

The Genesis of Marriage

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*
trans. Rev. John King (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. I, 128-
137, emphasis added and English updated.

Genesis 2:18-25

18. And the Lord God said, *it is* not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.

19. And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought *them* to Adam to see what he would call them: and whatever Adam called every living creature, that *was* the name of it.

20. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him.

21. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh at that place;

22. Then the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man.

23. And Adam said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.

24. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall be one flesh.

25. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

As a general rule, the nature of man requires marriage.

18. *It is not good that the man should be alone.* Moses now explains the design of God in creating the woman; namely, that there should be human beings on the earth who might cultivate mutual society between themselves.

Yet a doubt may arise whether this design ought to be extended to progeny, for the words simply mean that since it was not expedient for man to be alone, a wife must be created, who might be his helper. I, however, take the meaning to be this, that God begins, indeed, at the first step of human society, yet designs to include others, each in its proper place. The commencement, therefore, involves a general principle, that **man was formed to be a social animal**. Now, the human race could not exist without the woman; and, therefore, in the conjunction [joining together] of human beings, that sacred bond is especially conspicuous, by which **the husband and the wife are combined in one body, and one soul**; as nature itself taught Plato, and others of the sounder class of philosophers, to speak.

Marriage was ordained by God for the good of mankind.

But although God pronounced, concerning Adam, that it would not be profitable for him to be alone, yet I do not restrict the declaration to his person alone, but rather regard it as a common law of man's vocation, so that every one ought to receive it as said to himself, **that solitude is not good, with the exception only of him whom God exempts as by a special privilege [that is, by the special gift of celibacy].**

Many think that celibacy conduces to their advantage, and therefore, abstain from marriage, lest they should be miserable. Not only have heathen writers defined that to be a happy life which is passed without a wife, but the first book of Jerome, against Jovinian, is stuffed with petulant reproaches, by which he attempts to render hallowed wedlock both hateful and infamous. To these wicked suggestions of Satan let the faithful learn to oppose this declaration of God, by which **He ordains the conjugal [married] life for man, not to his destruction, but to his salvation.**

I will make him a helper. . . . Certainly, it cannot be denied, that the woman also, though in the second degree, was created in the image of God; from which it follows, that what was said in the creation of the man belongs to the female sex. Now, since God assigns the woman as a helper to the man, **He not only prescribes to wives the rule of their vocation to instruct them in their duty, but He also pronounces that marriage will really prove to men the best support of life.**

The differences between the corrupt state of marriage in this fallen world and the beauty of marriage as God ordained it.

We may therefore conclude, that **the order of nature implies that the woman should be the helper of the man.** The vulgar proverb, indeed, is, that she is a necessary evil; but **the voice of God** is rather to be heard, which **declares that woman is given as a companion and an associate to the man, to assist him to live well.** I confess, indeed, that in this corrupt state of mankind, the blessing of God, which is here described, is neither perceived nor flourishes; but the cause of the evil must be considered, namely, that the order of nature, which God had appointed, has been inverted by us.

For if the integrity of man had remained to this day such as it was from the beginning, that divine institution would be clearly discerned, and **the sweetest harmony** would reign in marriage; because **the husband would look up with reverence to God; the woman in this would be a faithful assistant to him; and both, with one consent, would cultivate a holy, as well as friendly and peaceful relationship.**

Now, it has happened by our fault, and by the corruption of nature, that this happiness of marriage has, in a great measure, perished, or, at least, is mixed and infected with many inconveniences. Hence arise strifes, troubles, sorrows, dissensions, and a boundless sea of evils; and hence it follows, that men are often disturbed by their wives, and suffer through them many discouragements.

Still, marriage was not capable of being so far vitiated [torn asunder] by the depravity of men, that the blessing which God has once sanctioned by His word should be utterly abolished and extinguished. Therefore, amidst many inconveniences of marriage, which are the fruits of degenerate nature, some residue of divine good remains; as in the fire apparently smothered, some sparks still glitter.

The marital duties of men and women

On this main point hangs another, that women, being instructed in their duty of helping their husbands, should study to keep this divinely appointed order. It is also the part of men to consider what they owe in return to the other half of their kind, for the obligation of both sexes is mutual, and on this condition is the woman assigned as a help to the man, that he may fill the place of her head and leader.

