

## **Marriage as an Honorific Estate**

by Theodore Plantinga

"Let marriage be held in honor among all ..." (Hebrews 13:4 RSV). These familiar words of Scripture do not fall into the apple-pie category of sentiments that everyone claims to embrace. The difficulty is that they contain a contested universal term, namely, marriage.

Have you heard of "contested universal terms"? Perhaps not. But I suspect you know what they are, even though the phrase might not ring a bell with you. They are words used in a social and cultural setting in such a way that people are inclined to argue about them. An example is the word "art." Someone may say, pointing to a twisted mass of metal, "You call *that* art? That's just junk." Art is a universal or general term applicable to many particular items, items to which a host of other general terms are also potentially applicable. And it is a disputed term, because such arguments take place often. Whether this or that particular item can properly be called a work of art is not just a matter of fact.

In my philosophy classes I explain the notion of contested universal terms and usually use art as an example, in passing. I also use the example of church, and in this connection I appeal to the Reformed creeds. The Belgic Confession makes a distinction between the "true" church and the "false" church (see Articles 28-29). In the Westminster Confession we read: "The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture [impurities] and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan."

[NOTE 1]

Not everything that calls itself church can lay valid claim to the title. If a group of students organize some worship activities under the rubric "church in the gym," does their activity count as church? Is a chapel service at a Christian college a *church* service? I remember that when I was a boy we children liked to play church; I enjoyed taking the role of the minister. I also recall that whereas the adults were somewhat amused when they overheard us, they were likewise concerned about our "playing church." There seemed to be something wrong with it. We also played at marriage -- you be the mommy, and I'll be the daddy.

It seems to me that there is some semantic connection between "playing" and "playing around." If we are to observe the Scriptural injunction that marriage must be held in honor, there should be no "playing around." Most would take this rule to mean that married persons are to have no romantic entanglements outside the marriage. But there is another possibility to be considered, namely, engaging in quasi-marital conduct which, in the long run, undermines what Christians have traditionally taken marriage to be.

Perhaps such a possibility has never occurred to you. Maybe you are wondering: do people actually do this sort of thing -- "play around" with marriage? Yes indeed, although sometimes they are not aware of what they are doing. Today it is no longer simply the case that a given couple in a relationship (a man and a woman, let's say) either are or are not married.

My thesis and concern in this essay is that the normative meaning of the term marriage is being weakened in our time. Marriage is becoming an honorific term and estate. I do not mean to assert that the current situation is unique in history; I do not know enough about the history of marriage to make such a pronouncement. But I see it happening, and I believe society is weakened thereby.

We need to restore some of the normative force and substance that has drained out of marriage in recent decades, in part because of changes in the law. We might conclude that Christians are on their own in this regard, since many non-Christians seem quite happy with the recent developments. To the extent that this is indeed the case, my essay is intended for -- and aimed at -- Christians, especially those who are concerned that marriage be held in honor.

The problem I am discussing, namely that marriage is becoming an honorific term and estate, has not been thrust upon us by a secular society that is ultimately unsympathetic to Christian teaching on social matters. The reason why we should not simply blame "secularism" is that part of the problem can be traced to Christian teaching and practice -- indeed, to the Christian teaching concerning marriage itself. "And what is that teaching?" you might ask. When I was a teenager I knew, or I *thought* I knew. I knew there was some Biblical advice on how husbands and wives ought to relate to one another; being immature and unmarried myself, I had only a general grasp of such teaching. What I knew and could recite in greater detail, however, was our position on divorce and remarriage.

Now, at this point I must be a bit more specific and mention that I was not then (nor am I now) a formal adherent of "Christianity in general." Rather, I was

affiliated with a certain fellowship of churches (the Christian Reformed denomination in North America), and it was this denomination's teaching that I could recite. Indeed, I recall that this was a topic for presentation at a young people's society meeting. We weren't even married yet, but we were already talking about the circumstances under which we would be able to seek a divorce!

