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Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage: The Triumph of Culture?

Gifford A. Grobien

Barna's extensive 2007 survey investigating marriage indicates that about one-third of Americans who have married (78% of the total population) have also divorced at least once.¹ This survey became the object of much discussion, especially because it indicated a lack of significant variation between the rate of divorce among non-Christians and the rate among "born-again" Christians. However, Barna's definition of "born-again" may be misleading. As the survey report indicates, the category "born-again" means that a person self-identifies as such and has made a commitment to Jesus Christ. Barna does not categorize people according to church attendance or practices of piety. When church attendance or religious practices are considered, other studies suggest that practicing Christians tend to have lower divorce rates.² How much lower? For Barna's most religious type, "evangelicals," of those who marry, 26% divorce. How much relief this report offers, I suppose, depends on whether we are viewing it from a relative or absolute perspective. A 26% divorce rate is better than one-third, but this still suggests that roughly a quarter of marriages among Christians in America fall apart.

Broadly speaking, faith makes some difference in a person's attitude toward marriage, but not much. In this study, I want to trace the apparent triumph of the American culture's view of marriage even within the church. In so doing, I hope to raise awareness to how the church has let her defenses fall, and to begin to suggest ways that the church might rejuvenate her holy understanding and practice of marriage.

¹ "New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released," The Barna Group, March 31, 2008, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/family-kids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released#.VH3NdcnYdkM>.

² Christine A. Johnson, et. al., *Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 Baseline Statewide Survey on Marriage and Divorce* (Oklahoma State University Bureau for Social Research, 2002), 25-26, www.healthymarriageinfo.org/download.aspx?id=324.

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I. Revisionist Understandings of Marriage

Contemporary conventional wisdom views marriage as a relationship of romantic love, including sexual relations, and of mutual support by which a couple shares the responsibilities and rewards of domestic life.³ Usually such a relationship assumes exclusivity, although the recent rise in swinger activity suggests this is also weakening. In any case, the high rates of divorce previously quoted suggest that *commitment* is a relative term. Commitment may endure only so long as the couple feels affection for each other or senses compatibility in personality or life goals. Christians may view the level or type of commitment as the difference between contemporary secular marriages and Christian marriages: "Unbelievers aren't committed to each other the way Christians are." More recently, as the conventional understanding of marriage has expanded to include any two people (and now, in some cases, beyond two) regardless of sex, Christians also express the divine definition of God as an important difference: "God defines marriage as between one man and one woman."

Such distinctions are true and important. However, this focus of Christians in the marriage debate camouflages the more fundamental problem among most Christians and churches in America today. While Christians may quibble over the variations of a term or who fits certain categories, they generally agree with this basic definition. If you ask a Christian to define marriage, he will typically answer in a manner similar to the secular, conventional wisdom: a committed, romantic relationship in which people share domestic life. He will probably include the limitation that it be between a man and a woman and probably argue that commitment takes some work and effort and goes beyond feelings of compatibility—that marriage needs a kind of stick-to-it-iveness. The actual relationship, however, between married partners for both secularists and Christians today is essentially the same. This similarity reveals the triumph of secular culture in this area and indicates the fundamental problem in the American church's contemporary ideas about marriage.

This contemporary view of marriage is labeled *revisionist* by Robert George.⁴ It is a view that differs significantly from a traditional, biblical view, and even undermines the traditional view. Because of this, when Christians try to tack on elements of biblical marriage, they fail to stick: "Marriage is between only one man and one woman." Okay, but why? Just

³ Sherif Girgis, Robert P. George, and Ryan T. Anderson, "What is Marriage?," *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* 34, no. 1 (2010): 246.