One thing more is to be noted, that, when the woman is here called the help of the man, no allusion is made to that necessity to which we are reduced since the fall of Adam; for the woman was ordained to be the man's helper, even though he had stood in his integrity [i.e., sexual purity free from sinful lust]. But now, since the depravity of [sexual] appetite also requires a remedy, we have from God a double benefit; but this latter benefit is accidental [that is, it is not off the essence of marriage]¹.

Suitable or fitting for him. . . . [Hence] is refuted the error of some, who think that the woman was formed only for the sake of propagation [bearing children], and who restrict the word "good," which had been lately mentioned, to the production of offspring. They do not think that a wife was personally necessary for Adam, because he was up until now free from lust²; as if she had been given to him only for the companion of his chamber, and not rather that she might be the inseparable associate of his life³. . . .

19. And out of the ground the Lord God formed, etc. This is a more ample exposition of the preceding sentence, for he says that, of all the animals, when they had been placed in order, not one was found which might be conferred on and adapted to Adam; nor was there such affinity of nature, that Adam could choose for himself a companion for life out of any one species. Nor did this occur through ignorance, for each species had passed in review before Adam, and he had imposed names on them, not rashly but from certain knowledge; yet there was no just proportion between him and them.

Therefore, unless a wife had been given him of the same kind with himself, he would have remained destitute of a suitable and proper help. . . .

21. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall, etc. Although to profane persons this method of forming woman may seem ridiculous, and some of these may say that Moses is dealing in fables, yet to us the wonderful providence of God here shines forth; for, to the

¹ Prior to the fall, marriage was primarily given to man because he needed companionship and a helper. Marriage was not necessary to prevent sexual immorality, because, prior to the fall, man did not struggle with sexual lust or immorality. Now, after the fall, marriage is needful both to prevent unnecessary loneliness and as a remedy for sexual immorality and burning desires. While Adam did not need marriage as a remedy for immorality, we also should note that God gave the gift and pleasure of sexual relations to Adam and Eve prior to the fall, and thus sex is a natural gift of God to the men and women He created. Many in church history wrongly denigrated the sexual relationship between husband and wife as something carnal or of man's fallen nature or inherently sinful while often at the same time exalting procreation (the bearing of children). By denigrating the sexual relationship, even within the covenant of marriage, they did not give due regard to God as the Author of mankind's sexual desires and needs, which were completely pure, good, and holy prior to the fall. While Christian couples should never exalt this aspect of marriage into an idol, they also should not feel guilt or think wrongly of the needs and desires that are given to them by nature by their Creator. God says that marriage is honorable and the bed undefiled (Hebrews 13:4).

² Even though Adam was free from lust, that does not mean that he lacked sexual desires nor that the union of husband and wife was without pleasure. Adam's uniqueness is in that prior to the fall, his desires were entirely pure, holy, and confined to his wife, without exception.

³ Marriage is not just about sex, bearing children, or raising children; the primary and foremost purpose of marriage is to provide a pure, sacrificial relationship, marked by loving friendship, mutual help, intense intimacy, and lifelong companionship.

end that the conjunction of the human race might be the more sacred He purposed that both males and females should spring from one and the same origin. Therefore He created human nature in the person of Adam, and from him formed Eve, that the woman should be only a portion of the whole human race. This is the meaning of the words of Moses which we have had before (Genesis 1:28): "God created man ... He made them male and female."

In this way Adam was taught to recognize himself in his wife, as in a mirror; and Eve, in her turn, to submit herself willingly to her husband, as being taken out of him. But if the two sexes had proceeded from different sources, there would have been occasion either of mutual contempt, or envy, or contentions.

. . . I am more in favor of a different conjecture [regarding the meaning of this passage], namely, that something was taken from Adam, in order that he might embrace, with greater benevolence, a part of himself. He lost, therefore, one of his ribs; but, instead of it, a far richer reward was granted him, since **he obtained a faithful associate of life; for he now saw himself, who had before been imperfect, rendered complete in his wife.** And in this we see a true resemblance of our union with the Son of God; for He became weak that He might have members of His body endued with strength.

In the meantime, it is to be noted, that Adam had been plunged in a sleep so profound, that he felt no pain; and further, that neither had the rupture been violent, nor was any want perceived of the lost rib, because God so filled up the vacuity with flesh, that his strength remained unimpaired; only the hardness of bone was removed. Moses also designedly used the word *built*, to teach us that in the person of the woman the human race was at length complete, which had before been like a building just begun. . . .

