover how it may speak a new yet unchanging word into our contemporary contexts. In returning to the tradition, in seeking to learn from and apply its insights in new ways the church is poised to speak more truthfully to the women and men of modernity.

The first step in recalling and renewing celibacy within the church is a return to the church’s eschatological orientation. As Jonathan Grant says “[t]he Christian vision of life must begin with the end in sight,” it is only by remembering the promised future entered into at baptism through the joining of our human lives to the resurrected life of Jesus Christ that Christians can “frame our present existence.”<sup>25</sup> Current debates on sexuality provide an opportunity for the church to return to an eschatological vision and grounding by providing a space for renewed consideration of the celibate life.

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<sup>24</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 128.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 143.

Celibacy proclaims the eschatological orientation of the Christian. As Paul says in Romans those who have been baptized “must consider [themselves] dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11), and again in Colossians “when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (2:12). Baptism inaugurates women and men into the resurrection life of Christ which is itself a foretaste of the eschatological reality of the new creation (c.f. 1 Cor. 15:20-28) and renders them members of a new world (c.f. John 17:16).

This eschatological aspect is defining for the Christian. As David M. Knight writes

the eschaton, the final state of things, is already a present reality: through baptism man dies and rises again right now, in this life, and possesses eternal life as a member of the living Christ. Through grace man shares right now in the life of God, and three Persons abide in him. Thus man’s fulfillment is here, but it is not from here. His real good is in the world (in his own heart), but it is from beyond this world, and nothing that is from this world can give it or take it away.<sup>26</sup>

The celibate thus serves, in a unique way, as a perpetual reminder of the promise of baptism to the church. They testify in their body to this baptismal reality which looks forward to the return of Christ and serve as “a sign of the orientation of Christianity toward the invisible mystery and presence of God.”<sup>27</sup> They stand in the world as members that “do not belong to the world” (John 17:16). Though all Christians, married and celibate, participate in the eschatological grace of baptism, it is the celibate who fully embodies the ‘not yet’ of the eschatological fact. They are like the wise young bridesmaids waiting for the return of their grooms (c.f. Matt. 25:1-13). Their lack of

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<sup>26</sup> David M. Knight, “Will the New Church Need Celibates?,” in *Celibate Loving: Encounter in Three Dimensions* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 216–217.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

marital and familial ties to the status quo of the world frees celibates to both embody the eschatological promise and work for the furthering of God's Kingdom in the world. Knight puts it well when speaks of celibacy as a reminder to married Christians of their eschatological membership. He writes that "[t]he whole message of celibacy is that the focus of man's fulfillment is now outside the world. Man's good, his only true good, his completely satisfying good, does not come from within this intramundane sphere, but from outside of creation"<sup>28</sup> This continuous proclamation of the significance of the eschaton is celibacy's "most important and most fundamental contribution" to the life of the church.<sup>29</sup>

Celibacy is more than simply not having sex or foregoing marriage and family life. It is an orientation towards God, God's Kingdom, and the eschatological consummation of the work of Christ. Gerard Loughlin puts it well, writing that "real virginity, 'real zeal for chastity', finds its end in 'seeing God.'"<sup>30</sup> It cannot accept, affirm, and testify to the eschatological dimension of human life without being grounded in a deep, personal life of prayer. The oft-use Roman Catholic characterization of celibacy as an "evangelical counsel" is useful here: though Catholic theology undoubtedly understands it somewhat differently, celibacy is evangelical in that its success is dependent upon a deep life of prayer and a personal relationship with God. It is not enough for the celibate to simply *not* engage in conjugal activity, such a bare minimum of

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<sup>28</sup> Knight, "Will the New Church Need Celibates?," 216.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>30</sup> Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology*, 1 edition (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 279.

existence would fail to qualify as Christian celibacy. Instead, celibacy must be a life of conjugal renunciation for the sake of something else. As a Christian mode of life it cannot simply be a negation, especially of something like sexual intimacy, marriage, and the family that, as creations of God, possess an inherent goodness.

The affirmation inherent in celibacy is an affirmation of the sufficiency of God for human life. Celibacy is not the proclamation of a lack, but the affirmation of superiority of self-donation to God above all others. The purpose of celibacy is to free women and men to enter into “a deepened state of being, of total availability to the Lord’s person and his enterprise, of a being sensitized to the new creation.”<sup>31</sup> The purpose of celibacy as an “evangelical counsel” is to open the celibate up to God more deeply by freeing the celibate from certain attachments to the world. This understanding finds affirmation in some of the earliest sources of the church, the Scriptures. Christ refers to eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 19:12), while Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 counsels and praises virginity and virgins as men and women “anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the lord...that they may be holy in body and spirit” (32,34).

Thus a deep life of prayer, bible study, worship, and participation in the sacramental life of the church is needed to sustain the celibate in his or her calling.<sup>32</sup> Marriage, bound as it is to the natural order, is intelligible apart from uniquely Christian logic. The same cannot be said of celibacy. The importance of an active spiritual life is

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Dubay, “...*And You Are Christ’s*” *The Charism of Virginity and the Celibate Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 37.

