

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ANTHROPOLOGY

The Doctrine of Humanity

Created, Fallen, and Redeemable — What It Means to Be Human Before God

UNIT 6

Human Sexuality, Marriage, and Gender

Lesson 18

Marriage as a Creation Ordinance

One Man, One Woman, One Lifetime — The Divine Design

“Marriage Is Not a Human Invention but a Divine Institution”

Key Texts: **Genesis 2:18–25; Matthew 19:3–9; Ephesians 5:22–33; 1 Corinthians 7:1–9; Hebrews 13:4**

*“For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife;
and they shall become one flesh.”*

Genesis 2:24, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Lesson 17 established that gender is a creation ordinance, the binary distinction of male and female, established by God's creative act in Genesis 1:27, carrying the authority of the Creator and immune to revision by any creaturely agency. Lesson 18 turns to the institution that depends most directly on the male-female distinction and is most comprehensively defined by it: marriage. Marriage is not a cultural invention that different societies have organized in different ways according to their own preferences and circumstances; it is a creation ordinance, established by God in the garden before the fall, before the law, and before any human cultural development, and therefore carrying the same permanence and the same divine authority as the creation itself. The contemporary culture's aggressive campaign to redefine marriage, to detach the definition of marriage from the male-female distinction, from the permanence of the covenant, and from the procreative purpose that the one-flesh union serves, is not a social or political innovation that the church is free to accommodate; it is a fundamental challenge to the creational order that the church is called to understand, to hold with theological confidence, and to defend with pastoral wisdom.

The definition of marriage that Genesis 2:18–25 establishes is not complicated: the lifelong, covenantal union of one man and one woman, established by God, expressed in the leaving of father and mother and the cleaving to the spouse, and consummated in the one-flesh union that is both the physical expression and the covenantal seal of the marriage covenant. Every feature of this definition is theologically significant and every feature is under challenge in the contemporary cultural moment: the one man / one woman specification (challenged by same-sex redefinition), the lifelong commitment (challenged by no-fault divorce and the therapeutic culture's account of personal fulfillment), the covenantal character (challenged by the reduction of marriage to a legal contract and a social arrangement), and the procreative purpose of the one-flesh union (challenged by the radical separation of sexuality from procreation that the contraceptive revolution and the reproductive technology industry have produced). The lesson addresses each of these challenges from the foundation of the creation narrative and the biblical theology of marriage as it develops through the Epistles to its ultimate expression in the mystery of Christ and the church.

This lesson proceeds in six sections. We begin with the creation of marriage in Genesis 2 and the specific elements of the creation narrative that establish the definition of the institution. We then examine Jesus's engagement with the question of marriage in Matthew 19, which confirms the creation narrative as the authoritative foundation and establishes the permanence of the marital bond against the Pharisees' tolerance of easy divorce. The third section examines the great mystery of Ephesians 5:31–32, Paul's revelation that the marriage covenant is designed by God to reflect and proclaim the covenant union of Christ and the church. The fourth section addresses the challenge of same-sex redefinition and other departures from the creation design with the theological precision and the pastoral sensitivity that the gospel demands. The fifth section examines the calling of singleness as an honorable and genuinely equal vocation, against both the cultural denigration of singleness and the ecclesiastical pressure that treats marriage as the normative Christian life. We close with the pastoral vision of marriage as a witness to the gospel in the midst of a culture that has comprehensively misunderstood what marriage is and what it is for.

A note on pastoral scope: Lesson 18 addresses the doctrine of marriage, the theological definition, the biblical testimony, and the primary challenges to it, rather than the comprehensive pastoral theology of marital relationships, which would require its own series. The practical dimensions of the marriage relationship, the specific dynamics of servant headship and intelligent submission, the discipline of communication and conflict resolution, the economics and the parenting and the sexuality of married life, are addressed more fully in Lesson 19 (complementarity) and in the pastoral resources that the curriculum's later series will provide. Lesson 18 focuses on the doctrine: what marriage is, why God designed it, what the biblical testimony to it requires the church to affirm and defend, and what the pastoral posture of those who hold the biblical definition must be toward those for whom the definition creates genuine conflict or genuine grief.

I. The Creation of Marriage: Genesis 2:18–25

God's Design for the Institution Before Sin Entered the World

A. *The Problem, the Solution, and the Pattern*

Genesis 2:18–25 is the creation narrative of marriage, and its theological richness has not always been fully appreciated in treatments of the doctrine that focus primarily on the definition of Genesis 2:24 without attending to the narrative context from which the definition emerges. The narrative begins with the divine observation and evaluation: “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him’” (v. 18, NASB 1995). This is the first “not good” in the creation narrative, the first indication that the very good creation is not yet complete. The incompleteness is not a deficiency of the creation but a condition of Adam’s existence that the creation’s next act will address: Adam, as a person designed for relationship, requires a partner who is both genuinely like him (a fellow human being, a fellow image-bearer) and genuinely different from him (a complementary other who can give what Adam cannot give himself). The naming of the animals in verses 19–20 is not a digression; it is the narrative means by which Adam’s incompleteness is demonstrated: among all the creatures God has made, there is no suitable partner for Adam. The suitable partner does not yet exist.

The creation of Eve in verses 21–22 is the divine act that addresses the incompleteness: God takes the *tsela*, the rib or the side, from Adam’s own body and builds (*banah*, בנה) the woman. The use of *banah* rather than the *yatsar* (formed) of Genesis 2:7 is significant: *banah* is the word for construction, for architectural design, suggesting a higher level of intentional craftsmanship in the creation of the woman than in the formation of the man from the dust. And the derivation from Adam’s own body, from his own flesh and bone, establishes the deep ontological connection between the man and the woman that Genesis 2:23 expresses in Adam’s first recorded words: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” The complementary other is not an alien but a kindred: she is bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, and the recognition of her as such is the first act of marital covenant, the husband’s acknowledgment of the wife as the one who is genuinely, essentially, constitutively his own.

Genesis 2:24 is the divinely narrated conclusion that the creation narrative draws from the act of Eve’s creation and Adam’s recognition of her: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh” (NASB 1995). The “for this reason” connects the creation act (the derivation of the woman from the man’s body) to the pattern of marriage (the man’s leaving of his parents and cleaving to his wife in the one-flesh union). The pattern established in the garden is not the description of a specific cultural arrangement; it is the normative pattern for every subsequent human marriage, drawn directly from the logic of the creation act: because the woman was taken from the man’s own body, every subsequent marriage reenacts the same ontological reunion, the man leaving his origin family and cleaving to the one who is in some sense his own flesh, reestablishing in the one-flesh union of marriage the complementary wholeness that the original creation displayed.

