

The “Metaphor” of Marriage in the Bible

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‘On account of this will a man forsake father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will be one flesh.’ This mystery is great; but I speak of Christ and the Church.

(Ephesians 5:31–32)

In Eph 5:22–33 the Apostle Paul delivers instructions to Christian husbands and wives according to the pattern of Christ as Bridegroom to his Bride the Church (ἐκκλησία). What is immediately striking is how Christian marriages are to reflect the divine Marriage, not the other way around. Christ’s relationship to the Church is not “like” marriage in human experience according to a simile; it *is* a marriage—the Marriage of which Christian marriages provide a dim but real reflection as they bear witness to Christ’s self-sacrificing love for his Bride and her subordination (ὑποτάσσω) to her Bridegroom and his word. Nor does St Paul speak about these things as though Christ’s Marriage to the Church were merely analogous to marriage understood a certain way. The direction of comparison rather runs the other way in Paul’s paraenesis as he exhorts husbands and wives to emulate the Lord and his holy Bride through loving, self-denying, self-sacrificial headship and faithful subordination.

Accordingly, this paper argues that the biblical witness concerning Christ’s Marriage to his Bride the Church goes beyond the usual understanding of *metaphor* as a rhetorical or cognitive-linguistic phenomenon for conveying ideas about God (hence the inverted commas about this term in the title). Rather, the bible bears witness to this Marriage as a *reality* after which the human institution of marriage is patterned according to God’s creative purpose. This Marriage is the Antitype, according to whose pattern the estate of marriage—in particular, *Christian* marriage—is typologically drawn. Nor is the subject of marriage a peripheral one in the bible, but is at the heart of the biblical witness to God’s creative and redemptive work in the world through Israel and culminating in Christ; that is, the bible consistently testifies to God’s Marriage to Israel through the covenant. So when Paul casts the estate of marriage between man and woman in the image of this divine Marriage—rather than the other way around, he shows Christian marriage to be a beautiful proclamation of Christ’s oneness with his redeemed people at the heart of the whole bible’s prophetic testimony.

To be sure, the bible draws on the “known” of human marriage and marital experience as the prophets and apostles proclaim this Marriage. To that extent the bible employs the image of marriage in the manner expected of a metaphor in the normal sense; that is, through analogous comparison to communicate the unknown by means of the known. But it does not end there, as though God’s Marriage were a mere projection of the known onto the unknown to provide a few poignant points of comparison, whereupon the image of marriage outlives its usefulness and can be safely set aside. Rather, according to Scripture God is and remains *Married* to his Bride the Church (hence the lack of inverted commas about *that* term in the title). The institution of marriage to which the biblical writers appeal in their proclamation itself derives from that Marriage, not the other way around. In Paul’s paraenesis human

marriages are like *It* rather than *It* like them, even as they foreshadow—or “post-shadow”—Christ’s Marriage to his Bride the Church as a witness to it. Accordingly, “typology” more fully describes the situation than “metaphor” because it prioritizes the “downward” direction of comparison as Paul does in his paraenesis even as the type (human marriage) facilitates the vision of its Antitype (Christ’s Marriage).¹ For, unlike metaphor, typology keeps in view the *ontological* nature of the patterns and analogues involved here. Indeed, in Ephesians 5 the human marriage *reality* derives from the Divine *reality* (ontologically)—hence the downward direction of comparison, even as it is known and appreciated through its shadowy human analogue (i.e., epistemologically). By contrast, metaphor as studied by modern scholars dwells exclusively in the domain of *epistemology*, which is inherently “upward” in nature because it understands the biblical image as a vehicle for *understanding* the unknown by means of the known.² Recognizing the basically “downward”—and not purely “upward”—direction to this pattern is vital, for it prevents us from projecting false attributes to the divine Marriage drawn from abuse within marriages, and allows us to hear Paul’s paraenesis to Christian couples clearly for what it is: his call to Christlike self-sacrifice and self-denial.

So after looking more closely at the NT witness and especially Ephesians 5, this paper explores several major biblical examples that reveal the centrality of Christ’s Marriage to his Bride the Church within the testimony of Scripture. It then explores the influence of post-Enlightenment thought for understanding the “metaphor” of marriage in the bible, suggesting that Johann G. Hamann’s critique of his contemporary Immanuel Kant remains powerfully relevant today. Finally, this paper reflects on pertinent points of contact between the biblical witness concerning the divine Marriage and three issues that plague the contemporary church: so-called gay “marriage,” the disgrace of domestic violence, and the ordination of women into public office of the ministry.

God’s Marriage in the Bible

As noted above, Paul’s paraenesis to Christian husbands and wives is rooted in the Marriage of Christ to his Bride the Church. Wives are to be subordinate³ to their husbands “*as* (ὡς) to the Lord, because (ὅτι) a husband is head (κεφαλή) of the wife *as* (ὡς) Christ is head (κεφαλή) of the church” (Eph 5:22–23). Having so patterned a husband’s headship regarding his wife on Christ’s headship of the Church, Paul then presents the flipside: “as

¹ See John J. O’Keefe and R. R. Reno, “Typological Interpretation,” in *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 69–88.

² It is no accident that ancient scholars were far more attuned to typology than their modern counterparts, for post-Enlightenment thinking is dominated by a concern for *epistemology* as man as “knowing subject” takes centre stage (cf. the father of modern philosophy, Rene Descartes). See “The Modern Turn” below.

³ As is often pointed out, the verb is implied from v. 21’s “being subordinate to one another” (ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις), which translations such as the ESV keep with what precedes. Neither the question of whether v. 21 belongs to what precedes or what follows, nor the reciprocal character of ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις in v. 21 has any bearing on the meaning of vv. 22–24, however, which repeat the term “be subordinate” (ὑποτάσσεται) in direct reference to the Church/wives clearly differentiated from Christ/husbands. Far from abrogating the paraenesis to wives that Paul is about to give in vv. 22–24, then, v. 21 at most shows that *self-denial* is at the heart of what Paul has to say to both husbands and wives. Indeed, that Paul is engaged in paraenesis through the participles that permeate this section is clear from his earlier imperatives, e.g., “Watch carefully how you walk, then...” in v. 15 (Βλέπετε οὖν ἀκριβῶς πῶς περιπατεῖτε), and “do not be unwise, but understand what is the will of the Lord” in v. 17 (μὴ γίνεσθε ἄφρονες, ἀλλὰ συνίετε τί τὸ θέλημα τοῦ κυρίου).