<sup>32</sup> Of course, all of this is needed for any Christian to sustain their calling.

due directly to the eschatological orientation of the celibate. In order for the celibate to truly live out the fullness of his or her vocation he or she must reflect to the world the love of Christ which motivates and animates the work of God in Christ. L. Patrick Carroll frames it thus: “No one can reach out in an effort to really care for other human beings unless they know day in and day out how cared for they are themselves. It is only since God first loved us that we can try to love one another in his fashion.”<sup>33</sup>To truly model to the world the love of God, to serve as signs and symbols of the eschatological truth of Christ and the Christian life the celibate must drink from the well of the Triune life.<sup>34</sup>

### *Celibate Desiring*

In the practice of celibacy prayer not only opens up the celibate more deeply into the life of God for the sake of revealing more perfectly the eschatological grounding of Christian life and celibacy, but it also acts as a training ground for desire. In this way the all-too popular view that celibacy is somehow a-sexual is revealed. In and through prayer the sexuality, desires, and erotic nature of the celibate is raised into the divine life, transfigured, and purified. “Unless a person begins with a basic bias against chastity,” Father Thomas Dubay has written, “he has no great difficulty sensing that a virginal life embraced as an ideal is somehow related to God.”<sup>35</sup> Celibacy is the physical setting aside

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<sup>33</sup> L. Patrick Carroll, “Becoming a Celibate Lover,” in *Celibate Loving: Encounter in Three Dimensions* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 117.

<sup>34</sup> Can Cantalamessa be integrated into this section more? Also – in revisions utilize Gregory of Nyssa ‘spiritual children’ and Pope Francis’ comments on ‘spiritual spinsters’.

<sup>35</sup> Dubay, “...And You Are Christ’s” *The Charism of Virginity and the Celibate Life*, 31.

of one's body for a use that is eschatological: fundamentally tied to the world, yet also transcending the world as is. Celibates retreat from the created order to proclaim the future of the created order, the redemption of it by Christ. Marriage and marital sex ties one into relationships with others, while celibacy ties one into relationship with God. In celibacy the sexual energies are directed towards God instead of a spouse.<sup>36</sup>

This reaches back to above comments wherein it was affirmed that celibacy is not simply a negation of sexuality. In fact, it is deeply sexual. It affirms that our desires are, fundamentally, attuned to and oriented to God. In his or her body the celibate accepts certain thwarted desires in light of the promise of greater consummation of desire promised in the eschaton.

In his masterful piece "The Body's Grace" former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams writes that

[t]he whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, *as if we were God*, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created so that we may be caught up in this, so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God.<sup>37</sup>

In Williams' imagining the Christian story is a story of desire: God is a God who desires within the intra-Trinitarian life and this desire spills over into the creation – God brings forth the created world out of the abundance of the divine Trinitarian love.<sup>38</sup> And his love for this world, his desire for this world, to be in relationship with this world remains

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<sup>36</sup> C.f. *Ibid.*, 33. For a discussion of 'setting aside.'

<sup>37</sup> Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace," in *Our Selves, Our Souls & Bodies*, ed. Charles Hefling (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1996), 59.

<sup>38</sup> Eugene Rogers offers interesting insights in this direction.

constant through fallenness and repeated turns to ‘adulterous’ lovers. The work of Christ is the final act of God’s desiring, the means by which God opens up to humanity the desirous life the Trinity and invites his creation to participate in that life and to recognize their own desirability. In light of this the church might properly be called an “erotic community,”<sup>39</sup> its purpose, according to Williams, is “teaching us to so order our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy.”<sup>40</sup> In this light marriage and celibacy take on a powerful purpose and significance.

Both teach women and men that they are desirable, that they are sights of joy, that they are wanted. Celibacy uniquely proclaims to the celibate and those in his or her community that he or she is desired by God and that his or her desires are satisfied and affirmed in the divine-human relationship. The celibate, David H. Jensen says, “symbolizes in his or her body humanity’s ultimate desire for God.” He continues that through celibacy one “cultivates a reserve of desire, which for married people is oriented sexually toward one’s partner and finds bodily satisfaction (sometimes ecstatically) in eros for God.”<sup>41</sup> This is no easy task. Celibacy is not simply saying no to sexual relationships and calling it a day – it is an affirmation that God is truly all in all, that the divine is the source and summit of one’s desires. This affirmation necessarily involves the negation of conjugal expression, marital companionship, and children. Yet the

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<sup>39</sup> John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, 1st edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 1998), 177.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” 59.

<sup>41</sup> Jensen, *God, Desire, and a Theology of Human Sexuality*, 112.

promise remains to be seized by those willing to take it that God will fulfill one's needs more fully, faithfully, and perfectly than any human relationship.

Rowan Williams adds to this understanding saying that celibacy "has, as one aspect of its role in the Christian community, the nourishing and enlarging of Christian sexuality."<sup>42</sup> The celibate attempts to "find themselves, their bodily selves, in a life dependent simply upon trust in the generous delight of God," they proclaim to themselves, those around them, and the world at large that we are ultimately God's, that we belong to God, and that our desires are ultimately realizable only in God.<sup>43</sup> Celibacy is the attempt to stand naked, honest, and raw before God; to expose oneself to God, to depend utterly upon God for the satisfaction of one's desires and needs.<sup>44</sup> In sexual life with an other we are challenged to stand before him or her in our full bodily selves, challenged to "be perceived as desirable by the other,"<sup>45</sup> challenged to "let oneself be formed by the perceptions of another,"<sup>46</sup> challenged to realize that "our identity is being made in the relations of bodies."<sup>47</sup> For the celibate this is done primarily before God, not a husband or wife.

