Marriage today: Sacramental or utilitarian?

by John Wall in the November 1, 2000 issue

Marriage After Modernity: Christian Marriage in Postmodern Times, by Adrian Thatcher

In the past few years, Christian theologians and ethicists have paid increasing attention to the state of modern marriages. Out of this concern has grown, among other things, a new Christian marriage theology that supports what has been called "critical familism," or new or progressive familism. Critical familism tries to move beyond the stale debate between conservative family values and liberal individualism. It argues that marriage and the family are valuable social institutions, especially important for children, but that they need to be newly understood in nonpatriarchal and egalitarian ways.

The books in this movement are written from various Protestant and Catholic perspectives. One might look, for example, at *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*: *Religion and the American Family Debate*, by neoliberal Protestants Don Browning, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Pamela Couture, Bernie Lyon and Robert Franklin; *Gender and Grace*: *Love*, *Work*, *and Parenting in a Changing World*, by evangelical Protestant Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen; and *Sex*, *Gender*, *and Christian Ethics*, by Catholic Lisa Sowle Cahill.

Adrian Thatcher's *Marriage After Modernity*, which takes some positions with which not all of the above authors would agree, is a new and fresh contribution to critical familism. It develops a Christian marriage theology that takes seriously both the Christian marriage traditions and the difficult challenges facing marriage today. Thatcher has constructed a systematic Christian vision of marriage that is substantive, provocative and eminently clear-sighted—a vision that prods us to reexamine the entrenched assumptions of modernity that have led to the current crisis of marriage.

The novelty and power of Thatcher's accomplishment is evident, first of all, in his central thesis that the core of Christian marriage should lie in the partners' "mutually administered sacrament." An Anglican theologian, Thatcher converts the Catholic notion of sacrament into a Protestant framework where it does not imply indissolubility. Nor does Thatcher reduce the sacrament of marriage to a purely spiritual union devoid of concrete worldly commitment and purpose. Instead, he argues that marriage should be viewed as a sacrament in the sense that it expresses "divine love." Divine love is realized in marriage in "generous, committed, human love," and the core purpose of marriage is to live out this sacred bond.

This sacramental vision seems to capture something most of us intuitively feel about marriage but have trouble articulating. Most modern literature on marriage bypasses the value and meaning of marriage itself to focus on marriage's more utilitarian benefits. We are encouraged to marry because (on average) marriage promises better sex, more money, longer lives and improved physical and emotional health. Sacramental marriage points to an underlying marital "communion" that delights in love for its own sake. For Thatcher, marital love reflects God's own triune relationality. Marriage is an opportunity to experience the reality of the divine.

Out of this vision of marriage, Thatcher develops three provocative theses. First, he argues that we should reappropriate the traditional Christian view of marriage as centrally oriented toward the procreation and raising of children. The connection between sacramental love and children is today far from obvious. The Christian tradition has always affirmed celibate adults' decision to forego having children. However, it has also generally argued that children are best nurtured and raised within the marriage of two committed parents. Going back to the early church fathers and Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, Thatcher argues that children should be "regarded as evidence of the blessing of God on marriage." The sacrament of marital love finds its further expression in parents' love for the fruits of their sexuality.

Thatcher's argument for the centrality of children to Christian marriage is not an argument against contraception. Nor is it an argument against committed homosexual unions. Rather, it is an argument for a renewed "theology of liberation for children." While many children born and raised outside of marriage do well, today's separation of child-rearing from marriage often is a form of child oppression. While modernity holds up the freedom of adults to make choices, a postmodern Christianity must insist that we stand up for the children who too often become the

victims of adult choices. Since “the Christian faith is the gift and practice of liberation,” it should strive to liberate children from the widespread and often unacknowledged suffering caused them by modernity’s culture of divorce.

A second provocative thesis is that we should develop a revised appreciation for the ritual of betrothal. This now quaint-sounding term represents, in the West, a long practice of premarital sexual union and cohabitation. Unlike most cohabitation today, however, betrothal was “emphatically premised by the intention to marry.” It held up the sacredness of marriage as something requiring a thoughtful, careful and public process of formation. Quoting the well-known marriage historian John Gillis, Thatcher points out that “among the English and American plebs in the last half of the 18th century, almost all brides below the social elite had experienced sexual intercourse with their future husbands before marriage.”

Betrothal lasted anywhere up to two years. It served the valuable functions of helping couples discover whether their union could produce children and giving the community and the couples’ families the time to come together to support the eventual marriage. Traditionally the church fully supported premarital sex within this betrothed context. It also supported breaking the betrothal under certain conditions: that no children had been produced or that there was evidence that this marriage would not be a good one.

The notion of betrothal should be revisited by Christians, Thatcher argues, because it helps us to see marriage not as a single event, but as a “process.” Today, the formal process around marriage generally takes only one day, the wedding day. As we are discovering, this quick entry into marriage insufficiently prepares couples for the important bond they are enacting. Churches now combine what were once separate betrothal and wedding ceremonies into one. The only symbol of betrothal a wedding ceremony retains is having the couple begin the ceremony down by the congregation before moving up to the altar.

A revised appreciation for “processual marriage” would help couples begin to explore the sacred dimensions of their bond to one another before they solidify their union for life. Perhaps more important, betrothal also would help couples begin to weave their relationship into the larger familial, ecclesial and social fabric that will sustain their marriage. Supporting the process instead of just the act of marriage could help couples link the various stages of their relationship, from premarital romantic infatuation to marital commitment to the possible procreation and rearing

of children.

A third thesis that emerges from this provocative book is that Christianity, properly understood, supports the marriage of gays and lesbians. This view follows from Thatcher's core Christian vision of marriage as a sacrament and the appropriate arena for child-rearing. Thatcher argues that gay and lesbian sexual unions express the sacrament of God's divine love just as heterosexual unions do. "The diversity of sexual orientation found among human beings is due to our having been wonderfully made by God," he states. Gay and lesbian couples should be supported in their role as parents, whether their children come from previous heterosexual relationships, adoption or artificial insemination. Whatever the sexual orientation of their parents, children deserve the protections and rights that only legalized marriage can ensure.

This book is overall a milestone in Christian marriage theology. I have not touched here upon many other important ideas this rich book develops, including powerful Christian arguments against patriarchy and marital indissolubility.

My one quarrel with the book is that Thatcher does not pay much attention to the influential Calvinist view of marriage as a "covenant." When the term is used at all, it tends to be conflated with the bond of sacrament, as in the phrase "covenanted love." While this neglect may be due in part to Thatcher's Anglican orientation, it also suggests an area in which Thatcher's view may require further development. The notion of marriage as a covenant points beyond the couple's interpersonal relationship to marriage as embedded within larger structures of society. Calvin was partly responsible for reforming medieval private marriage into a legal contract. In addition, he helped introduce the requirement that there be public and familial witnesses to the wedding. If marriage is to be upheld as a sacred and important bond, it will need the explicit covenanted support of the couple's larger community. Thatcher does not deny this. However, he does tend to assume that a marriage's strength can be assured chiefly by deepening the couple's bond. Perhaps this plays too much into modernity's privatization of marriage. A more fully Christian account would hold up the need to support marital love through broader covenants with families, communities, churches and the state.

Thatcher's book should be taken up by anyone seeking deeper insight into marriage's theological meaning and purpose. Although it is principally a work of scholarship, it avoids jargon. I use the book with much success in my college course on religion and families. It will help a wide range of professionals who deal with marriage and want a broader perspective on their work. In particular, it should be

useful to pastors and pastoral counselors. It is a book that will spur creative debate about critical familism for years to come.