B. *The Five Elements of the Biblical Definition of Marriage*

The creation narrative of Genesis 2:18–25, read as a whole, establishes five elements that together constitute the biblical definition of marriage. The first is the gender specification: marriage is the union of male and female, a man (*ish*, איש) and his wife (*ishshah*, אישה). The male-female character of the union is not incidental but essential, established by the derivation of the woman from the man’s body and the complementary relationship between them that the union restores. A union that is not between one man and one woman is not the union that Genesis 2 defines, regardless of the other qualities of commitment, fidelity, and love it may embody.

The second element is the leaving: “a man shall leave his father and his mother.” The leaving establishes that marriage creates a new social unit, a new household, a new primary loyalty, that takes precedence over the family of origin. The man’s leaving is not the abandonment of his parents but the establishment of a new covenant unit

in which the wife becomes his primary earthly partner, the one to whom his primary loyalty and his primary provision and care are directed. The third element is the cleaving: the man “is joined to his wife” (the Hebrew verb *dabaq*, דבק, meaning to cling, to hold fast, to adhere). The cleaving describes the committed, exclusive, covenant faithfulness of the marital bond, the permanent adhesion of one spouse to the other in the covenant commitment that marriage constitutes. The fourth element is the one-flesh union: “they shall become one flesh.” The one-flesh union is both the physical consummation of the marriage covenant (the sexual union of husband and wife) and the covenantal reality that the consummation expresses and seals: the two persons become, in the mystery of the marriage covenant, one. And the fifth element, implicit throughout the narrative and made explicit by its pre-fall location in Genesis 2, is the permanence: the marriage covenant established in the garden was not designed as a temporary arrangement subject to dissolution when the partners’ preferences change but as the lifelong covenant of two persons who become one flesh and whose union is dissolved only by death.

Hebrews 13:4 provides the New Testament’s most comprehensive single-verse account of the biblical doctrine of marriage: “Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (NASB 1995). The honor accorded to marriage in the verse, “among all,” universally, without exception for cultural context or personal circumstance, reflects the creation-ordinance character of the institution: marriage is honored not because particular cultures or individuals find it valuable but because the Creator who established it declared it very good. And the protection of the marriage bed from defilement, the warning that fornication and adultery are subject to divine judgment, reflects the covenantal exclusivity of the one-flesh union: sexual union outside the marriage covenant is the violation of the specific covenantal integrity that the one-flesh union is designed to express and protect.

“Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’”

Matthew 19:4–5, NASB 1995

II. Jesus and Marriage: Matthew 19:3–9

How Christ Confirms the Creation Ordinance and Addresses the Question of Permanence

A. The Pharisees’ Question and Jesus’s Hermeneutical Move

The Pharisees’ question in Matthew 19:3, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?”, reflects the specific intra-Jewish debate of the first century between the schools of Shammai (which permitted divorce only for serious sexual misconduct) and Hillel (which permitted divorce for virtually any offense, including burning one’s husband’s dinner). The question is designed to draw Jesus into this rabbinic controversy and to force Him to align with one school or the other. Jesus’ response is remarkable: He refuses to engage the question on the terms the Pharisees have offered. Instead of adjudicating between the Shammaite and Hillelite readings of Deuteronomy 24:1, He steps behind the Mosaic law entirely and grounds His account of marriage in the creation narrative of Genesis 1–2: “Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’” (Matthew 19:4–5, NASB 1995).

This hermeneutical move, grounding the normative account of marriage not in the Mosaic legislation but in the creation narrative, is theologically momentous and pastorally instructive. Jesus treats Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 as the authoritative foundation of the biblical account of marriage: the definition of marriage as the union of male and female (“He who created them from the beginning made them male and female”) and the permanence of the marital bond (“the two shall become one flesh”) are both grounded in the creation act rather than in the Mosaic

law. This means that the definition and the permanence of marriage are not features of the covenant with Israel that have been superseded by the new covenant; they are features of the creation itself, as enduring and as authoritative as the creation ordinances of the Sabbath and the image of God, and the new covenant's fulfillment of the Mosaic law does not diminish but confirms the creation narrative's account of marriage.

Jesus's conclusion from the creation narrative is expressed in verse 6: "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." The one-flesh union created by the marriage covenant is not merely the partners' mutual commitment; it is God's own act, "what God has joined together." The creator of the one-flesh union is God, not the couple; the covenant of marriage is God's institution, not the partners' invention; and the prohibition of its dissolution, "let no man separate", is grounded in the divine authorship of the union. The permanence of marriage is not a human ideal that the partners aspire to maintain by their own commitment; it is a divine act that cannot be undone by human decision without violating the created order that God has established and that He regards as binding.

B. *The Mosaic Concession and the Hard-Heartedness Principle*

The Pharisees' follow-up question in Matthew 19:7, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?", presses Jesus on the apparent tension between His affirmation of permanence and the Mosaic provision of Deuteronomy 24:1. Jesus's response introduces the crucial distinction between the creational norm and the Mosaic concession: "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it was not so" (Matthew 19:8, NASB 1995). The Deuteronomy 24 provision was not God's affirmative endorsement of divorce as a legitimate expression of the marital ideal; it was a regulatory concession to the hardness of heart that the fall had introduced into the marriage relationship, designed to limit the damage that divorce causes rather than to approve the practice itself. "From the beginning it was not so" is the key phrase: the creation narrative establishes the norm, and the Mosaic concession acknowledges the fallen reality without endorsing it as the ideal.

Jesus's statement that divorce "except for immorality" causes the one who remarries after divorce to commit adultery (v. 9) is one of the most debated texts in the entire biblical theology of marriage, and its interpretation has generated an enormous exegetical literature in the church's history. This lesson does not attempt to adjudicate the full range of interpretive positions on the exception clause and on the pastoral question of when remarriage after divorce is permissible. What the passage establishes with unmistakable clarity is the creational norm of permanence: the one-flesh union created by marriage is designed by God to last a lifetime, and the dissolution of that union through divorce is not the expression of the creational ideal but its violation, tolerated in the Mosaic law as a concession to hard-heartedness but never commended as the norm. The pastoral implications of this Christological affirmation of the permanence of marriage are urgent and demanding, demanding for the couples who struggle to maintain covenant fidelity in the face of genuine marital difficulty, and demanding for the pastor who is called to hold the creational norm with clarity while ministering with genuine compassion to those for whom the norm has been violated or whose marriages have broken under the weight of the fall's damage.

The disciples' reaction to Jesus' account of marriage's permanence, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry" (Matthew 19:10, NASB 1995), is a response that reveals the demanding character of the standard Jesus has articulated and provides the entry point for His subsequent teaching on the calling of singleness (v. 11–12). The disciples' reaction is not approved by Jesus; but His response to it acknowledges that the standard He has articulated is indeed demanding and that the calling to celibacy for the kingdom is a genuine gift for those to whom it is given. The transition from the doctrine of marriage's permanence to the affirmation of singleness as a genuine calling will be developed in Section V; the important point here is that Jesus holds both together without diminishing either: the permanent covenant of marriage is the creational norm, and the vocation of singleness for the kingdom is a genuine and honorable alternative, and neither is the lesser calling.