Yet the realization of the fruitfulness of celibacy is not up to God alone. It is not *solely* in a direct relationship with God that all one's needs are met. Humans are social

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<sup>42</sup> Williams, "The Body's Grace," 66.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.; c.f. Ibid., 3.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, "The Body's Grace," 60.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 64

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 64

creatures who, even in the prelapsarian state of communion with God, had an ache for human companionship (c.f. Gen. 2:18-25). Celibacy offers a chance of uniting one's desires to the larger desire for God, yet at the same time challenges the celibate to the sublimation of sexuality and sexual energies. Thomas Dubay describes sublimation as the "redirection of an energy from its immediate goal to another loftier social or spiritual purpose."<sup>48</sup> The sexual energies – the desire for intimacy, for physical contact, for relationship with others – may be channeled away from their natural and normal ends of marriage and family into friendships, communities, and organizations. The celibate "rechannels [sic] her sexual drives from a genital expression to a wider freedom for universal affection and profound prayer-love."<sup>49</sup> The sexual drives of a man or woman might be freed in new ways through living a celibate life that enables them "to love and yet remain honest, free, mobile, and able to carry the Lord's love where it is needed next and most."<sup>50</sup>

The virtue of celibacy lies "in loving, or even trying to love, as God loves us: freely, deeply, broadly, unpossessively[sic]." This calling in life empowers women and men to "carry the Lord's love where it is needed next and most."<sup>51</sup> Just as marriage frees women and men to welcome children into their lives, celibacy might be conceived as the freeing of women and men to enter into deep, abiding friendships and relationships

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<sup>48</sup> Dubay, "*...And You Are Christ's*" *The Charism of Virginity and the Celibate Life*, 77.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Carroll, "Becoming a Celibate Lover," 114.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

(explored more fully in the next chapter). David Jensen writes that celibacy frees individuals to not only enter into deep relationships, but *erotic* friendships.<sup>52</sup> Friendships characterized by passion, desire, and a deep intimacy that finds its expression not in sexual consummation but in a deep prayerfulness and spirituality.<sup>53</sup> In our contemporary setting such friendships are to be welcomed: they provide opportunities for Christians to love wildly and carelessly in a manner after Christ and many of the apostles. Further, they reject contemporary prioritization of romantic relationships over friendships. All too often in contemporary circles friendships are taken as far more expendable and transient than romantic relationships.<sup>54</sup> Celibates counter this narrative through their friendships and proclaim the worth and value of all forms of human interaction and relationships and the possibilities for new forms of relational life over and against a too-strong appraisal of marriage and family life.

### *The Call*

Lauren Winner writes “there’s that mysterious term *call*. We’ve all heard (and many of us have asked) that dreaded question: ‘Lord, am I called to lifelong singleness?’ This is usually followed by a protest. And it is sometimes followed by ‘How do I know?’”<sup>55</sup> No meaningful discussion of celibacy can take place that fails to think through

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<sup>52</sup> Jensen, *God, Desire, and a Theology of Human Sexuality*, 112.

<sup>53</sup> The friendships of St. Augustine and Aelred might offer a glimpse of the intense friendships celibacy makes possible.

<sup>54</sup> Wesley Hill and other’s work on this issue will be examined in chapter 4.

<sup>55</sup> Lauren F. Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 138.

the language of call or gift in regards to celibacy, language that frequently invites apprehension and anxiety. In certain regards this might be negative, but not always. The apprehension and anxiety at call-language serves to remind us of things we might be inclined to forget. “It’s good language, the language of call,” Winner writes,

[i]t reminds us that our social, familial, emotional, and sexual arrangements are not simply about us – they are foremost about God, about the one doing the calling; and they are also about our community, the community that helps us discern and live out these callings. The language of call reminds us that the choice to marry, or to join a convent, or to stay single sans monastic vows, is about more than merely making a choice.<sup>56</sup>

To think rightly about celibacy then, and after celibacy marriage, we must think rightly about these terms. Too often the way the church has employed “the language of call” has served to remove celibacy and celibates from the messiness and everyday realities of human life and existence.

Writer Albert Y. Hsu offers a way of reclaiming how we speak about and understand call language in regards to celibacy through his book *Singles at the Crossroads: A Fresh Perspective on Christian Singleness*. One way in which a man or woman might discern the call or vocation to celibacy is by examining whether or not they possess the “gift” of celibacy. For Hsu this “gift” is manifested “as some kind of supernatural empowerment that enables one to live as a single person without endless frustration at being unmarried.”<sup>57</sup> The “gift” is a sexual disposition that renders one able to live out the call to celibacy in a way that will avoid “endless frustration.” Celibacy,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Albert Y. Hsu, *Singles at the Crossroads: A Fresh Perspective on Christian Singleness* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 49.

