

When is Marriage Really Divorce?:

Viewing Marriage as a Little Church in Post-Christian Society

By Thomas T. Turner II

MatterCon 09: A Theological Creativity Event

September 18, 2009

In recent years, as sociological and demographic data has trended sharply toward deviations from the norm of American cultural ideas concerning marriage and the family. Divorce, single families, and non-traditional family arrangements are at all time highs. Compounding the problem, in his sharp critique of American feminism and dualism, Wendell Berry writes in his essay “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine” that modern marriage has more in common with divorce than with marriage:

Marriage, in what is evidently its most popular version, is now on the one hand an intimate “relationship” involving (ideally) two successful careerists in the same bed.... Marriage, in other words, has now taken the form of divorce: a prolonged and impassioned negotiation as to how things shall be divided.... (“Feminism” 34)

Berry comes to this line of thinking because he grounds all of his cultural critiques in economic terms. The center of Berry's philosophy is always the local economy of a community, including the community of marriage, as he opines

a healthy culture is a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration. It reveals the human necessities and the human limits. It clarifies our inescapable bonds to the earth and to each other. It assures that the necessary restraints are observed, that the necessary work is done, and that it is done well.

(Unsettling 43)

Berry gets to the heart of the problem with marriage today as a problem caused by the powerful economically motivated structures within American culture. Marriage has always been the foundation of what we were once taught in middle school as “home economics”: the way a family sustains itself. This economy was thoroughly localized, residing in the home and using products made within the home or purchased from local stores. In the popularized version of

marriage first thought of at the dawn of the industrial revolution and now thoroughly built up to its triumphant climax within our industrialized service based economy, home economics has been replaced with materialism and consumerism. Berry rightly critiques the modern household as having no economic value; it makes no food at home, makes no entertainment, makes nothing that brings joy or culture into the household. Instead, everything about the family has been outsourced to Boston Market, Wi-Fi, Nintendo, and DirecTV. The consuming, non-local, outsourced economy of the modern marriage, under Berry's definition of culture, is a marriage that has no cultural value other than the pleasure.

We exist within a post-Christian culture confused about marriage. Tragically, marriage has been desacramentalized in many parts of the American church and is now held synonymous with American cultural understandings of marriage. Many Christian marriages are no different than American marriage in approach or divorce rates, and the influence of a consumerist culture run by the forces of industrial capitalism on marriage has driven. In effect, marriage in the American church is post-Christian. Thankfully, the American church has a rich and important history of Christian marriage to look back onto for guidance as the larger culture's view of marriage fragments. The only way for marriage to not devolve into divorce within our post-Christian society is to recover the idea of marriage as a little church.

There is an idea of marriage in the early church fathers of marriage as a little church, the smallest body of Christ within the Kingdom. Understanding marriage as a church is to understand marriage as it is recognized in Genesis: "the two became one flesh." Berry elaborates on this sentiment as he counters the modern couple whose marriage is really divorce with a couple that has a sense of "belonging," and hold their possessions "in common": "To them, 'mine' is not so powerful or necessary a pronoun as 'ours'" ("Feminism" 34).

The oneness of the church is the same oneness of marriage: as there is “neither Jew nor Gentile... neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” within the church so to there is no me and you in marriage but only “us,” an economy where all is held in common. The economic collective of marriage as counter to modern conceptions of marriage is praised in Berry's poem “The Country of Marriage” as he writes: “our bond is no little economy based on the exchange of my love and work for yours, so much for so much of an expendable fund” (*Collected* 147). Marriage has an economy, and it is one that mirrors the church in its distribution of equality: marriage, as the church, exists to support all as one body. Possession, within the economy of marriage, is that of holding all things in common in a sustainable community.

