

*Timothy Keller*  
*with Kathy Keller*

# The Meaning of Marriage

*Facing the Complexities of Commitment*  
*with the Wisdom of God*

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First published by Dutton, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. in 2011

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

This paperback edition first published in 2013

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 444 70216 3  
eBook ISBN 978 1 444 70319 1

Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,  
Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
338 Euston Road  
London NW1 3BH

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*To Our Friends for Four Decades*

*Our journeys have taken us to different places  
but never away from one another,  
or from each other,  
or from our First Love*

*Adele and Doug Calhoun*

*Jane and Wayne Frazier*

*Louise and David Midwood*

*Gayle and Gary Somers*

*Cindy and Jim Widmer*

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## INTRODUCTION

*God, the best maker of all marriages,  
Combine your hearts in one.*

—William Shakespeare, *Henry V*

### A Book for Married People

Think of this book as a tree supplied by three deep roots. The first is my thirty-seven-year marriage to my wife, Kathy.<sup>1</sup> She helped me write this book, and she herself wrote chapter 6, Embracing the Other. In chapter 1, I caution readers about the way contemporary culture defines “soul mate” as “a perfectly compatible match.” Nevertheless, when we first began to spend time with each other, we each realized that the other was a rare fit for our hearts. I first met Kathy through her sister, Susan, who was a student with me at Bucknell University. Susan often spoke to Kathy about me and to me about Kathy. As a young girl, Kathy had been led toward the Christian faith by C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*.<sup>2</sup> She urged Susan to recommend them to me. I read and was moved by the books and by other Lewis volumes that I subsequently studied. In 1972, we both enrolled at the same school, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary on Boston’s North Shore, and there we quickly came to see that we

shared the “secret thread” that Lewis says is the thing that turns people into close friends—or more.

You may have noticed that the books you really love are bound together by a secret thread. You know very well what is the common quality that makes you love them, though you cannot put it into words: . . . Are not all lifelong friendships born at the moment when at last you meet another human being who has some inkling . . . of that something which you were born desiring . . . ?<sup>3</sup>

Our friendship grew into romance and engagement, and then from a fragile new marriage into a tested and durable one. But this only happened through the “pearls before swine” speech, the Great Dirty Diaper Conflict, the “smashing the wedding china” affair, and other infamous events in our family history that will be described in this book—all mileposts on the very bumpy road to marital joy. Like most young modern couples, we found that marriage was much harder than we expected it to be. At the conclusion of our wedding ceremony, we marched out singing to the hymn “How Firm a Foundation.” Little did we know how relevant some of the lines would be to the arduous and painful work of developing a strong marriage.

© When through fiery trials, thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace all-sufficient will be thy supply.  
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless  
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.<sup>4</sup>

This book, therefore, is for those spouses who have discovered how challenging day-to-day marriage is and who are searching for practical resources to survive the sometimes overwhelming

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“fiery trials” of matrimony and to grow through them. Our society’s experience with marriage has given us the metaphor “the honeymoon is over.” This is a book for those who have experienced this as a literal truth and may have fallen back to earth with a thud.

### **A Book for Unmarried People**

The second source for this book is a long pastoral ministry in a city with millions (and a church with thousands) of single adults. Our congregation, Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, is a rarity—a very large church that has been for years composed predominantly of singles. Several years ago, when we had about four thousand people in attendance, I asked a very prominent church consultant, “How many churches do you know of our size with three thousand singles?” He answered, “Your church is unique, as far as I know.”

Ministering in the center of New York City in the late 1980s, Kathy and I were constantly struck by the deep ambivalence with which Western culture views marriage. It was then we began to hear all the now society-wide objections—marriage was originally about property and is now in flux, marriage crushes individual identity and has been oppressive for women, marriage stifles passion and is ill-fitted to psychological reality, marriage is “just a piece of paper” that only serves to complicate love, and so on. But beneath these philosophical objections lies a snarl of conflicted personal emotions, born out of many negative experiences with marriage and family life.

