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Where Has All the Romance Gone? And Where It Can Still Be Found

By Amy Kosari

Many of us have made an idol of romance and marriage between a man and a woman, and this idolatry is not just in society as a whole. It is in our congregations and denominations, too. Our view of marriage tends to be a “non-view,” an inability to see what romance and marriage is, or even what men and women actually are.

This darkness weighs heaviest on the young people. The kids are decidedly *not* “all right.” In my ministry and just in my neighborhood, I see the tremendous pressure that we put on them. It is a pressure that is not of the Lord. Here is what the Gen Z vlogger Christina Aaliyah says: “There’s expectations and a rulebook for everything ... we are chasing after this imaginary thing.”¹

She speaks movingly and convincingly of the unbearable pressure that paralyzes her and her entire generation. Proverbs tells us, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov. 29:19).²

But it is worse than that. If Ms. Aaliyah is right, we have filled in the blank pages of knowledge with dreadful idols, that, like all idols, bind us with chains. Only a false idol could produce such unbearable pressure, such paralysis described as by Ms. Aaliyah and many others of Gen Z. An illustration: My father was an amateur mountaineer in his youth. Somewhere on the Matterhorn he came to a place where the cliff wall extended vertically up into the sky, as my father looked up into that spatial abyss he found he could not even lift his foot,

so daunting was the task. Many young people have the same experience when they look to the picture we have painted of romance and marriage; they cannot move a muscle, a hair, towards the goal—the thing that is expected of them, the thing that they expect of themselves, a sheer cliff reaching into infinite darkness.

Sometime in the early 2000s, I sat in the office of a scholar and colleague in my presbytery. We spoke about the proposed dissolution of the so-called “fidelity and chastity” ordination standard. For those who do not remember or were not there, G-6.0106b in the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was the requirement that those holding an office in the church would be required to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness. For various reasons my colleague and I disagreed.

“It’s a Side Issue”

He was against the requirement, and I was for it, but as we came to the end of the meeting, I brought up the importance of romance and marriage between men and women that we see in the Bible. I offered up the Song of

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Songs as evidence. “But Amy,” he said, cordially, as he opened the door for me to leave, “That’s just the Song of Songs. It’s a side issue in the Bible.” I had no reply. We bid one another goodbye, and I returned home with no answer to his objection for days.

For my colleague, the real issues in the Bible were, supposedly, things like justification, covenant, soteriology, eschatology, and perhaps even sanctification. Romance, marriage between men and women, these were humdrum things in comparison, perhaps pretty, perhaps even beautiful, but nothing in comparison to justification, sanctification, predestination, and the like.

I was looking to the Song of Songs, beloved of tweens when sent away to Christian camp, but my colleague was looking at the Epistle to Romans, the cornerstone of the Western civilization. It was only while driving home from a particularly fraught and tear-filled presbytery meeting—for those wondering what I mean by “fraught” and “tear-filled,” I am saying that the meeting was filled with hard looks, harder words, anger and distress, and that people wept as they made their statements on the floor of presbytery—when I remembered what I had been taught. Dramatic as it sounds, I had to pull over. “I remembered,” I say, but I must correct myself, as I was helped to remember by my elder who had joined me for the long drive to and fro. Long ago, my teachers had taught me about the love story in Isaiah 52–55; the romance and marriage right at the heart of the Bible, right at the place where we see the gospel (52:7a, b) most clearly preached (52:7c), right at the place where we see justification (53:11), sanctification (52:1, 10), predestination (55:8, 11), and the everlasting covenant (55:3) to name just a few of the “real issues.”

Of course, by this time in Isaiah there has been a steady drumbeat telling us of this love story, the love story and romance and marriage between the Lord and his city, Jerusalem, pictured as a woman. But now, beginning in Isaiah 52, we see what the labor of the Lord has been for—A woman made happy. “Happy wife, happy life,” as the old folks say. “Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city ... shake thyself from the dust ... loose thyself from the bands of thy neck, O captive daughter of Zion” (Isaiah 52:1). And as if that were not enough, then in Isaiah 54, the love story really gets going. We see what the man of sorrows, the “just my slave,” the Lord God, has been doing, what his suffering and death has all been for: “Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing ... enlarge the place of thy tent (your children are coming home!) ... for thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left ... for thine husband ... the Lord of hosts is his name” (54:1a, 2, 5). The Lord

speaks to a city that he compares with the afflicted Hagar (vs. 11a). But now he says:

I will lay thy stones with fair colors and lay thy foundations with sapphires ... and all thy children shall be taught of the Lord and great shall be the peace of thy children ... in righteousness shall thou be established: thou shalt be far from oppression, for thou shalt not fear ... no weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper (11b, 14, 17).

Nature Abhors a Vacuum

For my colleague in presbytery, marriage and romance between a man and a woman was a side issue. I understood his point as I left for the long drive home. I agreed. I saw what he was saying. But this agreement that marriage and romance is a “side issue” was a result of ignorance about Isaiah and deafness to the New Testament and the Bible in general. Marriage is only a “side issue” if we are not seeing the love story that builds and builds in Isaiah until it bursts into glorious flower in Isaiah 52–55. Here is what it comes down to: We have erased the knowledge of the heavenly romance between a man and a woman from our minds, created a vacuum in other words. But that erasure site, that vacuum, does not stay blank, instead it is filled with drear idols, the “imaginary thing,” the unbearable expectations that Christina Alliyah and so many others experience, because “man’s imagination, is evil from his youth” (Genesis 8:21). Indeed, “the human heart is,” as John Calvin says, “a perpetual factory of idols,”

Temptation to Forgetfulness

But why do we forget? Why this erasure? Why do we have this vacuum? Ernst Käsemann opined somewhere in his commentary on Romans that there is an unbridgeable gap between the Old and New Testaments. This gap is easy to see in most of our seminaries and divinity schools. I remember asking my beloved New Testament teacher about Romans 1:3. Karl Barth and Douglas Campbell translate *γινόμενον* as “born” rather than “made.”³ I suggested to my teacher that “born” or “having been born” is the correct translation since in the Septuagint “γεν” and “γενν” (gen, genn), are an apt translation of the Hebrew word for “born” or “begotten,” namely, יָלַד (yeled). Without unkindness, my teacher looked at me and said firmly, “I don’t do that.” She meant that she did not and would not cross the gap between the Old Testament and the New. She was a New Testament scholar and there, firmly planted, she would stay. I understood her remark completely. Among many in the guild of modern biblical scholars it is still considered unscientific, even undisciplined, to leap to the Old Testament in order to understand the New. But there is an even greater barrier to supposing that Isaiah

52–55 has anything to do with the suffering servant who is Jesus.