⁴ Girgis, George, and Anderson, "What is Marriage?," 246.

because the Bible says so? That's fine for Christians, but meaningless to a secularist. "Commitment should be for life." Again, why is this so, and why do we think it is self-evident? It is not difficult to make at least a pragmatic argument that commitment need last only as long as the relationship seems mutually beneficial, or as long as we receive joy and pleasure from one another, similar to a contract. Rather, to counter the revisionist view of marriage, the church needs to reflect more deeply on the essence of marriage and restore its traditional articulation of marriage as a fundamentally *conjugal* relationship: that is, one oriented around male-female sexual relations and the family (including, under typical circumstances, children) that is established thereby. This conjugal view of marriage is implicitly supported by sociological research. In reviewing the sociological data, we may discover that the triumph of culture is not so thorough.

Family research, broadly speaking, defines itself not only in relation to marriage, but also in relation to the bearing and rearing of children, especially within marriage. Critics may protest that this vestigial orientation toward child-rearing is due to the influence of religion and tradition. However, family research acknowledges that children are produced in domestic romantic relationships and become an important part of domestic life. Children are the acknowledged "most important resources created in marriage," while laws, social expectations, and community processes regarding marriage affect childbearing, even to this day.⁵

As such, families may be defined behaviorally, by coresidence and by childbearing, whether inside or outside of marriage. Formally, coresidence and childbearing, while defining behavioral characteristics of a family, differ from marriage, because marriage is defined, in part, by laws.⁶ Seltzer observes the role of laws in defining marriage: "As families formed outside of marriage grow in number, policy makers and individuals try to formalize aspects of nonmarital family relationships, such as when the father of a child born outside of marriage is formally identified as that child's father through the establishment of legal paternity."⁷ Clearly the connection between marriage and family has become much looser, and marriage is no longer definitive of family. Yet one cannot help but note that the institutionalization that revisionists hope to accomplish with new laws is accomplished by marriage itself. Marriage has become *passé* and restrictive, yet it

⁵ Judith A. Seltzer, "Families Formed Outside of Marriage," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62, no. 11 (2000): 1247.

⁶ Seltzer, "Families Formed Outside of Marriage," 1247.

⁷ Seltzer, "Families Formed Outside of Marriage," 1248.

actually does what is sought by coresidence and childbearing. Even revisionists see this as important.

Yet social expectations and laws have become more tolerant of divorce and of children born out of wedlock, so that marriage is tied less to childbearing and establishing a family. What is more, the permanence of marriage is also declining.⁸ In fact, we can see this gradual dissolution of marriage spanning the better part of a century, and this is indicated in two distinct trends. In the early twentieth century, couples began to view marriage not merely as the foundational institution for familial relationships and the raising of children, but also as special companionship that satisfied emotional and romantic needs. Spouses “were supposed to be each other’s companions—friends, lovers—to an extent not imagined by the spouses in the institutional marriages of the previous era. . . . [T]he emotional satisfaction of the spouses became an important criterion for marital success.”⁹ As a result, the importance of marriage in the minds of young people increased, so that 95% of young people in the United States married by the 1950s, about 5% more than those who married in the early part of the century. Young people also married younger than at the beginning of the century: age twenty-three for men (down from twenty-six) and twenty for women (down from twenty-two). As is widely known, the birth rate also increased, leading to the baby boom.¹⁰

After this time, however, laws regarding divorce began to change to eliminate fault or legal punishments in most divorces, weakening the legal institutionalization of marriage. This occurred with the second transition in marriage, which came to full expression toward the end of the twentieth century, in which young people began to view marriage as a unique relationship for individual expression and fulfillment. Developing out of the earlier transition to emotional satisfaction, married persons began to focus more on personal satisfaction in general. They “began to think more in terms of the development of their own sense of self and the expression of their feelings, as opposed to the satisfaction they gained through building a family and playing the roles of spouse and parent.” Personal development, rather than mutual sacrifice, the malleability of roles, and communication that would confront and address problems rose to characterize beliefs about

⁸ Seltzer, “Families Formed Outside of Marriage,” 1249.

⁹ Andrew J. Cherlin, “The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 11 (2004): 851.

¹⁰ Cherlin, “The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage,” 852. The following discussion draws heavily on Cherlin, 852–853.

marriage by the end of the twentieth century. The individualization of marriage could be characterized as “an intimate partnership entered into for its own sake, which lasts only as long as both partners are satisfied with the rewards (mostly intimacy and love) that they get from it.”