(ὡς) the church subordinates herself (ὑποτάσσεται) to Christ, so also (οὕτως καὶ) the wives to their husbands in everything” (Eph 5:24). Though Paul uses the terminology of *simile* (ὡς, οὕτως), it is not a simile in the usual sense wherein divine is likened to some human reality—the unknown patterned on the known, familiar, and experienced. On the contrary, at every point the direction of comparison is from the divine to the human, not the other way around. It runs *from* Christ’s loving headship to the Church and the Church’s willing subordination to Christ and his word *to* Christian husbands and wives and how they should be toward one another.

When Paul then exhorts husbands to “love (ἀγαπάτε) your wives,” the same direction of comparison undergirds his whole paraenesis: “just as (καθὼς καὶ) Christ loved the church and gave *himself* up for her,⁴ so that *her* he might sanctify,⁵ having cleansed her by the washing of water in the word...etc.” (Eph 5:25–28). Husbands are to love self-sacrificially according to the pattern of Christ’s love for the church, putting their wives before themselves. After dwelling on the mysterious depths of Christ’s love for the Church Paul continues: “just so (οὕτως) ought husbands love their own wives like their own bodies...for no one ever hated *his own* flesh but nourishes and cherishes it, just as (καθὼς καὶ) Christ [does] the church, for *members* of his body are we” (Eph 5:28–30). (Ironically, although some try to problematize headship by suggesting that it is conducive to domestic violence, the biblical teaching on headship enjoins husbands to the very opposite behaviour!) Again, the analogy runs from the divine reality to the human.⁶

Paul then cites Genesis 2:24, “on account of this will a man forsake father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will be one flesh.” At first this is unsurprising given Paul’s paraenetical purposes in addressing husbands whom he exhorts to love their wives like their own flesh, since Gen 2:24 affirms that they are one flesh with their wives. But Paul does something quite unexpected when he follows up the quote with: “this mystery is great; but I speak (ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω) of Christ and the Church” (Eph 5:32). Rather than apply Genesis 2:24 immediately to human husband and wife as Genesis 2 appears to do, Paul applies it to Christ’s union with his Bride the Church! Only then does he add—in an almost anticlimactic extension of the thought—“nevertheless also each of you, let each one love his own wife as himself, and the wife that she might revere the husband (ἵνα φοβῆται τὸν ἄνδρα).” Whatever Paul says to husbands, then, he draws from the pattern of Christ’s love of his own Body the Church, with which *he* is *one flesh*. That is the definitive Marriage after which Christian marriages are patterned. What is more, that is the definitive fulfilment of Gen 2:24!⁷

⁴ καὶ ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς; note the emphatic placement of “himself,” underscoring the *self-sacrificial* nature of Christ’s love for the church of which he is head.

⁵ ἵνα αὐτὴν ἀγιάσῃ; note the similar emphatic placement of “her,” underscoring once again the selflessness of Christ’s work, which is entirely for her benefit (sanctification).

⁶ See Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. *Whoredom: God’s Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), esp. 152–59.

⁷ Luther makes much of this and its importance for the Gospel. For example, in his *Treatise on Christian Liberty* he writes,

“By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh [Eph. 5:31–32]. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage—indeed the most perfect of all marriages, since human marriages are but poor examples of this one true marriage—it follows that everything they have

Although Paul’s immediate application of Gen 2:24 to Christ and the Church may catch the reader a little off balance within his unfolding paraenesis, it is not at all surprising from a broader biblical perspective and in view of Paul’s Adamic Christology. As is well known, Genesis 1:26–28 summarily relate God’s creation of humanity in his own image and likeness as *male and female*, while Genesis 2 relates the creation of Adam and Eve in greater detail. In Gen 1:27 we read, “So God created man (אָדָם) in his image. In the image of God he created him; *male and female* (זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה) he created them.” Genesis 2 then “zooms in” further as God first creates Adam and then his wife Eve from his side, who is Adam’s “flesh and bone” with whom he forms a new familial bond as the two become one flesh (Gen 2:24).

Genesis 2, however, is concerned not just with the estate of the *family*, but also with the estate of the *church*; the people of God in fellowship with God. Eden is the archetypal sanctuary of which Adam is high priest, charged with “guarding” and “keeping it” (לְעִבְדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ in Gen 2:15); the same combination of verbal roots applied to the Levites in Num 3:7–8 regarding the tabernacle. Numerous other correspondences between the garden and tabernacle confirm the parallel, such as the river that waters the garden and divides to nourish the earth (2:10; cf. Ps 46:5 [ET v. 4]), the Tree of Life and the seven-branched candelabra giving light to the sanctuary, and the cherubim guarding the garden entrance and adorning the ark and furnishings (Gen 3:24; cf. Exod 25:18–22; 26:1, 31–33).⁸ Having charged Adam with priestly responsibility for the garden sanctuary in 2:15, God then commands (צוה) Adam not to eat from the tree of knowing good and evil before woman has even been created, then holds Adam accountable for the original couple’s disobedience throughout chapter 3 (see esp. vv. 3:9, 11, 17).⁹ But where Adam had failed his wife by abdicating his responsibility and resorting to blaming her (Gen 3:12), Christ succeeded by cleansing and sanctifying *his* Bride through his self-sacrificial death (Eph 5:26–27).

In view of all this it is not at all surprising that Paul applies Gen 2:24 immediately to Christ’s Marriage to his Bride the Church. For Paul that verse foreshadows *the* Marriage according to which human marriages—especially *Christian* marriages—are typologically patterned. Indeed, elsewhere Paul recognizes Christ *as* the image of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; cf. Heb 1:3)—not merely created “in” it—and in Rom 5:14 recognizes Adam as a “*type* of the one to come” (τύπος τοῦ μέλλοντος) within his Adamic Christology (cf. 1 Cor 15:22, 45). According to Paul, then, Christ is Adam’s Antitype, and as God’s enfleshed image he makes present the Godhead in whose image mankind had been created (Gen 1:27). What is more, just as Adam was one with Eve, so Christ is “one flesh” with his Body the Church of

they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own. Let us compare these and we shall see inestimable benefits. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ’s, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul’s; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride’s and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers?” (LW 31: 351).

