The School of the Cross:

Marriage as an Instrument of Mortification in Reformed Theology

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Abstract

Modern evangelical accounts have recovered the conviction that marriage sanctifies, but without the doctrinal structure that once explained how. Marriage gives the universal command of self-denial a covenantal form. The Spirit uses faithful obedience to those Word-defined duties to mortify indwelling sin, and the Spirit uses the limits of marriage to redirect desire from the spouse to Christ. Read alongside Gary Thomas and Timothy Keller, and with Michael Allen's dogmatic account of sanctification in view, the work of Calvin, Owen, Gouge, and Bavinck supplies an account of mortification and a structure of duty, together with an eschatology that contemporary treatments presuppose but leave less developed.

Introduction

Contemporary Western culture asks marriage to make people happy. Timothy Keller traces the shift. Earlier generations found meaning in marriage through self-denial and the duties of family life, but marriage has since been "redefined as finding emotional and sexual fulfillment and self-actualization."[1] Under that definition the costs of marriage count as evidence against it, and a spouse who will not change or a hope the relationship cannot satisfy seems to prove that the bargain has failed.

Evangelical writers have answered this account by recovering an older conviction, that God gave marriage to make His people holy. Gary Thomas frames his whole book around the

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[1]Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Viking, 2011), 28.

possibility that God designed marriage more to make people holy than to make them happy, and Keller argues from Ephesians 5 that one of the chief purposes of marriage is the formation of Christ's character in husband and wife.[2] The conviction is right, yet the recovery has outrun its explanation. To say that marriage sanctifies does not yet say how it does so or by whose power. Without that account the claim slides easily into the general maxim that hardship builds character, a maxim any Stoic could accept. The gap is not peculiar to the marriage literature. Michael Allen observes that evangelical theology now needs careful work showing not only what Scripture says about sanctification but how that teaching relates to the work of Christ and the gift of grace, and he warns that a doctrine of sanctification cut loose from those connections reduces to mere exemplarism on one side or mere substitution on the other.[3] The question that remains is what God uses marriage to do to the people within it, and by what means He does it. The older Reformed tradition, from Calvin and Gouge to Owen and Bavinck, supplied that account with care.

Three terms require definition. Marriage is an *instrument* in Calvin's sense. Commenting on Paul's question whether a wife may save her husband (1 Cor. 7:16), Calvin explains that God works efficaciously through the instruments He uses, and he adds that "we have nothing in our power, except in so far as we are directed by him as instruments."[4] Marriage is neither a sacrament nor a means of grace, since Christ attached no sign or seal to it, and the outward and

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[2]Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), chap. 1, Logos; Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 132.

[3]Michael Allen, *Sanctification*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 30–31, 37–38. Thomas's account of marital growth through disciplined endurance illustrates the first reduction.

[4]John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, trans. John Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1848), 245, on 1 Cor. 7:16.

ordinary means of grace remain the Word, the sacraments, and prayer.[5] *Mortification* names the part of sanctification in which believers increasingly die to sin, and *vivification* names the part in which they increasingly live to righteousness.[6] Isolating mortification for study denies nothing about vivification.

Christian marriage is a providential instrument of sanctification, and particularly of mortification, because its covenantal obligations repeatedly require of both spouses the Christ-patterned self-denial commanded of every disciple and specified for marriage by Paul. Marriage confers no grace of itself. It is an ordinary arena in which the Spirit, through the Word, exposes and puts to death self-love and conforms believers to the self-giving form of Christ's love. Three claims establish this conclusion. First, the command of marriage is a command of self-denial, for Paul gives the universal call of Mark 8:34 a marital form in Ephesians 5 and makes Christ's self-giving love its pattern. Second, daily obedience to that command makes marriage an instrument of mortification, because the Spirit uses the Word to put to death the self-love that marital duties bring to light. Third, the Spirit also uses what marriage cannot give, since a spouse signifies the believer's final good but never supplies it, and the disappointment that follows exposes a demand the Word names as idolatry.

The Command of Marriage Is a Command of Self-Denial

Self-denial is the condition of discipleship itself. Jesus tells every would-be follower, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"

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[5]Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 88; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 4.19.34.

