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COUNTER COUNTER

FOLLOWING CHRIST
IN AN ANTI-CHRISTIAN AGE

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MODERN HOLOCAUST: THE GOSPEL AND ABORTION

Shamefully silent and appallingly passive.

These are the words that come to mind when I consider my approach to the issue of abortion for the majority of my life as a Christian and my ministry in the church. Until a few years ago, I barely talked about it. I viewed abortion as a political issue about which I had no need to be personally concerned. I failed to realize that abortion is a biblical issue about which I had great need to be deeply concerned. For of all the pressing social issues addressed in this book, abortion poses the most clear and present danger to the most people on a daily basis.

Across the world, more than forty-two million abortions occur every year.¹ That's 115,000 abortions every single day. I find it hard to fathom that number when I look at the faces of my four children each night as I put them to bed. I find it hard to imagine 115,000 other children who that day were introduced

to the world with a tool or pill aimed at taking their lives. And I find it hardest to comprehend how I, for so long, could show no concern for this gruesome global reality.

The worldwide practice of abortion is why I do not believe it is anywhere close to an overstatement to call abortion a modern holocaust. My intention in saying this is in no way to downplay the horror of the Holocaust in the mass murder of six million Jewish men, women, and children over a few short years. But we're talking here about the massacre of forty-two million unborn children every single year. And just as German Christians should not have ignored the reality of what was happening in concentration camps across their country, I should not have ignored—and American Christians must not ignore—the reality of what is happening in abortion clinics across our country and around the world. As multitudes of babies are dismembered and destroyed daily, this is clearly an issue where the gospel requires us to counter culture.

FOR ALL OF US

Abby was in her early twenties. She had grown up in a Christian home, attended a Christian school, and had even joined a church. But a relationship with Christ was far from a reality in Abby's life. Instead, she was consumed with her work and caught up in the pleasures and pursuits of the world. She met a man who captivated her thoughts and quickened her emotions, and before long they had given themselves to each other. Everything was going great.

Until Abby discovered that she was pregnant and he was gone.

In an instant, it seemed as though the world had come crashing down around her. *This can't be*, she thought. *I can't have a baby. My reputation will be ruined, my family will be shamed, and*

my career will be over. Enveloped by panic and gripped with fear, Abby saw a lone solution to her problem—only one way out of her predicament.

One Friday afternoon, Abby walked into an abortion clinic. Within a couple of hours, her problem was solved and her predicament taken care of (or so she thought). The following Monday morning, she returned to business as usual and life as normal, hiding the secret of what she'd done as if nothing had ever happened.

Abby is not alone when it comes to abortion in America. Conservative estimates reveal that approximately one-third of American women have had (or will have) an abortion at some point in their lives. In light of this, I realize that various Abbys with abortions in their past are likely reading this book right now. Some of these women have never shared that secret with anyone else. Abortion has been called a silent killer—not only of babies but of moms who possess deep wounds and dark scars from past history.

So I want to be sensitive to women who have had abortions. I do not presume to know all that may go through your mind and your heart as you read what I'm writing. I lean on good friends who have had abortions and who have shared with me that their deepest comfort has come not in minimizing the severity of abortion before God but in magnifying the reality of grace from God. That, more than anything, is what I want to do. I want to be clear about how a holy God views abortion, but I want to be equally clear about how a loving God views you in the gospel.

Moreover, my aim in this chapter is not simply to write for women who have had abortions. I hope also to speak to women who have thought about aborting a baby in the past, who may be thinking about aborting a baby in the present, or who might ever think about aborting a baby in the future. In addition, this

chapter is not only for women who are able to bear children; it is for every Christian who lives in a culture marked by abortion. My hope in the pages ahead is that every follower of Christ might see how the gospel informs our thinking on abortion, and that in so doing, we might be compelled not by way of party politics but by way of gospel passion to speak clearly and stand boldly against abortion in the church, in our country, and around the world.

GOD AND THE UNBORN

As you read through the Bible, you won't find the word *abortion* anywhere. But that doesn't mean Scripture is silent about it, for the core truths we've already seen in the gospel concerning who God is, who we are, and what Christ has done speak directly to the issue of abortion.

Consider the way the Bible describes the relationship between God and an unborn baby. The psalmist writes to God:

You formed my inward parts;

you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works;

my soul knows it very well.

My frame was not hidden from you,

when I was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw my unformed substance;

in your book were written, every one of them,

the days that were formed for me,

when as yet there was none of them.

PSALM 139:13-16

As we read these words, we're reminded of the core gospel truth that God is the Creator. He alone has the power and authority to give life. Elsewhere in the Bible, Job says, "The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (Job 33:4). He also says, "In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind" (Job 12:10).

God is not only the Giver of life; he is also the Taker of life. Again, Job confesses, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away" (Job 1:21). God himself declares, "I put to death and I bring to life" (Deuteronomy 32:39, NIV). This is why murder and suicide are both sins. It is God's prerogative alone, as Creator, to give and take innocent life.

In light of these biblical realities, it becomes abundantly clear that abortion is an affront to God's sole and sovereign authority as the Giver and Taker of life. Abortion, like murder or suicide, asserts human beings as the ones who control life and death. But God the Creator alone has the right to determine when someone lives and dies, and abortion flies directly in the face of his authority.

Abortion is not only an affront to God's authority as Creator; it is also an assault on his work in creation. Did you hear the psalmist describe the beauty of the way God forms the "inward parts" of a baby in a "mother's womb"? As the psalmist reflects on God's work in the womb, he responds in an outburst of worship: "I praise you! I am fearfully and wonderfully made!" The way God creates people compels praise.

These verses are all the more stunning when we realize that the psalmist came to his conclusions without knowing so many of the details that we know today concerning a baby's development. The psalmist didn't necessarily know how God takes an egg and a sperm and brings them together. How a few weeks later, often

before a woman even realizes she is pregnant, a human heart is beating and circulating its own blood. Within a few more weeks, fingers are forming on hands and brain waves are detectable. Before long, these "inward parts" are moving. Kidneys are forming and functioning, followed by a gall bladder, and then by the twelfth week, all the organs of a baby boy or girl are functional, and he or she can cry. All of this occurs within three short months—only the first trimester! A heart, a brain, organs, sexuality, movement, reaction—and the Creator of the universe is orchestrating all of it! This work of creation evokes awe and amazement.

So then, imagine in this moment of creation inserting a tool, taking a pill, or undergoing an operation that takes the very life God is developing and destroys it. Most abortions occur between ten and fourteen weeks of gestation—what is described as the "optimal time" for dismemberment and removal. Abortion is without question an assault on God's grand creation of a human life. There is no way around it.

Our lives and language testify to this. When I think about the journey my wife, Heather, and I have walked, including years of physical infertility, I remember the pure joy that filled our hearts when we found out that she was pregnant. Finally, a baby was living inside of her—the beginning of life for a boy who now reads every book put in front of him and runs around my house doing taekwon do moves on me and the rest of our family. From the very beginning, we talked about our son like he was a person. He was never a clump of tissue that could become our son if we chose to have him. He was our child from the start, and we loved him as such.

Similarly, I think about Chris and Melody, two close friends whose two kids are the joy of their lives. One is entering college, and the other is just starting elementary school. Between

the births of these two children, Melody miscarried four times. Chris and Melody don't speak in terms of losing tissue. Instead, they speak at their most vulnerable moments, through many tears, of losing treasured babies whom they loved and longed to raise.