Her name is Morna Hooker. In her ground-breaking work, *Jesus and The Servant* (1959),⁴ this brilliant doctoral student roused biblical scholars from their lazy sleep and challenged the theological world. It had been taken for granted by most Christian readers of the Bible for nearly two millennia that Isaiah 53–55 described the cross and resurrection and that further, Jesus understood himself to be the man of sorrows in his suffering, death, and resurrection. Hooker objected to this unexamined position. Her objection? To vastly oversimplify, it was: “Where are the direct quotations?” Jesus and the writers of the New Testament did not lay down the large slabs of Isaiah that Morna Hooker wanted. They did not directly cite large quotations from Isaiah 52–55. Therefore, there is precious little connection, if any, between Jesus and the Jerusalem mentioned in the New Testament, between the Lord, the man of sorrows, and the Jerusalem that we see in the Old Testament.

So, why are we blind to the romance in Isaiah? Why do we not see the love story there? Because we cannot get there. We cannot go, so we are told, from Jesus in the New Testament to the man of sorrows and Lady Zion in the Old Testament and, thus, we cannot see what romance and marriage actually are. There is no path, only a yawning, unbridgeable gap.

No Gap

But what if there was a way? What if there were no gap between the Old and New Testaments? Since my full argument is quite lengthy, a mere gesture in its direction is going to have to do for now: Matthew 16:22 has been mistranslated, but when it is translated correctly (the exact words of Peter’s rebuke) we hold in our hands the key to understanding.⁵ Long story made very short, while Peter believes rightly that Jesus is the Messiah (Mark 8:29), a correct translation of Matthew 16:22 indicates that he also thinks (wrongly) via the Septuagint that the Messiah cannot suffer and certainly cannot die. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes the Lord to that end. He is brief and to the point with Jesus; quoting the pertinent scripture, that in his view, shuts the door on the suffering of the Messiah with a nice hearty slam: “mercy to thee Lord.”⁶ This little snip of a quotation from Peter shows that he like many of his contemporaries believed that the suffering servant is Israel; it is Israel that suffers, *not* the Messiah.⁷ Jesus, however, *seeing the fuller picture in the Septuagint and knowing the underlying Hebrew texts*, names Peter as the adversary, “Satan” (Mark 8:33), and urges him to ‘get with the program.’

Under these circumstances, namely, that the Septuagint is basically the pew Bible of the time, the Bible that the

people read, it is no surprise that Jesus and the New Testament writers need to do a “work-around.” It is no surprise that they do not lay down those copious slabs of Isaiah that Morna Hooker wants. Instead, they are compelled to allude. They must take the indirect approach. They must do a “work-around.” What is a “work-around”? In addition to ballet, I also treat my aches and pains using a method developed by fascia therapist, Sue Hitzmann. It is a form of therapy called *Melt*—this is not a paid for endorsement, fear not—where, in the places where there is pain, her patients are not to put direct pressure on the area but rather, go right up to the hurt area, and then, back off, working around the problematic part. In the same way Jesus and the New Testament writers work up to Isaiah 53 and then back off. They leave us clues but prefer not to quote directly. Why? Because, again, the Septuagint’s Isaiah simply will not bear the weight. However, it seems clear that they also have confidence in us to search the whole of the Septuagint and even to look back at the underlying Hebrew scrolls extant at that time. They have such confidence in us because they have confidence in God and, I dare say, the confidence of God as well. This is perhaps the most amazing part. They expected the hearers of the New Testament to exercise ourselves. They will not spoon-feed us.

An illustration: Luke-Acts is all about the empowerment of humanity. Notice how Luke never reveals the scripture that Jesus opens to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27). We are expected to follow the numerous clues and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, find the way ourselves. Jesus said to his disciples, “you feed them” (Matt. 6:37). The scholars and hoi polloi are *both* right and *both* wrong. The people are right in seeing that the New Testament obviously is pointing to Jesus as the man of sorrows, but they are wrong in walling over the observations of Morna Hooker. The academy following Morna Hooker is right in demanding the end of laziness in exegesis but wrong in supposing that Jesus is not the man of sorrows. The clues are there. We can and we must follow them.

What Happens Next

What are some of the things that happen when we follow and are transported into the world of Isaiah, and really into all that “Strange New World of the Bible” about which Barth wrote and spoke? When, for example, it comes to marriage and men and women, we are delivered from the false idol of a god and his goddess consort or perhaps some version or other of Hera and Zeus and their distinctly unpleasant misadventures and mutual loathing. The Bible, you see, is the real critic. We may suppose that we are historical critics, dividing “J” from “E” and voting on what Jesus actually said or

what he actually did not say with our beads. But in comparison to the Bible, we are no critics at all.

Consider the Epic of Gilgamesh, the tale from ancient Mesopotamia (circa 2100 B.C.), that tells the story of the creation and the flood. Now, do you remember how in the 1990s the young people used to say? “Yeah (one raised eyebrow) ... No.” It was a wonderful piece of slang that meant to say, “You’re wrong but if I squint my eyes, I can sort of see where you are coming from. ... But, yeah, *no*.” In the same way the Bible critiques the Gilgamesh Epic. There, Enkidu is Adam, but this Adam does not love his wife and he certainly does not like her. Enkidu does *not* say, “This now is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23). Rather, Enkidu would much rather be with his half-god bestie, Gilgamesh, than with his wife. In the Epic of Gilgamesh we see the *origin* of the wife as “the old ball and chain.”

In the Gilgamesh Epic, we also see the story of the flood, but the gods here do not gently close down the hatch of the ark as our God does, shutting in the little family (including giraffes and elephants and mice and badgers and skunks and birds and lizards ... and all manner of beasts!). And here the gods see the people as flies crawling on the earth, annoyances. *They* do not walk in the garden in the cool of the day and ask, “Where are you?” It is only the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel who wants to be with us and who leads and upholds us with his victorious right hand. He is the one who immediately upon seeing Peter sink beneath the waves, reaches out his hand and catches him. The Bible is well aware of all our wrong notions about God and mankind, and it sets us straight.

In Isaiah 52–55, Isaiah critiques the idea of a god and goddess, indeed it demythologizes the notion. Jerusalem is no “queen of heaven.” Rather, the heavenly city, our mother, is the restoration of a very real and quite ordinary city in the Middle East, namely Jerusalem. (Gal. 4:26). Ordinary (and small) as she may be, the Lord loves her and out of her comes healing for the nations (Rev. 22:2). I do not know if Anthony Kiedis, the lead singer of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, is familiar with the Bible but he composed a song, “Under The Bridge” all about his love for *his* city, the city of angels, L.A., “I drive on her streets ‘cause she’s my companion, I walk through her hills ‘cause she knows who I am.”⁸ The Lord God is something like that. But the Bible’s own demythologization is only the beginning.