To view marriage as a community that can sustain an economy of oneness the sociological function of community from one of *geselleschaft* to one of *gemeinschaft*. Marriage in the American church has been infected by the individualism of American culture and is synonymous with a *geselleschaft* view of a group: the group and the individual are equal in rights and self-interest. The view of marriage the American church has adopted is one of not mutual dependency, modeled on the church, but one of mutual autonomy. The ability for marriage to become a housemate relationship is encouraged by the differentiation of the sexes within most church settings, where men's groups and women's groups are encouraged and the *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* mentality erodes the mutuality and need of the sexes to define one another. The American church instills a separation of genders that does not celebrate their unity in marriage but instead only celebrates difference.

Most of the American church has now journeyed, quite joyously and enthusiastically, to celebrating the individualism of sex, something that runs both counter to our gendered relationships with one another and to the interpretation of love within the Scriptures. Case in

point, *Christianity Today* highlights on their website the "Basics of Sex" within marriage as: "It's possible for each of you to get what you want. Here's how." Sex is seen in this light, and reinforced by male-oriented sermons, as an act where two people are not present in one act of sexual union (here noting union means unity and oneness), but present in two separate acts. Sexual intercourse, in this view celebrated by evangelicalism, is not "intercourse," meaning communication (as if we could even imagine communicating physically within our technological and cerebral world!) but instead makes sexual union a form of mutual masturbation, where both people attempt to arouse themselves at the same time to obtain not maximum unity but maximum pleasure. Tying together the industrial economy of America to the individualism and consumer culture birthed during the 1960s, Berry declares:

It is odd that simply because of sexual freedom our time should be considered extraordinarily physical. In fact, our 'sexual freedom' is mostly an industrial phenomenon, in which the body is used as an idea of pleasure or a pleasure machine with the aim of 'freeing' natural pleasure from natural consequence. ("Feminism" 42-43)

This view of marriage is portrayed within the vivid imagination of Huxley's *Brave New World*. The characters Bernard and Lenina are completely non-physical with one another, their typical dis-utopian sexual experience being formulaic rendezvous of two bodies taught how to elicit pleasure in Elementary Sex classes in all the loving attractiveness of a medical exam. Is this not the reason the two had to completely disconnect from physicality by having sex while "bottled" by soma and hypnotized into contraception? The industrialization of sexuality in a *Brave New World* is the culmination of the stripping of all unity from sex and turning it into an individual, non-physical act of pleasure.

Counter to this post-Christian view of marriage and sexuality is the Scriptural reasoning

of the New Testament authors, who viewed marriage as a *gemeinschaft*, or institution where the community is more important than individual rights and self-interest. This view has been often interpreted wrongly by feminist critics who are not trying to achieve unity within marriage but are merely trying to replicate the male's individuality within marriage and society with female power and autonomy ("Feminism" 37). The individualization of women in marriage, home, and workplace is just as destructive to Christian views on marriage as the centuries long domination of marriage, home, and workplace by males.¹

The term "submission" is indeed the problem here, and where the evangelical church has eroded a proper view of submission is in trying to interpret submission within Christian marriage using the philosophical constructs of the individual found in modern philosophy. Most important for the Christian interpreter is first and foremost to define the terms of Christian marriage not by an outside culture or a bastardized form of culture found in Christendoms but instead to let Christianity exist within its own world as a kingdom in its own right. Here, in a Christological, and not Modernist, interpretation of marriage, submission takes place as Christ submitted himself to the Church and the Church submits itself to Christ. The role of male and female is less important here, and should be easily reversed in argument, for the purpose of highlighting submission is not about power, authority, or headship but instead about unity. Headship must be defined not as power or supreme authority but instead as allowing for *gemeinschaft* (community) within marriage, for the act of mutual submission is toward an oneness of community and not an attempt to corral two autonomous individuals into a workable relationship.

The communitarian or *gemeinschaft* economics of marriage that Berry espouses work toward the reversal of the individuality caused by the repercussions of an industrial economy on the household and how it has redefined marriage in post-Christian society. This view of

marriage counters the industrial/physical and nurturing/emotional dichotomy between men and women, the defining of sex as pleasure, and the division of sex into individual not corporate units.