Early in our New York City ministry, in the fall of 1991, I preached a nine-week series on marriage. It has since been the most listened-to set of sermons or talks the church has ever produced. I had to begin the series by giving some justification for

devoting weeks of teaching on being married to a congregation of mainly unmarried people. My main rationale was that single people today need a brutally realistic yet glorious vision of what marriage is and can be. What I said then fits single readers today, and this book is for them, too.

In preparation for writing this, I read a host of Christian books on marriage. Most of them were written to help married couples work through specific problems. This volume will be useful for that as well, but its primary goal is to give both married and unmarried people a vision for what marriage is according to the Bible. That will help married people correct mistaken views that might be harming their marriage, and it will help single people stop destructively over-desiring marriage or destructively dismissing marriage altogether. Also, a Bible-based marriage book will help each reader have a better idea of who he or she should consider as a prospective mate.

### **A Book about the Bible**

There is a third source for the material in this book, and it is the most foundational. Though this book is rooted in my personal experience of marriage and ministry, it is even more grounded in the teachings of the Old and New Testaments. Nearly four decades ago, as theological students, Kathy and I studied the Biblical teachings on sex, gender, and marriage. Over the next fifteen years, we worked them out in our own marriage. Then, over the last twenty-two years, we have used what we learned from both Scripture and experience to guide, encourage, counsel, and instruct young urban adults with regard to sex and marriage. We offer the fruit of these three influences to you in this book.

But the foundation of it all is the Bible.

In the Bible there are three human institutions that stand



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apart from all others—the family, the church, and the state. There’s nothing in the Bible about how schools should be run, even though they are crucial to a flourishing society. There’s nothing there about business corporations or museums or hospitals. In fact, there are all sorts of great institutions and human enterprises that the Bible doesn’t address or regulate. And so we are free to invent them and operate them in line with the general principles for human life that the Bible gives us.

But marriage is different. As the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* says, God “established marriage for the welfare and happiness of humankind.” Marriage did not evolve in the late Bronze Age as a way to determine property rights. At the climax of the Genesis account of creation we see God bringing a woman and a man together to unite them in marriage. The Bible begins with a wedding (of Adam and Eve) and ends in the book of Revelation with a wedding (of Christ and the church). Marriage is God’s idea. It is certainly also a human institution, and it reflects the character of the particular human culture in which it is embedded. But the concept and roots of human marriage are in God’s own action, and therefore what the Bible says about God’s design for marriage is crucial.

That is why the Presbyterian service of marriage says that marriage is “instituted by God, regulated by his commandments, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ.” What God institutes he also regulates. If God invented marriage, then those who enter it should make every effort to understand and submit to his purposes for it. We do this in many other aspects of our lives. Think of buying a car: If you purchase a vehicle, a machine well beyond your own ability to create, you will certainly take up the owner’s manual and abide by what the designer says the car needs by way of treatment and maintenance. To ignore it would be to court disaster.

Plenty of people who do not acknowledge God or the Bible, yet who are experiencing happy marriages, are largely abiding by God's intentions, whether they realize it or not. But it is far better if we are conscious of those intentions. And the place to discover them is in the writings of the Scripture.

What if you want to read this book and you don't share the assumption that the Bible is the authoritative revelation from God? Maybe you appreciate the Bible in some regards, but you don't trust it on the subjects of sex, love, and marriage. These topics of ancient wisdom are at great variance with contemporary Western sensibilities, and therefore the Bible has a reputation for being "regressive" on those subjects. We would urge you give this book a try anyway. Over the years both Kathy and I have taught at length on marriage, and I have spoken on marriage at innumerable weddings. There we've learned that most people who do not share our view of the Bible or even our Christian faith are often shocked by how penetrating the Biblical perspective on marriage is and how relevant it is to their own situations. So often people have told me after the ceremony, "I'm not religious at all, but that was the most helpful and practical explanation of marriage I've ever heard."