We also enter the strange new world where Adam and Eve themselves are types of the originals in the heavens. Adam and Eve are the imprint on earth of the Lord, and Jerusalem in heaven. Do we understand how this might set many people in many generations free? In other

words, Adam and Eve are decentralized. Instead, we are empowered to turn our eyes upon Jesus. At the same time, Adam and Eve are now actually *seen*, perhaps for the first time. Adam is a walking, talking statue of the Lord and Eve is a walking talking poem about Jerusalem. Ladies, did you know that the woman across from you on the subway is a daughter of Jerusalem, a living portrait or poem about Jerusalem? Menfolk, did you know that? I didn’t. To recap: We, men and women, are decentralized and at the same time seen as we really are, imprints of the Lord and Jerusalem. The terrible pressure of being the center, the be all and end all is suddenly gone and at the same time we begin to glimpse what we really are as men and women.

Fidelity and Chastity—Indication of Error

The fidelity and chastity requirement mentioned above put the wrong thing first. At the very least it should have been the “chastity and fidelity” requirement. All things, however, work to the glory of God, because in so doing, we revealed that we did not understand Paul’s emphasis on singleness. (I Cor. 7:8, 26–40). The wrong order was the indication that we did not understand the Old or the New Testaments. On the other hand, if we are now able to cross the gap, if we are freed up to look where Paul is looking, namely to his Bible and to Isaiah in particular first and foremost, then the reason for his emphasis on singleness becomes clear. Singleness is better than marriage, above it, the first thing rather than the second, because though our marriages do point to the romance that we see in Isaiah 52–55, how much more Paul’s direct service to the Lord and Jerusalem? My marriage to my husband, Farhad, certainly points not only to Adam and Eve but even more so to Jesus and Zion. But how much more does Paul, as a man without a wife, point to that romance in his letters?

It is no coincidence that Romans starts with “the just by faith” (Jesus) and ends with the commendation and remembrance of Jerusalem (Romans 15:25–26).⁹ If our eyes are open to Isaiah we begin to see why this would be. It is no coincidence that Galatians begins with the Lord Jesus and heads towards the restoration of Jerusalem, i.e., the heavenly Jerusalem. If we can cross the gap and get to Isaiah 52–55, we understand why Paul writes as he does. He, as a single man, is *directly* serving the marriage and romance that is number one, the marriage and romance that is central, the marriage and romance that is the gospel (“good tidings,” Is. 52:7), that is, no pun intended, the Biblical heart of things. I had a wonderful time at my wedding, and I am having quite an adventure now sixteen years into my marriage, but who serves *the* romance, *the* marriage better? I would say that it is Paul—and that is why men and women with the gift of singleness, with the gift of serving this romance should be encouraged and not discouraged.

As older adults, are we not sometimes guilty of pushing the young into love and marriage? We can be free of that now because love and marriage has already been accomplished. We can toss that false idol into the garbage heap (Is. 30:22). And as if all that were not enough of a gift from the Bible, consider too our confusion about what men and women actually are. Are we not guided as we walk through this darkness as well? We can follow the lead not just into Isaiah but into the whole Bible. We can go to the Song of Songs now, seeing it, among other things, as an illumination of the Lord and Zion. Did you know that the woman in the Song of Songs is compared to “an army with banners” (6:10)? Matt Walsh goes around and asks, “What is a woman?” Certainly, a woman is an adult human female, but even more she is an army with banners. Did you know that that is how a woman is pictured? As a shining sea of armor with banners flying? I didn’t! Yes, when a woman begets a child, she or the midwife says, “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!” (Genesis 35:18), and that is all well and good but to define a man or woman we ought not to look first to any dictionary. Rather, we ought to look to the Bible and its very unexpected view of man and woman. There is a surprising universe to be found in the Bible. All I can personally guarantee is that it will not disappoint. In fact, both liberals and conservatives and everything in between will one day exclaim, “What’s not to like?”

The End of Expectations

If the marriage and romance of Isaiah 52–55 is *the* marriage and romance then all of the terrible expectations within Christina Aaliyah’s heart disappear. Why? Because all expectations have been fulfilled. I remember a young lady that was very unhappy with her husband. She would come to me and threaten to divorce him. What she wanted was for me to remonstrate with her. She wanted me to tell her to stay married. And when I complied, she could then insist all the more that she was now most certainly going to get a divorce. It was a strange game. She was tortured (and was sharing that torture by torturing me a bit) because she couldn’t help it, the pressure was enormous because everything depended on her marriage. *Our* marriages, *our* romances are central and, to top it all off, we do not even know what marriage and romance actually are. We do not even know of what marriage and romance consist. We are “chasing after some imaginary thing,” as Christina Aaliyah says. We wander in darkness and pain.

To return to the story, the darkness and pain was all too evident as “Susan” sat down next to me in the church basement. As she began her plaint, began once again to express her terrible sorrows, I must have been a little tired and I suppose God’s power really is made perfect in weakness because I finally said, “Well, Susan, you

may indeed get divorced someday but I just want you to know that there is one couple that is not divorced and that is the Lord Jesus and his bride, the city of Jerusalem.” Neither of us knew exactly what I was talking about but somehow it sufficed. We had gotten a glimpse of heaven, a breath of fresh air. Susan gave a little sigh then. In fact, we both exhaled and for the moment at least had some peace as we ate our hot dish in the church basement. We were reminded of *the* marriage and the pressure was off both of us.

I am a child of divorced parents. That divorce shook my world though I did not even know it at the time. I appeared, even to myself, as only a bit more sad, more worldly wise, and perhaps a little more bitter. But the truth was that my heart was hardened. Every child suffers with and for its parents. In Romans 5 we are told that suffering leads to perseverance and perseverance to character and character to hope, a hope that not only does not disappoint but leads out into love, the love of God shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. But when there is a divorce, it seems that that all the suffering of both the parents and the child is for naught. There is no happy ending. There is no port after the storm. There is no reconciliation at last. There is no coming through the night and into the dawn. Children of divorced parents often learn the truth of what Malachi says. When faith between a husband and a wife is broken, the faith of the children is often broken as well: “Let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth” if “he seek a godly seed ... for I hate divorce,” says the Lord, the God of Israel” (Malachi 2:15–16).