These transitions in the social understanding of marriage have attenuated the central place of marriage in the contemporary social context. Society accepts more forms of so-called marriage and other alternative relationships, so that intimacy, sexual relations, and even the raising of children need no longer occur within the social institution of marriage. Much of the decline in marriage since the mid-1960s is matched with a rise in cohabitation.¹¹ Even while individuals accepted the decline of marriage, they still sought the companionship and structure of marriage-like relationships.

Cohabiting women’s sexual behavior, such as frequency of sexual relations and the use of birth control, is closer to that of married women. Cohabiters see living together as an opportunity to assess compatibility, while fewer see marriage as a defining characteristic of their lives. Although individuals at first see cohabitation as an alternative to the companionship of marriage, socially the difference, although moderated, persists. Cohabitation dissolves more quickly and more frequently than marriage due to the persistent legal and social institutionalization of marriage. Marriages are more difficult to dissolve also because of the pooling of resources and mutual “investments,” such as children, a pooling that occurs to a lesser extent among the cohabiting.

This pooling of investments retains for marriage another importance—namely, one of economics. In the place of a committed companionship that supports family life, marriage is seen as an economic relationship, by which the pooling of economic resources gives partners advantages. If one spouse loses his job, the other’s job mitigates the loss of income. Pooling incomes, a home, and other significant property is more attainable. Yet, at the same time, economic uncertainty and the fear of the loss of economic independence may hinder marriage. Cohabitation requires fewer up-front economic achievements, while marrying couples feel the need to reach certain economic goals, such as a house, a secure career, or a minimum level of income in order to support a family. While only 33% of women marry by age twenty-four (in a 2007 study), 60% of women cohabit by that age. Cohabitation offers many of the same benefits of marriage and

¹¹ Seltzer, “Families Formed Outside of Marriage,” 1249. The following discussion draws heavily on Seltzer, 1249–1254.

has begun to substitute for early marriage and to be seen as "a viable pathway out of singlehood for young adults."¹² That is, depending on a person's situation, cohabitation may serve as a mediating step between singleness and marriage, or it may serve as an alternative to marriage.

As a moderating relationship, cohabitation contributes to (but is only one factor in) a delay in the age of marriage and of childbearing. Recall that the rewards sought in revisionist marriage and marriage-like relationships have changed from those oriented around social expectations about family stability and the proper raising of children to fulfilling personal needs.¹³ In this sense, marriage retains value among many as a relationship of status and recognition. Marriage makes the statement that the partners have "passed a milestone in the development of their self-identities," and have reached a comfortable, stable (if still progressing moderately) stage in life.¹⁴ Marriage now is typically a sign of maturity, not a relationship to enter into when one is merely entering adulthood. Thus, the elevation of the average age of marriage since the 1960s is affected not only by economic factors but psychological ones. Marriages are delayed until couples have reached a psychological or emotional maturity.¹⁵

This research suggests that marriage has not been completely deinstitutionalized and remains valued, but that other priorities have shifted the place of marriage. Significantly, young American adults desire to avoid mistakes in marriage or marriages characterized by abuse, discord, or being prone to divorce. Love and companionship are still of central importance, but these can be found and experienced in other contexts or relationships, such as cohabitation.¹⁶ Marriage is no longer reserved even for companionship and romance, but for the mature and established person.

This more recent understanding of marriage as the capstone of adulthood is illustrated in the difference between the *marriage naturalist* and the *marriage planner*. From a sociological perspective, marriage naturalists are holdovers from a bygone era. They see marriage as an inevitable and seamless step in life, to be entered into as the natural result of a

¹² Jeremy E. Uecker and Charles E. Stokes, "Early Marriage in the United States," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70, no. 11 (2008): 837.

¹³ Cherlin, "The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage," 853.

¹⁴ Cherlin, "The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage," 857.

