

*So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*  
--Genesis 2:22-24

*Jesus said "But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."*  
--Mark 10:6-9

*"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.*  
--Ephesians 5:31-33

As Christians, we believe that God has blessed his people abundantly in the wonder and beauty of his creation, in the miracle of life, in the mystery of love, and in ways too numerous to count. Perhaps nowhere is the abundance of God's blessings more manifest than in the marriage between one man and one woman, who commit themselves in the name of Christ to love, honor, nurture, and care for one another for the remainder of their lives.

Sacred Scripture teaches us that marriage is a divine institution, created and ordained by God himself. (Gen. 2:22-24; Mk. 10:9; Mt. 19:6.) Marriage is not of human origin, nor is it a creature of the legal system, but rather it is divinely instituted, an outward, visible sign of God's grace acting in the lives of a man and woman who make a lifetime, loving commitment to one another. Indeed, so profound is this loving commitment that St. Paul aptly likens Christ's love for his Church to the love of husband and wife for each other. (Eph. 5:22-33.)

Yet, a great number of people today, including many Christians, are either confused about, or do not fully understand, marriage--what it is, where it came from, and why it is critical to Christian life and witness. Our popular culture and our legal system has created enormous confusion regarding the meaning of marriage--the former regarding it simply as a lifestyle choice premised solely upon "loving commitment" and the latter treating marriage as just another contract between two people. To the committed Christian, marriage is neither of these things. Rather, marriage is a sacrament instituted by God as part of the creation of the world, it is an institution of divine origin that relates intimately to the very nature of our personhood, and it is a relationship explicitly declared sacrosanct by Jesus Christ himself. (Mt. 19:6-7.)

We know from sacred Scripture that marriage, which is integral to God's creation, is a mystical reflection of God's love for us--that is, just as husband and wife love each other, so God loves us.

(Gen. 1:27.) Similarly, as husbands and wives love each other, so Christ loves his Church. (Eph. 5:31-33.) This is the great mystery of marriage. It is a reflection--an echo, if you will--of the very love that is God, the love of the Father for the Son, and the love of the Son for his Church. We cannot know the mind of God, which is too awesome to comprehend, but we can readily perceive his love in the sacramental marriage of one man to one woman. We can also discern that the love of God that is reflected in marriage is a form of God's grace shared with us and that this grace descends upon a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in marriage, which serves as a visible and outward sign of that spiritual grace. Indeed, because of this, Christians regard marriage as a sacrament, which is defined as a visible and outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

Scripture also tells us that marriage has four essential purposes: procreation, complementarity, companionship, and the promotion of sexual morality. "Procreation" refers to the conception and rearing of children. At the moment of their creation, the Bible says, God blessed man and woman and commanded them to "be fruitful and multiply." (Gen. 1:28.) Marriage is the means that God provided for the fulfillment of this particular commandment. "Complementarity" means that God created woman to complete man and man to complete woman--in other words, we are able to achieve the fullness of our humanity in marriage. (Gen. 2:22-24.) Because God created distinct genders each possessing unique characteristics, spouses provide, if you will, the "missing

parts" for each other and together realize their full humanity in their marital relationship. The meaning of "companionship" is obvious, but, the Bible teaches, that God created men and women to provide companionship for each other, to assist one another, and to love each other. (Gen. 2:20.) Finally, St. Paul tells us that marriage is intended by God to serve as the proper vehicle for human beings to express themselves sexually and thereby avoid engaging in sexually immoral activity. (1 Cor. 7:2-5.) Sexual activity is exclusively the province of marriage and, in God's creative plan, only married people may engage in sexual intimacy with one another. Sexual activity outside of marriage--and that means any form of sexual activity--is gravely sinful, such that, as St. Paul tells us, those who engage in such activity shall not inherit the Kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9-10.)

So, what does all this mean to a Christian living in the 21st century?