Chris, Melody, my wife, and I are not alone in the way we think and speak about what is happening in the womb. Even abortion advocates join with us, albeit unintentionally, in talking about unborn babies as exactly that: *babies*. I remember when reports announced that Princess Kate of England was pregnant. Even the most secular news outlets immediately began talking about the child in the womb as an heir to the throne. They made much of the significance of this baby, and no one spoke in terms of a "blastocyst" or "blob of cells." We would loathe the journalist who dared to use such language. But doesn't the dignity we conferred on a "royal" baby apply also to countless other "ordinary" babies whose lives are no less significant?²

THE KEY QUESTION

The key question that we all must answer—and the question that determines how we view abortion—is this: What is contained in the womb? Is it a person? Or is it merely an embryo, a fetus? Virtually every other question and every single argument in the abortion controversy comes back to this question: What, or who, is in the womb? And once this question is answered, everything else comes into perspective.³

Think about it. As Gregory Kousser points out, "If the unborn is not a human person, no justification for abortion is necessary."⁴ And some people contend this. They will say that the unborn is not a person or that the unborn is merely a person who has the potential to become human (whatever that means).

Again, if this is true, the argument is over; no justification for abortion is necessary.

However, as Koukl writes, "If the unborn is a human person, then no justification for abortion is adequate."⁵ Many people say, "Abortion is such a complex issue, and there just aren't any easy answers." But if what is in the womb is a person, then even if someone is pro-abortion or pro-choice for any number of reasons, all of their reasoning falls apart. Regardless of where you currently stand on the abortion issue, imagine for a moment that the unborn *is* a person formed and created by God himself. If this is true, then think through the primary arguments for abortion.

"*Women have a right to privacy with their doctors.*" Without question, we all have a right to some measure of privacy. Yet our laws regularly override people's privacy when another person's life is in question. No woman or man has a right to a private conversation with a doctor to conspire how to end someone else's life. If the unborn are people, then we must protect them, regardless of what that means for someone's privacy.

"*Women should have the right to choose.*" Yet we all agree that no one should have unlimited rights to make choices. If toddlers or teenagers become burdensome or expensive, parents don't have the right to eliminate them. Similarly, then, when it comes to abortion, the real question is not whether a woman has a choice, but whether that woman actually has a human being that God recognizes as a valuable person in her womb. If so, then a moral duty to honor life supersedes the personal hardship that might come due to pregnancy. Choosing to terminate innocent life is by definition choosing to murder.

Indeed, the primary issue in the debate over abortion is the identity of the unborn. Listen to Gregory Koukl describe a little girl named Rachel, a daughter of a family friend:

Rachel is two months old, but she is still six weeks away from being a full-term baby. She was born prematurely at 24 weeks, in the middle of her mother's second trimester. On the day of her birth Rachel weighed one pound, nine ounces, but dropped to just under a pound soon after. She was so small she could rest in the palm of her daddy's hand. She was a tiny, living, human person. Heroic measures were taken to save this child's life.

Why? Because we have an obligation to protect, nurture, and care for other humans who would die without our help—especially little children. Rachel was a vulnerable and valuable human being. But get this . . . if a doctor came into the hospital room and, instead of caring for Rachel, took the life of this little girl as she lay quietly nursing at her mother's breast, it would be homicide. However, if this same little girl—the very same Rachel—was inches away resting inside her mother's womb, she could be legally killed by abortion.⁶

To any reasonable person, this makes absolutely no sense. Abortion is utterly ludicrous *if* this is a child in the womb.

Everything—everything!—revolves around what is happening in a mother's womb, and Scripture is clear: that womb contains a person being formed in the image of God. Any distinction between the unborn and a person (or a human and a person, for that matter) is both artificial and unbiblical. God recognizes the unborn as a person and designs the unborn for life from the moment of conception. While our culture is continually pushing against this idea, it is not possible to believe the Bible and deny that the unborn are persons. And once followers of Christ accept this, we can no longer sit idly by while people are mercilessly murdered in their mothers' wombs.

WONDERFUL WORKS

Abortion not only assaults God's work in creation, it also attacks God's relationship with the unborn. One of the wonderful things about Psalm 139 is the glimpse we get into how God relates to a child in the womb. He is intimately involved in the life of that baby from the moment of conception—and even before that! God tells Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you" (Jeremiah 1:5, NKJV). The psalmist says to God, "You are He who took Me out of the womb . . . from My mother's womb You have been My God" (Psalm 22:9-10, NKJV). Scripture speaks about how God calls, names, and blesses children while they are still in the womb (see Galatians 1:15; Isaiah 49:1; Luke 1:15). The Bible even describes a baby leaping with joy in the womb (see Luke 1:39-44)! God reminds us in his Word that though an unborn baby is visibly hidden from us, he or she is not hidden from him. God sees children in wombs all across the world right now, and he is personally forming, fashioning, knitting, creating, nurturing, shaping, and crafting them in wonderful ways (see Job 31:15; 10:8-12).

Unfortunately, this biblical view of God's relationship with the unborn is more and more at odds with what our culture believes to be true. Much of the contemporary defense for abortion denies that these works of God in the womb are all that wonderful. Abortions in America often occur because children are seen as inconvenient. Childbearing and child rearing are too costly. It's too much for women in certain situations to handle. It's inadvisable for women in other situations to undertake.

With the advancement of medical technology that enables us to detect gender before birth, people in countries around the world now have the choice to abort children based on this

revelation. China, for example, limits the number of children each family can have, and it's advantageous to have boys, which subsequently leads to the abortion of many girls. In India, it's much more expensive to have a girl (because a family will lose money on her dowry), so families who find out the child in the womb is a girl will often choose to discard her.

Do we believe this is right? Aren't all children, regardless of gender, wonderfully made in God's image? And if it's not right for people to discard girls in China or India for the sake of their convenience, then why is it right for us to discard children in America for the sake of ours?

This is not only an issue when it comes to the sex of a child but also when it comes to disability in children. It is possible for us to determine whether a baby in the womb is at risk for Down syndrome or other disabilities that will affect his or her life. So should abortion be permissible in such circumstances? Again, not if we actually believe all of God's works are wonderful.

Consider the man born blind in John 9. Most of the Jews who knew this man would have considered his disability a sure sign of sin in either his life or his parents' lives. So the disciples ask Jesus, "Whose fault is this?" Jesus answers them, "This is not his or his parents' fault, but this happened so that the wonderful works of God might be revealed to and through him." Jesus reveals that this man was born blind so that one day he might see, know, declare, and delight in the glory of Christ.

I in no way claim to know all the difficulties associated with disabilities. My wife and I have invested time and resources in a special-needs orphanage in China, where we have seen and served boys and girls with severe disabilities. Closer to home, we have walked alongside various families in our church who have taken heart-wrenching journeys with children with disabilities. I think of Thomas, a teenage boy with Down syndrome who for

years has come up to me almost every Sunday, shaken my hand, given me a hug, and told me all about his week. And I just can't get Thomas out of my mind when I hear a pediatric geneticist at Boston Children's Hospital report that "an estimated 92 percent of all women who receive a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome choose to terminate their pregnancies."⁷ We're killing 90 percent of the Thomases in our culture.