then, is a type of Christianized asexuality<sup>58</sup> in which the normal drives and desires of women and men seem to not occur. Hsu quotes C. Peter Wagner's definition of celibacy as an exemplification of this common understanding according to which celibacy is "the special ability that God gives to some members of the body of Christ to remain single and enjoy it; to be unmarried and not suffer undue sexual temptations."<sup>59</sup>

The view captured by Wagner's quote leads to many problems and issues, specifically it must be noted that this view reduces discernment of the call to celibacy to a "subjective feeling."<sup>60</sup> One is called to celibacy simply if one *feels* that celibacy is the right path or that it wouldn't be too much of a burden or source of temptation. However, this flies in the face of much Christian teaching regarding discipleship and call. One cannot leave a marriage if one feels after a certain amount of time that marriage wasn't the correct choice; nor can one be absolved of the Christian command to "shun fornication" (1 Cor. 6:18) if such a command is too difficult. Christ himself prayed to the Father asking him "let this cup pass from me" (Matt. 26:39) in regards to the crucifixion while still prepared to undergo the crucifixion. Wagner's definition fails to grasp that certain callings and commands are difficult and hard and that the promise of God isn't

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<sup>58</sup> Asexuality is a somewhat recent addition to the family of letters that make up the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual (LGBTQQIA) community. It refers to a sexual orientation wherein women and men have little or no sexual desire and/or drive though they experience romantic attraction to others.

<sup>59</sup> Wagner qtd in Hsu, *Singles at the Crossroads: A Fresh Perspective on Christian Singleness*, 49.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

that what's easy is what's God given, but that God supplies the grace and strength to live up to the call he has given us, and forgiveness when we fail to live up to that call.

For Hsu much of the traditional view of celibacy – that it is a gift of supernatural “ability to be happy with being single”<sup>61</sup> – can be attributed to a confusion between a gift and a spiritual gift based on certain readings of First Corinthians. By “misinterpreting and combining two passages” namely chapters twelve and 7 of First Corinthians, the church has been lead to assume that celibacy is a spiritual gift. In chapter twelve Paul speaks of spiritual gifts as “manifestation[s] of the Spirit for the common good” (v. 7), activities which are “activated by one and the same Spirit” (v.11). These gifts include speaking and interpretation of tongues, knowledge and wisdom, miracles and prophecy (vv. 8-10), they are all gifts given “to accomplish a particular task or function, in the context of the ministry of the church.”<sup>62</sup> These gifts are not *states of being*, instead, they are the abilities given by and through the Holy Spirit to perform certain activities and actions for the sake of the Christian community. In light of this Hsu claims that celibacy (and marriage for that matter) is not a *spiritual* gift. Celibacy is not *in and of itself* a gift that leads to the up building of the Christian community. Moreover, when one turns to chapter 7 one finds the kind of language used for spiritual gifts in chapter twelve to be lacking.<sup>63</sup> “Nowhere,” says Hsu, “is the Holy Spirit mentioned for the empowerment of [the] gift [of celibacy].”<sup>64</sup> Paul only states that “each has a particular gift from God, one having one

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 57.

kind and another a different kind,” (v. 6) there is no implication that this gift is spiritual in the same way that the gift of chapter twelve are spiritual.

While the spiritual gifts fail to be a fitting analogue to the gift of celibacy, Hsu does provide what, in his view, is a more fitting analogy: eternal life. Referencing Romans 6:23 Hsu claims that just as salvation is an “objective gift”<sup>65</sup> from God that one “simply receive[s] and accept[s]”<sup>66</sup> so too celibacy might be understood as an “objective gift,” something one is simply given by God. While this removes, according to Hsu, the hierarchy between marriage and celibacy,<sup>67</sup> it also complicates how the church must think of the celibate life. If one is unmarried one cannot simply be in the process of figuring out whether or not one is called to celibacy – celibacy is simply the gift one has been given.<sup>68</sup> The gift is not a quasi-asexuality, but rather the opportunities for ministry and love of neighbor that celibacy enables.

This understanding of gift also challenges individual Christians. If celibacy is an “objective gift” of God then the Christian must learn to live fully into that celibacy which she or he has been given. As Lauren Winner states “our task is to discern a call to singleness for right now, and that’s not so difficult. If you are single right now, you are called, right now, to be single – called to live single life as robustly, and gospel-conformingly, as you possible can.”<sup>69</sup> To see one’s unmarried state as a ‘layover’ period

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<sup>65</sup> Hsu, *Singles at the Crossroads: A Fresh Perspective on Christian Singleness*, 57.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>67</sup> C.f. *Ibid.*, 58-62

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 57–58.

<sup>69</sup> Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*, 139.

in which one actively searches for a mate is to fail to graciously and joyfully receive God's gift. Whether or not one lives in an unmarried state for a season of life or the entirety of life, our Christian response to the gift of celibacy must be the same. Celibates throughout the church and the world are called to be symbols of the eschatological in-breaking of God's reign, they are to remind the married Christians that hope, happiness, fulfilment, and our very future rely squarely on God and his promises and not on biological reproduction.