¹⁵ Donald T. Rowland, "Historical Trends in Childlessness," *Journal of Family Issues* 28, no. 10 (2007): 1329.

¹⁶ Maria J. Kefalas, et al., "'Marriage Is More than Being Together': The Meaning of Marriage for Young Adults," *Journal of Family Issues* 32, no. 7 (2011): 871.

romantic relationship as the couple enters adulthood. Full maturity and commitment develop *within* the marriage relationship, not prior to it.¹⁷

On the other hand, marriage planners prepare for marriage by establishing themselves as adults, educationally, professionally, financially, and mentally, prior to considering and entering into marriage.¹⁸ Even once maturity and independence have been reached, they then need to achieve a level of commitment with their partner before marrying. “[F]or planners commitment must be achieved by gaining intimate knowledge of one’s partner, experiencing decisions and setbacks together, learning to communicate, developing a sense of mutual trust, and believing that their relationship has a kind of inevitability; that is, that they are the ‘right person’ for one another.”¹⁹ By way of contrast, the marriage naturalist, commitment is not achieved, as it were; it happens when the couple marries and lives each day in view of this established, committed relationship.

The naturalist perspective is nourished in locations with a lower cost of living and economies in which moderate education provides a comfortable earning potential, such as in rural areas. On the other hand, a post-industrial economy with a high cost of living and the need for high levels of education and work experience to achieve financial self-sufficiency encourages the perspective of the marriage planner.²⁰ From this we see that both psychological and economic factors drive one’s perspective on marriage.

The researchers who have proposed this bilateral model of marriage naturalists and marriage planners claim that marriage has not been deinstitutionalized, just re-institutionalized. Their data does indicate that marriage is no longer connected strongly to childbearing and living together.²¹ In fact, the acceptability of these practices outside of marriage has shifted the place of marriage from a central life institution to one of a capstone relationship for marriage planners. The marriage planner marries only after he has established himself as an adult by achieving educational and professional goals, reaching financial independence, and developing a marriage mentality, that is, “the cognitive framework that allows them to give up the self-interested ways of an unattached single so that they can commit

¹⁷ Kefalas, et al., “Marriage Is More than Being Together,” 856–870.

¹⁸ Kefalas, et al., “Marriage Is More than Being Together,” 861–864.

¹⁹ Kefalas, et al., “Marriage Is More than Being Together,” 864.

²⁰ Kefalas, et al., “Marriage Is More than Being Together,” 869.

²¹ Kefalas, et al., “Marriage Is More than Being Together,” 864–866.

to the obligations and responsibilities of being a husband or wife."²² Before he reaches this stage, he may easily cohabit one or more times.

Data on increased rates of childlessness since the 1960s also give us insights into the changed perspective on marriage. These increased rates of childlessness are associated with "individualism and freedom of choice,"²³ that is, simply a perspective that views childbearing—even within the context of active sexual life—as something to control and choose, rather than something to receive as a fruit and blessing from God in a sexual relationship. The exercise of this choice is linked to other changes, including "fertility control, contraceptive technology, female work preferences and patterns, and sexual and family norms."²⁴ The "equalization between the sexes of opportunities for nonfamilial roles" presents the opportunity for this freedom of choice, especially among women.²⁵

II. Institutionalizing Cohabitation

The changing place of marriage in public opinion in the twentieth century is interwoven with the rise of cohabitation. Exploring the intricacies of the causality between the changing face of marriage and the rise of cohabitation is beyond the scope of this paper, although the data we have briefly reviewed suggest that the general rise in cohabitation followed the shift of marriage from a domestic institution oriented around raising children to that of a unique companionship that satisfied emotional and romantic needs, with the accompanying relaxation of divorce laws and social stigmas against cohabitation. Generally speaking, decisions about family are influenced by "trends toward greater individual autonomy," which is also supported by features of modern economics, the push toward sexual equality, developments in fertility control, and a changing psychology of maturity.²⁶

Cohabitation is now an important opportunity for many people to experience romantic companionship and to test the waters for marriage, even while working toward reaching psychological and occupational maturity. Again, to summarize, the three main reasons for cohabitation are

²² Kefalas, et al., "Marriage Is More than Being Together," 868.