III. The Great Mystery: Ephesians 5:22–33

Marriage as the Sign and Proclamation of the Gospel

A. *The Mystery Revealed: Marriage Points to Christ and the Church*

The most theologically profound and the most doxologically resonant dimension of the biblical doctrine of marriage is the revelation of Ephesians 5:31–32: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church” (NASB 1995). Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, the foundational marriage text, and declares that the mystery of the one-flesh union it describes has always, from its original institution in the garden, been designed by God to point beyond itself to the greater union of Christ and the church. The creation ordinance of marriage was not merely a practical arrangement for human social life; it was a theological sign, a divinely designed picture of the covenant union between the Son of God and the people He redeems by His own blood.

The implications of this Pauline revelation are far-reaching. First, it establishes that the marriage covenant has its ultimate purpose not in the happiness of the couple or even in the procreation and nurture of children (though both are genuine goods that marriage serves) but in the proclamation of the gospel. Every Christian marriage is a living sermon, a specific, embodied, publicly visible proclamation of the covenant love that Christ has for His church and the church’s responsive love for Christ. The husband who loves his wife as Christ loved the church (v. 25: “just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her”) is enacting in the domestic sphere the same self-giving love that the cross enacted in the cosmic sphere. And the wife who respects and honors her husband (v. 33: “the wife must see to it that she respects her husband”) is displaying in the domestic sphere the responsive, trusting love of the church toward the Christ who has given Himself for her.

Second, the Christ-and-church mystery establishes why the definition of marriage cannot be modified without theological loss. The mystery of Ephesians 5:31–32 is specifically the mystery of Christ’s covenant union with the church, a covenant union that has the specific character of a husband’s self-giving love for his bride and a bride’s responsive trust in her husband. The male-female structure of the marriage covenant is not an incidental feature that could be replaced by a gender-neutral covenant between any two committed persons; it is the theological content of the sign, the specific form in which the Christ-and-church mystery is embodied and proclaimed. A marriage between two men cannot embody the mystery of the Christ-and-church covenant because the mystery requires both the headship role (embodied by the husband, who images Christ’s self-giving love) and the responsive role (embodied by the wife, who images the church’s trust). The same-sex redefinition of marriage does not merely alter a social arrangement; it obliterates the theological sign that God designed the marriage covenant to embody, replacing the proclamation of the gospel with a form that cannot carry the proclamation.

B. *The Practical Theology of the Marriage Covenant: Servant Headship and Intelligent Submission*

The practical implications of the Christ-and-church mystery for the specific dynamics of the marriage relationship are developed in Ephesians 5:22–33 with a precision that the contemporary church has sometimes obscured in the effort to make the passage’s applications more culturally palatable. The passage’s account of the husband’s role (vv. 25–30) is not primarily the account of his authority over his wife but the account of his self-giving love for his wife: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, cleansing her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory” (vv. 25–27, NASB 1995). The husband’s headship is the headship of the self-giving servant who gives himself up for his bride, not the headship of the dominating authority who asserts his rights over his subordinate. The cross is the model of Christian headship, and the cross is the opposite of domination.

The wife’s responsive role is equally grounded in the Christ-and-church mystery: “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He

Himself being the Savior of the body” (vv. 22–23, NASB 1995). The submission called for is voluntary, intelligent, and grounded in the theological reality of the headship pattern, not coerced, not fearful, and not incompatible with the wife’s full dignity as an equal image-bearer. Just as the church’s submission to Christ is not the submission of an inferior to a superior but the voluntary, loving responsiveness of the redeemed to the Redeemer who gave Himself for her, so the wife’s submission to her husband is the voluntary, loving responsiveness of the partner who honors the headship pattern that God has designed for the marriage covenant. The submission is to her “own husband” (v. 22), specifically and exclusively to the one who has committed himself to her in the covenant of marriage, and it is modeled on the church’s response to Christ, which is a response of love and trust rather than of compulsion.

The fullest treatment of the complementarian dynamics of the marriage relationship belongs to Lesson 19; this lesson establishes the theological foundation for that treatment in the Christ-and-church mystery of Ephesians 5:31–32. What is important to hold clearly in this lesson is that the structure of the marriage covenant, the husband’s servant headship and the wife’s intelligent submission, is not a social arrangement that the church has the authority to modify in response to cultural pressure, but a theological structure grounded in the nature of the covenant relationship it is designed to proclaim. When Christian marriages embody this structure with the genuine servant love and the genuine voluntary respect that the passage describes, they are not performing a cultural tradition; they are preaching the gospel in the most intimate and the most visible domain of human life. And when Christian marriages fail to embody it, when husbands exercise their headship as domination rather than service, or when wives withhold the respect that honors the covenant’s theological structure, the gospel proclamation of the marriage is damaged or extinguished.

“This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.”

Ephesians 5:32, NASB 1995

IV. Against the Redefinition of Marriage: Same-Sex Unions and Other Departures

Why Departures from the Creation Design Are Not Merely Alternative Arrangements

A. Same-Sex Unions and the Theological Argument

The contemporary campaign for the legal and ecclesiastical recognition of same-sex unions as marriages is the most significant single challenge to the biblical doctrine of marriage in the church’s history, and it requires the church to engage it with both theological precision and genuine pastoral care. The theological case against the same-sex redefinition of marriage is not primarily an argument from tradition, from natural law, or from cultural preference, though all three provide supporting evidence; it is an argument from the creation narrative and from the Christ-and-church mystery that the creation narrative establishes. The biblical doctrine of marriage is not the church’s preferred social arrangement that it is entitled to maintain for itself while tolerating others; it is the Creator’s design for the institution, embodied in the creation narrative, confirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19, and revealed by Paul in Ephesians 5 to carry the theological weight of the gospel itself. To redefine marriage in a way that detaches it from the male-female binary is not to recognize an alternative form of the same institution; it is to eliminate the institution and replace it with something that cannot carry the theological content that the Creator’s design requires it to carry.

The specific biblical prohibitions of same-sex sexual activity, Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10; 1 Timothy 1:10, are part of the biblical testimony on this question but are not the primary basis for the theological case against same-sex marriage. The primary basis is the creation narrative: marriage is the creation ordinance of one man and one woman, established in the garden before any Mosaic legislation and confirmed by

Jesus as the permanent, creation-grounded norm. This creation-narrative argument is immune to the charge that the biblical prohibitions of same-sex activity are merely cultural expressions of ancient Near Eastern social norms that the contemporary church is not obliged to apply: the creation narrative is not a cultural expression but a theological account of the Creator's design, and the creation-ordinance character of marriage is precisely what Jesus appeals to in Matthew 19 when He grounds the definition of marriage in "the beginning" rather than in the Mosaic legislation that the Pharisees cite.