[6]Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 35; cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 88–90.

(Luke 9:23, ESV).[7] The imperative ἀρνησάσθω means to say no to oneself, and Luke's καθ' ἡμέραν makes the cross a burden carried every day. Calvin calls the denial of ourselves the sum of the Christian life, and he names the root that this denial attacks. Human beings rush so blindly into love of self that "there is no other remedy than to tear out from our inward parts this most deadly pestilence of love of strife and love of self."[8] The self Christ commands His disciples to deny is this φιλαυτία, the love of self that sets itself against God and neighbor.

Paul gives this universal command a marital form in Ephesians 5. The household instructions begin with a participle, ὑποτασσόμενοι, "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21), which depends on the imperative πληροῦσθε, "be filled with the Spirit" (5:18).[9] Submission is a mark of the Spirit-filled life before it is a rule of the household, and Paul introduces husbands and wives only after he has described the Spirit's work in the church. Calvin recognizes why the apostle grounds the instruction so deeply. Nothing grates on human pride more than mutual subjection, and so Paul directs believers to the fear of Christ, who alone can subdue that pride.[10]

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[7]Mark 8:34 and Matt. 16:24 have the compound ἀπαρνησάσθω. On the verb as a radical refusal of oneself for the sake of following Christ, see Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Spirit and Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 984. Owen calls mortification the believer's work every day of life. John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 6:9.

[8]Calvin, *Institutes* 3.7.4 (1:693–94). Battles's note supplies the Greek τῆς φιλονεικίας καὶ φιλαυτίας (1:694n9).

[9]Keller makes the same grammatical observation, describing v. 21 as the last mark of a person filled with the Spirit. Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 50–51.

[10]John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854), 317, on Eph. 5:21; cf. William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties: Eight Treatises* (London: John Haviland for William Bladen, 1622), 12.

The husband's form of self-denial takes its shape from Christ: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). The verbs ἠγάπησεν and παρέδωκεν set the pattern in an act Christ has already performed. That act has two aspects which must be held apart. Its redemptive efficacy belongs to Christ alone, and Calvin insists that the consequence of His death, "that by it he redeemed his church, is altogether beyond the power of men to imitate."[11] Its form, however, is binding. The cross cannot be repeated or extended, yet Paul and Peter set it before believers as something to be imitated (1 Pet. 2:21), and Allen notes that the apostles show no hesitation in holding up the most unrepeatable act in redemptive history as the pattern for ordinary love.[12] The comparative καθώς calls for likeness of kind. No husband will ever love as much as Christ loved, and for that reason no husband may conclude that he has loved enough.

The same comparison fixes the measure of the husband's love. Christ loved the church before she was lovely. Bavinck observes that Christ loved a church with nothing lovable in herself, and He loved her at the cost of His own self.[13] A husband's love therefore answers to Christ's measure, whatever his wife's merit or response. Paul then names the goal of Christ's self-giving, ἵνα αὐτὴν ἁγιάσῃ, "that he might sanctify her" (Eph. 5:26).[14] The love Paul

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[11]Calvin, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 319, on Eph. 5:25. Gouge reads καθώς the same way, as likeness of kind without equality of measure, so that husbands can never think they have loved enough. Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*, 44–45.

[12]Allen, *Sanctification*, 285–86.

[13]Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2012), 81, 83; cf. Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*, 415.

[14]Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*, 238–39; cf. Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 124.

commands is aimed at the wife's good. The husband may imitate that aim by caring for his wife's holiness, while the power that sanctifies her remains Christ's alone.

A difficulty follows immediately. Paul continues, "In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself" (Eph. 5:28). If the husband's duty consists in self-denial, why does Paul ground it in love of self? Calvin reads the verse as an argument from nature, that every man loves himself, and no man can love himself without loving the wife who has become one flesh with him (Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:31).[15] That argument requires a distinction between kinds of self-love, and the distinction is an old one. Aquinas holds that a man ought to love himself out of charity, and he separates the good man from the sinner by what each takes himself to be, the one loving the inward man and the other his corrupt and sensitive nature, so that inordinate self-love is the root of every sin.[16] Gouge carries the same distinction into the household. Natural self-love is lawful, and spiritual self-love, wrought by the Spirit, corrects it, but self-love becomes evil when it fixes on our lusts or when it exceeds its measure, "when our loue is wholly and only cast vpon our selues."[17] Paul appeals to the first kind and extends it to the wife, while Christ commands His disciples to deny the last.