Based on Scripture, I beg us not to deny the wonderful work of God even (or especially) in disability. Even when we don't understand it, God has a design and a desire to use everything for our good and his glory (see Romans 8:28), and it is not only wrong but also foolish to play god in such situations by essentially saying that we know better than he does.

Likewise, God's works are wonderful even (or especially) in the midst of difficulty. People ask, "Well, what about cases of incest or rape? Is abortion justifiable then?" Once again, I don't claim to know what it is like to be in such a situation. I shudder at the horror of rape happening to my wife or to any other woman, for that matter. I cannot imagine the physical and emotional toll such a situation brings upon a woman and her family.

Yet we come back to the fundamental question: Is the baby in the womb a person? If so, then our entire perspective changes. Would we murder a child *outside* the womb because he or she was conceived by rape? Of course we wouldn't. Then why would we murder a child *inside* the womb? Why should we punish a child for the father's crime (see Deuteronomy 24:16)?

How, after all, should we treat an innocent child who reminds us of a terrible experience? The answer is clear: with love and mercy.

But people will say, "Have you no care for the emotions of the woman?" Again, I cannot imagine what that woman has gone through emotionally. Without question that precious woman needs compassionate women and men around her to love her,

support her, and serve her in every way possible. But think about it this way. If the rapist were caught, would we encourage this woman to murder him in order to get emotional relief? Surely not. Then why would we encourage her to murder an innocent child in the name of emotional relief?⁸

On this question, I find myself particularly going against the culture, for even the most socially conservative politicians today would never say that abortion should be illegal in cases of rape or incest. But I am not a politician. I am a follower of Christ, and I am confident of this: the God of the gospel has a proven track record of working all things, including evil things, for his good purposes. He took Joseph's brothers' attempt to murder him and turned it into the preservation of multitudes of people. He used incest to eventually bring about the very birth of Jesus Christ (see Matthew 1:3). Ultimately, God took the murder of his Son and turned it into the means of our salvation.

The gospel proves that we can trust God. All of his works, even those we least understand, are wonderful, and he has the power, love, goodness, and grace to give you and me all that we need to persevere through difficulty. And in the end, he promises to turn all of our mourning into dancing and all of our suffering into joy.

GOD THE JUDGE

Abortion is an affront to God's authority as Creator, an assault on God's work in creation, and an attack on God's relationship with the unborn. Once we realize the severity of abortion before God, the implications of the gospel for abortion become clear.

Remember God's character. He is the holy and righteous Judge of all, and he hates injustice. He detests the taking of innocent life, and he is the Judge of all who participate in it. God is

the Judge of mothers who have aborted babies, fathers who have encouraged abortion, grandparents who have supported abortion, and friends who have advised abortion. God is the Judge of doctors who have performed abortions, leaders who have permitted abortions, pastors who have counseled people to have abortions, and legislators who have worked to make abortion possible.

This includes President Barack Obama and an ever-increasing host of other leading politicians in my country who are proactively and aggressively working to keep the murder of innocent children legal. I venture cautiously into the political arena with no desire to support a party line. Rather, I want to speak biblical truth, for Scripture is not silent on abortion, and it is not silent on government's role in it.

In Romans 13, the Bible addresses the role of civil authorities and our responsibility to them:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. ROMANS 13:1-4

The Bible teaches that God has given us government for our good. Government exists under God's authority. According to God's design, government is to reflect the morality of God, who cares for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, and the vulnerable who are least able to protect themselves. The fundamental

purpose of government under God is to promote the good of all its people.

Government does this by making and enforcing laws that reward good and punish evil. Many people today say, "It's not the government's job to legislate morality." This is a sham argument, though, and we all know it. The state not only has the right but also the responsibility to legislate morality. The state should most definitely say that stealing, lying, murder, and a host of other things are wrong. This is foundational to its purpose. Government imposes morality on people every day, and this is a good thing.

Other people say, "It's not the role of government to take away people's right to choose." But this is absolutely the role of government. You cannot choose to steal: if you do, there will be consequences. You cannot choose to do a whole host of things there are laws against, and it is good that government has made those laws. If everyone chose to do whatever they wanted, the inevitable result would be anarchy. It's moral silliness and cultural suicide to say that government shouldn't take away people's right to choose.

What matters is what we're choosing. Someone should have the right to choose Mexican or Chinese food for dinner, or where to live, or what kind of car to drive. Of course we are pro-choice on these and thousands of other things. But we aren't pro-choice about rape. And we aren't pro-choice about burglary. We aren't pro-choice about kidnapping children. So why should we be pro-choice about killing them?

If you are a Christian, I plead for you to step out of a muddled middle road that says, "I may not choose abortion, but I don't think we should take away others' right to choose it," and to realize how inconceivable it is for us to stay silent while millions of children—individuals made in the image of God—are

disembled and destroyed around us in the world. Such thinking is not enlightened tolerance; it is sinful indifference. Moral and political neutrality here is not an option for us. Randy Alcorn put it best when he said, "To endorse or even to be neutral about killing innocent children created in God's image is unthinkable in the Scriptures, was unthinkable to Christians in church history, and should be unthinkable to Christians today."⁹

As I said earlier in the book, we cannot pick and choose which issues we will address and which we will be silent on. If we believe the gospel, then we must speak out against the injustice of abortion. For God is not only the Judge of parents who have abortions, doctors who perform abortions, and politicians who permit abortions, but he is also the Judge of church members and leaders who do nothing about abortion. And as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I am the chief of sinners on this issue. For far too long, I have been guilty of selective injustice when it comes to abortion, and I desperately need God's grace.

REDEEMED AND RESTORED

Thankfully, God has given such grace—to me, to you, to all of us—in the gospel.

Remember: God is not only the Judge of sin, but he is also the Savior of sinners. God is the Judge who loathes abortion and the King who loves even those who participate in it, so hear this good news. To anyone and everyone who has ever aborted a child, supported abortion, encouraged abortion, performed abortion, permitted abortion, or done nothing about abortion, may the following realities lodge deep within your soul.

God forgives entirely. "As the heavens are high above the earth, so great is [God's] mercy toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our trans-

gressions from us" (Psalm 103:11-12, NKJV). God says, "I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (Isaiah 43:25). "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The good news of the gospel is that when we turn from our sin and trust in Christ, we find that he has paid the price for any part we have ever played in abortion, and because of his cross, we are entirely forgiven.

God not only forgives entirely, but he also heals deeply. God does not desire for you or anyone else to live with the pain of regret. It is altogether right to hate sin in your history. The pain of past sin is often a powerful deterrent to future sin, but don't let it rob you of the peace God has designed for you in the present. Remember what Jesus said to a woman who had lived an immoral lifestyle: "Your sins are forgiven. . . . Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:48-50). God desires that peace to be yours today.

He forgives entirely, he heals deeply, and he restores completely. To all who trust in Christ, remember this: in Christ you are not guilty, and there is no condemnation for you. This is true whether you have had one abortion or five. This is true whether you have medically performed thousands of abortions or legally permitted millions. You do not walk around with a scarlet A on your chest, for God does not look at you and see the guilt of abortion. Instead, he looks at you and sees the righteousness of Christ. God restores, and he redeems. Even as we saw earlier, God has a track record of working all things, including evil things, ultimately for good.