However, to say that all unmarried Christians are to live out the gift of celibacy in its fullness is not to say that these celibate Christians will never one-day marry; a gift of celibacy now does not preclude a gift of marriage later.<sup>70</sup> For every non-married person to foreswear marriage altogether would be a tragic refusal of the possibilities of God's gift-giving; the celibate who lives and loves robustly and freely might later be given the gift of marriage not as a wholly separate gift, but as a gift that draws on and deepens the lessons and insights of celibate Christian life.

Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the Papal Household, offers similar insight to Hsu's on the state of celibacy. Father Cantalamessa writes that virginity

is more a gift received from God than a gift given to God. Jesus' words: 'you haven't chosen Me; on the contrary, I have chosen you' (Jn 15:16) apply to virgins in an altogether special way. You do not choose celibacy and virginity in order to enter into the Kingdom, but because the Kingdom has entered into you.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> And vice-versa. Those who are married might at a later time be given the gift of celibacy yet again as Winner herself mentions (c.f. 139).

<sup>71</sup> Raniero Cantalamessa, *Virginity: A Positive Approach to Celibacy for the Sake of the Kingdom of Heaven*, trans. Charles Serignat (Staten Island, NY: St Paul's Press, 1995), 55.

For Cantalamessa, as for Winner and Hsu, virginity testifies to one's being claimed by God for the work of God. Thus the challenge of celibacy is not simply the denial of sexual life, but the acceptance of giftedness. Celibates must be challenged to see their life not *simply* as a sacrifice, but as a gift. This is a lesson many married couples and families can teach those who are single and celibate. The church might also aid celibates in seeing their state in life as a gift by reimagining and rethinking the role of vows and liturgical witness in affirming and celebrating the church's witness to celibacy.

### *Vowing Celibacy*

How might the church support women and men who have discerned a call to celibate life? How does the church recognize and support this unique vocation? Marriage is marked by celebrations and feasting, with vows and promises between the bride and groom as well as the newly married couple and their congregation or community; the weight, gravity, and importance of marriage is embodied in the vows made and witnessed to. Celibates no less than married individuals require for the successful living out of their vocation the support and accountability of a community – the church, therefore, insofar as it seeks to be a place that nurtures celibate individuals and affirms the value of the vocation to celibacy must endeavor to provide liturgical frameworks for the entry into this vocation. Formal acknowledgement of the choice of celibate life not only affirms the value of the individual's celibate vocation, but also instantiates the celibate life in the regular rhythms of the church's liturgical life.

Before endeavoring to give liturgical recognition and support to celibacy the church must think through what it means for a person to intentionally vow and promise

lifelong celibacy. Ideally, the vow of celibacy is made to God before a pastor or congregation after a period of discernment. The entry into the vow of celibacy should be no less thoughtful or rigorous than the entry into the vows of matrimony. The opportunity to affirm a vow of celibacy in the context of communal worship not only works to further integrate celibates into the life of the parish, but commits the celibate life – no less than the married life – into the thoughts, prayers, and support of others. Just as marriage is more than husband and wife, so too celibacy is more than just an individual. Vowing celibacy in the midst of community reminds all involved that celibacy as a life is bound up in the common life of the church.

Given the presence of vows of celibacy in the life of the church, what other forms of liturgical recognition might be offered to celebrate celibate life and support women and men in that life? Four brief suggestions on how the church might offer support for celibates follows:

First, one might commit to lifelong celibacy by joining a monastic order and professing celibacy alongside poverty and obedience. The decision to join a monastic order while providing the optimal means of living out a celibate life in all the freedom it promises also entails other commitments (poverty and obedience, as well as communal living) that are not required *per se* in order to live out a celibate life.

A second option is the type of hybrid monasticism found in “[s]ecular institutes.” Such institutes might be established or entered into as a means of sharing a vow of celibacy with others as well as a “spirituality and...rule [of life]” while maintaining one’s home and ‘secular’ job or career.<sup>72</sup> This method allows for a liturgical recognition of

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 85.

celibacy as well as a community of celibates without requiring a ‘withdrawal’ from the world.

Thirdly, a denomination or parish might develop rites (perhaps analogues to confirmation or the rite of brother-making) that enable an individual to publicly commit to celibacy before witnesses and/or a church community. In some ways this places celibacy more equally alongside marriage: one does not take on additional commitments or responsibilities, but simply affirms one’s desire to live out a celibate life and invites the help of a congregation in sustaining that life. Ideally, this type of liturgical recognition involves those who married and unmarried. In having a congregation, and not simply members of a religious order or secular institute witness to and affirm a commitment to celibacy the gulf between married life and celibate life in the church is crossed, or at least narrowed. The danger in relying on secular institutes or religious orders, either jointly or individually, to represent and provide liturgical witness to a commitment to celibacy is that both ways of life – though laudable, noble, and needed – might easily allow celibacy to be thought of as a unique or different way of life somehow separate from the ‘normal’ life of women and men in a congregation.

### *Conclusion*

The argument put forth in this chapter is highly theoretical. It is a way of conceptualizing celibacy in the church today, yet such conceptualization is useless if it is not embodied in practices, and practices cannot be properly and meaningfully enacted apart from life in a community. Community, then, undergirds this chapter in many ways. It is only through life with others that the symbol that is celibacy is received by others.