The wife's form of self-denial differs in shape and shares the same principle. Paul writes, "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22; cf. 1 Pet. 3:1–6). The phrase ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ directs her submission to Christ, so it answers to Christ before it answers to her husband. Bavinck is candid about what this requires. Her consent in marriage "requires immense,

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[15]Calvin, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 322, on Eph. 5:28.

[16]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), II-II, q. 25, aa. 4, 7; I-II, q. 77, a. 4.

[17]Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*, 80–83; cf. Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 130, who reads v. 28 as a metaphor for health and does not take up the problem of self-love.

continual self-denial, and she easily comes to think that the wishes and demands of her husband are unfair and unreasonable."[18] The duties of husband and wife are distinct and cannot be exchanged. Each duty confronts sin where that duty costs most, so that the husband's love resists self-interest and the wife's submission resists self-will. Neither sin belongs to one sex, since both spouses carry the same corrupt self.

Marriage is one calling among others, and Paul's treatment of singleness confirms that the command beneath it is universal. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul commends the unmarried state "to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:35).[19] Bavinck treats singleness as another way of carrying the cross. God often calls men and women to deny themselves in the matter of marriage and to crucify the flesh, and the cross He places on them is heavy.[20] The single believer and the married believer obey one command on different occasions. Neither state is the higher road, and Bavinck rejects the claim that marriage in itself is a harder route to perfection than celibacy as firmly as he rejects the reverse.

Marriage, then, has a cruciform shape because Christ is its pattern. Both spouses are bound to the self-denial required of every disciple, each in a form fitted to a distinct calling and measured by Christ. The form of the command, however, does not by itself explain how obedience changes the people who render it.

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[18]Bavinck, *Christian Family*, 82.

[19]Calvin, *Corinthians*, 263, on 1 Cor. 7:35, where Calvin denies that celibacy is a state nearer to perfection.

[20]Bavinck, *Christian Family*, 71–73.

The Spirit's Use of Marital Duty in Mortification

A pattern alone sanctifies no one. Marriage does not mortify sin, rather the Spirit mortifies sin, through the Word, as believers by faith bring the Word to bear on the desires their marital vocation exposes. Paul locates the agency precisely: "if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Rom. 8:13). Owen builds his whole treatise on this verse and draws from it the principle that governs everything else. The Spirit is the principal efficient cause of mortification, and "all other ways of mortification are vain, all helps leave us helpless; it must be done by the Spirit."[21] The believer remains active in the work, yet the power belongs to the Spirit from first to last.

Mortification is the Spirit's application of Christ's death to the sin that remains in believers. Samuel Willard defined it as the Spirit's crucifying of indwelling sin by applying to it the death of Christ.[22] Owen explains that sin was slain meritoriously at the cross and wounded at the root in regeneration, but the work of putting it to death proceeds gradually through the whole of the believer's life. Paul accordingly commands those who have been raised with Christ to "put to death therefore what is earthly in you" (Col. 3:5), and he reminds the Galatians that those who belong to Christ "have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24).[23] Union with Christ is the ground of the work, and the Spirit is its immediate agent.

Marriage provides an unusually concentrated setting for this work, first because its obligations do not depend on preference. Bavinck calls marriage a moral institution that no one

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[21]Owen, *Mortification of Sin*, 6:7; cf. 6:20.

[22]Samuel Willard, *A Compleat Body of Divinity* (Boston, 1726), 497–98, quoted in Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:638.