⁸ See further Lifsa Schachter, “The Garden of Eden as God’s First Sanctuary,” *JBQ* 41 (2013):73–77.

⁹ See Adam D. Hensley, “Redressing the Serpent’s Cunning: A Closer Look at Genesis 3:1,” (forthcoming: *LOGIA*).

which he is Head (Eph 5:23), the reality after which Christian marriage is patterned (cf. 1 Cor 11:3).

Covenant History and God’s Marriage in the Old Testament. Christ’s Marriage to His Bride the Church is by no means a novelty within biblical revelation. On the contrary, it is the culmination and fulfilment of covenant history.¹⁰ Indeed, the bible describes the covenant between God and His people in the terms of the covenant of marriage. As stated by the covenant formula, “I will be your God, and you will be my people” (whose distinctive syntax is found many times throughout the Old Testament), the Sinai covenant joined YHWH to Israel as a groom to his bride.¹¹

Correspondingly, the bible frequently describes Israel’s treasonous breach of the covenant in terms of *marital* infidelity. For example, as early as Numbers 25 the children of Israel *whored* (זנה) after the daughters of the Moabites, who called them to the sacrifices of their gods whereupon they “yoked” (צמד) themselves to the Baal of Peor. Though the imagery shifts to that of a beast of burden tethered to Baal by yoke—itsself a telling description of their spiritual enslavement—marital imagery persists even in the root צמד, whose cognate צמץ, “bracelet,” appears in betrothal texts (cf. Gen 24:22, 30, 47). The Book of Judges makes a similar point more directly when it summarizes Israel’s cyclical covenantal unfaithfulness to YHWH: “But even to their judges they did not listen, but whored (זנו) after other gods (אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים) and worshipped them...etc.” (Judg 2:17).

Perhaps most famous is Hosea 1–3, where Hosea’s marriage to the promiscuous Gomer stood testimony to God’s Marriage to his people and their faithlessness in running after other gods as “lovers” (מְאֵהָבִים in Hos 2:7 [ET v. 5] and מְאֵהָבֵיהָ in 2:15 [ET v. 13]). Chapter 1 has Hosea marrying Gomer and naming their three children appropriately—if cheerlessly—“Jezreel,” “No Mercy” (לֹא רַחֲמָהּ), and “Not My People” (לֹא עַמִּי) as a prophetic sign of God’s judgement of withholding compassion from his people (2:6) and declaring the antithesis of the covenant formula: “for you are not my people, and I am not yours.”¹² The discourse of chapter 2 then shifts to address Israel’s lusting after *Baal* (בַּעַל in v. 10 [ET v. 8]; הַבְּעָלִים in v. 15 [ET v. 13]) who is portrayed as an imposter “husband” or “master” in accordance with the meaning of that name. As children of YHWH’s marriage with Israel, whose monarchy and priesthood have embraced Baal, the people are to plead with their Mother who has “played the whore (זָנְתָה אִמָּם in v. 7)—i.e., institutional Israel’s leaders (king, priesthood, etc.)—lest they be accounted illegitimate “children of whoredom” (בְּנֵי זְנוּנִים v. 6 [ET v.4]). As in Numbers 25 and Judges 2, then, the verb זנה and cognate noun “adulteries” or “whorings” (זְנוּנִים) are definitive of Israel’s faithlessness toward YHWH in chapter 2 (vv. 4, 6, 7 [ET vv. 2, 4, 5]). As a corollary to the “anti-covenant formula” in Hos 1:9 the text even includes a divorce formula, “she is not my wife and I am not her husband” (2:4 [ET 2:2]). Here YHWH

¹⁰ See Ortlund, *Whoredom*, 15–45.

¹¹ The full “bilateral” formula expresses both sides of the covenant relationship, utilizing the verb “to be” (היה) followed by a lamed of possession with pronominal suffix and lamed of product with the object “people” or “God”: להיות לי לעם + להיות לך לאלהים. Regarding the use of the formula and so called “half formulae” see Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, OTS (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998). See further Paul Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant: A Comprehensive Review of Covenant Formulae from the Old Testament and Ancient Near East* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1982).

¹² BHS editors speculate that אֶהְיֶה לָכֶם should be read אֶלְהֵיכֶם in accordance with the covenant formula, though the reference is in nowise impaired by the MT as it stands.

proclaims the judgment by giving Israel over to these “lovers” (v. 7 [ET v. 5]) who are nowhere to be found when the chips are down, so that she would again return—i.e., repent—to her first husband (אֶל־אִישִׁי הָרִאשׁוֹן, v. 9 [ET v.7]). The law so proclaimed, chapter 2 draws to a close with gospel as YHWH speaks tenderly to his Bride in the wilderness who will answer as when He first brought her out of Egypt (2:16–17 [ET 2:14–15]), a reference to the covenant making in the wilderness at Sinai. Then follows YHWH’s commitment to renew the covenant with her, answering his own divine divorce formula with a threefold betrothal:

“In that day,” declares YHWH, “you will call out, ‘my Husband’ [אִישִׁי], and no longer call me ‘my Baal.’ For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and no longer will they remember their name. And for them I will cut a covenant in that day with the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens and the creeping things of the ground. The bow and sword and war itself I will break off from the earth and will cause them to lie down in security. I betroth you to myself (וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי) forever! I betroth you to myself (וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי) in righteousness (בְּצֶדֶק), in justice (וּבְמִשְׁפָּט), in steadfast love (וּבְחַסֵּד), and in mercy (וּבְרַחֲמִי)! I betroth you to myself (וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי) in truth (בְּאֱמוּנָה), that you may know YHWH! (Hos 2:18–22 [ET 2:16–20])

In renewing the covenant YHWH betroths Israel to himself anew, restoring his Marriage. The Sinai covenant allusions continue into the next verse as the witnesses to the covenant, heaven and earth, respond favourably as God restores his people (Hos 2:23; cf. Deut 4:26; 30:19; 31:28). The significances attached to each of Hosea’s children’s names are then addressed in turn, culminating with, “I will have mercy on No Mercy, and will say to Not My People, ‘You are my people!’ and he will say, ‘My God!’” Hosea then redeems his wife in chapter 3 as a prophetic sign of this proclamation. Accordingly, vv. 4–5 then directly describe the impending exile and future restoration in the latter days (בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים) when Israel would “return—i.e., repent—and seek YHWH their God” with “David” as their king, thus anticipating the restoration of a united Israel.

