

Preaching and the Family Crisis

Douglas W. Hix
Laurinburg, North Carolina

There was a time when we preached Mother's Day sermons. Recently we moved to preaching sermons on Christian marriage or the Christian family. Fortunately we were saved by the liturgical year and the new orthodoxy of preaching from the lectionary passages for the day. Now it is possible to engage in the older ritual if we are nostalgic, but it is possible to preach a really good and exegetically correct sermon on Acts 10:44-48; Ps. 98; I John 5:1-6; or John 15:9-17 without ever mentioning Mother's Day, Christian marriage, or the Christian family. That is one of the beauties of lectionary preaching; it provides us with the option of never being relevant. And on this cluster of subjects, at this particular juncture in our cultural history, all things considered, we would prefer not to be relevant.

And why not, if you can? For when the average pastor of the average mainline church stands up to preach of Christian marriage or the Christian family in our time, she looks out over a congregation that has a large number of single parents who are covered with guilt over their singleness and struggling to survive. There are also a number of gays or singles by choice or without choice and feel that anything you might say on these subjects is either a condemnation of them or irrelevant. And there will be those present who think that anything you might have to say on these subjects will smack of the patriarchal family with the father as head of the household and the bread winner and the mother as the subservient nurturer in "the haven in a heartless world" and they are either feminists who wish to spit in your face or struggling two-income families that also want to know why you seem to also preach all the time on giving one-tenth of your income to the church, another irrelevant subject. With those kinds of enthusiastic receptions to our words, we preachers of the mainline churches do what we increasingly do in the face of controversy or ambiguity: we are silent.

Unfortunately, that no longer is possible. It was possible as long as we, in our liberal mood, sort of went along with the mood and trends of our society and its attitudes toward marriage and divorce, not only approving those attitudes in our counseling room but also in our bedroom.

But now it is coming clear that the two pillars that provided support for those attitudes have crumbled. We always believed and taught that children reared in an intact family of mother and father in a *troubled* marriage were much more severely harmed than children reared in a single-parent home or a home with a stepparent. This conviction not only encouraged divorce, but blessed it. The facts indicate that this conviction is not true.

We also believed and taught that children of divorce are highly resilient and adaptable and quickly adjust to divorce and grow up to be healthy and free (of the confines of an unhealthy marriage). The facts increasingly indicate that such children are severely damaged throughout the course of their lives and never adjust.¹

But if we decide that we no longer can justify being silent in the face of these findings, then our work is cut out for us. We must face the corrosive impact our society's reigning individualism has had on the two interlocking components of a (Protestant) view of Christian marriage: covenant and communion.²

Covenant very subtly has become a contract. A contract is shaped toward the interest of the individual rather than the other and the individual's commitment to and

involvement with the other. It is stated with as much exactitude as possible rather than maintaining ambiguity and mystery characteristic of intimate relationships. It also is stated in minimalist rather than generous terms and has built into it protections and guarantees for the individual, the greatest being a time limitation either implied or explicit rather than “‘til death us do part.”

And hidden within the contract as its major presupposition is the free individual whose royal rights and good remain intact throughout and are bound by this instrument only because it serves the interest of the sovereign individual at this particular time and place. The contract does not enhance, enrich, or fundamentally change the individual like a covenant does, but has instrumental value only.

In fact, the rights and value of the free individual are so important and the danger that the individual might be altered and hampered in the contract that marriage has degenerated from a covenant to a contract entered into at the ceremony, to a prenuptial agreement prior to the contract, to “a relationship” that has no explicit contractual terms.

As can be seen, the nature of the self under consideration has changed from the individual whose highest flowering and fulfillment is a commitment to another to that of an individual who is chiefly characterized by choice and change. To be human is to be free, to have options and to take them and never to make a commitment that cannot be given up because to be human means to be free to make new and meaningful choices. And opportunities to make those choices will come because of change. We have come to see that whatever else is true about you and me, it is true that we change; we are always in process. Who I was, what I was like, where I was *at* ten years ago is not who I am, what I am like, or where I am *at* now. And for me to be human, to be authentic, to be true to myself, I must be true to myself now rather than to who I was then. In any case, marriage has, in the process, become a transitional phase of one's life.

Of course, this invincible individual ego has sustained some rather severe traumas along the way: an ego that always is poised to choose gets exhausted with making choices and sometimes becomes a paralytic that cannot choose among choices. It also has placed so much emphasis upon change and the claim that I am not the same person I was ten years ago or ten days ago, or, by implication, ten seconds ago that it has disappeared into thin air. As a result, most of us can recognize that some other alternative must surely be possible and that however difficult the task of rehabilitation may be, there is a yearning. But before we turn to that effort, let us look at what has happened to the other partner in marriage, communion.