[23]Owen, *Mortification of Sin*, 6:8; cf. Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:634–37.

invented or regulates, an ordinance laid on husband and wife by God.[24] A husband cannot suspend his duty to love when his wife disappoints him, and a wife cannot suspend hers when her husband grows unreasonable. The claim concerns the ordinary friction of two sinners bound together, not abuse or abandonment. The Confession recognizes adultery and willful desertion as grounds for dissolving the bond (WCF 24.5–6; 1 Cor. 7:15), and a spouse who is endangered or deserted is not asked to receive that as a cross. Marriage also places two sinners in an unusually intimate and sustained proximity. Bavinck observes simply, "Often husband and wife are each other's cross," and he adds that faults and weaknesses are nowhere exposed more clearly than in the intimate circle of the family.[25] Permanence keeps the believer under the duty, and proximity keeps the duty in front of him.

Marriage also makes love particular. Love considered in the abstract can remain inexpensive, because it never has to meet a specific need at a specific hour. The household binds the believer to the good of one neighbor in concrete matters, and Gouge's treatise shows how far those matters reach. He gathers the common duties of husband and wife under matrimonial unity and chastity, mutual love, and a provident care that extends to each other's soul, body, good name, and goods. Each of these duties confronts a desire that would otherwise remain hidden. Calvin draws the decisive connection in his treatment of self-denial, writing that "this mortification, then, will take place in us only if we fulfill the duties of love."[26]

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[24]Bavinck, *Christian Family*, 76; cf. Calvin, *Corinthians*, 245–46, on 1 Cor. 7:17.

[25]Bavinck, *Christian Family*, 80; cf. Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*, 393–94.

[26]Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*, 213–14; Calvin, *Institutes* 3.7.7.

A husband who would rather rest than listen to his wife meets a duty that his desire for ease resists. The duty brings the desire into view, and the Word names it for what it is. Bavinck describes Scripture's address to married people in exactly these terms, as a word that presses on their consciences and summons them back to God's law.[27] The Spirit then enables the believer to deny the desire by faith, acting on Christ. Allen states plainly that sanctification flows from faith, because trust in God is what frees a person to answer the call to self-denial that Jesus and His apostles lay down.[28] Repeated over years, that obedience weakens the rule of the desire and conforms the believer to the self-giving love of Christ.

This account must be guarded from a sacramental reading, since marriage works no change by the mere performance of its duties. Owen opposed the monastic disciplines of his day on exactly this ground, insisting that "there is nothing in religion that hath any efficacy for compassing an end, but it hath it from God's appointment of it to that purpose."[29] Marriage is a divinely appointed ordinance, yet even appointed means work only as the Spirit takes them up. For the same reason, difficulty and mortification are not synonyms. The cost that sanctifies a believer may harden an unbeliever, which is why Owen confines the duty of mortification to those already in Christ, and Keller warns that self-denial apart from the Spirit hardens the heart instead of freeing it.[30]

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[27]Bavinck, *Christian Family*, 80; Owen, *Mortification of Sin*, 6:19, 79.

[28]Allen, *Sanctification*, 297–98.

[29]Owen, *Mortification of Sin*, 6:17–18. Calvin's rejection of marriage as a sacrament rests on the same principle: a sacrament is "an outward ceremony appointed by God to confirm a promise," and marriage has no such ceremony. Calvin, *Institutes* 4.19.34; cf. Westminster Confession of Faith 27.4.

[30]Owen, *Mortification of Sin*, 6:6–7; Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 65–66; cf. Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, chap. 9.

The strongest objection concerns the spouse. If marriage is an instrument of one's own sanctification, the spouse appears to become equipment for a private spiritual project, and the self-love the argument opposes returns in a pious form. The objection would succeed against a husband who loved his wife in order to become holy. It fails against the love Paul commands, which aims at the wife's holiness. Gouge states the principle with precision when he writes "true loue hath respect to the obiect which is loued, and the good it may doe thereunto, rather then to the subiect which loueth, and the good that it may receiue."[31] Mortification is the by-product of love directed to the spouse's good. A husband who loves his wife for her sake is being put to death to himself, while a husband who loves her for the sake of his own sanctification has not yet begun.