Now, there are some interesting implications in the Christian teaching on divorce and remarriage; almost never do we hear them drawn out explicitly. But they are needed for the case I wish to make here. The most important of them is that some people (including Christians) who *claim* to be married are *not* really married. Because their divorce was not legitimate (in terms of church teaching, at least), their second marriage cannot be recognized as such. In my own denomination and in many others, marital status became an issue in relation to eligibility for church membership -- and even more so in relation to church office, especially the offices of elder and minister of the Word. A man whose marital status was questionable could not serve as an elder or a minister, and it was thought by some that he really did not belong in the local congregation at all; it might even be hinted to him that he would get a warmer reception if he joined a more liberal church.

These practices imply that not all marriages are equal. There are some marriages about whose legitimacy and standing there can be no question. But some other marriages are under a cloud -- because of a messy divorce, or because there was a remarriage apart from church approval. It was as though the local body of believers was saying, "We really don't know what we have here -- whether it counts as a marriage or not." Those who got into such messy situations seemed to be letting the side down. We did not think of them as holding marriage in honor.

The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Jewish traditions have also faced these issues; their practice also demonstrates that marriage is a contested universal term. In the Roman Catholic world, we find the phenomenon of annulment, which means, on the face of it, that some relationships that claim the status of marriage turn out not to be marriages at all when they are closely inspected.

The Roman Catholic world is famous for not countenancing divorce. Some people regard annulment as the Roman Catholic version of divorce, but that is not what is intended. A divorce really cannot be recognized by the (Roman Catholic) church, and the divorced person (having obtained his divorce from the state) is not eligible to remarry. If he remarries apart from the church's

approval, he is living in sin (adultery) and is not eligible to receive the sacrament.

In the Jewish world, there are interesting regulations regarding valid Jewish marriage. Those regulations are relevant to one status and identity as a Jew. If certain conditions were not met (perhaps the rabbi who officiated at the wedding cannot properly be recognized as a rabbi competent to conduct weddings), the marriage is no real marriage in Jewish terms. This might mean that the children are judged to be "mamzers" or bastards who are not really part of the Jewish community.

During the Holocaust, the Nazis had some ideas of their own as to what made a person Jewish and therefore a candidate for slaughter, but those ideas are not accepted in Orthodox Jewish circles. In many cases, the problem begins with a marriage that is not marriage. Thus we see that in Jewish circles, too, not all self-proclaimed marriages are equal. Some people who think they are fully and properly married are not. Even in a seemingly modern country like Canada, the factors create difficulties for Jews. [NOTE 2]

During a wedding ceremony we usually hear words to the effect that since God has joined this couple together, let no man try to break them up. This proclamation is a reinforcement of the "let marriage be held in honor" message. The ground mentioned is interesting: since *God* has joined the bride and groom together, we are to regard their union as sacred. We read in Scripture: "What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." [Mark 10:9; see also Matthew 19:6]

A question arises in the minds of the curious: *which* marriages are God-joined? One is tempted to say: "All of them." And this is indeed the position taken by Andrew Kornes, a pastor in the Church of England (Anglican, in Canadian terms, or Episcopalian, in American terms). Kornes has written a stimulating book on issues relating to divorce and remarriage, which I hereby recommend. [NOTE 3] His claim that all marriages are God-joined is not made lightly, as though he were wearing rose-colored glasses through which he observes that since all marriages are made in heaven, all are destined to succeed. Kornes writes: "This does not mean of course that there are no foolish marriages that should never have been entered into in the first place. But it does mean that even in these cases, God recognizes these marriages; indeed he validates them" (p. 289).

Kornes tells us: "Marriage is permanent (until broken by death) whether marriage partners recognize it or not ..." (p. 320). We should never really

accept a divorce (see pp. 179, 234, 284, 433). What we call divorce is really to be understood as a separation (see pp. 234, 437). In the Christian church we need to recognize that divorce in the sense of separation will sometimes take place, but this does not mean that the divorced parties are free to be remarried to other partners (see pp. 215, 231, 235, 243, 257, 286, 302, 307).