Remember Abby, whom I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter? For years she kept the secret of her abortion to herself. But on the weekend that her husband proposed to her, she decided she needed to tell him what she had done years before

they met. He listened graciously, and they chose to keep it a secret between them for the next eight years. No one else knew.

Until one day Abby and her husband were talking with some friends who told them about the freedom and forgiveness found in the gospel. Abby knew about Christ and had grown up in church, but the words of Isaiah 61 had never clicked in her mind and heart. In a passage that Jesus would later quote in reference to himself, the Bible says, "The LORD . . . has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound . . . to comfort all who mourn . . . to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit" (Isaiah 61:1-3).

For the first time, Abby realized why Christ came and died on the cross. He came to heal the broken hearts of people just like her by freeing them from their bondage to sin and shame. For fifteen years Abby had done all she could to cover her past in order to have others' approval. Now, for the first time, she knew that in Christ she had God's approval, regardless of her past.

The freedom Abby has experienced now propels her to lead a ministry in the church that reaches out to women who have had abortions. She has received training on how to wisely, carefully, and compassionately come alongside these women to serve and support them. She puts this training into practice on a regular basis with groups of women in the city. In addition to leading other women in the church, Abby is actively involved in public efforts to minimize abortions in the city, specifically counseling pregnant women who are considering abortions, sharing her own story, and telling them there is another way to solve their "problem." She does all of this together with her husband and two children—a beautiful daughter, who runs up to me with a huge smile to hug me every time I see her, and a wonderful son,

whom I had the opportunity to help coach in basketball. It is a priceless picture to see this woman who once thought abortion had permanently stained her past and forever stolen her peace now transformed by the gospel, and to watch God use her quite literally to save countless children's—and women's—lives.

EVERY ONE WORTH IT

As I bring this chapter to a close, I think about a mom who lives in one of those countries of the world where baby girls are not favorably looked upon. Over thirty-five thousand children are ripped from wombs every day in China, and over half of the women there have had at least one abortion.¹⁰ Some of these abortions are voluntary; others are mandatory. Government officials enforce abortion to ensure population control. Women in rural villages are routinely checked to make sure they neither are pregnant nor have given birth recently.

I don't know all the details about this particular mom, but I do know that when she became pregnant, she believed she was not able to take care of her child. Yet she refused to have an abortion. Instead, she brought her child to term and gave birth to a precious little girl on her own.

Then she took that newborn baby girl, wrapped her in a light-blue cloth, placed her in a brown paper box, and in the middle of the night laid her in front of an orphanage for children with special needs. The orphanage found this baby girl the next morning and conducted a search for her mother, only to come up empty.

Though I don't know who that mom is, I thank God for her. Because of her courage to refuse abortion, and because of her compassion for the unborn, a little girl was able to live. And every day when I come home from work, that little girl comes running up to me with a smile spread across her face, jumps into

my arms, yells, "Daddy!" and gives me the biggest bear hug you can imagine.

Every one of these children is worth it. May we have the conviction, compassion, and courage to do everything we can to stop the modern holocaust around us.

FIRST STEPS TO COUNTER CULTURE

Pray

Ask God to:

- End the injustice of abortion in our country and around the world.
- Forgive you for whatever part you have played in abortion.
- Convict those in positions of power to use their influence to end abortion.

Participate

Prayerfully consider taking these steps:

- Write to your representatives in Congress and clearly and respectfully lay out why abortion in this country must stop.
- Work with ministries or participate in events (e.g., Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, 40 Days for Life, prayer walks) that seek to uphold the value of unborn human life.
- Volunteer with a crisis pregnancy center in your city to aid in their work of showing women in desperate situations that there are options other than abortion.

Proclaim

Consider the following truths from Scripture:

- Psalm 139:15-16: "My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the

depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."

- Proverbs 24:10-12: "If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small. Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, 'Behold, we did not know this,' does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his work?"
- Matthew 19:14: "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.'"

For more (and more specific) suggestions, visit CounterCultureBook.com/Topics/Abortion

A PROFOUND MYSTERY: THE GOSPEL AND MARRIAGE

Definitions of terms are extremely important.

I was preaching in Germany one day, and a group of new friends asked me, “Do you want to play football with us this afternoon?”

I enjoy football—both watching it and playing it. In high school and college, my friends and I used to spend our weekends throwing the ball outside and playing pickup games. “Count me in!” I told them excitedly.

To my surprise, when I got down to the field, I didn’t find tall goalposts and a brown ball with pointy ends. Instead, I saw two goals with nets on them and a round, black-and-white ball. That’s when I remembered: football in Europe (and most of the rest of the world) is a lot different from my American understanding of football. I call their kind of football *soccer*.

Football. Same term, different definitions. And definitions of

terms affect the decisions we make. Football is a simple, relatively inconsequential, example of this (though had I known I'd agreed to play soccer with a group of European friends who are experts in the sport, I may have come to the field with a little less enthusiasm!). But there are other more significant, extremely consequential examples of this as well. As we considered in chapter 3, one's definition of a *human* has huge ramifications for one's view of abortion. How terms like this are defined by a culture determines much about how people not only make decisions but also lead their lives in that culture.

So how does one define *marriage*?

This question lies at the heart of a moral revolution in our time and culture. For millennia, civilizations have defined marriage as an exclusive, permanent union of a man and a woman. Two decades ago politicians in our country voted across party lines to defend this definition of marriage in what was called the Defense of Marriage Act. Yet in June 2013 the Supreme Court of the United States struck down key provisions of that Act, paving the way for the complete redefinition of marriage across our culture. In the days that followed, states began officially defining marriage according to different terms, now notably allowing same-sex relationships to be classified as so-called marriages. Such state decisions were then confirmed in June 2015, when the Supreme Court officially legalized so-called same-sex marriage across the United States, requiring all states to issue and recognize marriage licenses for same-sex couples.

As if these Supreme Court rulings were not enough of a paradigm shift, the majority opinion written in one case by Justice Anthony Kennedy asserted that the men and women who originally voted for the Defense of Marriage Act were acting with the intent to harm. In their minority opinions, Justices John Roberts and Antonin Scalia both acknowledged how the majority court

was painting supporters of marriage as it has been defined for millennia as “bigots” who sought to “demean,” “disparage,” “humiliate,” and “injure” same-sex couples. In a sweeping decision, the Supreme Court of our country thus redefined “an aspect of marriage that had been unquestioned in our society for most of its existence—indeed, had been unquestioned in virtually all societies for virtually all of human history” while simultaneously defining proponents of traditional marriage as “enemies of the human race.”¹

The court's decisions in 2013 and 2015 represent only one part of a much larger trend away from traditional marriage across our culture that has taken place over many years. Though it's difficult to obtain precise data, census figures project that nearly half of all first marriages will end in divorce.² And that's if men and women even decide to marry. The number of cohabiting couples in our culture has nearly quadrupled over the last thirty years as more and more singles postpone or put aside marriage altogether.³ Lifelong marriage between a man and a woman is clearly on the decline. According to Mark Regnerus, over the past forty years, “the number of independent female households in the U.S. has grown by 65 percent, while the share of independent male households has skyrocketed, leaping 120 percent. As a result, fewer than half of all American households today are made up of married couples.”⁴

All of these realities cause us to wonder, *Is marriage really that important in the first place? And what's the problem with redefining it? Are we really going to say it's wrong for two men or two women to marry each other? Isn't it more wrong (maybe even hateful) to deny two men or two women the right to love one another like this? In the words of one “Christian” leader who advocates the redefinition of marriage, “God [is] pulling us all forward into a greater realization that we need more love. . . . We need more people who are*

committed to each other. It's not good for us to be alone. So this is a huge moment when I think lots of us are realizing the old way of seeing things doesn't work."⁵

So is the discussion of marriage in our culture simply a matter of moving on from an "old way of seeing things" to a new way of seeing things? Is marriage merely a tradition that is open to changing with the times? Or is marriage an institution that was ordained to be consistent through all time?