The marriage bed is a microcosm of the marriage itself, and the purpose and role of sexuality within marriage bears witness to the understanding of marriage within the home. According to Berry, industrialization, and the quest for specialization and division of labor it necessitates, has led to a model for marriage that division of sexual labor. In the *Unsettling of America* Berry exposes the gendered roles men and women as a product of the industrialization of America as it relates to both the national and home economy: “the first sexual division comes about when nurture is made the exclusive concern of women. This cannot happen until a society becomes industrial: in hunting and gathering and in agricultural societies, men are of necessity also involved in nurture” (113). The division of sexuality within marriage into separate spheres of economy and intercourse is an act of “sexual capitalism,” one that places capital into the hands of both individuals instead of into the common fund (118). This “capitalism of love and marriage” is seen as leading to “divorce epidemic” through the changes of cultural dancing from “ring dances, in which all couples danced together” to “ballroom dancing, in which each couple danced alone” to the modern fashions of rock 'n roll dancing “in which each one of the dancers moves alone” (118).² The capitalization of sexuality leads to the individual's act of possession, as Berry opines concerning romance: “the sexual romantic croons, 'you be-long to me.' The sexual capitalist believes the same thing but has stopped crooning” (119). This capitalization of sexuality creates a marriage economy that is not set up for the sustaining of the marriage bond but instead a contractual relationship in which a market is set up to trade sexual capital between individuals in both work (men in industry, women in nurturing or mothering) and intercourse

(men and women seek to please themselves not the other by trading sexual capital). As goes capitalism, so goes the capitalist sex life, so it is no surprise that the consequences of a free market lead to the exploitation of individuals in sex just as the unfettered market gives incentive to those who lack ethics or morality to exploit labor and natural resources to produce capital. Within the market of marriage, “as in that of economics,” writes Berry, “one intends to exploit one's property and to protect it” (119).³ Marriage, if it is to be a *gemeinschaft*, must be viewed as a home economy existing within a local economy. Marriage is a corporate institution in both the home and the neighborhood. The marriage vows unite a couple together as well as uniting them within a vow of fidelity before all other couples. As Berry writes, “the whole community is married, realizes its essential unity, in each of its marriages” (122). Pushing this point further, the sexuality of a couple is an economic reflection of how the home exists within its larger community, whether as a consumerist one or a communitarian one, for “one lives in marriage and in sexuality” just as one lives “in home and in the world” (123).

The modern marriage exists as a consuming entity in an economy of consumption. No power has corroded the American church's understanding of marriage more than consumerism. American consumerism and materialism has become the focal point of marriage. Many married couples use their two incomes so that they can buy as many cars, houses, boats, season tickets, pay-per-view boxing, and Prada purses as possible. The household income has changed from an economic mentality of I must support a household to a consumerist mentality: we must earn capital so that our family can be consumerists. Marriage is seen as a means to an end for the household, a way for both people to tolerate each other enough so that they can both get what they want.

The foundations of a post-Christian, modern marriage must be seen as the foundation of

the household as well. Berry comments:

The modern household is the place where the consumptive couple does their consuming. Nothing productive is done there. Such work as is done there is done at the expense of the resident couple or family, and to the profit of suppliers of energy and household technology. For entertainment, the inmates consume television or purchase other consumable diversion elsewhere. (“Feminism” 34)