A somewhat less severe but still significantly stern position is the standard teaching in many Reformed churches. For example, Cornelis Van Dam, in a recent study of these issues that pays special attention to Old Testament data, affirms and defends the position of the denomination with which he is associated (Canadian Reformed). Remarriage can legitimately follow divorce only if the cause of the marriage breakdown is one of the "two widely recognized Biblical grounds for divorce," namely, "marital unfaithfulness or adultery" (see Matthew 5:31-2 and 19:9) and "desertion by an unbelieving spouse" (see I Corinthians 7:15). [NOTE 4] What if a member of the church violates this understanding of the Biblical teaching, obtains a divorce on grounds not accepted by the church, and proposes to remarry? Van Dam maintains: "When a civil judge declares that a legal divorce has broken a marriage, the church may still attempt reconciliation and not consider the judge's verdict final. In other words, the church can ask the people involved not to consider this as final since it is not pleasing in God's eyes and to try to undo it. If this fails, the church has no choice but to acquiesce in the law of the land and to accept the divorce. But the church must also warn against a subsequent remarriage because the divorce was not according to God's Word" (pp. 47-8).

Reformed teaching as interpreted by Van Dam, then, asks the church, in certain circumstances, to "acquiesce" in a civil divorce. This is not the Roman Catholic sentiment; Protestantism seems to yield more authority to the state in such matters than Roman Catholicism does. One may speak of God having joined the bride and the groom together, but in Roman Catholic thinking some marriages turn out, on close inspection, to be no marriages at all. In Jewish terms one might decline to accept New Testament sentiments and might therefore say instead that what the rabbi has joined together must not be broken up by man. But the rabbi might turn out not to be the genuine article (Reform rabbis are generally not recognized by the Orthodox), in which case the marriage is not a real marriage.

In the Protestant world, it was different. The situation was simpler. For a long time, it could be said that the criteria for marriage and for lawful divorce laid down in the law of the land were roughly the same as the ones taught in the church. Therefore Protestants could also be relatively comfortable with the notion of a wedding being performed by an official of the state, even though it

was preferable to have the service conducted by a minister in an explicitly Christian setting. Moreover, Protestants recognized that marriage was not only intended for Christian believers. Indeed, matrimony was no sacrament but an honorable estate which people who did not worship Christ should nevertheless be strongly encouraged to use as a framework for relations between the sexes. The "let marriage be held in honor" rule therefore meant that secular marriages should also be respected and regarded as God-joined, even if both marriage partners were atheists.

The basic coincidence between public and Protestant conceptions of marriage meant that Protestants could think of marriage largely in factual -- as opposed to normative -- terms. People were either married or they were not. And all marriages were God-joined and *not* to be tampered with. Converts to the faith who were already married were urged to remain in the marriage even if their marriage partner had not converted.

But when it began to be evident that there was a growing gulf between Protestant thinking and public law regarding grounds for divorce and the conditions under which people could properly remarry, a curious class of people came into being in our churches, namely, those who were legally in a position to remarry but could not do so with the blessing and approval of the church. These folks, whom I'll call the "ineligibles," had (1) failed in their marriage, and (2) obtained a divorce on some such grounds as mental cruelty or incompatibility -- grounds that were not sufficient, as far as the church is concerned. Some of the ineligible tended to drift over to other churches, the ones that are more open-minded about such matters. As a result, this group was relatively small, but in recent decades it has grown somewhat. Andrew Kornes takes a rather stern position on divorce and remarriage, but he tells us that his congregation includes people who are divorced and remarried. Moreover, most couples he marries are already living together. [NOTE 5] It is not his practice to chase away parishioners with a dubious marital pedigree.

I have never belonged to this curious class of people, and so I have no experiential understanding of what it might be like to *wish* to remarry but be forbidden to do so by the spiritual authorities. In Roman Catholic countries the existence of this class of people (the ineligible) has led to men keeping mistresses and people entering into common-law relationships while saying that they would be delighted to get married if they had the freedom to do so. A lucky few might get annulments and thereby become eligible to marry.

The ineligible must have had occasion to ponder the relation of the Christian doctrine of forgiveness to their state. Any horrible sin involving relations of

people to one another can be forgiven, and the sinner can make a new start. Part of the new start was that the blessings of holy matrimony would lie open to the repentant sinner. Thus a murderer -- provided he had paid his debt to society by serving a prison term -- could be married with the blessing of the church. So could a person who had led a life of immorality and sexual debauchery, provided that genuine repentance had taken place. So could a person who had cohabited with members of the opposite sex in a series of so-called common-law relationships, even if those relationships had led to the birth of children. All these sinners could be forgiven and could receive approval for marriage. But the person of good will who had failed in marriage and had obtained a divorce on some such ground as mental cruelty, without bringing a charge of adultery against his or her spouse, was *not* eligible.