Conversely, the celibate is in deep need of human community, especially deep, intimate friendships in order to avoid retreating into bitterness and unduly suffering from loneliness.<sup>73</sup> As L. Patrick Carroll has written “celibacy is a vow that only becomes Christian, only ultimately possible within a community,”<sup>74</sup> this is because the aim of Christian sexual life is to instantiate love of God and love of others, to give and receive love.

This insight should challenge the church in both its protestant and Catholic forms. If the church is to guide women and men in the organization of their sexual lives, it must create communities that celebrate marriage *and* celibacy without treating one better than the other. The celibate cannot be treated as anomalies in the Body of Christ, nor can their lack of a spouse be understood solely in terms of larger narratives of religious life or the priesthood. Instead, space must be made for celibates to fully and faithfully live out their calling and support must be created to empower celibates in their call. This chapter has attempted to articulate the theology and practices that are necessary for the creation of such a space, the following chapter will turn towards how this space – that is, a church that celebrates and affirms celibacy – necessarily impacts conceptions of marriage and family life, as well as other forms of human relationships.

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<sup>73</sup> There are those, such as hermits or anchorites, who do feel called to retreat almost completely from the world and human interaction. This, undoubtedly, is a special grace and not treated here.

<sup>74</sup> Carroll, “Becoming a Celibate Lover,” 117.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Celibacy, Marriage, and the Family

#### *Introduction*

Theologian Eugene Rogers, drawing heavily upon the work of Rowan Williams and the ascetic theology of Eastern Orthodoxy, has written of the intimate connection between celibacy and marriage. Like celibacy, marriage is “a discipline of denial and restraint that liberates the human being for sanctification.”<sup>1</sup> In celibate and married life Rogers sees “two forms of one ascetic vocation...in which God uses the very bodies of Christians to sanctify them.”<sup>2</sup> This concluding chapter attempts to tease this insight out by providing a vision of marriage and family life informed by the account of celibacy I have offered. This vision stands in contrast to the account of marriage outlined in chapter 1 while harkening back to the vision of marriage articulated by John Chrysostom and providing for an account of friendship which celibacy – and the eschatological witness embodied in celibacy – makes possible.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God*, 1 edition (Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999), 70.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

### *Celibacy, Marriage, and the Family*

The eschatological reality that grounds celibacy and gives rise to the Christian practice of celibacy bears upon the Christian narrative of marriage and family. Celibacy pulls Christian marriage away from overreliance on larger cultural narratives – such as family values narratives – in the way in which it relativizes the family and the biological. In the person of the celibate natural orderings are called into question and one is given pause in certain assumptions. The eschatological ground of Christianity, its forward looking orientation, calls into question much of the nature and function of marriage. Father Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap., preacher to the Papal Household, comments that through the presence of celibacy in the church marriage is made “relative.”<sup>3</sup> Celibacy stands before marriage as testaments to the fundamental difference between the social arrangements of the world and the reality of God and his kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

This insight of Fr. Cantalamessa is further fleshed out by theologian Stanley Hauerwas and offers much in the way of critically yet faithfully analyzing marriage and family. Hauerwas affirms that the church is rightly ill-at-ease with marriage and the family because of Christianity’s eschatological nature. “The church as the community of [the eschaton],” he says, “is freed from the necessity of marriage.”<sup>5</sup> Harkening back to

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<sup>3</sup> Cantalamessa, *Virginity: A Positive Approach to Celibacy for the Sake of the Kingdom of Heaven*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Fr. Cantalamessa also points out the way in which the inbreaking of God’s kingdom not only occasions celibacy and its relativizing of marriage, but also of the state.

<sup>5</sup> Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas*, 128.

figures such as John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nyssa, Hauerwas' comments arises from a deep commitment to the reality *par excellence* of Christian life: that, in virtue of our baptism, we are a people freed from fear of death. This freedom takes on a variety of forms, but in regards to sexuality it frees us from the *need* to reproduce and repopulate, from the need to find immortality in biological and social continuation. Instead, the church is promised life everlasting – dependent only on the superabundance of God's life which we are made part of.

According to Hauerwas celibates stand before families and spouses testifying that “as a people we live by hope, not biology.”<sup>6</sup> The church exists purely because of the grace and love of God, and its continuation is likewise tied to that grace and love. Just as God welcomed strangers – first Jews then gentiles – into his divine life, so too does the survival of the church rest upon such welcome. Celibacy “reminds the church we grow not through biological ascription but through witness and hospitality to the stranger – who often turns out to be our biological child,”<sup>7</sup> but who may just as well be someone with no blood relation to us. Further, the celibate stands as a reminder to the family that by virtue of baptism, all loyalties founded on worldly categories are broken – even the most basic loyalty to the family. The church in the person of the celibate calls into question and “attacks familial loyalties by reminding us that our true home is not the biological family but the church.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 128.