But here is what we learn from Isaiah, now that we are allowed to go there: The children of divorced parents have a father (the Lord) and a mother (Zion) who are still going strong, who have come through the storm and many sufferings and are not getting divorced, who are happily married. There we can rest, repose, exhale.

Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel’s Strength and Consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Here’s the thing. Our expectations are fulfilled in Jesus and not just our expectations when it comes to love and marriage between a man and a woman. The “long-expected Jesus,”—he has come. He has done it. It is finished and we *are* more than conquerors through him who loved us (John 19:30, Rom. 8:37).

Do we realize what that means? It means that all the books have been written, all the essays published, it means that all the committee meetings have been concluded wonderfully, it means that all the teaching has been done, all sermons have been preached, all good works have been completed and all romance and marriage and happiness has been won. It is done.

Let me explain. One of my best friends has children, young adults now actually; I am just an auntie, but my friend tells me (and she has known me since childhood) that I was a Gen Z-er before Gen Z. Like Ms. Aaliyah, I carry the weight of expectations. I chase after some “imaginary thing,” and I am felled by its enormous unbearable weight. But what if Jesus was serious on the cross? What if his words, “It is finished,” are not idle talk or, as Woody Allen might put it, “just so much chin music?” What if Jesus means it? Well, that would mean that I am free, and that Ms. Aaliyah is free too and in fact all of Gen Z and all of their parents and grandparents and aunties and uncles and everybody else are also free for the adventure (cf. Is. 55), free to do the good things that God has prepared in advance for us to do.

If Jesus is serious then, I, a horrific preview of the worst faults of Gen Z (and not many of their copious gifts), am not paralyzed anymore. I can take up my mat and walk. I am not pinned down by the pressure of expectations

because those expectations have already been met. It is done and we are free. We can lift our foot to ascend the sheer cliff. We are empowered to write our books and essays and live our lives and do fun things and hard things and everything in between that God gives us to do because the paralyzing pressure is off.

We can adventure now, like the rain and the snow that come down from heaven sent from God (Isaiah 55:10). The taut string is loosed, and we are freed, there is *play* to the line and we can give our sermons and do all the good deeds that we have been called to do because it all really is finished. We can take a risk and *not* date or get married, *or* we can do the opposite and we can take a risk and date and marry. The line is loosened, instead of bondage, we are held securely in a bundle of love, we have *play, freedom within true safety* ... and so, whether single or married we can be happy and serve. The happy marriage has already been accomplished in the Lord Jesus and Lady Zion.

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¹ Christina Aaliyah, “gen z Is undateable.” *Stop Shrinking, Start Living*, April 24, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y09FwgU9Imw&t=927s>, min. 3:28, 14:52)

² Unless otherwise noted all biblical citations from the KJV.

³ Karl Barth, *Epistle to The Romans*, trans. Edwyn Hoskins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 27; Douglas Campbell, “Romans: A Translation for Pagans.” *Pauline Dogmatics*, March 5, 2025 <https://www.douglascampbell.me/blog?offset=1744050469543>

⁴ Morna D. Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant: The Influence of the Servant Concept of Deutero-Isaiah in the New Testament* (London: S.P.C.K., 1959).

⁵ Amy Kosari, “Answering Morna Hooker,” https://www.academia.edu/35025251/Part_II_Chapter_One_Answering_Morna_Hooker_Faith_As_Establishment_docx

⁶ Peter says, “Mercy to thee Lord,”—“ἰλεως σοι, Κυριε.” Most scholars seem to take this phrase as a reference to 2 Chronicles but the phrase is an exact quotation of the Greek of Isaiah 54:10 in the Septuagint’s Codex Vaticanus.

⁷ Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant*, 57, 60.

⁸ The Red Hot Chili Peppers, “Under the Bridge” Spotify. <https://open.spotify.com/track/3d9DChrdc6BOeFsbzZ3Is0>, min.57ff

⁹ Douglas, Campbell, “Romans: A Translation for Pagans” Romans 1:17, “the just by faith”

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The Greatest Love Story Ever Lived

By Susan A. Cyre

All beautiful you are, my darling; there is no flaw in you.
Song of Songs 4:7

The creation of the world seems to have been especially for this end, that the eternal Son of God might obtain a spouse towards whom he might fully exercise the infinite benevolence of his nature, and to whom he might, as it were, open and pour forth all that immense fountain of condescension, love, and grace that was in his heart, and that in this way God might be glorified.

Jonathan Edwards¹

Think back to the last wedding you attended in a church sanctuary. The congregation is attentive, waiting for the wedding party to arrive. Suddenly you know the service will begin because the pastor, groom, and groomsmen move to the front of the sanctuary. The congregation watches expectantly as the bridal attendants walk down the aisle to the strains of organ music. Then the music swells and the sanctuary doors burst open for the first glimpse of the bride. The congregation leaps to its feet and turns to behold the radiant bride.

Until fairly recently, it was customary for the bride to wear a veil covering her face. All eyes are on the bride as her father leads her down the aisle to her beloved groom. The next time you are at a wedding, watch the groom. The moment the doors open and he glimpses his beloved, his eyes fill with breath-taking wonder, love, and devotion.

When the bride and her father reach the groom, the bride's father lifts her veil, thus fully revealing the bride and groom to each other. Then her father gives her his blessing kiss and puts her hand in the hand of her beloved.

The bride and groom face each other and vow to be your "loving and faithful husband [wife]; in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health; as long as we both shall live."²

Finally, the minister announces that since they have made their vows to each other in the presence of God and the congregation, "I proclaim that they are now husband and wife." Repeating Jesus's words from Scripture, the minister admonishes the congregation and couple, "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."³

After the wedding vows are exchanged, family and friends join the husband and wife in eating together and celebrating their new union. When the celebration ends, the bride and groom leave to consummate their one-flesh union and live together until death alone parts them.

Each marriage of a man and a woman is an image of Christ joining himself to his bride, the church, forever. It is the Father who gives the bride to his Son.⁴ Therefore, the Father leads the bride to her waiting groom.⁵ It is the church, the radiant bride, who expectantly looks up to see her beloved groom and exclaims, "I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me."⁶ It is the Father who lifts the veil from the bride's face so that she can see her beloved not dimly but "face to face."⁷ It is the groom, Christ, who whispers to her as she arrives and takes his hand, "All beautiful you are, my darling; there is no flaw in you."⁸

At the wedding of Christ and the church: "[His] bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean was given her to wear."⁹ Christ fulfills the vows first made in his betrothal to Israel. He vows to his bride to love her, to provide for all her needs, to give her the gift of children, to dwell with her forever—the Ten Commandments. Out of love and devotion to her beloved, the bride responds to his promises with her commitment of faithfulness and agrees to live in light of his promises. The Ten Commandments are still in effect, now written on the bride's heart.