Some of the ineligible must have contemplated the prospect of goading or tricking their spouse into adultery; perhaps certain of them took steps to encourage adultery so that they would be able to emerge from the divorce eligible to remarry. One is tempted to ask: in the great parade of sinners (remember that all churches are composed of sinners only), why must the person who has failed in marriage be singled out in this way?

What if that person went ahead anyway and married, perhaps in a church with a broader view of such matters? Could that person be barred from church membership because of this remarriage that should never have taken place? In practice it might have seemed so to some, but in the end such a stance could not be maintained. And so we have a class of people in our churches who are in effect second-class citizens when it comes to this business of marriage. They are married in name and are in good standing with the state, but they are not as married as some other members of the congregation who seem never to have stumbled as they made their way down matrimony's path. The church must eventually "acquiesce."

In the light of these considerations the notion of marriage as an honorific terms and estate begins to make sense. Relationship A might be of such a nature that Christians could disagree whether it truly counts as a marriage, whereas relationship B is beyond reproach or question. It would appear that Mr. and Mrs. B are more married than Mr. and Mrs. A.

The government also complicates the picture for us, in part through income tax regulations. (Here I am drawing mainly on my knowledge of Canadian law.) A lawyer explains: "In the Family Law Act of Ontario, the definition of spouse ... includes a man and a woman who have lived together continuously for three years or less if they have a child." [NOTE 6] There may be common-law

couples in some of our churches, but most of us would regard them as less married -- and as less entitled to call themselves married -- than many of the rest of us are.

What Christian advice should we give to the not-so-married folks in our churches? For some time I have considered the idea of marriage upgrades. If, indeed, some people are playing at marriage, if perhaps they have taken on some of the form of marriage without adopting the Christian substance thereof, why not invite them to go through a marriage-upgrade commitment process that would include some sort of ceremony in the setting of the local congregation?

Consider the following example. Suppose a Christian man has aspirations of leadership in the Christian community but is held back by the awareness that his marriage has a dubious history. Let's suppose that in his case, a romantic relationship led to living together prior to the time when he made a mature commitment to the Lord. Let's suppose, further, that at some stage after the birth of the first child there was a city hall wedding. Would it be unreasonable for such a man and his wife, both of them now committed to the Bible's teaching on marriage, to renew their vows in a ceremony in which they affirm that the context and basis for their relationship is the Christian teaching concerning marriage? Ceremonies that have something of this flavor to them are already being performed in our midst. Note also that a Christian couple may sometimes inaugurate their marriage with a civil ceremony, followed some days or weeks later by a ceremony in church.

Now, the marriage-upgrade notion sounds positive and hope-filled, but what about the ineligible? What if another man in the congregation, knowing himself to be one such, has a romantic relationship with a woman who has never been married but says to her that he can never marry her because the church does not recognize his divorce? Even if they were to get married by a civil official, no marriage-upgrade would ever be possible in their case.

Some might suppose that in such a case, the man's relationship to the woman is not honest and must be ended. But suppose she is willing to continue indefinitely in such a relationship that must always stop short of marriage. Some would argue -- and I am inclined to agree -- that such a relationship is not healthy in moral and psychological respects. The relationship should grow into a normal, full commitment, or it should be broken off. But we know in advance that it cannot become a fully committed situation -- the church will not have it. Are such ineligible required not just to practice what our culture freely calls

"celibacy" but also to avoid the company of the opposite sex altogether, lest unhealthy relationships which can never lead to consummation spring up?

To me this sounds wrong, in part because I am a promoter of marriage as a healthy and honorable way for men and women to relate to one another. More broadly stated, I am a promoter of *heterosexual* relationships that culminate in marriage. Since I teach in a Christian liberal arts college, I have plenty of opportunity to observe relationships forming, maturing, and flowering into Christian marriage.