The pastoral engagement with those who experience same-sex attraction, and with those who have entered into same-sex unions, must embody the same combination of theological clarity and genuine compassion that Lesson 17's treatment of gender dysphoria called for. Same-sex attraction is a genuine experience of many image-bearers of God, and the church that responds to it with contempt, with dismissal, or with the implication that the experience itself is a moral failure has not understood either the comprehensiveness of the fall's damage to human sexuality or the comprehensiveness of the gospel's grace for every form of human brokenness. The calling that the biblical doctrine of marriage places on those who experience same-sex attraction is not a calling to the elimination of the attraction, which may or may not occur through the Spirit's renewing work; it is a calling to the same sexual faithfulness that the biblical doctrine of marriage requires of all image-bearers: either the covenant fidelity of marriage between a man and a woman, or the sexual chastity of the single vocation. This is a demanding calling, and the church that acknowledges its demands with honesty while offering the specific, Christological, community-grounded support that makes the demanding calling livable is the church that is most faithful to both the truth and the grace of the gospel.

B. Polygamy and Other Departures from the One-Flesh Pattern

The same-sex redefinition of marriage is not the only form in which the creation design of Genesis 2:24 is challenged in the contemporary moment, though it is the most prominent. Polygamy, the union of one man with multiple wives, is present in the Old Testament narratives as a description of what some figures in Israel's history practiced; it is not, however, a prescriptive pattern that the Old Testament endorses or that the creation narrative establishes. The consistent testimony of the Old Testament narrative is that polygamous arrangements produce conflict, jealousy, and the distortion of the one-flesh union's exclusive covenant character: the stories of Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon are not advertisements for polygamy but cautionary tales about its consequences. And the creation narrative of Genesis 2:24 establishes the normative pattern as the union of one man and one woman, not one man and multiple women, a pattern that Jesus confirms in Matthew 19:5–6's reference to "the two" becoming one flesh, not the many.

The dissolution of the permanence of the marriage covenant through no-fault divorce is a departure from the creation design that has done more damage to the fabric of the Christian community and the wider society than perhaps any other form of the redefinition of marriage, precisely because it has been normalized within the church as well as in the culture. The statistics of divorce among self-identified Christians differ from the cultural average less than the church's theological commitments should require, and the pastoral response to marital breakdown within the church must navigate the tension between the creational norm of permanence and the genuine pastoral care of those whose marriages have broken. This lesson does not adjudicate the specific pastoral questions of divorce and remarriage, which require careful exegetical and pastoral engagement beyond the scope of a doctrinal lesson on the definition of marriage; it establishes the theological norm, the creation ordinance of permanent covenant union, against which the specific pastoral questions must be evaluated.

Cohabitation, the arrangement in which couples live together and engage in sexual activity outside the covenant of marriage, is perhaps the most widespread departure from the creation design in the contemporary church, and it represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what the one-flesh union is and why the covenantal framework of marriage is its proper and necessary context. The one-flesh union is not merely a physical act that becomes more meaningful when it is accompanied by emotional commitment; it is a covenantal act that creates a specific kind of covenant relationship, the relationship of husband and wife, and that therefore properly occurs only within

the context of the covenant that gives it its theological significance and its protective framework. The church's pastoral engagement with the widespread practice of cohabitation must be both theologically clear, holding the creation ordinance of marriage as the context within which the one-flesh union belongs, and pastorally sensitive, recognizing the specific social, economic, and relational pressures that make cohabitation seem like a reasonable arrangement to many young people who have not been formed by the biblical doctrine of marriage.

V. The Calling of Singleness: An Honorable Vocation, Not a Lesser State

Paul's Affirmation of Celibacy as a Genuine Gift for the Kingdom

A. Singleness Commended: 1 Corinthians 7

The church's engagement with the biblical doctrine of marriage has sometimes been marred by the implicit or explicit treatment of singleness as a deficiency, as the state of those who have not yet achieved the full and normative expression of the Christian life in the covenant of marriage. This treatment is not merely pastorally insensitive to those who are single; it is theologically wrong. Both Jesus and Paul commend the single vocation as a genuine and in certain respects superior calling, and the church that has not fully integrated this commendation into its pastoral practice and its community culture has not fully understood the biblical doctrine of marriage or the biblical theology of the kingdom of God.

Jesus' response to the disciples' reaction in Matthew 19:10–12 introduces the category of celibacy for the kingdom: "Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it." The category of "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven", those who have voluntarily embraced a life of sexual abstinence for the specific purpose of undivided devotion to the work of the kingdom, is not a lesser calling that Jesus reluctantly acknowledges as a valid alternative to marriage; it is a specific gift that Jesus regards as the calling of those to whom it is given.

Paul's extended treatment of singleness in 1 Corinthians 7 is the most theologically developed New Testament account of the single vocation, and its specific argument is worth attending to carefully. Paul writes: "I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Corinthians 7:7–9, NASB 1995). Paul describes both marriage and singleness as gifts from God, different expressions of the same grace, and commends singleness for those who have the gift on the grounds of its specific advantage for undivided kingdom service: "But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided" (vv. 32–34). The single person's undivided devotion to the Lord is a specific kingdom advantage that Paul regards not as a consolation prize for those who cannot find a spouse but as a genuine gift that serves the Lord's work in ways that the married person's divided attention cannot.

B. The Pastoral Dignity of the Single Vocation

The biblical commendation of singleness has specific and demanding implications for the church's pastoral culture and communal life. The church that has treated marriage as the normative Christian vocation and singleness as the waiting room for marriage has failed the specific single persons in its care and has misrepresented the biblical theology of the kingdom by treating the gifts of marriage and singleness as a hierarchy rather than as

complementary callings. The pastoral dignity of the single vocation requires, at minimum, three specific affirmations.

First, the affirmation that singleness is a genuine calling, not a deficiency to be remedied, a temporary condition to be endured, or a mark of failure to form the necessary relationships for marriage, but a specific gift that God gives to specific persons for specific kingdom purposes. The single person in the congregation is not a married person who has not yet married; she is a member of the body of Christ with a specific gift, a specific calling, and a specific set of contributions to make to the community that the married person cannot make in the same way. The church that treats single adults as a subgroup waiting to graduate into the normative category of married adults has not understood Paul's commendation.