²³ Rowland, "Historical Trends in Childlessness," 1321.

²⁴ D.L. Poston and E. Gotard, "Trends in Childlessness in the United States (1919-1975)," *Social Biology* 24, no. 3 (1977): 212; quoted in Rowland, "Historical Trends in Childlessness," 1321.

²⁵ Rowland, "Historical Trends in Childlessness," 1321.

²⁶ Seltzer, "Families Formed Outside of Marriage," 1258.

1) to provide some economic support while also allowing for a quick exit without economic ties to a partner, 2) to seek gender equality through psychological and occupational maturity with the resulting avoidance of stereotyped gender roles, and 3) to serve as a trial period for determining how well the partnership serves individual fulfillment.

Because of this significant role played by cohabitation, many sociologists and policy makers suggest further institutionalizing cohabitation with legal protections. This would serve to reduce its instable nature and support couples in these circumstances.²⁷ Cohabitation has little to no official legal recognition in the United States, although cohabiting partners may support their relationship legally through contracts, such as by sharing property rights, establishing lines of inheritance, and sharing power of attorney. Health and social insurance claims would require legislation.²⁸

In all of this, although children are seen as central to family life, very little has been said about children. Advocates of legislation to institutionalize cohabitation further assume that the well-being of children of cohabiting partners can be managed positively. It is interesting to note that cohabiting couples who conceive are more likely to marry than those who do not, while having children reduces the chance that cohabiting couples will break up, even if they do not marry.²⁹ In having children, couples recognize the importance of commitment, which many see as having its best expression in marriage.

III. Marriage as a Divine Order, Not as a Choice

There is something of a loose irony concerning the contemporary status of marriage. Some people fear or conclude that marriage has become deinstitutionalized, or that its status as an institution has changed. In its place have arisen different ways of experiencing and expressing romantic companionship and domestic relationship, such as cohabitation. Promoters of cohabitation, or, at least, those who see it as a part of society that is here to stay, have suggested that legislation be developed to institutionalize cohabitation more fully. Those who cohabit are in need of legal support, just like married couples, to make the sharing of assets, benefits, and children easier and legally defensible.

²⁷ Seltzer, "Families Formed Outside of Marriage," 1255, 1263.

²⁸ Seltzer, "Families Formed Outside of Marriage," 1262.

²⁹ Seltzer, "Families Formed Outside of Marriage," 1255.

Yet we already have the kind of legal support for these things that couples need. It is called “marriage.” Somehow, in the convoluted developments of marriage over the last century, marriage has been adjusted, rejected, renamed, or marginalized, and yet what society generally wants and needs is marriage—a romantic companionship that is legally recognized and defined in order to support domestic life. They may call it something else, such as cohabitation or domestic partnership, but it is, fundamentally, marriage—so long as it is truly sexual, that is, male-female. When we recognize that the general, natural expression of domestic life includes the bearing and raising of children, we have, in its basic form, the biblical, traditional, and conjugal view of marriage.

It is this conjugal understanding of marriage that now requires further consideration. As a sexual union, marriage is a unique union. As Robert George points out, it is the only union that is a truly organic or biological union. Nearly all biological, or fleshly, acts can be accomplished by one independent body—for example respiration, circulation, and digestion. Indeed, fleshly union with respect to any of these bodily acts is impossible. Only in coitus do two bodies act for one biological function—that of procreation.³⁰ Coitus brings together two bodies in a fleshly union to make possible the singular biological act of procreation.

Any bodily touching that is not coitus—even other touching of a sexual nature—is not true bodily union but only juxtaposition or contiguousness, even if this juxtaposition happens to occur inside a person’s body. One might argue that non-coital sexual relations nourish and express intimacy and emotional union. Yet such a union would be just that: one of emotion, the will, or the mind. It is still not a union of the flesh, by which two bodies act together as one body or one flesh, seeking a fleshly—that is, organic or biological—purpose.

