I don’t see why we need to get married if we’re committed to each other. Marriage is just a piece of paper.

Marriage is a right that shouldn’t be denied to any couple, whether homosexual or heterosexual.

You’ve almost certainly heard these sentiments today. Whether in Canada (where same sex marriage has been legal nationwide for nearly 10 years) or in the United States (where the Supreme Court legalized same sex marriage earlier this year), marriage is increasingly viewed as a civil right that should be extended to all couples, regardless of sexual orientation. At the same time, the number of couples living together without seeking the traditional marriage commitment continues to rise on both sides of the border. The church seems caught in the middle.

So should the church adapt her positions and her interpretation of Scripture in order to be more accepting? Dig in her heels and fight the cultural trends that threaten the church’s historical position? There is no shortage of voices on either side of this issue.

Sadly, our conversations can sound more like we are playground bullies than followers of Jesus. Those on both sides of the issue spend more energy stating what they oppose rather than what they are for. What remains to be heard is a positive argument for the historic view of marriage. Here are two reasons why the traditional biblical view of marriage portrays something of great value—not only to married people but to society at large.

Marriage Is a Covenant That Reflects God’s Character

Marriage was not created merely as a romantic relationship, nor even as an institution aimed at self-fulfillment. Marriage is God’s way of modeling his covenant-keeping nature. In Ephesians 5:32, Paul concludes his instructions on marriage by stating, “This is a great mystery—but I am talking about
Christ and the church. Paul has been giving instruction on marriage, when suddenly he is describing Christ’s relationship with his church. Is Paul talking about marriage or the church? The answer is yes; marriage is patterned after God’s relationship to his church. Thus, in marriage (our own or others’) we begin to know God more intimately.

How? In a godly marriage we begin to discover what it means to be deeply known and steadfastly loved. From beginning to end, God’s preferred way of relating to his people is by covenant. By making a covenant, God joins himself to his people, pledging to remain steadfastly committed and loving his imperfect people even at the cost of death. In other words, by making a covenant, God makes an unwavering promise that he will continue to love and care for his people—even though they may fail God, even though they may be unfaithful to him, and even though they may grow cold in their love for him. In the fullness of time, God kept this promise with his people, even though it meant laying down his life for them in death. As a covenant, marriage is, ideally, meant to model this steadfast, promise-made/promise-kept relationship. In a marriage, two people publicly bind themselves together, committing themselves to one another, promising to be faithful, exclusive, and sacrificially loving, until death.

Keeping this commitment is no small effort. Feelings and affections can cool for a season. Circumstances like illness, job loss, or family conflict can create strain that tears at the fabric of a marriage. And of course, we stare at our own personal sins and failures—pride, a critical spirit, and selfishness, to name a few—in the mirror of relationship. The covenant of marriage is meant to hold husband and wife together through these purifying fires, leading us to growth and maturity.

Seasoned spouses will often acknowledge times in marriage when it was the covenant vows alone that kept them together. But when the vows are kept and the covenant upheld, those around begin to glimpse (though admittedly through a dark glass) what God’s commitment to us actually looks like: a promise made to us, and a promise kept, even at infinite cost to himself. Faithfulness to his bride, through sickness and health, good times and bad. Marriage, then, becomes a beautiful portrayal of the gospel itself.

So why withhold this covenant from same sex couples? This is a fair question that requires a careful and pastoral response. In part, the answer lies in how marriage reflects not only God’s relationship to the church, but also his nature. Genesis 1:27 emphasizes that when God created human beings, he “created them in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Masculinity and femininity are not artificial social constructs, nor are they traits to be either idolized or ignored. They are a piece of what it means to reflect God’s image. In a marriage between man and woman, the image of God is reflected in a way that is unique. This does not diminish single people, who also beautifully reflect the image of God. Rather, it suggests that when two people become one flesh, God’s intent is to illustrate something of his image that cannot be communicated in homosexual relationships. The joining together of male and female as one gives us a more complete picture of God’s character.

So how ought the church live in the midst of these changing times? First of all, churches ought to do all they can to promote healthy marriages that reflect God’s covenantal relationship. This means preaching and teaching about marriage, it means promoting premarital ministry, as well as ministry to married couples. Some churches have invited couples who have been married for a decade or longer to serve as mentors to newlywed couples. Church leaders would be unwise to take an indifferent approach to couples living together. Each situation is unique, of course, so there are no one-size-fits-all answers. But churches should take care to disciple couples to pursue the covenant commitment of marriage, even though that may be culturally unpopular. Such care for those living together should always be offered with the truth and grace that Jesus himself so marvelously demonstrated.