More foundational than each of these questions is how the gospel applies to marriage. What has the Creator God said about marriage? Have we turned aside from what he has said? Does Christ's death on the cross have anything to do with how we define marriage? And what does it mean for followers of Christ to live in a culture that often defines marriage differently than the Bible does? If we're willing to ask these questions honestly, we need to be ready for surprising answers. More important, we need to be prepared to counter the culture around us in significant ways.

MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM

Our understanding of marriage is built upon our understanding of sexuality. According to our culture, sexual differences are merely social constructions. Sure, men and women have physical distinctions, but even these can be altered or disregarded, if we prefer. Even if we maintain an understanding of human beings as distinctly male and female, we view them as equal—and by equal, we mean identical. Consequently, it makes complete sense for a man to marry a man or a woman to marry a woman, just as it makes sense for a man to marry a woman. There is no difference since we are identical—so our culture says.

But what does God say?

The first two chapters of Genesis record complementary accounts of human creation. Genesis 1 tells us, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (verse 27). The dignity of men and women is on display from the start. Nothing else in all creation, not even the most majestic angel, is portrayed "in the image of God." Men and women alone are like God, but not in the sense that we share all of his qualities. He is infinite; we are finite. He is divine; we are human. He is spirit; we are flesh. Yet in a way that nothing else in all creation can, men and women share certain moral, intellectual, and relational capacities with God. We have the power to reason, the desire to love, the ability to speak, and the facility to make moral decisions. Most important of all, men and women have the opportunity to relate to God in a way that dogs and cats, mountains and seas, and even angels and demons can't. As soon as God creates man and woman, he immediately blesses them, beginning a relationship with the only beings in all the created order who resemble him.

This is where any Bible-informed conversation about men and women must begin: with men and women *both* created with equal dignity before God and each other. We previously explored what this reality means for slavery in chapter 5, but we must also consider what equal dignity means for how we understand sexuality. Men and women *both* share in the inexpressible worth of creatures formed in the image of God himself. In this way, God speaks loudly from the start of Scripture against any sort of male or female superiority or dominance. Near the end of Scripture, God refers to men and women as fellow "heirs . . . of the grace of life" (1 Peter 3:7). According to God's design, men are never to be perceived as better than women, and women are never to be perceived as inferior to men. God abhors any treatment of men or women as inferior objects to be used or abused.

For all of eternity, no gender will be greater than the other. No one should feel superior or inferior by nature of being a man or a woman. Both are beautifully—and equally—created in the image of God.

But not *identically*. Equal dignity does not eliminate distinction. Genesis 1 makes clear that God creates humans uniquely male and female, and he does it for a reason. Right after he blesses them, he commands them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28). This command is only possible by virtue of the peculiarity of male and female. Multiplication would have been impossible if God had created humans male and male or female and female. God’s unique design enables them to carry out his command.

Moreover, this divine design involves far more than the capacity to reproduce (as important as that is). There is something greater than mere biological accident or evolutionary adaptation going on here. God creates man and woman to cherish their shared equality while complementing their various differences.

Genesis 2 provides a more close-up picture of how God initially creates man. God forms him from the dust, breathes life into his nostrils, and places him in the Garden of Eden. God parades animals before him, tasking him with assigning names to each of them. The point of this procession is to make clear to man that he is alone—that there is no one else like him. As man looks at each animal, considering monkeys that march their nature, he realizes, *None of these match my nature*. He sinks back in solitude, and for the first time in the Bible, we read, “It is not good” (Genesis 2:18).

Keep in mind that this is before sin has entered the world. Throughout Genesis 1, there is a constant interchange between earthly creation and heavenly declaration. God creates light, and he declares it good. God creates the land and the water, and he

declares them good. God creates the sky and the planets, the animals and the plants, and he declares them all good. But one thing is not good. Man is alone.

So God says, “I will make him a helper fit for him.” When man falls asleep, God performs the first surgery, taking a rib from man. Obviously God doesn’t need to do this. Just as he has created man from dust, he can create woman the same way. But he doesn’t. Instead, God takes a rib from man’s side, and he forms a woman. When the man opens his eyes, he is stunned, to say the least. The first recorded human words are poetry, as the man sings,

This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.

GENESIS 2:23

Don’t miss the magnificence of this scene. God brings man to realize that he needs someone equal to him, made with the same nature that he possesses but different from him, in order to help him do things he could never do on his own. This is precisely what God gives to man in woman, and the stage is thus set for the institution of marriage. In the very next verse, we read, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).

Behold the beauty of God’s design for man, woman, and marriage. Two dignified people, both molded in the image of their Maker. Two diverse people, uniquely designed to complement each other. A male and a female fashioned by God to form one flesh, a physical bond between two bodies where the deepest

point of union is found at the greatest point of difference. A matrimony marked by unity in diversity, equality with variety, and personal satisfaction through shared consummation.

CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

None of this was haphazard. From the beginning of time, God designed marriage in this way for a purpose. That purpose was not fully revealed until Jesus died on the cross, rose from the dead, and instituted the church. After all of this, the Bible looks back to the institution of marriage and asserts, "This mystery [of marriage] is profound, and . . . it refers to Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32). When God made man, then woman, and then brought them together in a relationship called marriage, he wasn't simply rolling dice, drawing straws, or flipping a coin. He was painting a picture. His intent from the start was to illustrate his love for people.

This revelation stunned men and women in the first century, and it should shock us in the twenty-first century. Moreover, it is momentous for the way people understand marriage in any culture. Whether Greco-Roman citizens then or American citizens today, most people view marriage as a means of self-fulfillment accompanied by sexual satisfaction. A man or woman's aim is to find a mate who completes him or her. In this view, marriage is an end in itself, and sexual consummation is a celebration of such completion.

Yet the Bible teaches that God created marriage not as an end but as a means to an end. While personal enjoyment and sexual pleasure are part of God's good plan for marriage, God's purpose does not stop there. For God created the marriage relationship to point to a greater reality. From the moment marriage was instituted, God aimed to give the world an illustration of the

gospel. Just as a photograph represents a person or an event at a particular point in history, marriage was designed by God to reflect a person and an event at the most pivotal point in history. Marriage, according to Ephesians 5, pictures Christ and the church. It is a living portrait drawn by a Divine Painter who wants the world to know that he loves his people so much that he has sent his Son to die for their sins. In the picture of marriage, God intends to portray Christ's love for the church and the church's love for Christ on the canvas of human culture.

So how is this picture portrayed? The Bible explains, saying, "The husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior." Moreover, "as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands" (Ephesians 5:23-24). In other words, God designs husbands to be a reflection of Christ's love for the church in the way they relate to their wives, and God designs wives to be a reflection of the church's love for Christ in the way they relate to their husbands.

