



Sex is About Union

The union between a husband and wife is ultimately beautiful because it too stands as a picture of the union between Christ and the church.

by Michael Lawrence

A Unions that Displays ... A Marriage

Sexual intimacy is all about union. Physically, of course, that's obvious. But there's so much more. In sexual intimacy, we also know a union that is emotional, as our hearts are knit together even as our bodies are. We know a union that is intellectual, as we come to understand and know one another in intimate detail. We know a union that is even spiritual, for as every married couple figures out, the best sex isn't when I make sure I get what I want, but when I forget about myself, and give myself for the blessing and delight of my spouse. And at that moment, we are very close to the heart of Christ, "who loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25).

But there's more. This union of sexual intimacy, complete in itself, is also a sign and symbol of an even more profound union of lives in the covenant marriage, when a man leaves his father and mother, and is united to his wife, and the two become one flesh. Being "one flesh" with someone can refer in a secondary way to sex, but primarily it's just a Hebrew way of saying one family, flesh and blood. The union of marriage is not an alliance of families, with each partner representing a previous set of priorities and loyalties. No, and this was and remains quite radical, marriage is a union that dissolves the old bonds, the old loyalties, the old priorities, and creates one new family, with all that entails — one new set of priorities, one new set of fundamental loyalties.

Do you see the picture so far? The beauty of sex is that it is a profound union that stands as a sign and symbol of an even more profound union of lives in the covenant of marriage. This of course is why sex outside of marriage is ultimately unsatisfying and destructive. Without the union of marriage, the union of bodies is a parody and mockery of itself. Bereft of it's proper point and context, sexual intimacy outside of marriage does not bring us into the lover's embrace, but merely exposes us to the stranger's stare, and reduces us to the means of someone else's pleasure.

But there's even more to this union that makes sexual intimacy as God designed it so beautiful. I mentioned that many men tend to view sex as a means to the end of their pleasure. If that is the typical failure of men, then I think many women tend to view intimacy, broadly considered, as an end in itself. But women, that view is just as much idolatry as the man's worship of pleasure. There is no created thing, including the intimacy of marriage, that exists for its own sake.

The amazing thing that Paul reveals in Ephesians 5 is that the union between a husband and wife is ultimately beautiful because it too stands as a sign, a picture of something else. And that is the union between Christ and the church.

A Union that Displays ... the Gospel

The ultimate point of marriage isn't your emotional satisfaction, but to make visible the gospel reality of Christ's love for the church and the church's love for Christ. The absolutely amazing truth of the gospel is that we who were separated and alienated from God have been united by faith to the Son he loves in the New Covenant of his grace. The marriage covenant illustrates the New Covenant; the marriage union points to that even more profound union between Christ and the church.

What does this have to do with the beauty of sexual intimacy and the single who is still waiting to experience it? You can think of this like *matryoshka*, or nested Russian dolls, in which each doll's shape is determined by the shape of the next doll hidden inside. The intimacy of sexual union, as desirable as that is, is also picture of the marriage union, which in turn is a picture of our union with Christ.

As profoundly intimate the experience of sexual union is, at it's best, it is just a hint, a small taste of the joy and satisfaction and perfect intimacy we will know with Jesus, when we are united to Him as his Bride. That union won't be sexual, but there is no other union God's given us that speaks more truly of the intimate love we'll know in Christ. To rip one of these unions out of it's connection with the others is to destroy not only it's goodness and meaning, but to distort the pattern that it was

designed to display.

A Union that Displays ... God

There is one more connection to draw, one more union to think about. For as profound as our union with Christ is, that union is not the ultimate and final union in the universe. Have you ever wondered why we are united to Christ? It's kind of an odd image, when you think about it. Jesus himself gives us the answer. In John 14-17, Jesus repeatedly told his disciples to abide in him, to remain in him, for in that union they had life. And then, in his high priestly prayer in John 17, he says the most remarkable thing:

"Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

There is more there than we can possibly unpack, but at least this much is clear. The union we have with Christ in the gospel, and the transformation that union effects, is meant to be a visible sign, a proof, of the prior eternal union of Christ and the Father in the Trinity. So that when the world looked at those united to Christ, they could not help but see that Christ himself is one with the Father.

What is the point of our union with Christ? It is the glory of God. As Jesus concludes his prayer, "I have made you known to them ... that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them." In our union with Christ we are mysteriously made signs and symbols of the Son's union with the Father. What's more, through that union we participate in and are taken up into the eternal love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father.

Here we have finally come to the mystery of union, the core that defines every other union in the universe, including the union of sex. That's right, you read that correctly. Sex is a foretaste, a hint of what it will mean for us to participate in the eternal union of love that exists at the very heart of the Trinity. The beauty of intimacy is that it is a taste of the glory of God.

Isn't God good that he would make something so enjoyable at the same time so noble? Isn't he good that he would make something so full of pleasure so good and pure. Isn't he gracious that he would make us in such a way that delighting in our spouse leads us to find our ultimate delight in him?

What does this mean for you if you're single? It means that the problem with sex outside of marriage isn't finally that you're breaking an arbitrary rule, or that it is emotionally destructive, or that it is more likely to expose you to an STD.

No, the problem is that sex outside of marriage is a fraud and a fake. It pretends to be true intimacy, but is nothing more than exposure. It uses the language of love and commitment, but knows nothing of either. And by suggesting that true pleasure and intimacy can be had without loving, covenantal commitment, it perpetrates a massive assault against the very character and glory of God, whose eternal, intimate, loving relationship within the Trinity is the blueprint and pattern for every intimate pleasure that you or I will ever know.

What if you gave up waiting? Some things can't be undone in this life. But for those who repent of their sin and trust in the grace of God held out through cross of Jesus Christ, all things may be forgiven.

If you're still waiting (or waiting again) for marriage to have sex, keep waiting. Because it's not about waiting. It's about displaying the glory of God and his gospel in your life.

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