The fleshly union of man and woman is fundamentally a bodily union, but it also includes the union of other human qualities, such as the will, the emotions, and the mind. In sexual relations a man and woman would also properly coordinate their wills, emotions, and minds. Indeed, their souls are coordinated and caught up with one another in the purposes of deepening and nourishing their relationship, of enjoying one another, and of conceiving, bearing, and raising a child. And, in this sense, marriage is not just mating. The relational bond is as much a part of the fleshly union as the biological union. Coitus is not the only element of marriage, yet it is one of the fundamental, unique elements of marriage. To insist upon the biological

³⁰ Girgis, George, and Anderson, “What is Marriage?,” 254.

or organic union as fundamental to marriage does not in any way marginalize the other ways that a husband and wife are united in marriage.

Nor does the fundamental character of fleshly union in marriage in any way diminish or annul the marriages of infertile couples. The union of flesh refers to the act of coitus. In coitus, man and woman come together as one organically. That this act should not later result in conception says nothing about the act of union itself. “[W]hether a couple achieves bodily union depends on facts about what is happening between their bodies,” not other factors regarding the effectiveness of the reproductive system.³¹

It is, in fact, only through fleshly union that two people can be completely united. People of all sorts may be united emotionally, according to their wills, or according to their minds. Coworkers united to find the solution to a research question or to a mechanical problem in an automobile have a kind of union in intellect. Friends are united in common activities according to their wills and often according to their emotions. Bodily union, however, occurs only between two who engage in a union of the flesh. Thus, the only relationship that allows the full union of persons—bodily, emotionally, according to the will, and according to the mind—is the relationship that includes fleshly union, that is, marriage. St. Paul’s words in Ephesians 5 express the character of this fleshly union: a union of love, of care, of growth, and of nourishment (Eph 5:28–30).

This, then, is the conjugal view of marriage: the “permanent and exclusive” relationship of a man and a woman expressed in conjugal acts, which also presume the conception of children. As such, marriage is oriented toward raising children.³² The descriptors “permanent” and “exclusive” are fundamental both because the greatest companionship should be that which has no end and because the raising of children requires the enduring commitment of the parents. In both cases, permanency becomes a basis for trust. With a confidence that the spouse will not leave the marriage, a husband or wife lives in the intimate, trusting confidence to be self-giving both to spouse and to children.

Note here the fundamental difference: revisionist marriage is for romantic enjoyment and self-fulfillment. Conjugal marriage is to be united, and to grow in the unity, not only of bodies, but of love, through self-giving that expresses and confirms trust in the other.

³¹ Girgis, George, and Anderson, “What is Marriage?,” 266.

³² Girgis, George, and Anderson, “What Is Marriage?,” 246.

Marriage, then, is no mere choice, but a new way of living. Marriage is a divine order of life, by which God naturally provides companionship for individuals and by which he himself continues to bring forth new natural life, educate children, and provide for them. Romance is a good and blessed quality of marriage that grows out of the conjugal relationship and commitment and ought to be nourished by the husband and wife. It is not, however, definitive of marriage.

Marriage is much more than a choice, because the presumption is that most will marry. Consider Luther's discussion of the Sixth Commandment:

[Marriage] is a necessary [walk of life]; it is solemnly commanded by God that in general both men and women of all walks of life, who have been created for it, shall be found in this walk of life. To be sure, there are some (albeit rare) exceptions whom God has especially exempted, in that some are unsuited for married life, or others God has released by a high, supernatural gift so that they can maintain chastity outside of marriage. Where nature functions as God implanted it, however, it is not possible to remain chaste outside of marriage; for flesh and blood remain flesh and blood, and natural inclinations and stimulations proceed unrestrained and unimpeded, as everyone observes and experiences. Therefore, to make it easier for people to avoid unchastity in some measure, God has established marriage, so that all may have their allotted portion and be satisfied with it. (LC I 211–212)