The depiction of the Sinai covenant as God’s Marriage to his people even turns up in the famous “new covenant” oracle, Jeremiah 31:31–34. There God announces that he will cut a “new covenant” with the house of Israel and the house of Judah; a covenant characterized by both continuity *and* discontinuity with the great biblical covenants of the Old Testament. Like the “new moon” (חֹדֶשׁ) that is not so much replaced as renewed, this was a “new covenant,” a בְּרִית חֲדָשָׁה. YHWH would write his *torah* (תּוֹרָתִי) on the hearts of his people rather than the tablets of stone held in the Ark of the Covenant, and this new covenant would remain effectual not on the bilateral basis of the Sinai covenant with its Ten Commandments, but on the forgiveness of the people’s sins against those very commandments (Jer 31:34)! YHWH therefore declares it to be “not like the covenant which I cut with their fathers in the day I took them by their hand to bring them out from the land of Egypt—my covenant that they broke, *though I had married them/was husband to them* (בְּעֵלְתִּי בָּם).” But like the old covenant at Sinai—and as just observed in the example of Hosea—the new covenant would realize the relationship summed up in the covenant formula, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer 31:33; cf. Exod 6:7 et al.). God would restore his Bride! Like in Hosea, Jeremiah’s new covenant envisions a restored unity between the long-since divided monarchies of Judah and Israel. Davidic kingship and Levitical priesthood would fulfil their

proper intended purpose (Jer 33:14–22) as the ancient biblical covenants are renewed; a fulfilment we see in Jesus who fulfils the offices of Prophet, Priest, and King.

While the bible also speaks of God having “feminine” attributes—e.g., it has often been pointed out that “compassion” (e.g. Exod 34:6) and “womb” derive from the same root (רחם)—such metaphoric language is not nearly so developed as that seen above. God’s “maternal” compassion, for example, is based on cognate word associations rather than directly naming him a “mother.” Though God exercises this especially maternal quality of compassion, he is not a mother. On the other hand, he *is* Husband to his Bride the Church as repeatedly seen above. Other such attributes are achieved through similes whose direction of comparison run *upward*. For example, although Jesus may long to gather Jerusalem *as* a hen gathers her chicks (Matt 23:37; Luke 13:34), he is nonetheless not a hen. Isaiah 66:13 likewise employs a simile when YHWH says, “As a man whom his mother comforts (תִּנְחַמְנֶנּוּ), so will I comfort you (אֶנְחֶמְכֶם); in Jerusalem you shall be comforted (תִּנְחַמְכֶם).” Like all similes Isaiah 66 stops well short of identifying YHWH as a mother, however, so that the direction of comparison remains “upward” and descriptive of YHWH’s way with people rather than his Being. Meanwhile Isa 50:1 affirms YHWH status as Israel’s Husband, when he asks, “Where is it! this certificate of divorce of your Mother, by which I dismissed her?” (cf. 63:16; 64:8).¹³

This brief tour of biblical examples shows how pervasively the bible recognizes God’s covenant with his people in terms of a Marriage with God as Husband and his people as Bride, and why Paul applies Gen 2:24 first to Christ and His Bride the Church.¹⁴ Returning to the early chapters of Genesis, Adam and Eve’s creation in the image of God (Gen 1:27) also affirms the “downward” direction of comparison we observed at the heart of Paul’s “metaphoric” correlation between the divine Marriage and human marriages. “Male and female” are created in *God’s* image, not the other way around. In fact, to reverse the direction of comparison is—quite literally—*idolatry*; the casting of God in the human image (cf. Exod 20:4; Acts 17:19; etc.). Such a reversal was widespread in the ancient world, whose deities included both gods and goddesses as consorts with one another, such as the Canaanite fertility deities, Baal and Asherah. But not so in the bible where male and female image the *divine* reality. Indeed, the same “downward” direction of comparison—or better, *derivation*—ensues regarding God the Father, “from whom all fatherhood (πατριὰ) in heaven and on earth is named (ὀνομάζονται)” (Eph 3:15). According to Eph 3:15 God the Father is no mere projection of human fatherhood onto the divine—an attempt at a limited analogy. The opposite is rather the case: God is *the* Father after whom human fatherhood is patterned (cf. Exod 4:22; Hos 11:1). Human fatherhood derives from divine Fatherhood, not the other way around as through some human attempt to describe God by human analogy.

Just as, for Paul, the opening chapters of the bible foreshadow Christ’s cleansing and sanctification of his Bride the Church—the heart of the biblical testimony—so St John sees their fulfilment in the bible’s closing chapters. In his eschatological vision of Revelation 21, John sees “the holy city (τὴν πόλιν τὴν ἁγίαν) New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven

¹³ That Isa 66:13 promises divine comfort “in *Jerusalem*” befits Zion/Jerusalem’s role as “herald of good news” in Isa 40:9 (cf. twofold f. ptc. מְבַשְּׂרָה) and her restored status as YHWH’s Bride (cf. 50:1).

¹⁴ There are, of course, many other places that presuppose God’s Marriage to Israel. For example, even Isa 5:1–7, where vineyard imagery dominates, is introduced as YHWH’s “love song” (שִׁירַת דִּוְרָי) for Judah and Jerusalem. (cf. Song of Songs).

from God, prepared as a bride (ἡτοιμασμένην ὡς νύμφην) adorned for her husband” (v. 2). Although John here uses the language of simile in a more conventional sense, the biblical witness has by this time firmly established the Marriage typology. In any case, shortly before St John hears the voice of a great multitude saying, “Let us rejoice and exult and give him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his wife/bride (γυνή) has prepared (ἡτοιμάσεν) herself,” whereupon the angel declares, “Blessed are those called to the wedding supper (τὸ δεῖπνον τοῦ γάμου) of the Lamb” (19:7, 9). Moreover, right after this vision of New Jerusalem St John hears the voice from the throne declaring the covenant formula seen throughout the bible: “See, the tabernacle (ἡ σκηνή; ESV: “dwelling”) of God [is] with people (μετὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων); and he will tabernacle (σκηνώσει) with them, *and they will be his people, and he himself will be with them as their God*”¹⁵ (Rev 21:3), thus describing the renewed covenant Jeremiah had prophesied in the same matrimonial terms.