Second, the affirmation that the sexual chastity required of the single person, the abstinence from sexual activity outside the covenant of marriage, is a genuine and demanding calling that the church is obligated to support with genuine community. The single person who is called to sexual chastity is not being asked to deny a need that can easily be met in another way; she is being called to a specific and costly form of faithfulness that requires the genuine, embodied, daily support of a community that takes the calling seriously and provides the specific forms of intimacy and belonging that the single person needs without providing them in the ways that the marriage covenant provides them. The church that does not provide this community has not fulfilled its obligation to those it calls to the single vocation. Third, the affirmation that the kingdom purposes that Jesus and Paul identify as the specific advantage of the single vocation are genuinely important and genuinely valuable, that the undivided devotion to the Lord's work that singleness enables is not a secondary contribution to the kingdom but one of its most essential engines, as the ministries of Paul himself, of the monastic tradition at its best, and of countless single missionaries and servants of the church have demonstrated throughout the history of the people of God.

“Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge.”

Hebrews 13:4, NASB 1995

VI. Marriage as Gospel Witness: The Pastoral Vision

What the Biblical Doctrine of Marriage Means for the Church's Life and Proclamation

The doctrine of marriage as a creation ordinance, the lifelong covenant union of one man and one woman, designed by God to proclaim the mystery of Christ and the church, is not merely a doctrinal position to be defended against cultural challenge but a living reality to be embodied, celebrated, and proclaimed in the community of faith. The church that understands Ephesians 5:31–32 will not merely hold the biblical definition of marriage as a theological conviction; it will invest the pastoral and communal resources required to help the specific marriages within its community become the specific, embodied, publicly visible proclamations of the gospel mystery that they are designed to be. The formation of Christian marriages, the ongoing pastoral care and formation that helps husbands love their wives as Christ loved the church and helps wives respect their husbands as the church respects Christ, is not a supplementary program for those whose marriages are in difficulty; it is a central dimension of the church's discipleship mission, because the quality of the marriages in the congregation is one of the most visible and the most powerful witnesses to the character of the gospel that the congregation proclaims.

The pastoral vision for the ministry of marriage in the congregation has several specific dimensions. The first is the premarital formation of those preparing for marriage: the theological, relational, and practical formation that helps couples understand what they are entering, not merely a social arrangement or a romantic partnership, but a covenant ordained by God to proclaim the gospel mystery, and equips them with the specific knowledge and

the specific commitments they will need to honor that covenant through the inevitable difficulties of a lifetime together. The second is the ongoing care and formation of married couples: the preaching and teaching that consistently holds the Christ-and-church mystery before the congregation as the theological framework within which the specific dynamics of the marriage relationship are to be understood and practiced; the small-group and mentoring structures that provide the specific relational support and accountability that sustaining a covenant over a lifetime requires; and the pastoral care that is available when the marriage is in genuine difficulty and the couple needs help beyond what the community's general formation has provided.

The pastoral vision must also include the explicit and sustained welcome of those who have experienced the failure of the creation ordinance in their own marriages, those who are divorced, those who are separated, those who have entered into unions outside the biblical definition, and those who have experienced the specific grief of a marriage that ended through the death of a spouse. The biblical doctrine of marriage is the proclamation of what marriage is designed to be; it is not a condemnation of those whose experience of marriage has fallen short of the design, whether through their own failure, through the failure of a partner, or through the circumstances of a fallen world that the gospel addresses but does not eliminate. The church that holds the biblical definition of marriage with theological conviction and simultaneously holds the specific grief and the specific brokenness of those who have experienced marriage's failure with genuine pastoral compassion, this is the church that most fully embodies the character of the God whose love for the covenant is the model for the covenant that the marriage proclaims. The grace that the gospel announces is the grace for those who have failed the covenant, and the church that proclaims the covenant must proclaim with equal vigor the grace that the covenant's Maker extends to those who have broken it.

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.”

Ephesians 5:25, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Marriage (Biblical Definition)	The lifelong, covenantal union of one man and one woman, established by God in the garden before the fall (Genesis 2:18–25), expressed in the leaving of father and mother and the cleaving to the spouse, and consummated in the one-flesh union. Marriage is a creation ordinance, a structural feature of the created order established by God before sin entered the world, whose authority is independent of cultural preference, legal recognition, or the subjective experience of the partners. Its five defining elements are: (1) male-female gender specification; (2) leaving (the creation of a new primary covenant unit); (3) cleaving (permanent, exclusive covenant faithfulness); (4) one-flesh union (physical consummation and covenantal bonding); and (5) permanence (the lifelong character of the covenant dissolved only by death).
Creation Ordinance	A structural feature of the created order established by God in the original creation before the fall, whose authority is independent of the Mosaic law, the cultural conventions of any particular society, or the preferences of any particular generation. Creation ordinances include the Sabbath, the image of God, the male-female distinction, and marriage. Their normative status is derived from the creative act of God that established them, not from any subsequent legal or cultural endorsement. Jesus' appeal to "the beginning" in Matthew 19:4–6 as the authoritative foundation of the doctrine of marriage is the definitive hermeneutical confirmation that marriage is a creation ordinance whose authority transcends the Mosaic legislation.
One-Flesh Union	The marital union described in Genesis 2:24 ("they shall become one flesh") that is both the physical consummation of the marriage covenant (the sexual union of husband and wife) and the covenantal reality that the consummation expresses and seals. The one-flesh union creates a new ontological reality, "no longer two, but one flesh" (Matthew 19:6), in which the two persons are united in a covenant bond that is deeper and more comprehensive than any other human relationship. The one-flesh union is the reason divorce constitutes the rupture of something that God has joined rather than merely the dissolution of a social contract.
The Great Mystery (Ephesians 5:31–32)	Paul's revelation that the marriage covenant of Genesis 2:24 has always been designed by God to point beyond itself to the greater union of Christ and the church: "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church." The mystery establishes that the ultimate purpose of marriage is not the happiness of the couple or the procreation of children (though both are genuine goods) but the proclamation of the gospel, the embodied, publicly visible proclamation of the covenant love that Christ has for His church and the church's responsive love for Christ. The male-female structure of the marriage covenant is not incidental to the mystery but constitutive of it: the headship role (husband imaging Christ's self-giving love) and the responsive role (wife imaging the church's trust) together constitute the specific form in which the Christ-and-church mystery is embodied.
Hardness of Heart (Matthew 19:8)	Jesus' explanation for the Mosaic permission of divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1: "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it was not so." The hardness of heart (sklerokardia,