The cost of marriage, met in faithful obedience, is therefore the material of sanctification. Calvin distinguishes the pure ordinance of God from the punishment of sin that came afterward (Gen. 3:16), so that marriage now mixes bitter with sweet.[32] The troubles of marriage arise from the corruption of the institution. Bavinck draws the practical conclusion that the Christian accepts the adversities and crosses of marriage as a means to exercise faith. "No Christian says that the person is corrupted by marriage, but he confesses that marriage is corrupted by the person."[33] The irritations of marriage belong to the Christian life itself, and the Spirit does much of His work in them.

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[31]Gouge, *Domesticall Duties*, 415; cf. 45, where Gouge says Christ loved the church for her good and happiness.

[32]Calvin, *Corinthians*, 224, on 1 Cor. 7:1; cf. 255, on 1 Cor. 7:28.

[33]Bavinck, *Christian Family*, 79.

The Spirit's Use of Marital Limits in Mortification

The Reformers recovered this account of marriage against the monastic ideal. Calvin read Paul's warning against depriving one another (1 Cor. 7:5) as a rebuke to husbands who fled to the desert and wives who took the veil, since "by loosing the marriage tie, they cast off the Lord's yoke."[34] Holiness was to be sought within the calling God had given, and James Johnson has shown that Gouge's Puritan contemporaries reordered the traditional ends of marriage accordingly, giving mutual help priority over procreation.[35] The recovery left some ascetic habits in place, which Daniel Doriani traces to Greek and Thomist ideals of moderation,[36] and Owen's principle judges that residue as surely as it judges the cloister, since a restraint God has not appointed has no power to mortify. Bavinck gave the tradition its fullest modern form, calling the family a school of life in which virtues are cultivated as in no other school.[37]

Thomas stands with this tradition in his conclusion, and he shares its quarrel with the old preference for celibacy. He describes marriage as a mirror that exposes sin, and he insists that service and sacrifice belong to its purpose.[38] His account of how marriage sanctifies, however, takes its model from the cloister. "This book sees marriage the way medieval writers saw the monastery," he writes, and he invites believers to use marriage for growth as celibates use

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[34]Calvin, *Corinthians*, 227, on 1 Cor. 7:5; cf. Bavinck, *Christian Family*, 70, 87.

[35]James T. Johnson, "English Puritan Thought on the Ends of Marriage," *Church History* 38, no. 4 (1969): 429.

[36]Daniel Doriani, "The Puritans, Sex, and Pleasure," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53, no. 1 (1991): 141–42; Owen, *Mortification of Sin*, 6:17–18.

[37]Bavinck, *Christian Family*, 86, 107–8.

[38]Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, chaps. 1, 7, 11.

abstinence, drawing chiefly on contemplative writers of the Roman and Anglican traditions.[39] When he explains how hardship produces growth, the ingredient he adds is virtue understood as strength, illustrated by the endurance of Abraham Lincoln. At that point Christ has become what Allen, following Christopher Holmes, identifies as the exemplarist error, an instance of a pattern that lies beyond Him which a Lincoln can instantiate as well.[40] Thomas rightly rejects the monastery's ranking of celibacy above marriage, yet his account of how holiness is gained still follows the monastery's pattern of spiritual discipline.

Keller stands much closer to the Reformed account. He identifies self-centeredness as the central enemy of every marriage and attributes its defeat to the Spirit, whose "work of making the gospel real to the heart weakens the self-centeredness in the soul."[41] He calls spouses to root out selfishness as it is revealed, and he describes each spouse as a vehicle for the work Jesus does in the other through the Word. His emphasis on the fullness of Christ's love as the power for self-giving recalls Owen's direction to set faith to work on the fullness laid up in Christ. Keller has recovered in pastoral form much of what the tradition taught as doctrine.

The difference lies in the ordering of ends. Keller summarizes the Christian teaching as "mutual fulfillment through mutual sacrifice."[42] The formula is true as a description of what God often gives, yet as a statement of purpose it carries a risk. If fulfillment is the end that sacrifice serves, self-denial can become a strategy for securing a return, and the self-love it should mortify

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[39]Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, chaps. 1, 9.