The Modern Turn

The study of metaphor has experienced what Job Jindo describes as a “turn” amid a growing appreciation of metaphor as a deeper conceptual phenomenon rather than, more narrowly, as a rhetorical or literary device found chiefly in poetry.¹⁶ Accordingly, biblical scholarship has begun to embrace the broader field of cognitive linguistics that explores the wider conceptual “mappings” common to human thought and expression. As Jindo puts it, “metaphorical expressions that seem unrelated on the textual surface level are, in fact, conceptually interrelated on the deeper level.”¹⁷ This “turn” has yielded mixed blessings. On the one hand, it has led—and continues to lead—to a fuller appreciation of how metaphoric language in the bible may evoke ancient Near Eastern societal and religious realities, hence also the communicative power of metaphor. On the other, it has fostered interpretive approaches subject to fewer controls, as biblical texts are said to elicit all sorts of ideas and significances not otherwise made plain in the text.¹⁸ These developments and the issues associated with them are indeed too complex and too large to engage here.

Whether we are talking about metaphor pre- or post- the above turn, deeper issues emerge: the notion of “metaphor” cannot do justice to the *downward* direction of comparison inherent to the “metaphor” of marriage seen in our brief accounting of it in the bible. This is because even sophisticated approaches to metaphor still presuppose that metaphors communicate through *analogy* with its inherently “upward” direction of comparison. The unknown—e.g., the divine—is analogous to the known; a *projection* of it by means of “upward” comparison. Contrary to the biblical witness just explored, then, God’s “marriage” becomes a conceptual construct or projection that properly belongs in inverted commas. To

¹⁵ N.B. the strong connection with John 1:14, “And the Word (ὁ λόγος) became flesh and tabernacled (ἐσκήνωσεν) among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as an only-begotten with the Father, full of grace and truth.”

¹⁶ See Job Y. Jindo, “Metaphor Theory and Biblical Texts,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2013), 2:1–10.

¹⁷ Jindo, “Metaphor Theory and Biblical Texts,” 6.

¹⁸ For example, feminist criticism’s use of such approaches to problematize God’s treatment of his bride in books like Hosea. See, e.g., the discussion in Sharon Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13–16.

be sure, a fuller account of a metaphor's conceptual entailments is valuable and deepens awareness of the metaphor and its communicative power in specific contexts. Such "metaphorical language" that the bible applies to Christ's Marriage indeed shapes the reader's understanding of the divine reality to which it bears witness. But it does not follow that Christ's Marriage is reducible to a cognitive linguistic construct—that the "marriage metaphor" *defines* or *delimits* the divine reality it signifies. The "downward" direction of comparison inherent to the biblical witness suggests, then, that "metaphor" is an inadequate description for Christ's Marriage. By contrast, the premodern language and categories of *typology* better account for it, as the above biblical tour implies. At the least, "metaphor" only goes part way to describing what is going on in the biblical witness where Christ's Marriage is concerned.¹⁹

This modern—and postmodern—state of affairs is itself due to a greater and more far-reaching "turn," however; one that occurred with the Enlightenment and especially under Immanuel Kant's influence. Kant distinguished the "phenomenal" world—the world accessible to our senses and intellect that we can see, touch, and experience—from the "noumenal;" things in and of themselves according to their objective nature and beyond our knowing because our knowledge is mediated through sensory experience and therefore "phenomenal."²⁰ For Kant, then, God is impenetrable to human reason, since he is transcendental and belongs to the noumenal. Assuming we could suspend our belief in the *Incarinate* God, we might be able to journey this far with Kant. Certainly we can, together with Kant, acknowledge the limitations of our reason when it comes to knowing God—in the words of Luther's Small Catechism, "we cannot believe in Jesus Christ or come to him." But here Lutheran spirituality and hermeneutics parts ways with Kant.

Since Kant's system leaves us cut off from direct access to God, all that might be said of God are mere *projections* of the divine drawn from the phenomenal world and are finally illusory. Where does this leave us? God can *only* be known by analogy. The problem in fact goes deeper, for who is to know whether the analogy holds true to God's real nature—what

¹⁹ Put another way, cognitive-linguistic study is useful for a fuller understanding of biblical typologies such as Paul presents regarding Christ's Marriage because type and Antitype do in fact inform one another; that is, there is not *exclusively* a "downward" direction of comparison but also an upward one insofar as types are patterned on their Antitype, or Pattern, and therefore also communicate that which they reflect. According to Paul's paranesis Christian marriages *should* reflect Christ's Marriage. But nonetheless Paul's paranesis depends on a primarily "downward" direction of comparison from what *is* (Christ's Marriage) to what *ought to be* (Christian marriages) as noted above. The modern study of metaphor, however, operates with only the "upward" dimension so that we are left with a mere analogy that reduces "God as Husband" to a cognitive linguistic construct (cf. nominalism vis-à-vis realism in medieval thought). In other words, metaphor understood as a purely "upward" comparative or analogous exercise in understanding reduces everything to an issue of *epistemology* in such a way that precludes access to the *ontology* of the divine reality in question. But Paul's downward direction from Christ's Marriage to human marriages it is at heart *ontological* as the latter ought to reflect the Reality of the former. It is thus not reducible to an epistemologically expedient similitude, even as the divine ordinance of human marriage informs our understanding of Christ's marriage. Incidentally, Luther affirms the validity of arguing from human matters to the divine—i.e., this upward direction of reasoning—"as long as we base it on a divine ordinance" and not, e.g., "on human feelings that are depraved" (LW 26:297). This suggests that marriage according to divine ordinance, not distortions of it, is able to teach us about *the* Marriage between Christ and his Bride the Church to which human marriages themselves bear witness.