But talk about countercultural! Or maybe more aptly put, talk about politically incorrect! *The husband is the head of his wife? Wives should submit to their husbands? Are you serious?*

God is serious, and he is good. In our limited understandings, we hear words and phrases like the ones in Ephesians 5, and we recoil in disgust. But if we pause for just a moment to consider the picture of marriage from a gospel perspective, our reaction may be different.

When the Bible says that "the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church," we immediately need to ask the question, "What does it mean for Christ to be the head of the church?" The Bible answers that question by saying, "Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word. He

did this to present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:25-27, HCSB).

What a breathtaking picture. For Christ to be the head of the church is for Christ to give everything he has for the good of the church. Christ takes responsibility for the beauty of his bride, ready to lay aside his rights and willing to lay down his life for the sake of her splendor.

So this is who God has designed a husband to be: a man who gives everything he has for the good of his wife. A man who takes responsibility for the beauty of his bride, ready to lay aside his rights and willing to lay down his life for the sake of her splendor. God has designed a husband to be the head of his wife like this so that in a husband's love for his wife, the world might see a picture of Christ's love for his people.

I think about Don, a husband I watched serve his wife, Gwen, through terminal cancer. In the years preceding Gwen's diagnosis, it was clear that Don cherished his wife. But when Gwen began a thirteen-month journey that eventually led to her death, I watched Don lay down his life, in every way he knew how, to serve her. He walked alongside her, waited on her, took her to appointments, and attended to her every need. He put himself aside, prioritizing his wife more than his own life in a way that powerfully portrayed the way Christ put himself aside on a cross, prioritizing his church more than his own life.⁵

Likewise, "as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands" (Ephesians 5:24). As soon as we hear the word *submission* alongside the previous picture of *headship*, we immediately think in terms of inferiority and superiority, subordination and domination. But that's nowhere close to what the Bible means with these terms. As we've already seen, God made clear from the start that men and women

are equal in dignity, value, and worth. Submission is not about denigrating the value of another's life. Instead, this biblical word means to yield to another in love.

Such submission throughout Scripture is a wonderful, if not inevitable, component of human relationships. I am a dad, for example, with four children. They are in a position of submission in their relationship to me (though they unfortunately don't always acknowledge it!). But this is a good position for them as I love, lead, serve, protect, and provide for them. Their submission to me in no way implies that I am superior to them. Instead, their submission shows that they trust my love for them.

Such submission is not limited to human relationships; it's also true of the divine. The Bible describes one God revealed in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These three persons of the Trinity are equally divine. The Father is fully God, the Son is fully God, and the Spirit is fully God. They are all equally worthy of eternal worship, with no person in the Godhead superior to another. Yet the Son submits to the Father. Jesus says, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34). When facing the cross, Jesus pleads, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me." But then he prays, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).

Not insignificantly, in another instance where the husband is described as the head of his wife, the Father is also described as the head of the Son: "The head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Corinthians 11:3). Certainly this doesn't mean that God the Father is dominating and that God the Son is cruelly forced into compulsory subordination. Rather, the Son gladly submits to the Father in the context of close relationship.

This, then, is what the Bible means when it talks about

the church submitting to Christ. As followers of Christ in the church, we are in a position of submission to Christ. Is this a bad thing? Certainly not. It's a great thing! Christ loves, leads, serves, protects, and provides for us, and we gladly submit to him in the context of close relationship with him.

God has designed marriage to display this relationship. God desires people to know that following him is not a matter of begrudging subordination to a domineering deity. God longs for people to know that following him is a matter of glad submission to a loving Lord. So he calls a wife to submit to the loving leadership of a husband who lays down his life for her good. And as this portrait of marriage is portrayed all around the world, God shows men and women that he can be trusted to lead them by his love.

I think about Clint and Katie, friends of ours who recently moved their family to another city. Clint is a doctor, and an opportunity arose to join a practice with a former coworker in a completely different place. When he first mentioned the idea to Katie, she was hesitant. She had a variety of concerns and a list of questions about whether they should go. Clint listened to his wife, empathized with her concerns, and addressed her questions with wisdom and care. After many discussions and much prayer, Clint believed God was leading them to move, and Katie supported his decision. But it wasn't because Katie wanted to move. In reality, she was still hesitant with remaining concerns and questions about the unknown, and if it were up to her alone, she would not have moved. But she trusted Clint's loving leadership of her life and their family, and she gladly moved where he was leading them. Many people in our culture would call Katie weak, and some might even say that she should have stayed, with or without Clint. But Katie knows that God has designed her marriage to be a picture of what it looks like for people to trust

his loving leadership and to gladly follow wherever he guides, regardless of whether they fully understand what he is doing. In turn, she knows that Clint will continue to love and serve her amidst the challenges of adjusting to a new place, and in so doing he will demonstrate the way Christ loves his people.

This is why biblical marriage is worth defending in the face of cultural redefinition, and this is why biblical marriage is worth displaying even when it may mean cultural confrontation. For God established marriage at the beginning of creation to be one of the primary means by which he illustrates the gospel before a watching world. As husbands sacrifice their lives for the sake of their wives—loving, leading, serving, protecting, and providing for them—the world will get a glimpse of God's grace. Sinners will see that Christ has gone to a cross where he has suffered, bled, and died for them, that they might experience eternal salvation through submission to him.

They will also see in a wife's relationship to her husband that such submission is not a burden to bear. Onlookers will observe a wife joyfully and continually experiencing her husband's sacrificial love for her and then gladly and spontaneously submitting in selfless love to him. In this visible representation of the gospel, the world will realize that following Christ is not a matter of duty. Instead, it is a means to full, eternal, and absolute delight.

THE DISTORTION OF GOD'S DESIGN

Unfortunately, this is not the picture of marriage that the world most often perceives. And the primary reason is not the laws in various states, or even the decisions of the Supreme Court. The primary reason the gospel is not clear in marriage across our culture is that the gospel has not been clear in marriage across the church.

I'm not talking here only about the divorce rates and cohabitation patterns among self-professing Christians. Data on these realities is hard to nail down for a variety of reasons,⁷ yet numbers themselves would fail to tell the stories that lie beneath the surface—stories of how God's plan and pattern for marriage to portray the gospel have been denied, distorted, and disparaged in the lives of those who claim to follow Christ. In the words of Francis Schaeffer,

Evangelicalism is deeply infiltrated with the world spirit of our age when it comes to marriage and sexual morality. . . . There are those who call themselves evangelicals and who are among evangelical leadership who completely deny the biblical pattern for male and female relationships in the home and church. There are many who accept the idea of equality without distinction and deliberately set aside what the Scriptures teach at this point.⁸

But even this should not be altogether surprising in light of the first few chapters of the Bible. For the first sin occurred not as a reaction to a generic temptation but as a response to a gender-specific test. The serpent's design in deceiving the couple in Genesis 3 was a deliberate subversion of God's design in creating the couple.

In Genesis 2, before God has even created the woman, God tells the man not to eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (see Genesis 2:16-17). God thus entrusts the man with the responsibility of carrying out the divine command. Yet in Genesis 3, the serpent approaches not the man but the woman. He converses with her while the man does nothing (see Genesis 3:1-6). Instead of taking responsibility for protecting

himself and his wife from temptation, the man sits silently by—like a wimp. Then, when God confronts him in his sin, the man has the audacity to blame his wife (see Genesis 3:12). In all of this, the world witnesses the first spineless abdication of a man's responsibility to love, serve, protect, and care for his wife.