Here a word about homosexuality is in order, for it is a complicating factor in our discussion. In Christian circles we tell each other that we are "against" homosexuality. I'm not sure whether all of us know just what this means. Secular society suspects us of gay-bashing, by which is meant, roughly, the process of making life miserable for people of homosexual orientation. Now, I certainly hope we are *not* guilty of such a thing. When I teach about homosexuality, what I stress especially is that Christians are strongly in favor of *heterosexuality* -- because the Bible itself is. To advocate heterosexuality is not to advocate homosexuality or to wish it for anyone.

In today's battle over homosexuality, the Christian community in which I participate wishes its younger members to develop a mature heterosexual orientation. And what are they to do with that orientation? We don't want them to become "sexually active," as the current euphemism has it. Rather, we want that heterosexual orientation to flower within the context of marriage -- which is to say that we are quite much in favor of marriage.

Today, of course, we hear talk of domestic partners, gay marriages, and so forth. In our circles these things are not recognized as valid counterparts to marriage as presented in the Bible. But insofar as they have become part of the contemporary public discourse, we find ourselves using the term marriage in an honorific sense, a sense which cannot help but rank some so-called marriages as inferior to others. What we want for our children is marriage in the best and fullest Christian sense.

To want marriage for our children is to encourage them in their heterosexual relationships. And because we are also committed to Christian morality, to the value of long-term relationships, we will urge them to "hold marriage in honor" by seeking it as the proper fulfillment of a healthy and successful heterosexual relationship. The price we pay for opposing homosexuality by strongly encouraging lifelong heterosexual commitment is that we wind up urging marriage upon young people.

But then we may be held back somewhat when we reflect upon the plight of those whom I have called the "ineligibles," those who have failed in marriage and are not eligible to marry again. Andrew Kernes has thought through the logic of this situation and is not afraid to draw the expected conclusion: he believes it is not healthy to try to pair young Christians off in hopes of seeing them married. He maintains further that it is not in accord with New Testament teaching. [NOTE 7]

If we are to sympathize with Kernes and be very strict about marriage break-up and the circumstances under which a subsequent marriage might take place, there may be a tendency on our part to say to young people, "Be *very, very careful* when you embark on the voyage of matrimony, for certain mistakes are, in effect, never forgiven. If your marriage fails on grounds not recognized by the church, you will never be free -- as far as the church is concerned -- to marry again."

The upshot of such logic, for which there are plenty of secular parallels in our society, is that young people might think they should start with a trial marriage or perhaps with a period of sexual experimentation prior to making a definitive and final commitment. Insofar as marriage is coming to be regarded as an honorific term and estate, hesitant young people may think in terms of getting married in stages. They may even suppose that the ultimate state (marriage in the strong or full sense) is for somewhat older persons, e.g., people past the age of thirty-five. In this general way, the logic of combating homosexuality by celebrating heterosexuality has the potential to contribute to sexual immorality.

I recognize that people may well choose to disagree with this analysis; today, much more than during my childhood, marriage is a contested universal term. I do not see an easy way out of this problem.

I much prefer the old days, when problems of this sort did not loom as large as they do today, but I don't know how we could bring them back. And so I conclude, with a degree of regret, that Christians are in effect "acquiescing" in the new situation in which, more and more we think in terms of marriage as an honorific estate.

## **NOTES**

[NOTE 1] Westminster Confession, Ch. 25, Sec. 5, in *Creeds of the Churches*, revised edition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973), ed. John Leith, p. 222.

[NOTE 2] For an interesting analysis of how these problems threaten the Jewishness of Canadian Jews (or of those who *think* they are Jews), see Reuven P. Bulka, *The Coming Cataclysm*, second edition. Oakville: Mosaic Press, 1986.

[NOTE 3] See *Divorce and Remarriage: Biblical Principles and Pastoral Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 81-2, 289, 291, 309.

[NOTE 4] *Divorce and Remarriage in the Light of Old Testament Principles and Their Application in the New Testament* (Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1996), p. 42; see also pp. 37-8.

[NOTE 5] See *Divorce and Remarriage*, pp. 336, 23.

[NOTE 6] *Hamilton Spectator*, September 29, 1995, p. E6.

[NOTE 7] See *Divorce and Remarriage*, p. 473.