Author, theologian, and counselor Henri Nouwen offers similar reflections on the role and power of celibacy. Father Nouwen, referring to Thomas Aquinas writes that “[t]o be a celibate means to be empty for God, to be free and open for his presence, to be available for his service.”<sup>9</sup> This emptiness, however, is not a special calling of the celibate. Rather, the uniqueness of the celibate comes in that the celibate reminds those who are married and those with families that God desires and demands such emptiness, reliance, and openness from all of us. Celibacy is the state of being vacant for God in order that we might more fully participate in God’s love and life.<sup>10</sup> Celibates offer “a visible witness for the priority of God in our lives,”<sup>11</sup> they point much like the steeples of parishes and cathedrals in the midst of fast-paced cities. Just as these architectural features of many cityscapes invite pause, so too do the presence of celibates in our lives. Their detachment simultaneously reminds women and men of their attachment and the calling of all Christians to be attached more fully and faithfully to God. Continuing on Nouwen writes that “[c]elibates are people who, by not attaching themselves to any one particular person, remind us that the relationship with God is the beginning, the source, and the goal of all human relationships.”<sup>12</sup>

This witness is directed towards all people, Christian and non-Christian, but especially to the married.<sup>13</sup> The celibate stands (or should stand) before those entering

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<sup>9</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, “Celibacy and the Holy,” in *Celibate Loving: Encounter in Three Dimensions*, ed. Mary Anne Huddleston (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 164.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 165–166.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

into and living in marriage as a reminder of one's ultimate loyalties, one's ultimate focus. The celibate stands before the married so as to draw their gaze from one-another, to the celibate, and, through him or her to God. There is a beauty, then, in the image of a Catholic wedding: two joining themselves to the other, kneeling before one who points to the supreme Other. All sexuality, thus, is oriented towards the welcoming of the stranger in this new imagining. Marital sexuality most properly welcomes the stranger first in the person of one's spouse then in the person of one's child. Celibate sexuality embodies a more radical welcome: a welcome that is open and gratuitous, that is dependent not on attraction, progeny, or the like but simply on sheer wantedness.

### *Celibacy, Friendship, and the Family of God*

Author Wesley Hill has written that Jesus “takes the basic notion of ‘family’ and cracks it open, stretches its contents beyond their agreed-upon limits, and wraps the result around a much wider range of people than was socially acceptable.”<sup>14</sup> For Hill, Christ has fundamentally changed how we understand and order our lives, including our familial lives. Christ, as a single Jew, challenged the contemporary notions of what family and sexual life should look like. His followers continued in that vein by encouraging and modeling celibacy as a way, indeed as *the way par excellence* of following Christ and living more deeply into his teachings. Paul specifically continues Christ's example of challenging the notions of family life that held sway. “Paul too relativizes biological ties in order to elevate the new spiritual siblinghood that he understood the death and

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<sup>14</sup> Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 55.

resurrection of Jesus to have created.”<sup>15</sup> In Christ, Christians are transformed into brothers and sisters, made spiritual siblings by participation in baptism and the Eucharist.<sup>16</sup>

Spiritual siblinghood is most clearly manifested in and through friendships, a witness to which celibates and celibacy might uniquely offer the church. According to Nouwen the presence of celibacy and celibates in the church is an “occasion for friendship,” and requires that Christians manifest the “genius for friendship”<sup>17</sup> first modeled by Christ and his early followers. Celibacy provides a freedom for women and men to form deep, intimate friendships with others in a way that marriage and family life does not.<sup>18</sup> Celibates stand in a unique position to imitate the life of Christ, marked as it was by wide-ranging and deep friendships with women and men of all classes and backgrounds. Yet in their freedom for deep friendships celibates undertake a work given to all Christians: to welcome the stranger.<sup>19</sup>

Wesley Hill’s work provides a wellspring of insights and reflection on the topic of celibacy and friendship. As a gay, celibate Christian Hill has done much to challenge the church to make space for those called to celibacy (specifically, but not exclusively, gay

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Nouwen, “Celibacy and the Holy,” 129-130.

<sup>18</sup> For both obvious and less obvious reasons. Demands of family life leave precious little time to invest in non-familial relationships, especially new relationships; but many contemporary narratives of family life seem to forget that friendships might ever be a concern of husbands and wives.

<sup>19</sup> Waters, *The Family in Christian Social and Political Thought*, 245.

Christians who are called to celibacy) by rethinking the role of friendship in Christian life. In his work *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* Hill writes that “the church isn’t reducible to individuals but rather to pairs of friends. We aren’t called to exist as isolated units who love God in distinction from those around us. Instead, we’re told, the love of God is manifested in our love – not for our spouses or children or extended family, first and foremost, but our friends (John 15:13).”<sup>20</sup>

In much of this work the medieval monk Aelred of Rievaulx stands large. According to Hill Aelred understand celibacy as something that enabled men (and women) to form bonds and friendships that manifested “a holy, purified intimacy [and] that involved something like kinship ties or spousal promises.”<sup>21</sup> Friendship was, for Aelred, an intense relationship and one with profound Christological dimensions. Taking the words of John 15:13 as his guide he saw in Christ the ultimate testament and praise of friendship. God in Christ proclaimed those he died for as “friends” (c.f. John 15:13), thus friendship cannot be stripped of and denied its place in the life of the Church. Before we were spouses of the bridegroom, we were his friends. As Hill states, Aelred and his company of monks were not simply *denying* something. They were affirming something. It was “celibacy [that] enabled the elevation and purification of desire, rendering love *more* substantial, not less.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