	σκληροκαρδία) refers to the fallen human incapacity to maintain the covenantal faithfulness that the creation ordinance of marriage requires. The Mosaic concession was a regulatory accommodation to the fall's damage to human marital faithfulness, designed to limit the harm divorce causes rather than to endorse it as consistent with the creation ideal. "From the beginning it was not so" is Jesus' explicit statement that the creation narrative establishes the norm from which the Mosaic legislation's divorce permission is a concession.
Servant Headship	The specifically biblical account of the husband's headship role in the marriage covenant, grounded in the Christ-and-church mystery of Ephesians 5. The husband's headship is not the exercise of authority over a subordinate but the self-giving love of the one who gives himself up for his bride: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). The cross is the model of servant headship: the husband leads by serving, provides by giving, and protects by sacrifice. Servant headship is distinguished from domination (which is the fall's distortion of headship) and from egalitarian role-erasure (which denies that the headship structure is part of the creation design).
Intelligent Submission	The specifically biblical account of the wife's responsive role in the marriage covenant, grounded in the Christ-and-church mystery of Ephesians 5. The wife's submission is voluntary, theologically grounded, and modeled on the church's responsive love for Christ: "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:22). The submission is to her own husband specifically (not to men in general), is voluntary rather than coerced, and is fully compatible with the wife's equal dignity as an image-bearer of God. It is distinguished from servility (which the fall produces as a distortion of the creation's ordered complementarity) and from the egalitarian refusal to honor the headship structure that God has designed for the covenant.
Vocation of Singleness	The calling, commended by Jesus (Matthew 19:11–12) and Paul (1 Corinthians 7:7–9, 32–35), to a life of sexual chastity outside the covenant of marriage, for the purpose of undivided devotion to the work of the kingdom. The single vocation is not a lesser state than marriage but a different gift from the same God, with its own specific advantages for kingdom service: the undivided devotion that Paul describes ("One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord") is a specific contribution to the kingdom that the married person's divided attention cannot make in the same way. The church that treats singleness as deficiency rather than vocation has misunderstood both the biblical theology of singleness and the theology of the kingdom that grounds it.
Fornication / Sexual Immorality (Porneia)	The Greek term porneia (πορνεία), translated in the NASB 1995 as "immorality" or "sexual immorality," encompasses all sexual activity outside the covenant of marriage: premarital sex, cohabitation, adultery, same-sex sexual activity, and other departures from the creation ordinance of the one-flesh union within the lifelong covenant of one man and one woman. The broad scope of porneia reflects the comprehensive character of the creation ordinance: all sexual activity that occurs outside the specific covenantal context of the marriage covenant is a violation of the design that the Creator established for the one-flesh union, and Hebrews 13:4 warns that God will judge those who defile the marriage bed through fornication and adultery.

Cohabitation

The arrangement in which couples live together and engage in sexual activity outside the covenant of marriage. Cohabitation represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the one-flesh union: the sexual union is a covenantal act that properly occurs within and creates the covenant of marriage, not an act that becomes meaningful through the accumulation of emotional commitment or relational familiarity outside the covenant framework. The prevalence of cohabitation within the contemporary church reflects the inadequacy of the church's formation in the biblical doctrine of marriage and the covenantal character of the one-flesh union.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that marriage is God's institution, not a cultural arrangement that the church has traditionally endorsed and that it is now free to modify in response to cultural change. The authority of the definition, the lifelong covenant of one man and one woman, is the authority of the Creator who established it, confirmed by the Lord Jesus who grounded His account of marriage in the creation narrative rather than in any subsequent legal or cultural framework. This conviction is not primarily the conviction of cultural conservatives who prefer traditional social arrangements; it is the conviction of those who have understood Ephesians 5:31–32's revelation that the marriage covenant proclaims the gospel, and who therefore understand that the redefinition of marriage is not merely a social change but the replacement of a gospel sign with something that cannot carry the gospel's specific content.

We must also believe that both marriage and singleness are genuine vocations, genuine gifts from the same God for the same kingdom, and that the church's pastoral culture must honor both with equal theological seriousness and equal pastoral investment. The congregation that invests heavily in the formation and support of married couples while treating single adults as a subgroup waiting for the normative vocation has not understood 1 Corinthians 7's account of singleness as a genuine gift with specific kingdom advantages, and has failed those in its care who have been given the gift of the single vocation.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Let the Ephesians 5:31–32 mystery produce in you a genuinely doxological response to the marriage covenant. If the marriage of a husband and wife is the embodied proclamation of the covenant love between Christ and the church, if every Christian wedding is the performance of the most fundamental truth of the gospel in the medium of two persons' covenant commitment to each other, then the appropriate response to the institution of marriage is not the cultural familiarity that dulls the mystery but the theological wonder that sees in the domestic covenant the cosmic mystery it was always designed to embody. The husband who loves his wife as Christ loved the church is enacting in his marriage the same self-giving love that the cross enacted in redemptive history. Let this conviction produce in married persons the specific quality of attention to their marriage as a gospel witness, and in all persons the specific quality of reverence for an institution that carries the mystery of the covenant of grace.

Desire also the specific pastoral compassion that the failures of the marriage covenant require. The divorce, the broken family, the same-sex union, the cohabiting couple, each of these represents a specific form of the fall's damage to the creation ordinance that God designed for human flourishing and gospel proclamation. The appropriate response to each is neither the condemnation of those whose experience of the creation ordinance has been broken nor the affirmation of what the creation ordinance does not affirm, but the specific pastoral grace that holds both the truth of the design and the compassion of the gospel for those who have failed it.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read Genesis 2:18–25 and Matthew 19:3–9 in sequence. In Genesis, identify each of the five elements of the biblical definition of marriage as they appear in the narrative (gender specification, leaving, cleaving, one-flesh union, and the implicit permanence). In Matthew 19, identify the specific points at which Jesus confirms each element of the creation narrative's definition as the normative and authoritative account of what marriage is. Then reflect: how clearly does the congregation you serve understand that Jesus grounds His account of marriage specifically in the creation narrative? What preaching, teaching, or formation would most effectively communicate the creation-ordinance character of the institution to those who have been formed primarily by the surrounding culture's account of marriage as a social arrangement?