The wedding is followed by the wedding feast described in Revelation.¹⁰ Through the marriage union, Christ and his bride are joined together and made one flesh. They dwell together in perfect joy, know each other fully, and "reign [together] forever and ever."¹¹

The marriage of Christ to the church is the greatest love story ever lived. It is a union of the perfect divine One and the once-sinful human church. It is a love that is so powerful it transforms the bride so that she becomes radiant and holy, and reigns with Christ forever.

The marriage of a man and woman images Christ's marriage to the church. This also means that the reality of Christ's marriage union with the church shapes what our human marriages ought to be and do. The reality is greater than the image, but nevertheless the image points to the reality.

Our Identity Flows from Our Union with Christ

As members of the church, we are part of the Body of Christ—the Bride of Christ—and that defines who we are. We are not autonomous beings. We are destined to be fully united in a face-to-face one-flesh union with the living God and dwell with him forever. Even now, through the “earnest” of the Holy Spirit, he lives in us and we in him as a guarantee of the fullness that is to come. Because of our union with Christ, we have been taken up into the love that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have for each other. We are not individuals alone in the universe. We are a new entity. We are no longer two but one—Christ and the Church. What God has joined, let no man separate.

We are not defined fundamentally by our career, our accomplishments, or our human relationships. We are defined foremost by our relationship with Jesus Christ. Our human marriage, our role as mother, father, daughter, son, our career—every aspect of our lives—is subject to our union with Christ.

The marriage of a man and a woman also results in a new creation, for two separate individuals have become one through the power of God. The bride is no longer an autonomous individual alone in the world. Her identity is in relation to her husband, “the wife of John” and similarly, John is defined in relation to his wife, “the husband of Nancy.” The husband and wife come together in a conjugal union as a physical expression of their oneness that has the potential to create a new life. This is not a loss of identity but a new, willingly chosen identity. Husband and wife receive and give love in a relationship of promises and commitments that remains until death parts them.

We Are Not Alone

The Father loves us so much, he gave us to his Son in marriage. Christ loves us so much, he gave his life to demonstrate his love, to pay the penalty for our sin, and to make us holy. Many people feel alone today. Fractured families, job mobility, and just being busy and overextended, means that people often feel alone.

No one in the church, however, is alone, ever. Not only do we have brothers and sisters in local churches and around the world, but also we are loved and cared for by Christ as “his own body.”¹² We speak and he is there. We mourn and he comforts us. We are weak and he carries us. We are vulnerable and he covers us with his banner of love.¹³ We are hungry and he feeds us. We are wounded and he heals us. We are frightened and he speaks into the darkness. We ask for direction and he guides our steps. We stumble in the dark and he speaks in a still small voice. We are not alone.

In marriage, husband and wife are not alone, either. They are an image of God’s tender care for his bride when they comfort and care for one another. The statement describing the Gift of Marriage from the *Book of Common Worship*, includes the following:

God created us male and female, and gave us marriage so that husband and wife may help and comfort each other, living faithfully together in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, throughout all their days.

Our Lives Have Meaning and Purpose

Our lives have meaning and purpose because of our union with Christ. If we believe we are autonomous human beings, then the only purpose our life has is the purpose we assign it, and that purpose must be limited because we are temporal. Usually the purpose is to acquire more material possessions, to live comfortably, to find challenging work, and to love and be loved by another person. Deep in our heart, however, we know, that all of that is meaningless in light of eternity. The author of Ecclesiastes looks for meaning in his work, in study and wisdom, in pleasure, in relationships, and in wealth. His conclusion is that “everything is meaningless” because all of it is temporary. The author recognizes that we were created for eternity, for “he [the LORD] has set eternity in the hearts of men.”¹⁴ Nothing on this earth can ultimately satisfy our desire for meaning and purpose.

Christ and all who belong to him have an eternal purpose “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”¹⁵ We glorify God when we live in joyful union with him and praise his Name for who he is and what he has done. The elders in Revelation fall down before the throne of God and worship him:

They lay their crowns before the throne and sing:

“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being.”¹⁶

Tens of thousands of angels, living creatures, and elders sing: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”¹⁷

Then the promise in Philippians 2 is fulfilled, that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”¹⁸ John sees and hears the fulfillment:

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and every!”¹⁹

The chief purpose or fulfillment of man and woman is to know God fully, praise him for who he is, enjoy our wondrous relationship, and therefore bring glory and honor to his name.

We Have an Eternal Mission

Because of our union with Christ, we are part of his great enterprise to claim the world for himself. Our work, our study, our relationships, our wealth are from him and for him. Our mission is to bring others to Christ. Jesus explains this when he commands his disciples to “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”²⁰ Having experienced the love of Christ, we want that love to overflow and touch others. We want to introduce him to others who do not know him and his love. We want to help care for those who are part of the church—his bride. Some have said that we are Christ’s hands and feet in the world—reaching out with his love and care to a hurting world.

We want others to know the love of Christ and be welcomed into his church. Jesus gives us a glimpse of that purpose when he prays to the Father the night before he is crucified:

As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ...My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message....²¹

The marriage of a man and a woman is part of this eternal purpose and mission—to glorify God and to make disciples. God did not design human marriage haphazardly or randomly, but as an intentional image of Christ’s union with the church. Human marriage is a flawed, imperfect image of the true divine marriage between Christ and the church. Human marriage is mortal and Christ’s relationship with the church is immortal. Human marriage is marred by sin and Christ’s relationship with the church is perfect. Yet, even in its imperfection, God uses human marriage as a signpost pointing to the perfect divine relationship in which we find our fulfillment and through which others come to know the living God.

We Live Our Lives In Light of His Promises

The Ten Commandments describe our response to this divine marriage of joy and abundance. We no longer live

according to our sinful nature, which Paul describes as committing acts of: “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.”²²

Instead, we have a new heart devoted to Christ that is increasingly filled with the fruit of his Spirit, which is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”²³ Christ’s life is united with ours and flows through us.

All life belongs to Christ: “All things were created by him and for him.”²⁴ He knew us and chose us “before the creation of the world.”²⁵ Therefore, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and the days he has given us. And we thank him for the gift of children and seek to care for them as his own beloved children. In every circumstance, we rejoice because Christ is with us and in us. He is faithful and his promises are true.

Our view of the world is seen through the eyes of our beloved. We know that our greatest joy and highest fulfillment comes from responding to our beloved. All of our earthly relationships and possessions are part of his great purpose.