To be successfully and faithfully lived out the celibate necessarily needs friendships of deep commitment. Paradoxically, however, these types of friendships in many ways need celibates to serve as witnesses to the ability of friendship to be a site of deep intimacy and emotional nourishment. Today the hierarchy of relationships places often places friendship near the bottom. Friends are important and invaluable during key points and seasons of our development but as women and men enter puberty and beyond dating relationships, then marriage and children take precedence over non-romantic friendships. This is not to be condemned wholesale, marriage and family life make demands upon a person that must be honored and acknowledged; issues arise, however, when the church fails to be a site where the commitments of family life and the commitments of friendship are held to be of equal value and of equal worth. Though family life necessitates a change in how certain friendships are maintained and supported, the church must resist consciously or unconsciously viewing friendship and treating friends as extraneous, inherently transient relationships. This requires not new theology or insights, but a return to theologies of friendship found in the Christian tradition, specifically in the works of Augustine, Aelred, Anselm, and Thomas Aquinas. Celibates can play a special role in helping the church reclaim the value and importance of friendship by intentionally investing in deep friendship with other singles and celibates.

According to Hill to be celibate one cannot simply think in terms of what am *not* doing, but must, rather, ask “what am I being called to, *positively*?”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps it is the case that celibates, today, while at once calling the church and fellow Christians to a more perfect allegiance to Christ, are also calling one women and men through their

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 75.

witness to a deep, more free love that transcends simply familial bounds. That is, the celibate today in their witness to friendship – with others and with God – might testify to the boundless love of God to which we are all called. God’s love does not stop where his divinity stops, but reaches out into that which is created. So too, the love of one person for another and vice versa cannot and does not stop where the biological family ends. Friendship shows forth and testifies, in a mysterious way, to the seemingly arbitrary and random nature of God’s choice of humanity. Friends pick each other, they are bound together simply by love and affection; so too does God simply pick us and binds us to himself through acts of love – including the supreme act of love on the cross.

Charles Kiesling, O.P. joins Hill in exploring the nature and gift of celibate loving, specifically the opportunity celibacy enables for deep friendships. According to Kiesling the love that celibates are called to witness too is not an exclusive or overly particular type of love. Though celibate friendships must necessarily limit themselves, simply because of human limitations, celibates can be “selective of more than one.”<sup>24</sup> Celibacy for Kiesling, besides offering an opportunity for deeper service to the Lord, offers the celibate the freedom to develop “affection which is less selective and exclusive than married love.”<sup>25</sup> The celibate is challenged to imitate the love of God by loving widely and deeply, just as the married man or woman is challenged to imitate the love of God by loving particularly and exclusively.<sup>26</sup> Though anchorites and hermits have existed

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher Kiesling, “Difficulties in Celibate Love,” in *Celibate Loving: Encounters in Three Dimensions*, ed. Mary Anne Huddleston (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 48.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

throughout the history of Christian asceticism, it is undeniable that these callings are an extreme exception. Generally, celibates no less than married couples, are called to find community and challenged to love others as selflessly as possible: the absence of conjugal sexual life does not absolve women or men from the call to love nor does it remove a woman or man from the declaration of Genesis that “it is not good that [humans] should be alone” (Gen. 2:18).

The relationships of the church are characterized and “shaped by the cross and empty tomb” of Christ, with the goal of knowing Christ ““and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering, becoming conformed to his death.””<sup>27</sup> Christian relationships can no longer primarily be founded on ties of blood, kinship, and nationality. Celibacy testifies to this, pointing to this reality in a powerful way by offering to embody the new “circle of kin and spiritual relations” which Christ created. Celibacy in the life of the church pulls families away from the temptation to look inwardly and care only for their kin and celebrates the possibility of friendships and relationships founded on the waters of baptism and the flesh and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. Celibacy proclaims the primacy of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection in defining and supporting our relationships over biological or cultural sources.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian*, 57–58.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 56

## *Conclusion*

The church cannot continue on its trajectory of ignoring those who have foregone sexual relationships – whether by choice or circumstances. It must attempt to resist cultural influences that make romantic coupling and/or family the be-all, end-all of human existence and, instead, offer a vision of sexual wholeness and sexual life grounded in the unique claims of the church about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Failure to acknowledge those who are not married and failure to critique cultural notions regarding marriage and romantic coupling abandon a large segment of Christians to a kind of ‘sexual wilderness’ and lends tacit support to the prevailing notion of our time that sexuality and sexual orderings are a profoundly personal, individualistic affair.

By reclaiming a place for celibacy and reimagining marriage in light of the place of celibacy the church becomes empowered to more carefully, faithfully, and critically examine who may enter into matrimony. When all people are given the ability to faithfully and fully live out their sexual lives in ways that proclaim and testify to the presence of God in the world and in the very depths of human life then the church is better able to adjudicated issues of doctrine and discipline as it relates to marriage. Until we provide a way of making sense of non-married life, however, the church will not be able to truly and fruitfully make sense of married life. The church is only able to discern possible moves of the Holy Spirit when it recalls and attempts to faithfully respond to the moves the Holy Spirit has previously made. If Christians fail to recall the depth and beauty of Christian theological teaching on celibacy they cannot hope to provide a theologically rich description of marriage. And with a theologically rich description of

neither celibacy nor marriage the church risks following a sex-saturated culture that too often reduces women and men into sexual commodities.

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