- Evaluate the congregation's current formation of engaged couples and support of married couples in the light of Ephesians 5:31–32's account of marriage as a gospel proclamation. Does the premarital formation communicate the Christ-and-church mystery as the theological framework within which the specific dynamics of the marriage relationship are to be understood? Does the ongoing pastoral care of married couples engage the specific gospel content of their marriage covenant, or does it address primarily the practical and relational dimensions without the theological foundation? Identify one specific initiative, in preaching, in premarital formation, or in the ongoing pastoral care of married couples, that would most effectively deepen the congregation's engagement with the Ephesians 5 mystery.
- **Read Andreas Kostenberger's *God, Marriage, and Family* (2004), chapters 1–3.** Kostenberger's treatment of the creation narrative, the New Testament theology of marriage, and the contemporary challenges to the biblical definition is the most comprehensive biblical-theological account of the doctrine of marriage available in the Reformed evangelical tradition. His engagement with the exegetical and theological dimensions of the creation-ordinance argument provides the depth of biblical grounding that the congregation's formation in the doctrine of marriage requires. For the specific pastoral dimensions of the singleness question, read Barry Danylak's *Redeeming Singleness* (2010), which traces the biblical theology of singleness from the Old Testament to the New and provides the most developed account of the single vocation's positive kingdom theology available in the contemporary evangelical tradition.
- Identify one specific single adult in your congregation who is navigating the calling of singleness with genuine faithfulness, and commit to a specific pastoral engagement with that person that explicitly honors the single vocation as a genuine gift from God. The engagement should include: an explicit acknowledgment of the theological dignity of the single vocation (not merely the practical challenges of being single); a genuine exploration of the specific kingdom purposes that the person's singleness is serving or could serve; and a specific commitment from the congregation's community to provide the genuine belonging and the genuine intimacy, in forms other than marriage, that the single person needs for human flourishing. Reflect afterward on the specific ways in which the congregation's current communal culture does or does not honor the single vocation with the theological seriousness that 1 Corinthians 7 requires.
- Prepare a pastoral response to the following specific scenario: a couple in your congregation who have been living together for two years before marriage come to you for premarital counseling. They are genuinely committed to each other and genuinely interested in the church's teaching on marriage, but they have not understood the significance of their cohabitation in light of the biblical doctrine of the one-flesh union. What theological account of the one-flesh union and the covenantal context within which it belongs will you offer? How will you hold the truth of the creation ordinance together with the genuine pastoral care of the couple before you? And what specific formation and what specific covenant commitments will you invite them to embrace as part of their preparation for the covenant of marriage?

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before working through this lesson, how would you have defined marriage? Would your definition have included all five of the elements the lesson identifies (gender specification, leaving, cleaving, one-flesh union, permanence)? Which element of the biblical definition is most countercultural in the specific community you serve, and why? Has the lesson changed the emphasis of your understanding of the definition, and if so, in what direction?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Genesis 2:18–25 carefully and in full. What is the significance of the divine observation “it is not good for the man to be alone” as the first “not good” in the creation narrative? What function does the naming of the animals (vv. 19–20) serve in the marriage narrative? Why does the narrative specify that the woman was built from a part of the man’s own body rather than being created from the dust of the ground as Adam was? And what does Adam’s first recorded speech (v. 23) contribute to the understanding of the relationship between the man and the woman that the marriage covenant creates?
- Read Matthew 19:3–12. What is the specific question the Pharisees ask, and why does Jesus respond by appealing to the creation narrative rather than to the Mosaic legislation? What does the phrase “from the beginning” in verse 8 (“from the beginning it was not so”) establish about the relationship between the creation ordinance and the Mosaic concession? What does the disciples’ reaction in verse 10 reveal about the demanding character of the permanence standard Jesus has articulated? And how does Jesus’ response to the disciples (vv. 11–12) relate the permanence of marriage to the calling of singleness?
- Read Ephesians 5:22–33 in full. What is the specific relationship Paul draws between the husband’s role and Christ’s role, and between the wife’s role and the church’s role? What specific aspects of Christ’s love for the church (vv. 25–27) does Paul present as the model for the husband’s love for his wife? Is the submission of verse 22 the same as the submission of verse 21 (“submitting to one another in the fear of Christ”), or is it something more specific? And what does Paul’s description of the Genesis 2:24 text as “this mystery is great” (v. 32) establish about the relationship between the creation ordinance of marriage and the theological reality of Christ and the church?
- Read 1 Corinthians 7:1–40. What specific pastoral questions is Paul addressing in this chapter? How does Paul distinguish between his “command” and his “opinion” in this passage, and what does the distinction suggest about the authority and the nature of his counsel? What specific advantages of the single vocation does Paul identify (vv. 32–35), and how do those advantages relate to the kingdom purposes that Jesus identifies in Matthew 19:11–12? How does Paul hold together the commendation of singleness (v. 7–8) with the affirmation that it is better to marry than to burn (v. 9) without contradicting himself?
- Read Hebrews 13:4. What does the phrase “among all” (en pasan) establish about the universality of the honor that marriage is to be accorded? What does the protection of the marriage bed from defilement (amianton, undefiled) specifically require in practice? And what does the warning about divine judgment for fornicators and adulterers contribute to the understanding of the covenantal character of the one-flesh union?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the creation-narrative argument against same-sex marriage is more fundamental than the specific biblical prohibitions of same-sex sexual activity, because it grounds the definition of marriage in the Creator’s design rather than in the Mosaic legislation that is subject to the hermeneutical objection of cultural relativity. Do you find this argument persuasive? Does the creation-ordinance character of marriage provide a more stable and more comprehensive theological case against the same-sex

redefinition than the specific prohibitions of Leviticus and Paul's letters? What hermeneutical principles are required to make the creation-ordinance argument clear and consistent?

- Paul reveals in Ephesians 5:31–32 that the Genesis 2:24 marriage text has always carried the mystery of Christ and the church. Does this revelation imply that the original meaning of Genesis 2:24 was always the Christ-and-church mystery (a *sensus plenior* interpretation), or that the marriage covenant has always typologically prefigured the Christ-and-church covenant even if that typological meaning was not fully understood until Paul revealed it? What difference does the hermeneutical account of the Ephesians 5 revelation make for the understanding of the creation ordinance of marriage?
- The lesson treats Jesus' exception clause in Matthew 19:9 ("except for immorality") as a genuine exception to the general norm of permanence without adjudicating the full exegetical debate about its scope and its implications for remarriage after divorce. Do you think the exception clause is best understood as permitting divorce and remarriage, permitting divorce but not remarriage, or permitting legal separation without the dissolution of the covenant? What specific exegetical considerations bear most directly on this question, and how would you communicate your interpretation of the exception clause in a pastoral counseling context with a person considering divorce?
- Paul's commendation of singleness in 1 Corinthians 7 is grounded in the specific eschatological context of "the present distress" (v. 26) and the conviction that "the time has been shortened" (v. 29). Does the eschatological grounding of Paul's commendation limit its applicability to the specific circumstances of the first-century church, or does it reflect a permanent theological reality about the relationship between the marriage covenant and the kingdom of God that applies equally in every generation? What does the eschatological grounding of the singleness commendation suggest about the relationship between the present age's family structures and the eschatological kingdom in which "they neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Matthew 22:30)?
- The lesson argues that the Christ-and-church mystery of Ephesians 5:31–32 establishes that the male-female structure of the marriage covenant is not an incidental feature but the theological content of the sign: the headship role (husband imaging Christ's self-giving love) and the responsive role (wife imaging the church's trust) together constitute the specific form in which the mystery is embodied. Is this argument exegetically compelling? Does the Christ-and-church analogy require the specifically gendered structure of the husband-wife relationship, or could the mystery be embodied in a gender-neutral covenant between any two persons who inhabit the respective roles? What is at stake theologically in the answer to this question?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson identifies the Ephesians 5:31–32 mystery as establishing that every Christian marriage is a living proclamation of the gospel. Evaluate your own marriage (if you are married) or the marriages you observe in the congregation you serve: do those marriages function as visible proclamations of the Christ-and-church mystery? What specifically would it look like for the husband's servant headship and the wife's intelligent submission to be practiced in a way that makes the gospel mystery visible to those outside the church? What specific formation, what specific pastoral care, and what specific community support would most effectively develop this gospel-proclamation quality in the marriages of the congregation?
- The lesson calls for the church to hold the biblical definition of marriage with theological conviction and simultaneously to hold the specific grief and brokenness of those who have experienced marriage's failure with genuine pastoral compassion. In the congregation you serve, which side of this tension is currently underdeveloped: the theological conviction about the definition, or the pastoral compassion for those who have experienced failure? What specific initiatives, in preaching, in pastoral care, or in community formation, would most effectively develop the underdeveloped side without compromising the other?
- The lesson identifies cohabitation as the most widespread departure from the creation ordinance of marriage within the contemporary church. What is the current prevalence of cohabitation among the young