Where nature functions, it is not possible to remain chaste outside of marriage. Our earlier brief sociological survey certainly confirms Luther's words. While the perceived burdens of marriage have been rejected by society, the desire for companionship remains, and not only does marriage remain, but also other relationships, such as cohabitation, have arisen as attempts to meet the desire for companionship and so-called self-fulfillment (which even the most radical of marriage revisionists acknowledge happens because people are in relation to another). Society cannot surpass the natural inclination to sexual relations, and it struggles to find ways to enjoy these relations. All along, however, marriage has stood as God's gift for the expression of sexual relations and the relationship—indeed the intimate one flesh—that is inherent with sexual relations.

When marriage remains in the realm of mere choice, it becomes one other option, to choose or not to choose, to enjoy once I am mature or not, or to cap my entrance into and success in adulthood. Except for those who have been given the gift of celibacy, marriage is not a choice. It is a relationship into which we are called. Choice plays a role, to some extent, in

the decision of whom we marry and when we marry, and, to be sure, we choose every day to love and serve our spouses. Yet fundamental to these choices is God's calling of us into this natural and blessed institution.

The title of this study includes the term "divorce." When we understand and teach marriage rightly, the teaching on divorce becomes clear. Just as those without the gift of celibacy do not have the choice not to marry, so they do not have the choice, strictly speaking, to divorce. Divorce is not a choice of one or both spouses, but a recognition of the brokenness of the marriage. There are reasons for divorce—real reasons that ought to be upheld and defended so that our injured brothers and sisters may be defended: sexual infidelity, abuse, or abandonment. When there is no repentance or the breach of trust is irreconcilable in such cases, the marriage is broken, and there is divorce. Divorce exists not from the beginning but because of our hardness of heart. Precisely because our hardness of heart remains until the resurrection, divorce also remains until the resurrection. And it ought to remain, for the sake, love, and defense of the one sinned against. Divorce protects Christians; it does not stigmatize them. Divorce renews the opportunity for married life for the Christian.

Thus, in a simple sense, neither marriage nor divorce are choices, but come upon us. The former is given as a great gift to be embraced by God, and the latter is the protection and renewal of Christians who have been sinned against in marriage. This is how the church should view and practice marriage. The church should teach and model marriage as a conjugal relationship, a permanent and exclusive union that God establishes and by which he teaches us how to love and to raise up the next generation in fear of him. It is not mere romance, but a solemn order, not to be tweaked or revised or renamed, even in the face of secular challenges. It should teach and model the good things and fruits of marriage, of which romantic pleasure is only one part, and not the greatest part. It should teach and model this truth: that in the bond of marriage husbands and wives learn true love in the giving of themselves to their spouses, that fathers and mothers learn true love in the giving of themselves for the nurture and education of their children, and that they learn that true love is to empty oneself for the sake of another. A person does not mature before he marries. A person learns to mature by living in marriage, supported by family and the church. This is not the self-fulfillment of secular society, and the sooner children learn this, the sooner they will be on their way to embracing conjugal marriage. As they learn these truths of marriage, they will be ready to marry as they approach adulthood, not waiting to attain some

level of maturity at age thirty or forty, a maturity that will never really come, because the individual has not given himself over to love another.

Yet, finally, conjugal marriage is true self-fulfillment. It is the union not only of feelings and will, but of the flesh. It is a union and fulfillment deeper, more complex, and more mystical than the romance of secularism. It is an expression of true, permanent love, the love that Christ shows and expresses toward his church. Out of such love comes new life, and out of such love comes the inexpressible joy of true fellowship. This is the love, joy, and fulfillment that our culture longs for, which it has ironically abandoned in marriage, even while stumbling out to embrace it again. For decades, the church has followed the culture. Let the church now, in marriage also, be the church, and once again be a light for the culture, whether those of the culture come to the light or not. Is this a retreat, separation, or flight from culture? Not when we have the courage to acknowledge that this is to teach and practice that for which the culture truly longs.