Our Self-giving Love Images Christ’s Love

Christ’s love for his bride, the church, is self-giving love. He withheld nothing from her, even giving his own life for her. Self-giving love says more about the lover than the loved. That is true in the great passage on love from Corinthians that says a lot about the lover and nothing about the one loved. Paul describes this self-giving love:

Love is patient, love is kind.... Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.²⁶

Christ’s love does not make the church an object or tool to satisfy his needs. Christ is perfectly complete within the Trinity. His desire is to bring the church into the love relationship that exists between the members of the Trinity. By being united with Christ, the Son, the church is lifted up into the great love that the members of the Trinity have for each other: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This self-giving love transforms the church into the bride she was created to be. Sin now hides her beauty. It is as if she is a bride with dirt all over her face; her dress is torn and tattered, and she is angry and uncertain. She is filled with shame and guilt that causes her to hide from herself, other people, and God. Christ loves her so much he washes her, removes every spot and wrinkle and as the glorious, majestic, loving King of kings and Lord of lords, he unites himself to this beautiful bride. Christ left

his Father and joined himself to his bride and the two will become one flesh.²⁷ Peter reminds the church, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree ...by his wounds you have been healed.”²⁸

This is the love that a man and a woman are to give each other in marriage. Author Dennis Kinlaw observes, “Biblically, marriage is the union of a man and a woman in such self-giving love that they share a name, their bodies, their possessions, their vocation, their common life—their total selves.”²⁹ While one can share possessions and vocation and other aspects of life, only in marriage can a man and a woman share their bodies in total self-giving.

May our marriages image the self-giving love of Christ for his church.

The Marriage Union Results in Children

The marriage union of Christ and the church results in children of God. John writes, “To all who receive him [Christ], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”³⁰ God has given the Word and sacraments to the church to proclaim his love. Therefore, these children of God are conceived, given birth, and nurtured at the breast of their mother, the church. Reformer John Calvin explains:

[T]he church, into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith. “For what God has joined together, it is not lawful to put asunder” [Mark 10:9 p.], so that for those to whom he is Father the church may also be Mother.³¹

Calvin also quotes early church father Cyprian who said, “You cannot have God for your Father unless you have the church for your Mother.”³² Christ’s last words to his disciples in Matthew’s gospel are to go and bear children of God. He tells his followers, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”³³

It is the church that reaches out to the lost world to birth new children of God. Often it is at great sacrifice to the church’s own life. On February 12, 2015, twenty-one Coptic Christians were killed by ISIS forces in Libya because they confessed Christ. The news media report church buildings in the Middle East being burned or used for torture chambers or stables. More Christians

died for their faith in the twentieth-century than all other centuries combined.³⁴ According to the Pew Forum, Christians face persecution today in 133 countries, which is 2/3 of the nations on earth.³⁵ Each year 150,000 Christians are killed for their faith, according to the Catholic relief agency, “Aid to the Church in Need” and the evangelical group “Open Doors.”³⁶ The church demonstrates self-giving love when she continues to exalt Christ and bear his children even at the cost of her own life.

In the marriage of a man and a woman, their self-giving love results in the birth and nurture of children. Parents’ self-giving love for their children results in their willing sacrifices for their children: the sacrifice of time, resources, and emotions.

Elizabeth Santorum tells the story of her sister Bella, who was born in 2008 with a genetic disorder and has an extra 18th chromosome. Children with “Trisomy 18” often do not survive birth, and 90 percent die before their first birthday. Therefore, doctors encouraged mother and father, Rick and Karen, to “just let her go” rather than seek life-saving medical procedures. Some doctors advised them, “Don’t grow attached to the baby. It’s for the best.” But they would not withhold their love. Elizabeth writes that Bella taught her that “the highest form of love is self-giving and chooses the beloved even when it proves difficult.”³⁷ Bella is now 9 years old, a precious member of a family that surrounds her with love.

Marriage Fulfills God’s Reconciling Love

Sin severed the intimate relationship between humanity and God in Genesis 3. Suddenly man and woman no longer walked with God in the cool of the garden, but instead hid from him. Their guilt and shame caused them to recoil from a holy God.

God’s restoration of what was lost in the Fall is not merely to once again walk together. God’s plan in the marriage union of Christ and the church is to be united with his bride in a one-flesh union. She is now his very body. At the consummation of the marriage, Christ will not just walk in fellowship with his bride, Christ will lift her up into the perfect life, love, and eternal being of the Triune God.

Scripture assures us that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”³⁸ Christ paid the price for our sin. That is called “justification.” Christ sent his Spirit to give us new hearts so that we no longer desire to sin. That is called “sanctification.” But human beings are still “other”—still outside and apart from God—creature and Creator. It is only when Christ joins himself to us in

marriage that we enter into his life—that we are united to him, inseparable from him.

The Westminster Confession of Faith explains that Christ's two natures—man and God—remain distinct and yet are “inseparably joined.”

The two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.³⁹

The union between Christ and his church may be described in similar terms: “inseparably joined, without conversion, composition, or confusion.” In the union of Christ and the church, the church does not become divine. The natures remain distinct, just as they do in human marriage. There is a union, a oneness, but the distinction remains.

Men and Women are Reconciled

The relationship between man and woman was also affected by the Fall. Rather than being united, they were separated by blame and hostility. Instead of being completely vulnerable with one another—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—they now hide. Their physical vulnerability is hidden behind fig leaves. Their emotional vulnerability is hidden behind blame. And their spiritual vulnerability results in their hiding from God.

In marriage, God helps Christian men and women to overcome the hostility and brokenness resulting from the Fall. Through the one-flesh union of marriage, in the power of the Holy Spirit, man and woman begin to experience the reconciliation between men and women that God offers. Only in marriage do a man and woman give themselves totally to the other. A man is to love his wife as he does his own body. He is to cherish and care for her as he does his own body. He is to give his life for her as Christ did for the church. And the wife is to respond to such a great love with her own love and devotion.

Early church father, John Chrysostom, encourages husbands to express their ardent love and unity by telling their wives:

I have taken you in my arms, and I love you, and I prefer you to my life itself. For the present life is nothing, and my most ardent dream is to spend it with you in such a way that we may be assured of not being separated in the life reserved for us. ... I place your love above all things, and nothing would be more bitter

or painful to me than to be of a different mind than you.⁴⁰

Sacraments Are a Visible Sign of An Invisible Truth

Protestant churches have two sacraments: baptism and communion. These sacraments are a visible sign and seal of the invisible truth of Christ's marriage union with the Church. The traditional meaning of baptism is a sign and seal of the washing away of our sins, our dying and rising with Christ, and our being received into his kingdom. That is true. However, in the context of marriage, baptism may be understood as the bride's ritual bath before her wedding.⁴¹ In New Testament times, the bride typically had this ritual bath just before her wedding.⁴² Believers and children of believers are washed by Christ in preparation for being united to him as members of the Bride, the church. Indeed Paul writes that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, *cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word...*”⁴³ (emphasis added).