Stories of such spineless abdication are all too common among professing Christian men and their marriages today—husbands who have refused to take responsibility for loving, serving, protecting, and providing for their wives in every way possible. Sure, through a job a man may rightly and responsibly provide for the physical needs of his wife, but if he is not careful, that same job often prevents him from providing for her spiritual, emotional, and relational needs. He comes home and can't put his phone down or e-mail aside. He turns on the TV, surfs the Internet, or tinkers in the garage—whatever it is, he manages to maintain his physical presence in the house while creating emotional distance from his wife. He never asks how she feels, and he doesn't know what's going on in her heart. He may think he's a man because of his achievements at work and accomplishments in life, but in reality he's acting like a wimp who has abdicated his most important responsibility on earth: the spiritual leadership of his wife.

This is the story among many men who have decided to marry, not to mention other men who have ignored marriage altogether. I'm not talking here about those God has called to maximize singleness for the spread of the gospel (see 1 Corinthians 7), which I will address in a moment. I'm talking about men in their twenties and thirties who dwell in perpetual adolescence that revolves solely and selfishly around *them* and what *they* want to do. Maybe it's the guy who is ten years into his undergraduate studies and hasn't taken a wife because he has no idea where he would take her. Or maybe it's the guy who works part-time while he plays video games the rest of his time, leaning on his parents

or others in the church to help him pay his bills. He's trying to "find himself," which means he doesn't take responsibility for himself, and he's certainly not willing to take responsibility for anyone else. Or maybe it's the guy who works hard at his job in order to advance himself in the world, but he never takes time to consider how he might deny himself in order to lay down his life for a wife. In all his attempts to be successful according to our culture, he fails to consider how God may be leading him to commit less of his time to a career and more of his time to a marriage. Such warped pictures of singleness are yet more evidence of the tendency among men to abdicate the responsibility God has given them to love a wife in a way that displays Christ's love for the church.

The pendulum can swing, though, from a man's spineless abdication of his responsibility to his wife to a selfish abuse of authority over her. One of the effects of sin in Genesis 3 is the tendency for a man to rule his wife in a forceful and oppressive way that denigrates woman's equal dignity with him. It is as if a man says, "Okay, I'm not going to be a wimp; instead, I'm going to *dominate* my marriage."

This is one of the primary reasons why *submission* and *headship* are such unpopular and uncomfortable terms for us today—because we've seen the dangerous ways these ideas have been exploited. Particularly in marriage, we think of men who mistreat their wives emotionally, verbally, and even physically in order to show they are in control, men who selfishly use their wives to get what they want when they want it, no matter how their wives feel or how their wives are affected. This, of course, is not how Christ loves the church and is nowhere close to what the Bible means by submission and headship. Yet this is exactly what many men are communicating to the world about submission and headship.

The corresponding effects in women's lives are clear, and wives find themselves susceptible to a sinful distortion of God's design for them. When the woman receives the penalty of her sin in Genesis 3:16, God tells her that as a result of sin, not only will her husband be tempted to oppress her, but she will have a tendency to oppose him—to work against him and his role in marriage. A wife will also be prone to do what she wants when she wants, regardless of what her husband says or does. *He's not in charge; I am*, she'll think, as she defies not only her husband but ultimately her God.

See how the work of Satan in Genesis 3 is a foundational attack not just upon humanity in general but specifically upon men, women, and marriage? You can almost imagine the adversary laughing as he thinks, *Now I've created confusion that will forever muddle their marriages*—a confusion that will also ruthlessly misrepresent the gospel. For husbands will waffle back and forth between abdicating their responsibility to love and abusing their authority to lead. Wives, in response, will distrust such love and defy such leadership. In the process they'll completely undercut how Christ's gracious sacrifice on the cross compels glad submission in the church.

COUNTERCULTURAL MARRIAGE

So what does it look like for Christians to counter culture in the area of marriage? Surely personal, not political, action is the primary starting point. To be sure, none of us (including me) has the perfect marriage, and all of us have distorted God's design in some way, whether in past or present marriages or sin amid singleness. But the gospel is good news for all.

I think of Bob and Margaret, who each married early, divorced quickly, and then found themselves together in a second marriage

that was on the verge of collapse. Yet by God's grace, they came to understand the gospel, and they realized the role of marriage in illustrating that gospel. Forty long, hard, good years later, they're still illustrating it. I think of Andre, who loved his wife Emily even when she committed adultery; through his Christlike forgiveness and patience, they (and their children) now enjoy one another in a resentment-free family that testifies to God's glory. Though our culture neither cultivates nor encourages such grace-saturated, gospel-centered approaches to marriage, these men and women know (and show) that God is able to redeem and reconcile this most important of relationships, and he is willing to strengthen and sustain all who will trust in his ways and live according to his Word.

We have seen God's clear command to husbands: "Love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). This is the first of four times in the matter of nine verses that husbands are commanded to love their wives in Ephesians 5. Love them unselfishly, the Bible says. Our culture tells us to defend ourselves, assert ourselves, and draw attention to ourselves, yet Christ compels us to sacrifice ourselves for our wives. Headship is not an opportunity for us to control our wives; it is a responsibility to die for them.

This means, husbands, that you and I don't love our wives based upon what we get from them. That's how the world defines love in marriage. The world says that you love your wife because of all her attractive attributes and compelling characteristics, but this is a dangerously fickle love. For as soon as some attribute or characteristic fades, then love fails. Husbands, love your wives not because of who *they* are, but because of who *Christ* is. He loves them deeply, and our responsibility is to reflect his love.

Now obviously we don't do all that Christ has done—namely, we don't die for the sins of our wives. Yet we do live to serve them

and to see them grow in Christlikeness. We are accountable for loving our wives in such a way that they grow in loveliness. Just as Christ takes responsibility for the spiritual health of his church, we have responsibility for the spiritual health of both our wives and our marriages.

Imagine the captain of a navy ship falling asleep on his watch. As he sleeps, a rebellious sailor runs that ship into the ground. Is the sailor guilty? Absolutely. Is the captain responsible? Without question. In a similar way, the Bible is not saying a wife is not guilty for sin in her own life. Yet the Bible is saying a husband is responsible for the spiritual care of his wife. When she struggles with sin, or when they struggle in marriage, he is ultimately responsible.

For this reason, God calls a man to "nourish" and "cherish" his wife, "just as Christ does the church" (Ephesians 5:29). The language of Scripture here is evocative. A husband is to treasure, encourage, build up, and comfort his wife. He is to take the initiative in tending to his wife, not waiting for her to approach him and say, "There are some problems in our marriage that we need to talk about," but going to her and saying, "How can I love you and lead our marriage better?" I regularly ask my wife that question, and she is usually able to answer without any hesitation! I share that to make clear that in all this talk about marriage, I have so much room to grow. Yet I want to grow, not only because I love my wife, but also because I want to show an accurate picture of Christ in our culture.

Husbands, realize what is at stake here: you and I are representing Christ to a watching world in the way we love our wives. If we are harsh with our wives, we will show the world that Christ is cruel with his people. If we ignore our wives, we will show the world that Christ wants nothing to do with his people. If we leave our wives, we will show the world that Christ deserts his

people. What pictures are our marriages giving to our culture about Christ's relationship with his church?