²⁰ For a good summary of Kant's thought and influence, see Anthony Kenny, *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 275–97.

he is like in himself—since the noumenal lies beyond reach? This is arguably the basic problem underlying the theological pluralism of our current day. Indeed, it has had far-reaching implications for post-Enlightenment biblical scholarship, which imbibed deeply of Kant’s system of thought and applied the same limitations to the biblical writers whom they assumed were similarly confined by their phenomenal experience. Relevant to our purposes here is the direction of comparison entailed in such analogizing efforts. Within Kant’s system of thought the *noumena* or, we might say, the “things above”—e.g., who God is and what God is like—can only be approximated by realities and experiences to which we do have access in the phenomenal world. Metaphor can at best be only a crude description of a divine and ultimately unknowable reality and so functions “from the bottom up.” It is a projection of things *known* onto Someone who is *unknowable*; at best a communication of ideas *about* God, rather than God communicating *himself*.²¹ On this view it goes too far to say that God is *really* married to his people, because marriage *really* entails a man and a woman, a sexual bond, progeny, commitment, etc. The phenomenal experience is held to be the “real” and full account of the reality at the heart of the metaphor, which at best can only dimly convey the divine reality to which it points. So understood, God is not really “married” to his people. He is not really their “husband” nor they his “bride.” This was just a way of communicating certain truths about God’s relationship to them, e.g., his commitment, a sense of obligation and loyalty between God and people, etc.²²

But Kant’s contemporary and greatest critic, Johann G. Hamann, faulted Kant’s system precisely because it disregards God’s self-revelation through his divine condescension in the Word.²³ God is not the object of “pure” rational thought, but condescends—Hamann speaks

²¹ At one level, cognitive-linguistic approaches to metaphor eschew its reduction to simile, rejecting what Moughtin-Mumby calls the “traditional” or “substitutionary approach to metaphor” which tends “to understand metaphor as *word-based*” (Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors*, 6–7.), and instead seeing the metaphor as the message rather than presenting something *like* it. Nonetheless, this methodological withdrawal from the “*word*” to the supposed network of thoughts behind it still lands the reader in much the same place, since it inherently understands the text as comparing God to those thoughts. Far from *God* communicating realities through the text, the text communicates ideas about God; it just does so in a more complex way. Moreover, retreating from the *word* to the supposed network of ideas that it elicits yields no greater vision than the relatable human experience, thus reducing the greater divine reality to a conceptual network of ideas. The words themselves—e.g., God as “Husband” who “loves” his “Bride”—are therefore no longer *theologically* pregnant, presenting *divine realities*, but merely ideal and conceptual.

²² We find a cruder example of this in someone like Rudolph Bultmann, for whom “demythologization” became the highest priority in biblical interpretation. To get to the real “meaning” of Scripture, one has to strip away the “myth” from Scripture and distil the key principle or propositional idea, which was usually a thinly disguised reflection of the interpreter’s own modernist worldview or values.

²³ This is the key point for our current purposes, but it should be noted that Hamann’s “meta-critique” of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is in fact much more extensive. For example, he points out Kant’s real indebtedness to the philosophical traditions in which he stands and thus the *contingency* of Kant’s thought about thought and its consequent lack of objectivity, and calls into question Kant’s theoretical division of “pure reason” from experience by showing their actual unity through *language*. On this latter point, Hamann pre-empted 20th century philosophers’ interest in language, though for Hamann the contingency of language does not lead to infinite regress of meaning proclaimed by atheist philosophers like Jacques Derrida, precisely because in Scripture the Holy Spirit condescends to speak *the* Word (Logos). For a good introduction to Hamann and his critique of Kantian thought, see John R. Betz, *After Enlightenment: Hamann as Post-Secular Visionary* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), esp. 38–55 and 230–53. For a shorter introduction see John R. Betz, “Hamann’s London Writings: The Hermeneutics of Trinitarian Condescension” *Pro Ecclesia* 14, No. 2

of God's *kenosis* (emptying) and self-abasement—to make himself known through phenomenal means, even the ordinary human words of Scripture. As (“economic”) Trinity thus makes *himself* accessible to humankind, bridging Kant's impervious divide between the noumenal and the phenomenal.²⁴ For Hamann, then, it was not only that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity became flesh in order to make God present and accessible to Kant's phenomenal world, but that the Third Person of the Holy Trinity likewise condescended through the Scriptures. The material principle of Christian theology, *solus Christus*, thus holds fast to the formal principle, *sola scriptura*, as the Holy Spirit suffered himself to speak through the divine-human words of Scripture—even the Old Testament, which Luther famously called the swaddling cloths in which one finds God enfleshed in Christ. In other words, Scripture is *Word of God* through which God makes himself known and gives access to himself. Returning to the Catechism: “but the Holy Spirit has called me by the *gospel*, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified, and kept me in the one true faith.” Furthermore, Hamann says that even the *First Person* of the Holy Trinity, the *Father*, condescends in creation. His creatures thus bear the imprint of their Creator; an important insight that makes typology possible as human *realities* foreshadow divine ones.

What does this have to do with biblical metaphor? That the Holy Spirit should so condescend to us through Scripture permits us to see beyond the strictures imposed by Kant's system of thought and so to recognize the opposite direction of comparison at work in the biblical witness to God's Marriage to his people. Human marriages are not simply a relatable phenomenon that biblical writers used to give insight into important aspects of God's relationship with his people; an analogy that outlives its usefulness once some pertinent points of comparison have been understood because it is just an idea or concept. Marriage as human beings know and experience it is not merely a cognitive linguistic “vehicle” to communicate certain truths or propositions about how God relates to us, and once the interpreter arrives at the destination—i.e., apprehends those propositions—he or she gets out of the car, leaves it at the roadside, and surveys the “real” view. The direction of comparison does not run exclusively upwards from below, but primarily downwards from above. God *is* Married to his people, and addresses his Bride through the Scriptures. This is the Marriage of marriages, from which all human—especially Christian—marriages derive, even though they are but a dim reflection of it (cf. Eph 5:22–33). And although our perceptions and experiences of marriage in the phenomenal world “below” invariably affect our perception of God's marriage to his people when we read about it in Scripture, *through* Scripture the Holy Spirit sets about reshaping those very perceptions according to the image of Christ and His Bride the Church. Epistemologically, then, the Holy Spirit draws us upward through Scripture, constituting us and our awareness, our wonder, our joy—in short, *creating faith*—

(2005): 191–234; and “Johann Georg Hamann” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (rev. 2017), accessed via <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hamann/>.