The sexual division of the marriage becomes the economic division of the household. Husband and wife are separated by “work”: one or both parents active in specialized industries outside the home so that the home does not create anything: the home becomes only a place of consumption. Consumption culture is the bedfellow of individualism, and the home becomes a place lacking unity (nothing happens within the home except the furthering of individual pleasure and entertainment) where all members of the family become hotel guests in separate rooms, not family members under one roof). The modern home is also a place lacking industry. Nothing is made in the home: no food is grown, no clothing is made, no crafts or art are made, and no work is done within the home. The home is only for consuming, a place with a 100% trade deficit. Consumption is antithetical to belonging and holding things in common. The connection between sexual division and the disunity and consumerist bent of marriages as divorce is the continuation of the dualism of sexual division into a dualistic understanding of the individual in everyday life. “The modern urban-industrial society,” Berry proposes, “is based on a series of radical disconnections between body and soul, husband and wife, marriage and community, community and the earth” (*Unsettling* 137). Theologians have had ample practice in rejecting this type of dualistic mentality in regards to our ontological situation on this earth, that our religious or spiritual lives must not be divorced from physicality or community. This applies to

sexuality in marriage just as it applies to the sacramental theology of the church: if the physical is not equal to immaterial, Gnosticism rises in religion, industrialism and the machine rises in economics, and divorce (or sexual division) rises within marriage. Berry takes feminism to task precisely for this reason: it does not right the wrong of the patriarchal household but instead creates a division between reducing everything to an individual level. This individuality within marriage, a marriage of divorce, is a mode of dualistic disconnect where all suffer “for the same reason: they are in exile from the communion of men and women, which is the deepest connection in the community of all creatures” (*Unsettling* 116).

Dualism has always been opposed within the church by the insistence on the sacramental. that the physical can be made holy. Marriage as a little church best serves as a metaphor for the resacramentalization of the church in a post-Christian society.⁴ Marriage as a little church must be a revolutionary critique of post-Christian, industrialized marriage. As Lundin writes on Berry: “He has long realized that in terms of modern theoretical enterprise...one of the most revolutionary things we can do is to promote a poetics of marriage and the body” (334). The poetics of marriage and body are meaningless in our industrialized, post-Christian culture that neglects the body in pursuit of detached work, consumption, and sexuality. This is why resacramentalization is so necessary, because sacramental is the way to describe “this relationship between practical and spiritual,” or between the practicality of the home and the spiritual understanding of the body as an “individual-in-community”: a sociological unit bound to a larger collective (Peters 329; Franke and Grenz 215). In viewing marriage as a sacrament, marriage exists in post-Christian society as a refuge of community, economy, and unity in a fragmentary world of individualism, consumerism, and sexual division, where marriage is not really marriage but is divorce.

NOTES

¹ Here, under the individualization of men and women within the institution of marriage, do both the views of complementarianism and egalitarianism falter: both views seek, in the end, to justify a Modernist and American view of the individual within marriage. Complementarianism celebrates the differences of individuals, and the right for one individual to be more equal than the others, to paraphrase Orwell. Egalitarianism celebrates not the unity or oneness of male and female but instead insists that both male and female are separate, fully autonomous, and equal individuals. Complementarianism and egalitarianism, though they seem at war with one another, are merely two sides of a Janus coin.

² Dance is often a metaphor of marriage and sexuality, and as art imitates culture the rapid individualization of industrialism led to the erosion of sexual love as being held in the common to one where sexual love was capital individuals possessed as they do dollar bills in their wallets.

³ Adultery within modern marriage is thus an evil not because of a failure to live up to a covenant enacted before a community but because sexual property has been trespassed upon: just as a keep out sign is placed upon real estate.

⁴ For this to happen the church, in a post-Christian society, must reclaim its power as a sanctifying agent to bless marriages that are set apart from the world.

WORKS CITED

Berry, Wendell. *Collected Poems: 1957-1982*. New York: North Point Press, 1987.

---. "Feminism, the Body, and the Machine" *Crosscurrents* Spring 2003: 32-47.

---. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996.

Grenz, Stanley and John Franke. *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*. Louisville: WJK Press: 2001.

Lundin, Roger. "Wendell Berry and the Poetics of Marriage and Embodiment." *Christianity and Literature* 56.2: 333-42.

Peters, Jason. "Wendell Berry's Vindication of the Flesh." *Christianity and Literature* 56.2: 317-32.