Similarly, wives, revere Christ through respect for your husband. Hear God's wisdom in the final verse of Ephesians 5: "Let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband" (verse 33). Notice how the husband is commanded to love his wife, yet the wife is commanded to respect her husband. Now obviously that doesn't mean that love and respect should not both be expressed by a husband and a wife, but God's Word is subtly yet clearly pointing out that God has created women with a unique need to be loved and men with a unique need to be respected.

Women often find it easier to love their husbands than to respect them. A woman can sit with other women and speak about her husband disrespectfully, but then quietly go home and care for his needs. Why? Because she loves him. But the more important question is, does she respect him? So also when a wife is trying to work on a troubled marriage, she may tell her husband that she loves him, which is what she would like to hear. But again, the more important question is, does she respect her husband, and does she tell him that she respects him?

A wife may think, *Well, my husband doesn't work hard enough or do enough to earn my respect.* Might such a wife be buying into the unbiblical lie that respect is based purely upon performance? In the same way that a husband's selfless love for his wife is based upon God's charge to him, isn't a wife's selfless respect for her husband based upon God's charge to her?

So wives, see yourselves in a complementary, not competitive, relationship with your husband. Yield to leadership in love, knowing that you are representing the church's relationship to Christ. If you disrespect your husband, you show the world that the church has no respect for Christ. If you do not pursue your

husband, you show the world that Christ is not worth following. If you sleep around on your husband, you show the world that Christ is not satisfying enough for his people.

For that matter, if you are single, for the sake of the gospel, don't sleep around with any man or woman who is not your husband or wife. We will explore God's clear command for single brothers and sisters to flee sexual activity outside of marriage in the next chapter, but suffice it for now to say that it is appalling today to see young, single evangelicals, who are often most passionate about social issues like poverty and slavery, simultaneously undercutting the social fabric of marriage through sex outside of marriage. According to one "nationally representative study of young adults," close to "80 percent of unmarried, church-going, conservative Protestants who are currently dating someone are having sex of some sort."⁹ If this is you, then I beg you to stop and see how God has mysteriously and gloriously designed this one-flesh union in marriage to display the love of Christ for the church. If you do not stop, even in all your action on behalf of the poor and enslaved, you will undermine the gospel you claim to believe while mocking the heart of the God you claim to worship. As we've seen throughout this book, we cannot pick and choose where to obey God.

Along these lines, Scripture speaks clearly to single men and women. For those who have a strong sexual desire for marriage, God's Word exhorts single men and women to be married (see 1 Corinthians 7:2). The onus here is particularly upon men, whom God has designed to take the initiative in the marriage relationship. Without question, this call to pursue a wife goes against the grain of current cultural trends that minimize the importance of marriage. Yet part of why God made us male and female is to pursue marriage over and above the comforts of this world and our careers in this world.

At the same time, Scripture also contains exhortations to singles who are waiting for a husband or wife as well as to men and women whom God specifically calls to singleness. The apostle Paul put himself in the latter category, even saying, "I wish that all were as I myself am" (1 Corinthians 7:7). "In view of the present distress"—the persecution and perversion that surrounded Paul in first-century culture—he advocated remaining single in favor of "undivided devotion to the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:26, 35). Scripture thus encourages every man and woman who is single, as long as they are single, to maximize the potential of singleness through commitment to Christ and his commission in the culture around us.

All of this is good for us. It is good for husbands to lay down their lives for their wives, and in losing their lives, to find them, just as Jesus promised (see Matthew 10:38-39). Moreover, it is good for wives to receive this love and respect their husbands. I have yet to meet a wife who didn't want to follow a husband who was sacrificially loving and serving her. Finally, it is good for a single man and a single woman to join together in a supernatural union that God designed to satisfy them both. Yet as long as they remain single (which may be their entire lives, as it was for Christ and has been for many Christians throughout history), it is good to maximize such singleness through purity before God and with a passion to spread the gospel.

Ultimately, all of this is glorifying to God. He has sent his Son to die for sinners, and he has set up marriage to reflect that reality. When we understand this, we realize that marriage exists even more for God than it does for us. God has ultimately designed marriage not to satisfy our needs but to display his glory in the gospel. When we realize this, we recognize that if we want to declare the gospel, we must defend marriage.

ONCE AND FOR ALL

For these reasons, it is altogether right to be grieved about the redefinition of marriage in our culture. So-called "same-sex marriage" is now recognized as a legitimate entity in the eyes of our government. Such a designation by a government, however, does not change the definition God has established. The only true marriage in God's eyes remains the exclusive, permanent union of a man and a woman, even as our Supreme Court and state legislatures deliberately defy this reality. Without question, we are living in momentous days—momentous in devastating ways.

Yet all is most definitely not lost. The opportunity for gospel witness in contemporary culture is far greater now than it was even a couple of years ago. As spiritual darkness engulfs the biblical picture of marriage in our culture, spiritual light will stand out even more starkly in the portrait of a husband who lays down his life for his wife and a wife who joyfully follows her husband's loving leadership. Be sure of this: God's design for marriage is far more breathtaking and much more satisfying than anything we could ever create on our own. The more men and women manipulate marriage, the more we will discover that "this kind of marriage" or "that kind of marriage" will not fully gratify us, for only the King who designed marriage is able to finally (and eternally) satisfy us.

Furthermore, we have much reason to be confident in the resilience of marriage as God has defined it. After all, it has been around since the beginning of time (see Genesis 2:24-25). Jesus himself affirms the foundational reality of marriage in the fabric of God's creation (see Matthew 19:1-12). Moreover, marriage will be around at the end of time. Sure, it won't look the same as it does now, for this earthly shadow will one day give way to its eternal substance. On that day, Christ will be united completely

with his church, and all of heaven will shout, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:6-7). John writes in the book of Revelation, "The angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, 'These are the true words of God'" (verse 9).¹⁰

Based upon these "true words of God," we need not worry about whether marriage is going to make it. Ultimately, we do not look to any court or government to define marriage. God has already done that, and his definition cannot be eradicated by a vote of legislators or the opinions of Supreme Court justices. The Supreme Judge of creation has already defined this term once and for all. *Marriage* does not morph across cultures the same way that *football* does; for *marriage* is a term that transcends culture, representing timeless truth about who God is and how God loves. The call and challenge for us is to live according to such truth in the time and culture in which he has placed us.

FIRST STEPS TO COUNTER CULTURE

Pray

Ask God to:

- Empower you to be pure, faithful, and selfless in your own marriage or in your singleness.
- Strengthen the church's witness to the beauty of the gospel and to the biblical pattern of marriage.
- Change the hearts and minds of legislative and judicial bodies on the issue of so-called same-sex marriage.

Participate

Prayerfully consider taking these steps:

- Humbly ask the leadership of your church to address the topic of marriage through the preaching and/or teaching ministries of the church.
- Offer to talk to, pray with, or meet with individuals you know (of the same gender) who are struggling in their marriage.
- Vote for political candidates who support a biblical view of marriage and actively encourage them to continue their support.

Proclaim

Consider the following truths from Scripture:

- Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."
- Ephesians 5:22, 25: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. . . . Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."
- Hebrews 13:4: "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous."

For more (and more specific) suggestions, visit CounterCultureBook.com/Topics/Marriage