

MARRIAGE AS INTERPERSONAL

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Marriage is a specialized interpersonal relationship. Whatever we know about personal associations in general applies most crucially to matrimony. The products of love and the ways of expressing and developing it apply to marriage more than anywhere else because of the intensity and all-inclusiveness of that relationship. Marriage is primarily interpersonal with added distinctives.

Marriage involves complementary relationship. The ultimate concept in marriage is oneness, not *sameness*. Husband and wife have complementary capacities in the full range of human personhood and complementary roles in their operation as a socio-physical unit.

Marriage involves interdependent relationship. The emphasis is on oneness, not *equality*. Oneness contrasts with equality as the ultimate concept in marriage. Equality implies two-ness, but marriage stresses the complete, permanent, and exclusive relationship epitomized in the one flesh of Genesis 2:23-24. Nevertheless, men and women have equal worth because they are both persons who individually and corporately bear the image of God in themselves and in their “married-ness.” In their oneness they are interdependent. Paul pictures this matter by a combination of historical and natural facts: woman was created from man and man is born by woman (1 Corinthians 11:11-12).

Marriage involves hierarchical relationship. As there is oneness and order in the trinity that forms the one God, so also there is oneness and order in the marriage that forms the one flesh. In all personal relationships, as much as possible happens by personal interaction governed by love. Leadership, parenting, marriage, and other group activities have structure added to social dynamics for the sake of good order. Responsibilities are assigned to avoid confusion about who does what. Authority is not appealed to unless social factors do not suffice. That order does not affect the demeanor of the persons toward each other. They simply recognize who is being held responsible for what. In marriage, God holds the husband ultimately responsible for the support and success of the family, and the wife conducts herself with that in mind.

The fact that interpersonal process transcends any legal elements involved provides the key for understanding how “*husband as head of wife*” does not demean wife any more than “*Father as head of Christ*” demeans Christ, or “*parent as head of child*” demeans child, or elders as head of congregation demeans laity. “Demeaning” refers to “*lessening the worth and meaning of*” wife, children, laity, women. The value of persons does not derive from status,

station, or ability, but from being in and acting according to the image of God, conforming to his purpose, and fulfilling the responsibilities husband and wife have in the corporate situation.

However, as with all cases where order overlays relationship, the responsibility is limited to matters involved in the goals of the group. Order does not annul relationship (Galatians 3:7). Improperly functioning order interferes with relationship. Respect and love do not exclude each other in marriage any more than in parenting. As to attitude the husband operates from love: “husbands love your wives.” The emphasis falls on love and self-giving, not order (Ephesians 5:25).

Unlike most personal associations, marriage is all-inclusive. It calls for sharing all aspects of each including the physical bodies. The interpersonal finds physical expression in sexual relationship; so neither has exclusive right over his or her own body (1 Corinthians 7:4). In a way the compenetration of personalities bears analogy to physical relationship, tangibly reinforcing the corporate identity experienced in this deepest of all human relationships.

The priority of personhood and the quality of personal relationship in marriage is illustrated in an unfortunate way by the failure of marriages between physically attractive partners, equally capable people. “Beauty is only skin deep.” Even in those cases where the marriage fails partially because of the physical condition of either spouse, that lack of attentiveness to physical matters—hygiene, sexual relations, appearance—itself reflects a lack of love for the other person.