adults in the congregation you serve, and what is the congregation's current pastoral response to it? Does the congregation's preaching and teaching provide the specific theological account of the one-flesh union and the covenantal context within which it belongs that would equip young adults to understand why cohabitation is a departure from the creation design? And what specific pastoral and communal initiatives would most effectively address the practice?

- Paul's commendation of singleness requires the church to provide the specific forms of community, belonging, and intimacy that the single person needs for human flourishing, forms that are genuine but that differ from the specific intimacy of the marriage covenant. Identify three specific ways in which the congregation you serve currently provides (or fails to provide) these forms of community for the single adults in its care. For each failure you identify, propose one specific initiative that would begin to address it. And reflect on the underlying communal culture that produces either the adequate provision or the inadequate provision: what theological formation would most effectively cultivate a communal culture that genuinely honors the single vocation?
- The doctrine of marriage as a creation ordinance, the lifelong covenant of one man and one woman, designed to proclaim the mystery of Christ and the church, is the most theologically comprehensive account of what marriage is and what it is for available in the history of Christian thought. How clearly has this account been articulated in the congregation's public preaching and teaching? Is the Ephesians 5:31–32 mystery, the revelation that the marriage covenant is designed to proclaim the gospel, a living theological reality in the congregation's understanding of marriage, or primarily a doctrinal curiosity? What specific preaching series, what specific formation curriculum, or what specific pastoral initiative would most effectively make the Ephesians 5 mystery a living, doxological, gospel-proclaiming reality in the congregation's engagement with the institution of marriage?

Prayer Focus

Open this eighteenth lesson of the Anthropology series with a reading of Ephesians 5:25–33, Paul’s account of the Christ-and-church mystery as the theological content of the marriage covenant. Read it not as a doctrinal proposition to be analyzed but as the doxological revelation it is: the mystery that was hidden from ages and generations has now been revealed, that the covenant of one man and one woman joined in the lifelong union of the one flesh has always been the embodied proclamation of the covenant love between the Son of God and the people He redeemed by His own blood. Read the specific description of Christ’s love for the church, “just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, cleansing her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless” (vv. 25–27, NASB 1995), and let the specific content of that love, self-giving, sanctifying, glorifying, perfecting, become the specific content of your understanding of what the husband’s love for his wife is meant to proclaim. Let the specific account of the church’s responsive trust in Christ, embodied in the wife’s voluntary and intelligent submission to her husband, become the specific content of your understanding of what the wife’s role in the marriage covenant is meant to proclaim. And then let the revelation of verse 32, “this mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church”, produce in you the theological wonder that is the appropriate response to the discovery that the most intimate and the most ordinary of human covenants was always, from the garden, the embodiment of the most extraordinary and the most cosmic of divine covenants.

Spend time in Trinitarian adoration, allowing the doctrine of marriage as a creation ordinance and a gospel proclamation to deepen your worship. Begin with the Father, who designed the marriage covenant in the garden before sin entered the world, who looked at the incompleteness of Adam without Eve and said “it is not good,” who built the woman from the man’s own side with the artisanal care of the banah, and who declared the result, the complementary pair, the one-flesh union, the covenant of leaving and cleaving, very good. Adore the Father who designed the marriage covenant not merely as a practical arrangement for human social life but as a theological sign, carrying from its first institution in the garden the mystery of the covenant that He was planning to make with a redeemed people through the sacrifice of His Son. Move to the Son, who confirmed the creation ordinance of marriage by grounding His account of the institution in the creation narrative rather than in any subsequent legal or cultural framework, who gave Himself up for His bride in the specific act of self-giving love that is the model for the husband’s covenant faithfulness, and who is even now at work through His Spirit in the marriages of His people to form them into living proclamations of the covenant love that He has shown toward the church. Conclude with the Spirit, who is at work in Christian marriages forming the specific quality of servant headship and intelligent submission that the Ephesians 5 mystery requires, who sustains the specific covenant faithfulness of the married couple through the inevitable difficulties of a lifetime together, and who brings to the specific single person the undivided devotion to the Lord’s work that makes the single vocation its own distinctive form of kingdom service.

Pray together for the marriages in the congregation and for the single adults in the congregation, and for the specific pastoral challenges that the doctrine of marriage’s creation-ordinance character creates in the contemporary moment. First, for the marriages: pray that the specific marriages in the congregation would become increasingly genuine proclamations of the Christ-and-church mystery, that the husbands would love their wives with the specific quality of self-giving, sanctifying love that Christ showed to the church, and that the wives would honor their husbands with the specific quality of voluntary, intelligent responsiveness that the church shows to Christ. Pray for the marriages that are struggling, for the couples in conflict, for the spouses who feel the weight of a covenant that is harder than they expected; pray that the grace of the gospel that the marriage covenant proclaims would be the grace that sustains the covenant through its difficulties. Second, for the single adults: pray that the congregation would genuinely honor the single vocation as a gift from God, and that the specific single adults in the congregation would experience the genuine community, genuine belonging, and genuine support that makes the demanding calling of sexual chastity livable and fruitful. Third, for the pastoral

wisdom to engage the specific contemporary challenges to the definition of marriage, the same-sex redefinition, the cohabitation culture, the normalization of divorce, with the theological clarity and the pastoral compassion that the gospel demands: holding the creation ordinance with conviction and holding those who struggle with the creation ordinance with grace.

*“For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife;
and they shall become one flesh.”*

Genesis 2:24, NASB 1995

Key Texts: *Genesis 2:18–25; Matthew 19:3–12; Ephesians 5:22–33; 1 Corinthians 7:1–40; Hebrews 13:4; Proverbs 31:10–31*

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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