²⁴ Betz, “Hamann's London Writings,” 203–4, writes, quoting Hamann,

What is unique about Hamann's experience, however, is that he does not begin with the humility of the Son, as one would expect, but with the humility of the Holy Spirit, who reveals the humility of all the persons of the Trinity. And it is with this essentially triune mystery that he opens his hermeneutical preface, *On the Interpretation of Scripture*: “God an author!—The Creator of the world and Father of human beings is denied and reprov'd, the God-man was crucified, and the inspirer of God's Word is ridiculed and blasphemed. The inspiration of this book is just as great an act of abasement and condescension as the creation of the Father and the incarnation of the Son.”

in the ontological reality of God enfleshed in Christ and Married to his Bride the Church with whom the Incarnate Christ is one flesh.

Some Contemporary Applications: Gay “Marriage,” Domestic Violence, and the Ordination of Women

We shall conclude by observing a few points of contact between the above and some major issues currently besetting Christ’s church. First, the church is under significant cultural pressure to sanction gay “marriage.” Of course, such a deconstruction and re-conception of marriage belies the binary nature of marriage as the one flesh union of “male and female.” That in itself is deal-breaker for those who look to the biblical testimony to shape their understanding of marriage. The matter becomes more involved again, however, when we recognize human marriage in the image of Christ’s Marriage to his Bride the Church. Man and woman are *others*; that is, man is *other* to woman, and woman *other* to man. They are altogether different human beings whose union is, on that account, all the more miraculous and whose complementarity is deeply mysterious. As a type and shadow of Christ’s Marriage to his Bride the Church, then, Christian marriage bears witness to the *otherness* of God with whom we human beings are united in the resurrected and ascended God-Man Jesus Christ. God did not marry God! He took to himself *another*, the Church—a new humanity whom he has redeemed for himself.

Second, Paul’s teaching about marriage in Ephesians 5, which revolves around headship and subordination, calls husbands to self-sacrificial love precluding all violence and abuse against their wives, and wives to honour their husbands through their subordination. As with any typology, where the type is but a shadow of the Antitype, marriage as instituted by God in the bible is finally patterned on Christ’s husbandly love for his Bride the Church and her willing subordination to her Lord. The *downward* direction of comparison that permeates Paul’s paraenesis in Ephesians 5 is vital here, for it prevents us from assuming a distorted view of headship detached from the pattern of Christ, or worse, blasphemously attributing an abusive character to Christ’s headship through analogy with our own dysfunctional family experiences.

Finally, since Christ is Husband to the Church is his Bride, the maleness of pastors is not and cannot be an indifferent matter, since incumbents of the pastoral office do not represent their own persons but the Person of *Christ (in persona Christi)* who is both Husband to his Bride the Church and representative of the Father (John 5:19–26; 8:30, 37–38; 12:49–50; 14:6, 9–11). The common suggestion that only Jesus’ “humanness” matters in this respect must finally reduce Christ’s Marriage to his Bride the Church to merely a construct of the mind; the projection of a cognitively generated image onto a disincarnate god to express something about his relationship to people. But as we have seen, this is no mere “metaphor” from which *we* may determine what is relevant to the *in persona Christi* of the pastoral office. God in Christ has Married his people; Christ *is* Husband to his Bride the Church. Accordingly, the maleness of the pastor is inseparable from his vocational representation of Christ as Husband and Head of the Church as well as representative of the Father to it. However capable she may be, a woman cannot image Christ in his capacity as Husband to the Church anymore than she can *be* a husband within a marriage. The limitation here lies not so much with Christ (though he was born a male human being—a fact congruent with the OT witness to God’s husbandly love for Israel observed above). The limitation, rather, lies with

men and women in our createdness, since only the former can be husbands and thus “post-shadow” Christ as Husband to his Bride the Church, hence represent him liturgically as he hosts us at the foretaste of the wedding feast to come (Rev 19:7, 9).

Since the biblical witness to Christ’s Marriage is no mere cognitive construct but a Reality, the Church is not left to—nor does it have the authority to—construct the pastoral office/vocation as she sees fit. Rather, the office is Christ’s gift to the church and instituted by his Word (Matt 28:19–20; John 20:21–23; Eph 4:11–12; etc.). Indeed, the Pastoral Epistles have much to say about what fits a person for the pastoral office (1 Tim 3:1–7) shortly after forbidding women from teaching in public worship; requirements that prevent many men from exercising the pastoral office as well. But we may note that here, too, sexual differentiation applies, for in doing so 1 Tim 3:2 requires that an “overseer” or “bishop” (ἐπίσκοπος) be “*husband of one wife*” (μῑὰς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα) rather than the other way around.

What is more, given Genesis 2–3’s foundational theological importance for the estate of marriage and family and also the *church*, it is not at all surprising that Paul should premise his prohibition against women teaching in public worship in 1 Tim 2:11–14 on Genesis 2–3. Set in the context of public worship (1 Tim 2:1–8), the emphasis of his prohibition falls upon women *teaching* (διδάσκειν δὲ γυναικὶ οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω οὐδὲ αὐθεντεῖν ἄνδρός), which he premises on Adam’s being formed first—hence his priestly responsibility (v. 13) and Eve’s usurpation of the same through her transgression (ἐν παραβάσει γέγονεν in v. 14).²⁵ What is more, Christ, the one Mediator between God and people (1 Tim 2:5), also represents the Father to the Church, and for the same reason a woman cannot impersonate Jesus as he represents the *Father*. In Eph 3:15 Paul affirms that—like human marriage—human *fatherhood* is patterned on the Fatherhood of God, “from whom all fatherhood (πᾶσα πατριὰ) in heaven and on earth is named (ὀνομάζεται)” (Eph 3:15). As with marriage, which follows the pattern of Christ’s Marriage to his Bride the Church, so the direction of comparison—or rather, the direction of derivation—is *downward*. God’s Fatherhood is not a projection of human fatherhood, but the (perfect) *source* of it! When a pastor stands in Christ’s stead as he mediates the Father’s word, he images God’s Fatherhood.