[40]Allen, *Sanctification*, 282–83, citing Christopher R. J. Holmes, *Ethics in the Presence of Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 23–25.

[41]Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 56–58, 65, 121; cf. Owen, *Mortification of Sin*, 6:79–80.

[42]Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 47; cf. 58, 60, 133.

survives inside it. Calvin warned that the outward duties of love are fulfilled only by one who performs them from sincere love for the neighbor.[43] The Reformed account orders the self-denial of marriage to conformity with Christ and to the good of the spouse, and it treats fulfillment as a gift God may add, never as the wage the sacrifice earns.

That ordering rests on the eschatological character of marriage. Paul quotes the creation ordinance and then writes, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). Marriage is a sign of a greater union. The Larger Catechism describes that union as the elect being "joined to Christ as their head and husband" (WLC 66), and Allen observes that the catechism's phrase carries both the political sense of headship and the marital closeness of the one-flesh principle of Genesis 2:24.[44] Calvin, who refused to make the verse a proof text for a sacrament, located the mystery in Christ Himself: "The great mystery is, that Christ breathes into the church his own life and power."[45] Every Christian marriage points to that union and to the marriage of the Lamb, for which the bride is even now being made ready (Rev. 19:7; 21:2).

A sign does not outlast the reality it signifies. Jesus teaches that "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Matt. 22:30), and Bavinck concludes that marriage, honorable and sacred as it is, is a provisional state restricted to this age. He treats that limit as a preparation, since earthly marriage images the heavenly marriage and readies the church for it, and the goal of history is a humanity of which Christ is the Head.[46] Paul applies the same horizon

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[43]Calvin, *Institutes* 3.7.7.

[44] Allen, *Sanctification*, 161–62.

[45]Calvin, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 326, on Eph. 5:32; cf. Calvin, *Institutes* 4.19.35–36.

[46]Bavinck, *Christian Family*, 41, 44, 71.

to the married and the unmarried alike, since those who have wives are to live as though they had none, "for the present form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:29, 31).[47]

The Spirit uses the limits of marriage in mortification as truly as He uses its duties, because self-love has two faces. In one face it is reluctance, the refusal to give what love requires, and the duties of marriage confront it. In the other face it is demand, the insistence that a spouse supply what only Christ can give, and the limits of marriage confront it. Calvin observes that many who marry, "having promised themselves unmixed honey," are cast down by the first trouble that comes.[48] Belden Lane finds the same danger in Puritan spirituality. Because the Puritans saw temporal beauty as "an unpolished mirror of eternal Beauty," they knew the risk of "lingering at the enjoyment of the one without pressing on to ecstatic union with the other."[49] A spouse is the nearest of those mirrors, and for that reason the one most easily mistaken for what it reflects. A spouse cannot bear the weight of eternal hope. The disappointment exposes the demand, the Word names it as idolatry, since Paul calls the covetous desire that reaches past what God has given εἰδωλολατρία (Col. 3:5), and the Spirit puts it to death as the believer turns his desire toward the Bridegroom. Keller rightly diagnoses the idolatry of marriage, and the Reformed account adds that God uses the very limits of the spouse to mortify it.[50]

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[47]Calvin, *Corinthians*, 257, on 1 Cor. 7:29–31, where believers use the things of this world as goods lent for a single day; cf. Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 193.

[48]Calvin, *Corinthians*, 259, on 1 Cor. 7:32.

[49]Belden C. Lane, "Two Schools of Desire: Nature and Marriage in Seventeenth-Century Puritanism," *Church History* 69, no. 2 (2000): 374.

[50]Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 42, 72, 198.

Conclusion

The older Reformed tradition explains how marriage makes people holy, and its explanation changes how the cost of marriage is received. A Christian who knows that God has appointed marriage as a school of the cross will not be surprised when it costs him, and he will receive its shortfalls as the place where the Spirit puts to death the demand that a spouse be what only Christ is. The marriage that most fully images Christ is not the one without cost. It is the one in which the cost has been received in faith, until the sign gives way at last to the marriage of the Lamb, where the Bride stands holy and without blemish because her Husband gave Himself up for her (Eph. 5:25–27).

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