The sanctity of marriage

22. And brought her, etc. Moses now relates that **marriage was divinely instituted**, which is especially useful to be known; for since Adam did not take a wife to himself at his own will, but received her as offered and appropriated to him by God, the **sanctity of marriage** therefore more clearly appears, because **we recognize God as its Author.**

The more Satan has endeavored to dishonor marriage, the more should we vindicate it from all reproach and abuse, that it may receive its due reverence. From this it will follow that the children of God may embrace a conjugal [married] life with a good and tranquil conscience, and husbands and wives may live together in chastity and honor. The artifice of Satan in attempting **the defamation of marriage** was twofold: **first**, that by means of the odium [disgrace] attached to it he might introduce the pestilential law of celibacy; and, **secondly**, that married persons might indulge themselves in whatever license they pleased.

Therefore, by showing the dignity of marriage, we must remove superstition, lest it should in the slightest degree hinder the faithful from chastely using the lawful and pure ordinance of God; and further, we must oppose the lasciviousness of the flesh, in order that men may live modestly with their wives. But if no other reason influenced us, yet this alone ought to be abundantly sufficient, that **unless we think and speak honorably of marriage, reproach is attached to its Author and Patron, for such God is here described as being by Moses.**

23. And Adam said, etc. . . . The deep sleep was sent on Adam, not to hide from him the origin of his life, but to exempt him from pain and trouble, until he should receive a compensation so excellent for the loss of his rib.

This is now bone of, etc. . . . Adam indicates that something had been lacking to him; as if he had said, Now at length I have obtained a suitable companion, who is part of the substance of my flesh, and in whom I behold, as it were, another self. And he gives to his wife a name taken from that of man⁴, that by this testimony and this mark he might transmit a perpetual memorial of the wisdom of God. . . . [It is] to be remarked that the Hebrew term means nothing else than the female of the man.

Marriage is the principal and most sacred relationship pertaining to human society.

24. Therefore shall a man leave. It is doubted whether Moses here introduces God as speaking, or continues the discourse of Adam, or, indeed, has added this, in virtue of his office as teacher, in his own person. The last of these is that which I most approve. Therefore, after he has related historically what God had done, he also demonstrates the end of the divine institution. **The sum of the whole is, that among the offices pertaining to human society, this is the principal, and as it were the most sacred, that a man should cleave unto his wife.** And he amplifies this by a superadded comparison, that the husband ought to prefer his wife to his father.⁵ But the father is said to be *left* not because marriage severs sons from their fathers, or dispenses with other ties of nature, for in this way God would be acting contrary to Himself. While, however, the piety of the son towards his father is to be most assiduously cultivated and ought in itself to be deemed inviolable and sacred, yet Moses so speaks of marriage as to show that it is less lawful to desert a wife than parents. Therefore, they who, for slight causes, rashly allow divorces, violate, in one single particular, all the laws of nature, and reduce them to nothing. If we should make it a point of conscience not to separate a father from his son, it is a still greater wickedness to dissolve the bond which God has preferred to all others.

They shall be one flesh. Although the ancient Latin interpreter has translated the passage 'in one flesh,' yet the Greek interpreters have expressed it more forcibly: 'The two shall be *into* one flesh,' and thus Christ cites the place in Matthew 19:5. But though here no mention is made of *two*, yet there is no ambiguity in the sense; for Moses had not said that God has assigned many wives, but only *one* to one man; and in the general direction given, he had put the wife in the singular number. It remains, therefore, that the conjugal [marital] bond subsists between two persons only, from which it easily appears, that nothing is less in accord with the divine institution than polygamy.

Now, when Christ, in censuring the voluntary divorces of the Jews, adduces as his reason for doing it, that 'it was not so in the beginning' (Matthew 19:5) he certainly commands this institution to be observed as a perpetual rule of conduct. To the same point also Malachi recalls the Jews of his own time: "Did He not make them one from the beginning? having

⁴ The English word *woman* is a contraction of *womb-man*.

⁵ Therefore, the relationship between spouses is greater than the relationship between parents and their children. Bearing children, raising children, and training up children is extremely important, and yet the relationship between husband and wife must be first in order and importance.

a remnant of the Spirit?" (Malachi 2:15). Wherefore, there is no doubt that polygamy is a corruption of legitimate marriage. . . .

25. *And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.*

He now esteems it enough to say, that in our uncorrupted nature, there was nothing but what was honorable; from which it follows, that whatever is shameful in us, must be imputed to our own fault, since our parents had nothing in themselves which was improper until they were defiled with sin.