First, and foremost, it means that marriage is a unique institution that exists independently of civil government, popular culture, or human whim. It has a unique and transcendent meaning that cannot be changed by human action. Marriage is not a creature of government and cannot be changed, redefined, or have its meaning altered by law, politics, fashion, or cultural preferences. Marriage has been created by God, is part of the divine creative order, and is not subject to human agency or action. Human beings can no more change the meaning, purpose, and definition of marriage than they can decree that the sky shall be henceforth orange or the moon

shall orbit around the Sun rather than the Earth. These are all matters exclusively reserved to God.

Second, Christians need to understand that marriage is not a purely romantic relationship premised exclusively on love (or what may be perceived to be love), but rather has very specific purposes that can only be achieved when one man and one woman give themselves physically and spiritually to each other in marriage. Marital love is something much more profound than the romantic "love" celebrated in popular culture. It is a love rooted in willingness to accept the gift of children created as a result of the sexual union of husband and wife; a love found in complementary nature of the diverse genders of husband and wife joining together to bring forth a fuller humanity in the unity of the spouses; a love grounded in lifelong companionship in the form of an unqualified commitment to love, support, honor, assist, and respect one another; and, a love found in an exclusive commitment to sexual union and intimacy shared between the spouses and no others. Only the marriage of one man to one woman exhibits these indispensable attributes.

Third, and likewise, it is imperative for Christians to realize that marriage is not a civil contract, which depends upon civil law or governmental authority for its existence. Indeed, as Christians, we believe that marriage, as a divinely ordained sacramental institution, exists outside, and above, civil authority and is not subject to amendment or modification by governments, politics, or the decisions of legislatures, judges, or political leaders. To be

sure, marriage has the aspects of a covenant, but those aspects reflect God's covenant with his people, Israel, and his unqualified love for his people. This is something quite different than a civil contract, which is essentially a commercial relationship in which one party receives something of value in exchange for some form of financial or beneficial consideration. The notion of Biblical "covenant," which would apply to marriage, is unconditional and without regard to commercial or financial interests. It is inextricably related to the notion of divine love and an unequivocal commitment to fidelity. Thus, claims that marriage is simply just another contract are false and demean marriage as a divine institution and a sacrament of the Church.

Finally, it means that, as a divinely ordained institution and a sacrament of Christ's Church, all Christians are called to defend the institution of marriage in our culture, to proclaim boldly its importance to a just, moral, and ordered society, and to witness the centrality of marriage to Christian life in our own lives. We must, in charity and without fear, resist efforts to "redefine" or demean marriage, insisting that man may not redefine that which God has created or drain it of its fundamental meaning. While there is immense social pressure to "tolerate" a myriad of relationships that claim to be "marriage" or socially acceptable substitutes for marriage, we know that, as disciples of the Risen Lord, we cannot tolerate or sanction what we know to be sin substituting for what others will claim is virtue. (1 Cor. 5:11-13.) Moreover, we must witness the importance of marriage in our own lives by living in

accordance with the purpose of marriage, refraining from all forms of sexual activity outside of marriage and refusing to be co-opted into a sexualized culture that celebrates promiscuity, denigrates chastity and sexual abstinence, and bombards people with licentious and sexually-oriented literature, images, music, dance, and entertainment.

God has abundantly blessed his people and nowhere is this blessing more tangible than in the beauty of marriage and family life, in which love, self-giving, and nurturing enrich the lives of each spouse and the children that result from that marriage. Marriage truly reflects God's love for us and, as a consequence, must be treasured, protected, and promoted by his faithful people, who understand that it is a sacramental fountain of God's holy grace.

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Call or write us at:

FIFNA  
P.O. Box 210248  
Bedford, TX 76095-7248  
800-225-3661

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Dr. Michael Howell  
E-MAIL: [michael.howell@fifna.org](mailto:michael.howell@fifna.org)

WEBSITE: [www.fifna.org](http://www.fifna.org)

# MARRIAGE: SACRAMENT AND BLESSING

*A Reflection Upon  
Christian Marriage*



*By James F. Sweeney*