It is hard to get a good perspective on marriage. We all see it through the inevitably distorted lenses of our own experience. If you came from an unusually stable home, where your parents had a great marriage, that may have "made it look easy" to you, and so when you get to your own marriage you may be shocked by how much it takes to forge a lasting relationship. On the other hand, if you have experienced a bad marriage or a divorce, either as a child or an adult, your view of marriage may be overly wary and pessimistic. You may be *too* expectant of relationship problems and, when they appear, be too ready to say, "Yup, here it goes," and to give up. In other words, any kind of

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background experience of marriage may make you ill equipped for it yourself.

So where can you go for a comprehensive view of marriage? There are many good “how-to” volumes usually written by counselors that can be very helpful. In a few years, however, marriage manuals look dated. In the Bible you have teaching that has been tested by millions of people over centuries and in multiple cultures. Do we have any other resource on marriage like that?

### **The Plan of the Book**

The substance of this book draws on St. Paul’s great passage on marriage in Ephesians 5, not only because it is so rich and full in itself, but also because it connects and expounds on the other most important Biblical text on marriage, Genesis 2. In chapter 1, we put Paul’s discussion into today’s cultural context and lay out two of the most basic teachings by the Bible on marriage—that it has been instituted by God and that marriage was designed to be a reflection of the saving love of God for us in Jesus Christ. That is why the gospel helps us to understand marriage and marriage helps us to understand the gospel. In chapter 2, we present Paul’s thesis that all married partners need the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The work of the Spirit makes Christ’s saving work real to our hearts, giving us supernatural help against the main enemy of marriage: sinful self-centeredness. We need the fullness of the Spirit if we are to serve one another as we should.

Chapter 3 gets us into the heart of what marriage is all about—namely, love. But what is love? This chapter discusses the relationship of feelings of love to acts of love and the relationship of romantic passion to covenantal commitment. Chapter 4 addresses the question of what marriage is *for*: It is a way for two spiritual friends to help each other on their journey to become the persons

God designed them to be. Here we will see that a new and deeper kind of happiness is found on the far side of holiness. Chapter 5 lays out three basic skill sets with which we can help each other on that journey.

Chapter 6 discusses the Christian teaching that marriage is a place where the two sexes accept each other as differently gendered and learn and grow through it. Chapter 7 helps single people use the material in this book to live the single life well and to think wisely about seeking marriage themselves. Finally, chapter 8 takes on the subject of sex, why the Bible confines it to marriage, and how, if we embrace the Biblical view, it will play out in both the single life and in marriage.<sup>5</sup>

In this book we examine the Christian understanding of marriage. It is based, as we have said, on a straightforward reading of Biblical texts. This means we are defining marriage as a lifelong, monogamous relationship between a man and a woman. According to the Bible, God devised marriage to reflect his saving love for us in Christ, to refine our character, to create stable human community for the birth and nurture of children, and to accomplish all this by bringing the complementary sexes into an enduring whole-life union. It needs to be said, therefore, that this Christian vision for marriage is not something that can be realized by two people of the same sex. That is the unanimous view of the Biblical authors, and therefore that is the view that we assume throughout the rest of this book, even though we don't directly address the subject of homosexuality.

The Bible's teaching on marriage does not merely reflect the perspective of any one culture or time. The teachings of Scripture challenge our contemporary Western culture's narrative of individual freedom as the only way to be happy. At the same time, it critiques how traditional cultures perceive the unmarried adult to be less than a fully formed human being. The book of Genesis

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radically critiques the institution of polygamy, even though it was the accepted cultural practice of the time, by vividly depicting the misery and havoc it plays in family relationships, and the pain it caused, especially for women. The New Testament writers, in a way that startled the pagan world, lifted up long-term singleness as a legitimate way to live.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the Biblical authors' teaching constantly challenged their own cultures' beliefs—they were not simply a product of ancient mores and practices. We cannot, therefore, write off the Biblical view of marriage as one-dimensionally regressive or culturally obsolete. On the contrary, it is bristling with both practical, realistic insights and breathtaking promises about marriage. And they come not only in well-stated propositions but also through brilliant stories and moving poetry.<sup>7</sup> Unless you're able to look at marriage through the lens of Scripture instead of through your own fears or romanticism, through your particular experience, or through your culture's narrow perspectives, you won't be able to make intelligent decisions about your own marital future.