The sacrament of communion is also related to marriage. We often interpret communion as a sign and seal of Christ's forgiveness, communing together with Christ and other believers as a foretaste of eating together in his Kingdom, and spiritually nourishing us with his own body. Those explanations are true. But, there is more. A man and woman reaffirm their marriage union each time they give their bodies to the other. Therefore, when Jesus told his disciples, “this is my body given for you,” he meant more than just his dying on the cross. He gave his body totally to his bride. He gave his body even unto death in order to give her life. He did it out of sacrificial, self-giving love.

Author Christopher West tells the story of his father-in-law's reaction to receiving communion the day after his wedding, having consummated the marriage the night before. He wept. When his new bride asked the reason for his tears, he said, “For the first time in my life I understood the meaning of Christ's words, ‘This is my body given for you.’”⁴⁴

Out of his great self-giving love, Jesus tenderly tells his bride, the church, “This is my body given for you.”

Conclusion

God created man and woman so that their marriage would be an image pointing to Christ's marriage union with the church. God created man and woman in his image in Genesis 1: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”⁴⁵ But, it is not just as individual human beings that we are created in the image of God. There is more. God ordained the marriage union between a man and a woman to be an image of Christ's marriage union

with the church. In instituting marriage, God announces in Genesis 2, “*for this reason* a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh.” West asks, “For what reason?” and he answers, “To reveal, proclaim, and anticipate the union of Christ and the church.”⁴⁶ Pastor Tim Keller explains it this way: “Marriage is God’s gift to the church. Through Christian marriages, the story of the gospel—of sin, grace, and restoration—can be seen and heard both inside the church and out in the world. Christian marriages proclaim the gospel.”⁴⁷

Scripture begins and ends with marriage. It begins with the first marriage of a man and a woman, which is marred by sin, and it ends with Christ’s marriage to the church, without blemish, spot, or wrinkle. God’s purpose in the creation of the world, as eighteenth-century pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards explains, is to gain a bride for Christ so that he might pour out his boundless love on her and thus bring glory to God:

The creation of the world seems to have been especially for this end, that the eternal Son of God might obtain a spouse towards whom he might fully exercise the infinite benevolence of his nature, and to whom he might, as it were, open and pour forth all that

immense fountain of condescension, love, and grace that was in his heart, and that in this way God might be glorified.⁴⁸

Our marriages have an eternal, holy purpose: to make the love of God known and bring glory to God. May our marriages reveal and proclaim the union of Christ and his church. May they reflect to the world his selfless love for his bride. May we grasp with new hearts the depth of Christ’s love for us. May we respond to so great a love with hymn writer Isaac Watts’ words:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.⁴⁹

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¹ Jonathan Edwards, sermon September 19, 1746, “The Church’s Marriage to Her Sons, and to Her God,” www.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/index.php?view=article&aid=3426.

² *Book of Common Worship*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 116.

³ Matthew 19:6.

⁴ John 17:2, 6, 9.

⁵ Praying to the Father, Jesus says, “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me ...” John 17:6.

⁶ Song of Songs 7:10.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

⁸ Song of Songs 4:7.

⁹ Revelation 19:7–8.

¹⁰ Revelation 19:9, “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!”

¹¹ Revelation 22:5.

¹² Ephesians 5:29.

¹³ Song of Songs 2:4.

¹⁴ Ecclesiastes 3:11.

¹⁵ *Book of Confessions*, (Louisville: Office of General Assembly (PCUSA), 1999), Westminster Shorter Catechism, 7001.

¹⁶ Revelation 4:10–11.

¹⁷ Revelation 5:12.

¹⁸ Philippians 2:10–11.

¹⁹ Revelation 5:13.

²⁰ Matthew 28:19.

²¹ John 17:18, 20.

²² Galatians 5:19–21.

²³ Galatians 5:22–23.

²⁴ Colossians 1:16.

²⁵ Ephesians 1:4.

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:4–8.

²⁷ Genesis 2:24, Ephesians 5:31–32.

²⁸ 1 Peter 2:24.

²⁹ Kinlaw, Kindle location 1031–1037.

³⁰ John 1:12–13.

³¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, Translated Ford Lewis Battles, (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, MCMXL), 4.1.1.

³² Ibid, footnote 3.

³³ Matthew 28:19–20.

³⁴ “Christian Persecution Statistic” July 27, 2010, <http://www.examiner.com/article/christian-persecution-statistics>.

³⁵ “Persecution kills 150,000 Christians every year, September 12, 2012, <http://www.ucanews.com/news/persecution-kills-150000-christians-every-year/60090>. UCA News.com is “Asia’s most trusted Independent Catholic News Source.”

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Bella Santorum’s Gift” by Kathryn Jean Lopez, Feb 16, 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/398660/bella-santorums-gift-kathryn-jean-lopez>.

³⁸ Romans 5:8.

³⁹ *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of General Assembly, 1999), The Westminster Confession, 6.044.

⁴⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media), 2365. Original reference: St. John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Eph. 20*, 8: 62, 146–147.

⁴¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1617.

⁴² West, *Theology of the Body*, 86.

⁴³ Ephesians 5:26.

⁴⁴ Christopher West, *Theology of the Body for Beginners: A Basic Introduction to Pope John Paul II’s Sexual Revolution*, (West Chester: Ascension Press, 2004), 10.

⁴⁵ Genesis 1:27.

⁴⁶ West, 122.

⁴⁷ Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, (New York: Dutton, 2011), 218.

⁴⁸ Edwards.

⁴⁹ Isaac Watts, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” *Celebration Hymnal*, (Word Music, 1997), 321.

A Devotional Reflection on George Herbert’s Poem, Love III

By Suzanne McDonald

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack’d any thing.

A guest, I answer’d, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr’d them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

This is the most famous of the poems written by George Herbert (1593–1633). It is also the final poem in the main section of *The Temple*, which is the collection of his English poems.

Throughout the spiritual journey of Herbert’s poetry (the main section of *The Temple* contains over 160 poems), the love of God in Christ has been his spoken and unspoken theme every step of the way. Sometimes Herbert’s poetic persona has been aware of it, sometimes not being able to feel God’s loving presence has plunged him into desolation. Other times he has sought to flee from God’s love. Often his sense of unworthiness has made it extremely difficult for him to accept that God could possibly love him. Many times, he has tried to earn or deserve God’s love in some way.

