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# An Edifying Vision of Marriage

A Review of Timothy Keller, with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*. New York: Dutton, 2011.

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There are dozens of good Christian books on marriage. Why another one? Because our cultural context has changed so drastically.

Tim Keller has witnessed this change from a front-row seat since 1989, when he planted Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, which he still pastors. He penetratingly understands how non-Christians and young Christians tend to think about the Bible's counter-cultural teachings on marriage. His church reflects the demographics of center-city Manhattan: over 80% of the people are single. Keller has found that singles are very interested in the topic of marriage, and this book is based on his most listened-to sermons: a nine-part series he preached on marriage in 1991.

This is Keller's sixth book published by Dutton. The first five are *The Reason for God* (2008), *The Prodigal God* (2008), *Counterfeit Gods* (2009), *Generous Justice* (2010), and *King's Cross* (2011). Like the previous ones, this book's target audience is broad. Keller successfully reaches his "primary goal": "to give both married and unmarried people a vision for what marriage is according to the Bible" (12). This is a book I would give to Christians and non-Christians, married and single, older couples and newlyweds, engaged couples and singles—including singles who are not interested in getting married. Keller weaves the gospel throughout the book while disarmingly exposing harmful views on marriage, realistically explaining how God designed marriage to work, and powerfully demonstrating how glorious marriage is. He anticipates objections (e.g., regarding homosexuality or the role of women), probably states them better than the objectors could

themselves, and respectfully responds.

In contrast to some of Keller's previous books (e.g., *Counterfeit Gods* or *King's Cross*), Keller's exegesis is easy to follow straight through to his theological statements and applications. Sometimes Keller shares a brilliant insight but bases it on a text that I'm not convinced supports it. But this book straightforwardly explains and applies Ephesians 5:21–33, and Keller shares, "I follow closely [Peter T.] O'Brien's exegesis of the Ephesians 5 passage throughout this book" (253 n. 53).

The book's argument unfolds in eight steps:

(1) Our culture views marriage very differently than the Bible presents it; God instituted marriage and designed it to illustrate the gospel (ch. 1, "The Secret of Marriage").

(2) The Holy Spirit enables husbands and wives to serve each other joyfully (ch. 2, "The Power for Marriage").

(3) Marriage is about love, which is not merely romantic passion but commitment to our promise (ch. 3, "The Essence of Marriage").

(4) The purpose of marriage is for two best friends to help each other become more holy (ch. 4, "The Mission of Marriage").

(5) We can help our spouse become more holy with the power of constructive truth, renewing love (especially the "love languages" of affection, friendship, and service), and reconciling grace (ch. 5, "Loving the Stranger").

(6) God created men and women with equal value but distinct roles (ch. 6, "Embracing the Other").

(7) Singles should neither overvalue nor

undervalue marriage, and those seeking marriage should take some precautions (ch. 7, “Singleness and Marriage”).

(8) God created sex solely for marriage as a glorious uniting act that maintains the marriage covenant (ch. 8, “Sex and Marriage”).

One of Keller’s recurrent themes is that the popular “I love you because you make me feel good about myself” concept of love is bankrupt and shallow. “In the long run,” Keller comments in an interview about the book, “the more superficial things that made a person sexually attractive will move to the background, and matters of character, humility, grace, courage, faithfulness, and love will come to the foreground. So companionship, duty, and mutual sacrifice are, in the end, the sexiest things of all.”<sup>1</sup>

Except for chapter 6 and a short appendix, Keller writes the book in his own voice but acknowledges that it “is very much the product of *two* people’s mutual experience, conversation, reflection, formal study, teaching, and counseling over thirty-seven years” (245 n. 1). Kathy Keller writes chapter 6 and the appendix in the first person, and she winsomely shows how the Son’s submitting to the Father applies to the roles of husbands and wives (174–76, 242–44).

Most of my criticisms of *The Meaning of Marriage* are pedantic and not worth highlighting. I’ll mention just one: with reference to God’s commanding husbands to love their wives, Keller states, “Emotions can’t be commanded, only actions, and so it is actions that Paul is demanding” (103). I’m not convinced that dichotomizing emotions and actions like that is viable. I ask my three-year-old daughter to obey me “with a happy heart” (i.e., cheerfully, joyfully, without arguing or complaining), and I don’t think that standard is unreasonable. The writings of John Frame and John Piper, among others, present a more satisfying view of emotions.

I could apply many adjectives to the book: insightful, shrewd, disarming, realistic, convicting, pastoral, warm, gracious, penetrating, theological, relevant, faithful, incisive, accessible, clear, compelling. But perhaps best of all (because of those

traits), it’s edifying. It has inspired me to glorify God by loving and leading my wife like Ephesians 5:21–33 commands.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See [http://thegospelcoalition.org/book-reviews/interview/meaning\\_of\\_marriage](http://thegospelcoalition.org/book-reviews/interview/meaning_of_marriage).