The Church Must Call People to Holy Living

That brings us to the second reason why the church must become known for upholding the traditional biblical view of marriage, particularly as it relates to those experiencing same-sex attraction. As a church, we must learn to love deeply those with whom we disagree. Jesus showed on many occasions the transformative ability to love a person while simultaneously calling them out of sin and into holiness. Too often we are known for one or the other: we call people to holiness, but we do it without love. Or we love people unconditionally, but we dismiss the destructive presence of sin. Neither fits the fullness of the biblical approach. The church must be a place that embraces those struggling with sexual sin—loving them, encouraging them, and joining them in pursuing the gift of holiness.

A couple I once counseled listened intently as I shared this biblical pattern for sex and marriage. In their past, all they had learned from the church were the cold and unfeeling rules about sex and marriage. Those who kept the rules were accepted; those who did not were judged. Hearing this message on marriage, they said this was a message they had wanted to hear their whole lives.

As a church, we have a glorious message to bring to the world! Let us be faithful to speak it and live it well, before the eyes of a watching world.

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Christmas Treats and Treasures for Everyone on Your List

Everlasting Is the Past
by Walter Wangerin, Jr.
reviewed by Kathryn Hoffman

In this memoir, Wangerin chronicles three significant stages in his life: the experience of losing and then regaining his faith, the discovery of his vocation, and the tender journey he embarks on with an inner-city church. Wangerin expertly tells his stories: some are lovingly detailed and others are simple yet profound snapshots of a life where doubt and belief twist tightly together to form a cord called faith. (Rabbit Room)

The Truth According to Us
by Annie Barrows
reviewed by Judy Hardy

It’s 1938, and the town of Macedonia, W.Va., is celebrating its sesquicentennial. Twelve-year-old Willa, who prides herself as “a natural-born sneak,” is the fearless narrator who peels back the complicated layers of the Romeyn family in the wake of the Great Depression. Laced with warmth and humor, this novel for adults doesn’t shy away from the hard realities of life in a mill town among people who aren’t always what they seem to be—even in Willa’s own family. (Dial Press)

Ask Me
by Bernard Waber
reviewed by Jenny deGroot

“How me!” says the little girl to her father as they go for a walk around the neighborhood. She wants her papa to ask her questions. “What else do you like?” They talk about seashells and starfish, ice-cream cones and stories, waiting and next Thursday. The text is as honest and tender as any conversation a parent has had with their young child. Published posthumously, this picture book honors Bernard Waber’s storytelling tradition. The accompanying illustrations evoke the gentleness and intimacy of the text. A great gift book. Ages 4 and up. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

Sound of a Living Heart
by JJ Heller
reviewed by Paul Delger

JJ Heller, a popular independent artist with a strong Internet following, invites listeners on a journey toward wholehearted life with her eighth studio album, Sound of a Living Heart. Heller’s voice is simply sweet and inviting; the lyrics are honest and vulnerable. The music features pop with a dash of folk. With standout songs like the title track and “Father-Daughter Dance,” this album will both soothe and challenge listeners. (Stonetable Records)

Escape from Baxters’ Barn
by Rebecca Bond
reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Burdock the barn cat is a loner who has experienced repeated rejection. When he learns that all the farm animals are in grave danger, Burdock realizes that he “could go it alone.” When the animals plan their escape, he faces a moral quandary: “Saving yourself seemed right. Obviously abandoning your companions seemed wrong. But what if saving yourself meant abandoning them?” This winsome juvenile novel, illustrated with charming pen and ink drawings, will delight fans of Charlotte’s Web and other lovely animal stories. Ages 7 and up. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

Waiting Songs
by Rain for Roots
reviewed by Robert J. Keeley

If there is one thing kids know, it’s that waiting is hard. Waiting Songs explores that idea. This is not your typical Christmas album. It’s actually an Advent album about waiting. The album opens and closes with traditional Advent songs; in between are eight original songs ranging from serious to silly. The songs are catchy and easy to learn. Rain for Roots once again shows that simple does not have to mean simplistic, and child-like is not childish. (Rain for Roots)
Dream Again: A Story of Faith, Courage, and the Tenacity to Overcome
by Isaiah Austin and Matt Litton
reviewed by Paul Delger

For years, Isaiah Austin envisioned walking across the stage on NBA Draft Night. But just days before the 2014 draft, Austin was diagnosed with a serious condition called Marfan syndrome, and his competitive playing days were over. Austin’s book talks about his faith, basketball, and his many health challenges. It’s a story of encouragement and motivation in which God redirects the life of a skilled basketball player into a servant mode. (Howard Books)

Anne of Green Gables, My Daughter, & Me
by Lorilee Craker
reviewed by Kristy Quist