Much of that complex mix is present in this final poem. Much of that complex mix describes us and our walk with God too.

Through all the ups and downs of his own faith journey, this saving love of God has been the truest and deepest thing he has known about God, and about himself. And knowing himself as he does, that is why Herbert assumes that this is also true for all of us who read his poetry. If God can love him so dearly and so deeply, then that is how God loves the rest of us too. That is why Herbert wants Love to be his—and above all, God’s—last word to all those whose journey of faith has led them to follow his own through this central collection of poems in *The Temple*.

In his manual for pastors, Herbert describes how a pastor might come alongside those who are in spiritual despair, fearing that God cannot possibly love such as them. His poetry makes clear that he has trodden this path, and we see it even here in this final poem. Herbert also knows from experience, though, that those who fear in this way are far closer to God than they realize, and that God is far closer to them than they may be able to discern for themselves. And so he urges the pastor to “dive into the boundless ocean of God’s love” with them. The pastor is to show them that God loves everything that he has created, including them, because how could the perfect Artist hate anything that he has made? And his love for them as sinners is even greater than the love with which he created them, because out of that love he came as Love incarnate to overcome all that separates them from his love. Only by utterly despising that Love, says Herbert, can we shut ourselves out. It is only thrusting away his arm that prevents us from being embraced by God.¹

Just in case this has you wondering, Herbert was indeed thoroughly Reformed in his soteriology.² In this section of *The Country Parson*, we see Pastor Herbert urging those who are struggling in their faith to entrust themselves to the love of God, because he knows full well that if they both feel their need for God's love and long for it, that is already the work of the Holy Spirit within them.

In "Love III," we see Herbert trying one last time to turn away from Love, and how Love's infinitely gentle patience and persistence (and wry humor!) overcome his resistance. The deeply beautiful tenderness and wondrously thoughtful attentiveness of the perfectly loving Host ensures that his guest finally feels wholly welcome, utterly loved, and completely at home.

In an earlier poem, called "The Glance," Herbert anticipated the overwhelming holy awe of experiencing Christ's full-eyed love in eternity, more radiant than a thousand suns. He isn't quite ready for that here, but quick-eyed Love immediately notices what this particular beloved guest needs. Frozen at the threshold, crushed by his sense of unworthiness, Herbert doesn't need dazzling light in that moment. Like so many of us, he simply needs loving intimacy. So Love comes close, and just as Jesus so often does in the gospels, asks what he would like. It all comes pouring out: Herbert's sense of being hopelessly unworthy and unlovable, and yet, in his exclamation, "Ah my dear...!" we see all of his love and longing too. With unutterable tenderness, Love responds by taking his hand. Throughout Herbert's poetry, this is the gesture that most intimately signifies Christ's love for him.

Even when he finally accepts that he is indeed loved and welcome, Herbert still cannot quite allow himself simply to be a beloved guest: "My dear, then I will serve!" Ever so gently, Love is having none of that. In this life we are indeed called to love and serve God and others as our response of gratitude for all that we have received from God. But this poem is a glimpse into the fullness of our redemption, when Jesus promises that we will recline at his table, and he himself will serve us (Luke 12:37). Like the younger son in the parable (Luke 15:11-32), we will be welcomed home not as servants but as the beloved children we are, with the table set for a feast.

¹ This is from Chapter 34 of Herbert's *The Country Parson*, which can be found in John Tobin, ed., *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems* (Penguin, 2004), pp.253–56, with this passage being on p.256.

² He has a trenchant poetic statement of "double predestination" in his poem, "The Watercourse," and in another poem,

And so, in that beautiful final line—and after so many poems reflecting his struggle to accept that he really is beloved of God, and to allow himself to truly receive God's grace, we have Herbert's expression of complete surrender.

In the meanwhile, there is another table to which we are lovingly welcomed by our dear Host, as a foretaste of the coming marriage feast of the Lamb. Herbert loved the Lord's Supper with every fiber of his being, so it is no surprise that this depiction of coming home to Love also points us to the communion table. Let Love bid you welcome to that table, until the day when he will welcome you home to his eternal feast.

For further reflection:

- In this poem, Herbert is at last able to rest in the experience of being wholly known and wholly loved. Allow yourself to anticipate what this might be like for you. How might this help you to live more freely for Christ now, as you wait for him to welcome you into the fullness of your redemption?
- "Love took my hand, and smiling didst reply ..."
Imagine Christ taking *your* hand and smiling at you. What do you feel? And how might Christ reply to your doubts, struggles, and fears?
- Consider taking the time to learn this poem by heart, to let it continue to teach you about yourself, and about the Lord who loves you.

Adapted from the reflection on "Love III" in Suzanne McDonald, *Love Bade Me Welcome: Drawing Nearer to God with the Poems of George Herbert* (Cascade Books, forthcoming). Used with permission.

Suzanne McDonald is Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan. She is the author of several books, including Re-Imaging Election as Representing God to Other and Others to God.

"Dialogue," he presents a conversation between himself and Christ which is in part an illustration of God's eternal election and his irresistibly sovereign grace.

The Institute for Theological Education

Theology Matters has established The Institute for Theological Education. Our goal is to equip the next generation of pastors and congregational leaders for Presbyterian and other Christian congregations. We seek to provide theological instruction that is biblical and from the mainstream of the Reformed tradition, and we begin by offering three programs:

1. A Master of Arts in Reformed Theology in partnership with the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary (for more details, see below);
2. A continuing education program that offers seminars and retreats for pastors, elders, teachers, and other congregational leaders; and
3. An adult education program that offers courses, lectures, and seminars to all interested in the subject matter, whether for academic credit, a certificate in theological studies, or as auditors.

Master of Arts in Reformed Theology

In August 2023, Theology Matters and the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary launched a Master of Arts in Reformed Theology. We have had two strong cohorts, and we are beginning to recruit a third. Focusing on classic texts and practices valued by the Reformed tradition, this program offers instruction from pastor-scholars whose knowledge has been tested in the academy and significant pastoral ministry. The M.A. in Reformed Theology is a fully accredited, 36-credit degree offered in a hybrid format that includes both face-to-face and online learning. In-person instruction will be held at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

Required Courses

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Interpretation of the New Testament in the Reformed Tradition
Reformed Theology I
Reformed Theology II
Capstone Project in Reformed Theology

Elective Courses

Early & Medieval Church History
Reformation & Modern Church History
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Dr. Jeffrey Bullock, President
University of Dubuque & Theological Seminary

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