Communion we shall, for the moment, leave ambiguous for that may be its ultimate nature—maybe more adequately characterized as a mystery. Suffice it to say that by the time we begin to track its demise in our time, it has become romantic love that is an emotional attachment driven by idealization of the partner and erotic passion, in equal parts. It was roughly what the returned soldier from World War II felt toward his girl whom he had left behind. When that did not sustain the relationship through the rough times of the postwar traumas of life and work and marriage and kids, he and she sought help.

That help was generously given through the blossoming field of psychotherapy and that therapy labored to provide counseling for the individuals by treating the marriage as a therapy group which exists to provide enrichment for each of the individuals. Each self should go into the relationship to enhance and express his or her authentic self through the sharing of genuine feelings. Each should keep in touch with

and express current feelings, emotions, and concerns. Each should be self-assertive and responsive to the self-assertion of the other. No obligation or commitment that goes beyond the obligation and commitment to pursue the enhancement of the self through the relationship is embraced. Thus the relationship lasts so long and only so long as it serves to further the goals, desires, and wishes of meaning- seeking and meaning-affirming individual ego. Since that was the reason for entering the relationship, when that purpose no longer is served, the relationship is opted out of. In the process of articulating this shape and character to marriage, love, and communion became care for and expression of the self and its feelings. Even passion which might have involved some dimension of bonding becomes a vaguely intellectualistic “expression of authentic feeling.” This redefining of love in therapeutic and egoistic terms has bled it dry and left the participants yearning for some alternative.

But if what has been described above is a true account of what has happened to these ingredients of marriage in our time, the participants may yearn for something different, but the disintegration described means that it is difficult for the parties to imagine or picture an alternative. Nevertheless, it is necessary, and though difficult, must be done with some care and simplicity. And with a certain ambiguity and mystery not only because these matters are such in themselves but because the parties have been living in a world view that has been construed in reductionist terms.

It may be well to begin the hardest part first, to try to talk about marriage as a covenant in a world in which covenant has no meaning, or is interpreted as a contract, or is thought of as confining and a legalism.

I guess the place to start is with the marriage vow:

I, _____, take you, _____, to be my wife;
And I promise, before God and these witnesses,
To be your loving and faithful husband,
In plenty and want;
In joy and in sorrow;
In sickness and in health;
As long as we both shall live.

_____, I give you this ring as a sign of our covenant. . . .

As the ring exchange and pledge indicate, the vows made are the entering into a covenant.

A covenant is a relationship in which each partner expresses a commitment to the welfare of the other. It is assumed that it is for the welfare of the self, but it is appropriately the welfare of the other that is stressed. All of its statements refer to the welfare of the other and what the partner is willing to commit for their life together. A covenant is a promise; it is not a contract or a conditional relationship—if you will do this, I will do that—but a promise that the person makes in word and seals through the ring and does so in public with the presence of God and witnesses. The covenant’s terms are maximized in that the best and worst of circumstances are imagined and commitments made that encompass them both rather than stipulate minimalist terms.

And finally, it is permanent and binding for life. It may not turn out that way for reasons neither party has control over, but the assumption and commitment is that it is permanent. In our culture such commitments always have a built-in caveat such as permanent as long as circumstances stay the same and since they don’t, the commit-

ment is not. But this is a permanent commitment through changes which come and go. Since this is an idea that is almost “inconceivable” by the modern church member, the preacher must try to come up with illustrations.

The first must be God, whose character as a covenant maker and keeper, is the chief and main message of the Bible. This must be proclaimed as the origin and pattern, and chief illustration of the covenant that is reflected in Christian marriage.

The example of Hosea may be cited and the relationship between Hosea’s faithfulness and God’s faithfulness.

And then there are two human examples, which in our society are becoming increasingly tenuous, but the “idea” may evoke in the mind of the inquirer conception and conviction. The first is the covenant that parents make with their children at birth. I believe there is a sense among people that when a child is born the parents promise to rear and love and care for that child no matter what happens and no matter what the child does. Often we have observed the agony parents go through to keep that covenant and how it is one which they genuinely regard as binding and the most difficult to give up. A comparison can be made between the ease with which the marriage covenant is abrogated, compared to the parents’ covenant with the child, and we can make the point that the former should be as binding as the latter.

