

What My Father Has Joined



by AARON SIRONI

“Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen 3:16). These words fall like a death sentence on every marriage. From the third chapter of Scripture, we see that sin has distorted a glorious marriage of equals and twisted it into a struggle for control and domination. Instead of a one flesh partnership fruitfully ruling over creation together, marriage has become a never-ending power struggle between spouses casting blame (Gen 3:12–13). Sin affects every marriage. “To love and to cherish” has become “to desire and to dominate.”¹ A relationship that started in intimacy, unity, and joy, now drifts toward distance, alienation, and conflict.

Talks on marriage always seem to draw a crowd. Hot button issues of intimacy, happiness, and romance motivate couples to read, work on, or at least talk about their marriages. These topics are all good. However, when Scripture speaks of marriage, personal fulfillment and romance are not the primary focus. Remarkably, when addressing issues in marriage, both Jesus and Paul reaffirm God’s design for marriage by going straight to Genesis 2: “a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to

1. Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 76.

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his wife, and they shall become *one flesh*” (v.24).² In the Gospels, Jesus starts his teaching with the words “from the beginning,” making it clear that his Father’s original intentions for marriage *continue* to be his plan for marriage.

Even though the term *one flesh* presents some enduring theological and transformational truths, it has not always been well understood. Therefore, my aim is to unpack not only the definition of this term but also its dynamics and power. This leads us, in turn, to renewed methodological priorities for our work in marriage counseling.

To structure the discussion, picture marriage as a series of three concentric circles (see figure below). Each circle has a theological foundation that informs how we, as counselors and pastors, are called to

minister to a couple in distress. The innermost circle is a couple’s one flesh union. God endows marriage with specific and unique characteristics. However, this one flesh inner circle is always nested within a larger circle—the one body of Christ—the church. It is vital to understand that the marital relationship is located within the broader context of God’s intentions for every relationship in his body. But that is not all. An all-encompassing third circle, the church’s union with Christ, gives the other two meaning, significance, and shape. Christ has eternally united himself to his people and human marriage reflects this spiritual union. This truth is vital to how we understand and relate within marriage.

One Flesh Union

To understand the one flesh union, it’s necessary to draw attention to a common error when discussing this reality. When we read Genesis 2:24, “and they shall become one flesh,” it is common to think sexual intimacy carries the freight of this

2. Matthew 19:4–6; Mark 10:7–8; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:31

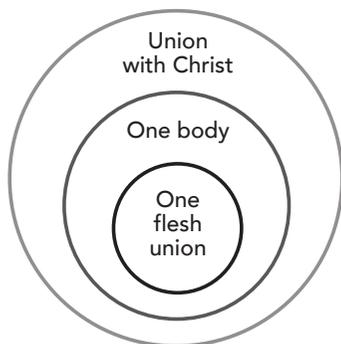
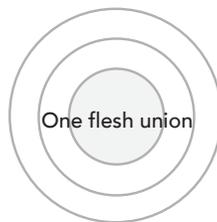


Figure 1. Marriage in Context



phrase. Although one flesh certainly includes a physical union, the primary emphasis of this passage is not on procreation or physical intimacy. Historically, theologians have seen the phrase as indicating far more than a husband and wife's sexual union. For example, Ephesians 5—the principal New Testament text which quotes this passage—does *not* include (and even ignores!) the procreative focus of Genesis 1:28 (be fruitful and multiply) and Genesis 3:15 (Eve's *offspring* will bruise the serpent's head). The coming of the Messiah gives Paul the freedom to look beyond biological procreation toward a bigger purpose. Jesus has accomplished the redemption of the world and defeated the serpent. Therefore, Paul shifts his focus away from an Old Testament emphasis on bearing children and pinpoints a unity between husband and wife that *includes* sexual union but goes well beyond it to a restored oneness.

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The unique oneness of marriage. While there are many facets of the one flesh union, God's creation and joining of Adam and Eve stands in contrast to the rest of creation. There is an unparalleled oneness that is on display. God, as Creator, makes Adam and the world around him, but when he gets to Eve, he creates her out of Adam's own body. God's Word memorializes this amazing event with a physical reminder that woman is actually a part of man. Adam says, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Gen 2:23). Adam isn't merely saying, "Here is another human who is similar to me in many ways." Or "here is one who is not an animal, fish, or reptile." No. For Adam, the "one flesh" is more of a joyous *re*-union than a novel union. Adam knows the woman was created from his very own body. God could have used anything to create her. He could have used the dust of the earth as he used for Adam (Gen 2:7; 3:19,23). He could have created Eve solely by the power of his word, as he had created much of the universe. Instead, he chose to take something from Adam's body to fashion Eve. This amazing reality is important to understand.

In marriage, the one flesh union between a husband and wife is analogous to the previous union between Adam and his rib. Their lives are so bound up together that what impacts one will also impact the other. The joyful blessing that Adam experiences is truly with his “other half.” By using two words that sound alike—“man” and “woman”—Adam, as one of his first acts, names the woman in relation to and solidarity with himself.³ These details in the creation story emphasize the profound closeness, unity, and complete oneness shared by husband and wife. They are truly one flesh, not simply two married individuals. At the heart of Adam’s identity is his bond with Eve; at the heart of Eve’s identity is her bond with Adam. This union between the two cannot be severed without profound damage to who they are. A couple’s sexual union symbolizes, strengthens, and reminds them of this profound unity—one that points beyond their physical intimacy to a holistic oneness.⁴

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Marriage as service, work, and witness. With the unique and powerful oneness that exists between a husband and wife firmly in mind, we can dig deeper into a central implication of the one flesh union. Marriage involves a special oneness that makes it different from any other relationship. It emphasizes a solidarity of common interests, pursuits, possessions, needs, shared identity, and responsibilities. At the beginning of creation, nothing, not even nakedness, can drive a wedge between Adam and Eve (Gen 2:25). They are completely one—in heart, mind, and practical life together—unity personified. It’s not that the man and wife are expected to be exact replicas of each other. Nor are they to be joined at the hip in every activity, or doing exactly the same work. But they are intended to cultivate a oneness that unifies them in how they

3. The Hebrew words are even more similar than the English with *ish* for man and *ishshah* for woman.

4. For an excellent article on this topic, see Rob Lister, “The Beautiful Meaning of Marital Sexual Intimacy,” *eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology* 3:1 (Spring 2021): 30–41.

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