Nor does Paul’s “there is no...male and female, for you are all one in Christ” in Gal 3:28 in any way deny Christ’s Marriage and its implications for Christian marriage or order in the church.²⁶ Indeed, any suggestion that Paul should intend this to negate his paranesis in Eph 5:22–33 would be quite absurd! In considering Gal 3:28, it is important to observe that out of the three differentiated categories Paul speaks about—Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female—only the last has any relevance to Christ’s husbandly relationship to his Bride the Church, since neither ethnicity nor one’s status as a slave/servant precluded a man from being a husband. Moreover, unlike the other two the male/female distinction explicitly belongs to *created* order (Gen 1:27). It is therefore telling that we should find this differentiation only here, and not where Paul gives instruction about how the church is *ordered*, such as 1

²⁵ See further Hensley, “Redressing the Serpent’s Cunning.”

²⁶ On the contrary, in Galatians 3 he speaks specifically of Christians’ baptismal unity within the Church, the Bride of Christ—in which all are collectively feminine—so it makes sense that the male-female differentiation should have no place there. But when Paul speaks of order in the church where public teaching is concerned, sexual differentiation remains powerfully relevant as already see above in 1 Timothy 2–3.

Corinthians 12. There in the lead up to Paul’s admonitions about women’s participation in the prophetic activity of the church in 1 Cor 14:26–40, Paul does *not* include this male-female differentiation at 1 Cor 12:13 when stressing the oneness of the body, even though he does include the other two (Jew/Greek; slave/free). This is because male-female differentiation remains vitally relevant to how the church is ordered (1 Cor 14:40; cf. the taxonomical language ὑποτάσσω in vv. 32 and 34) as the Spirit prohibits women from publicly scrutinizing²⁷ the contributions of other prophets in the gathered worship assembly (ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ)—a point underscored by the divine passive “it is not permitted (οὐ γὰρ ἐπιτρέπεται) for them to speak...etc” in 14:34. What is more Paul appeals to ecumenical practice (14:33), the Law (12:34)—itself a reference to created order in Genesis 2 (cf. 11:8–9), the Word of God (12:36), Christ’s command (12:37), and his own prophetic authority (12:37), thereby showing that this is no theologically indifferent matter but the revealed will of God. This too is in keeping with chapter 12, for there Paul stresses that such church order concerning prophetic utterances (προφητεία in 12:10) and their prophetic evaluation (διακρίσεις πνευμάτων directly after in 12:10)—the key issues he will pick up in 14:29–38 after the subject of tongues (14:27–28)—is *not* by mere human arrangement but according to the Spirit’s apportioning (cf. καθὼς βούλεται in 1 Cor 12:11). Clearly Paul is not concerned with some general “principle of order,” as is sometimes claimed for these verses, but with divinely instituted order where male-female differentiation remains deeply relevant.²⁸ “God has arranged (ἔθετο) the members” (1 Cor 12:18), “composed the body” (12:24). *He* has appointed “first apostles, second prophets, and third teachers, etc.” (12:28). They are *not* human-appointed offices in the church but subject to his divine ordinances in Scripture.²⁹

Conclusion

God’s covenant of Marriage to Israel finds fulfilment in the “great mystery” (Eph 5:32) of Christ’s Marriage to his Bride the Church in the new covenant. As such it is central to the biblical witness to God’s redemptive love for his people in both the Old and New Testaments. This is no mere cognitive construct or projection of ideas onto a disincarnate god, but a Reality culminating in the incarnation of the Son of God, who has assumed human flesh to purify and sanctify the new humanity, his *Body* the Church, of which he is Head, and his *Bride*, with whom he is one flesh as her Husband (Eph 5:31–32). According to Paul, then, the estate of marriage bears witness to this Reality pertaining to the estate of the church as Bride of Christ, which human marriages typologically post-shadow. The Church and the Christian people within her cannot pick and choose points of comparison between the *idea* of marriage and God’s relationship to his people, because it is no mere “idea” or cognitive construct to begin with. Rather the Church looks to the Apostolic teaching of the New Testament to recognize how it may faithfully proclaim the Marriage of Christ to his Bride the Church through both the estates of Christian marriage and of the church.

²⁷ διακρίνω in 1 Cor 14:29, variously translated “weigh,” “sift,” “judge.”

²⁸ What is more, Paul specifically invokes *headship* in 11:3 at the beginning of chapters 11–14 dealing with public worship matters and bookended with the Apostle’s instructions qualifying women’s prophetic activities in public worship (11:2–16; 14:26–40). Again, it is clear that sexual differentiation plays a foundational role in Paul’s teaching on order in public worship.

²⁹ For a fuller account of 1 Cor 14:26–40 see, Adam D. Hensley, “σιγάω, λαλέω, and ὑποτάσσω in 1 Corinthians 14:34 in their Literary and Rhetorical Context,” *JETS* 55 (2012): 343–64.

We shall let Martin Luther have the final word from one of his sermons on the Gospel according to John:

“Therefore it behooves us to learn to identify the Bridegroom’s voice. If someone should come without Christ, against Christ, or under the name of Christ, tell him: “The name of the Bridegroom and of the bride dare not be blasphemed and dishonored. Christ says so and so. And whoever follows the voice of the Bridegroom will not alter or change this message...The church has no right either to hear Christ the Bridegroom speak or command, and then to change His orders. Therefore to say: “The church has ordained this or that” is sheer blasphemy. For Bridegroom and bride are but one body; and the bride complies with all the demands of the Groom, as St. Paul declares in the fifth chapter of Ephesians (5:25, 32). Whether someone acts arbitrarily against Christ, without Christ, or under the guise of His name, it is immaterial; it is all against Christ. Therefore we must be on the alert against the devil, who assails us either with doctrine that runs counter to Christ, as the tyrants do, or with doctrine that is devoid of Christ, as the canon laws do. And others will come with the Scriptures and give themselves the semblance of the Lord Christ; this, of course, is also against Christ. Christ alone must remain the Bridegroom; He alone is vested with authority and must be heard, as the voice from heaven declared (Matt. 17:5).” (LW 22: 445)