A second comparative covenant is that between adult children and aging parents. Despite scattered families and horror stories about nursing homes as warehouses, it is astounding that the vast majority of adult children feel bound to provide care for their aging parents “‘til death us do part” and many go to incredible lengths to fulfil that obligation. A marriage covenant should be viewed as similarly binding.

In these and other ways the reader can imagine, we have a responsibility to reimage the covenant of marriage in our time. And thus far, it must be admitted, such efforts inevitably seem like the articulation of unrelieved “oughts” and legalisms, and moralisms. Two responses are appropriate, one within the context of discussions of covenant and the other through moving to the discussion of communion. The first can be stated briefly: the oughtness character of the covenant is relieved by the fact that the experience of living inside the covenant relationship allows for relaxation and a recreation from the twenty-four-hour-a-day vigil that must be maintained where one is simply in “a relationship” or in an easily terminated contract. The intolerable burden of needing always to be “working” on a relationship to keep it in existence is surely the worst form of slavery and the most exhausting known to humankind. Living and loving in a permanent covenant does not obviate such endeavors, but it at least gives the parties a chance to catch their breath!

But finally let us move on to speak of communion, its characteristics and how it relates to covenant in an interlocking way to promote the necessary ingredients to marriage.

Communion is really another word for love, but I have used it instead of love because the latter has been given, as we have seen and need not recapitulate, unhealthy definitions in modern society and needs to be understood as a more many-splendored thing. Communion has four dimensions³ which are all present in a rich marriage, though at times one may predominate or alone sustain and enrich the relationship. The first dimension is affection. It is appreciation of the other. It is liking the other. It is acknowledging characteristics in the other that are fascinating, idiosyncratic, and sometimes even cute. It is delighting in the fact that the beloved is a “character” with loveable quirks which are maybe even repulsive to the outsider.

The second dimension is friendship. Friendship is the recognition of equality, that

the two are kindred souls, that the two share many of the same interests, enjoy the same tasks, have something in common, work well together side-by-side, like one another, are compatible. All these commonalities forge an implicit and unconscious and unspoken bond. A friendship takes on the character of permanence or longlastingness. This dimension of communion is a prerequisite for marriage, is undervalued, and provides much of the substance to the relationship.

The third dimension is Eros. This is the element that has been given a bad name by the Christian church, but is so obviously a gift of the Creator and should be honored as such. It is the need that brings sexual opposites together; it is the sexual hunger that is natural. It is passion; it is delight, excitement, and thrill. It has its basis in our "animal energies" but in humans includes all the subtleties of courtship, foreplay, and nuanced wooing and laughter and joy. It provides the impetus for bonding and makes a greater contribution to that aspect of marriage than has usually been acknowledged. Its passion may ebb and flow and expresses itself in various forms, but it extends unaltered into the later years, as has been adequately documented.

Finally, there is Agape, the mirror and image of God's love in Christ—the totally unselfish love, the care for the other when the other is undeserving, the caring act of the will when liking or affection or Eros is not present, the loving and creating value in the beloved. This dimension is necessary because our sinfulness and inadequacies are always in danger of corrupting the other three dimensions of communion and making them idols and forms of our own selfishness. It also makes the greatest contribution to the permanence of the covenant, though as we have seen the others have their part to play, because our Agape is a mirror of and is energized by God's Agape which is God's faithfulness to promises made.

Thus we see that communion is an essential ingredient to Christian marriage and a support and energizer of the covenant. It needs to be said in complementary fashion that the covenant provides structure, shape, a permanent playing field for the full development and expression of all four dimensions of communion. In more fragile forms of marriage, some of these dimensions must be eliminated or all truncated. Thus covenant and communion are both necessary and sufficient for a Christian marriage and make such possible. It is the claim of these paragraphs that the articulation and exposition of such is the calling of our time and place.

NOTES

¹ These finds are most readily accessible in these references.

Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Family Matters: The Plight of America's Children," *The Christian Century* 110 (1993): 710-712.

Don Browning and Ian Evison, "The Family Debate: A Middle Way," *The Christian Century* 110 (1993): 712-716.

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Dan Quayle Was Right," *Atlantic* 271, no. 4 (April, 1993): 47-84.

² See William Everett's most perceptive analysis of the entire subject of marriage.

William Johnson Everett, *Blessed Be the Bond* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

³ I borrow these from C. S. Lewis *The Four Loves*, though without being bound to his interpretations. C.S.Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960).