When Lorilee Craker was a young teen, she found a kindred spirit in Anne Shirley, the orphan in the Anne of Green Gables series by L. M. Montgomery. Craker herself had been adopted, and she and her husband eventually adopted a daughter of their own. In this memoir, she intertwines the stories of these adoptions, while framing their stories in the greater picture of our adoption into the family of God. Craker is at her best when relating the emotional complexity of her own experiences. The perfect gift for the adult Anne fan in your life! (Tyndale)

Mad Miss Mimic
by Sarah Henstra
reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

In 1872 London, the opium trade and a mysterious gang cause havoc. Meanwhile, 17-year-old Leonora Somerville struggles with a speech disorder—she stutters and imperfectly imitates other people’s voices. Leo lives with her sister and brother-in-law, Dr. Dewhurst. Leo becomes uneasy as she realizes that lower-class patients are dying in Dr. Dewhurst’s care as he experiments on them with an injectable form of opium. Fast-paced and exciting, this young adult novel introduces readers to an intriguing character who learns how “a person grows brave.” Ages 13 and up, available from booksellers in Canada. (Razorbill)

Counternarratives
by John Keene
reviewed by Phil Christman Jr

This story collection, one of the best I’ve read in years, presents moments from North and South American literary and cultural history, reimagined from somewhere on the far side of power (think Jim rather than Huck Finn). Keene’s sense of form is breathtaking—the stories turn inside out; snap shut on the reader; take sudden, dazzling twists that on reflection were inevitable—and his sentences reflect an almost crazed love of language. It’s also a good deal more fun to read than I’m making it sound. (New Directions)
**Rachmaninoff: All-Night Vigil**
*by Phoenix Chorale and Kansas City Chorale; Charles Bruffy, director*
reviewed by Otto Selles

At 100 years old, this music sounds timeless, especially under Charles Bruffy’s impeccable direction of the combined Phoenix and Kansas City Chorales. The liner notes provide an excellent introduction to the composition of the Vigil and also offer a complete translation of the Russian text. But even without knowing Russian, listeners cannot help but soar along with the choirs’ singing of “Glory to God in the Highest” and “O Praise the Name of the Lord.”

**Waiting**
*by Kevin Henkes*
reviewed by Sonya VanderVeen Feddema

Five creatures—an owl, a pig, a bear, a puppy, and a rabbit—wait on a windowsill. Each waits for a particular thing: the moon, rain, wind, snow, or for whatever will happen next outside the window. One day a cat arrives. They wonder what she is waiting for. In a humorous surprise ending they learn that the answer differs radically from what they have been waiting for. In this gentle, leisurely children’s picture book, young readers are introduced to the nature and wonder of waiting—something that most children find difficult to do. Ages 4 and up. (Greenwillow Books)

**Inside Out**
*reviewed by Kristy Quist*

In this outstanding Pixar film, 11-year-old Riley’s life changes abruptly when her parents decide to move. Riley experiences some of the typical losses of a big move—friendships, familiarity, favorite activities, and even her sense of self. The film’s focus is the range of Riley’s emotions, depicted by the characters Joy and Sadness, among others. This inventive and beautifully animated movie creatively explores things like memory, imagination, and personality, subtly teaching the wonders of the brain while keeping the movie-watching experience fun and meaningful for everyone. (Disney)

**The Night Stages**
*by Jane Urquhart*
reviewed by Jim Romahn

Jane Urquhart’s new novel alternates between Gander International Airport in Newfoundland and County Kerry, Ireland, in the 1940s and 50s. Tamara flies warplanes from Canada to Europe. She meets and marries a dashing young man who, it turns out, is not a good choice. This novel unfolds slowly, beautifully, as it paints landscapes, but it develops surprising tempo and drama in the final chapters. (McClelland & Stewart)

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**The Road to Character**
*by David Brooks*
reviewed by Robert N. Hosack

David Brooks, op-ed columnist for *The New York Times*, leads readers on a personal journey while applying inspiring lessons of history. Through 10 major biographical sketches, ranging from St. Augustine to George Eliot, Brooks’s characters confront some core sin and discover a way to beat it. In so doing they serve as models for us, showing how strength comes from their weakest places. (Random House)

**Orbiting Jupiter**
*by Gary D. Schmidt*
reviewed by Kathryn Hoffman

Jack’s family takes in Joseph, a 14-year-old who is being released from a detention facility and who is already a father. By all appearances, Joseph is on his way to becoming a hardened criminal. His life becomes even more complicated with the unexpected arrival of his abusive father. Jack and his parents see Joseph for who he really is—a hurting young man with a large capacity for love and family. Can they help him see that in himself? Schmidt tells Joseph’s difficult story with warmth, humor, and an unflinching capacity for telling the truth. Ages 12 and up. (Clarion)