

The Beautified Bride: The Church from the Perspective of Her Groom

Intro: The Joy of the Groom

Someone asked me the other day how many weddings I've officiated. And I honestly don't know, but it's been a lot, mainly because my role at my previous church was the youth guy, college guy, and the counseling guy (so I did all the premarital counseling). Needless to say, I've done a bunch of weddings.

Surely, many would agree that one of the main highlights of a wedding ceremony is when the bride comes out, everyone stands, and she's escorted down the aisle towards her groom. And that's where most people's attention is fixed—on the beautiful bride walking forward.

Do you know where I try to look? If possible, I like to look at the groom. The facial expression on the groom says a lot of what he thinks about the bride. Some guys are just beaming! Other guys are ugly crying.

The wedding photographer at mine and my wife's wedding snapped a picture of me—and it was definitely an ugly cry. But in the background was my stepmom, and she wasn't looking at Chris, she was looking at me. And she had a big smile on her face because she saw the joy on my face as I watched my bride coming towards me.

The Metaphor of Marriage

It is not coincidental that one of the primary metaphors used in Scripture to describe the church is that of a bride. There are many metaphors the Bible gives for the church. A family. A structure. A temple. A body. Each metaphor draws out something unique about the nature of the church.

- The metaphor of a body captures the idea of our interconnectedness to each other; we're one body, praise God!
- Or the metaphor of a family captures the idea of the unique relationship we have with one another that is stronger than even blood relationships.
- Or the metaphor of temple highlights the truth that the people of God is a sacred place where God dwells.

But the metaphor of a bride is special. It captures, like no other metaphor, who the church is from the perspective of Christ himself. He's the groom who deeply, intimately, covenant-keeping loves his bride. **[Explain sermon series]**

A Biblical Theology of Marriage

This metaphor doesn't come out of nowhere. In Ephesians 5, Paul did not just think, "What would be a good way of describing the relationship between Jesus and his people? I know! Marriage!" This analogy is not random. There's something way more than just a helpful illustration to get guys to be better husbands.

Paul is bringing us into a story that began in Genesis and ends in Revelation. The Bible really is just one long story about God's working in the world, and there are a number of themes that can be traced throughout that story, one of which is the theme of marriage. So I want us to trace this theme across the storyline of Scripture in four acts, so that we might see the beauty of who the church is from the perspective of Christ...

Act 1: The First Bride and Groom

Before we reflect on the theme of the marriage between God and his people, we have to start with the backdrop of that relationship, which is the first marriage between a man and woman.

[Gen. 2:18-23, pg.2]

There is complementarity here: the animals would not do. He needed someone like him, yet still different enough than him to allow him to fulfill the task of spreading the image of God across the face of the earth. And then the writer of Genesis looks beyond this first marriage to all future marriages that would exist after this and says in **[v24]**.

What's he referring to there? One flesh? No doubt, he has in mind the sexual union between a husband and wife that signifies the deeply, uniquely intimate relationship that exists between a man and woman in marriage. There is nothing like it! It is amazing! But is that all he's talking about here? Is this merely describing the intimacy that exists between a man and woman in marriage, most vividly portrayed in the sexual union?

As the theme of marriage unfolds across the storyline of Scripture, we come to find, there's something WAY BIGGER happening in that first marriage than just a man and woman who complete one another. It's a pointer. Your marriage (if you're married, or if you get married someday, or if you're single and you seek to conduct your life in purity as a way of honoring marriage...then you know, marriage) is a pointer to something WAY BIGGER than husband and wife who love each other. What is it? **[v25]**

That's a beautiful picture of perfect intimacy. BUT they did not remain naked and unashamed. They became filled with shame after...WHAT? They sinned.

In Gen. 3, when they rebelled against God and sought pleasure and satisfaction in something other than him (their rebellion was way worse than the biting out of a forbidden fruit—it was a demonstration that they didn't want God; they didn't trust God; they preferred something more than they prefer God—that's called SIN!)...and when they did that, everything changed.

There was a brokenness in their relationship with one another and certainly with God. And as this theme of *marriage* in the Bible continues to unfold, it's applied to the relationship between God and his people, but it picks up post fall. In other words, the way the Bible describes the relationship between God and his people after Gen. 3 is in terms of a marriage, but it's a marriage with a lot of drama because God's people keep rebelling against him. So that takes us to...

Act 2: The Wandering Bride

Let me just give you a sampling of verses that depict this drama of God's people wandering away from him, and pay attention to how such rebellion is described: **[Explain discreteness in language...DON'T SAY THE WORD "WHORE"]**

- **[Exodus 34:14-15; pg. 69;** written just after Israel worship a golden calf]
- **[Judges 2:11-17; pg. 188—**This describes the cycle of rebellion in Judges.]
- **[Hosea 1:2; pg. 703—**God is telling Hosea to picture the relationship between him and his people.]

Do you see the point being made? The relationship between God and his people is depicted in terms of a marriage. And when God's people forsake him and worship other things, what does God call it? I'll use the word "Adultery"! Why? Because they're being unfaithful to their Groom!

One person put it like this: "The language and imagery of sexuality are the most graphic and most powerful that the Bible uses to describe the relationship between God and his people—both positively (when we are faithful) and negatively (when we are not)." (Piper, 26) Let's look at one more passage, perhaps the most vivid and most powerful: ***Ezekiel 16* (pg. 657)**. It is the picture of God calling the nation of Israel to be his special people. **[vv1-5]**

See the picture? An unwanted baby cast into a field with her umbilical cord still attached. It's a vivid picture that describes the desperate spiritual state of the people of Israel—and it's the spiritual state all of us were in before God saved us. **[vv6-7]**

Do you see the beautifying power of the love of God? **[v8]** There's marriage! **[vv9-14]** What a powerful picture of the way God lavished his love on his OT Israel. She became like a queen in royalty and beauty. But what happened? **[vv15-17]** You get the point?

This imagery is used to help us understand what it means—what it really means—to turn our backs on God. We've all done it. That's what sin is! It's betrayal, it's unfaithfulness, it's adultery, and it is ugly. BUT, that's not how Ezekiel 16 closes. **[v59]** Where does it sound like he's going? It sounds like he's about to lay into them with judgement! Notice the surprising turn here. **[v60]**

Where did that come from? Here's the way one person put it, "The word 'yet' in verse 60 [revives] our hearts with gospel grace. Following everything God has said to this point in the book, the word 'yet' is not a rational word. It is not logical [in the sense that] It does not come because of a considered argument, but rather solely and completely because of love. There is no reason for God to save and restore Israel, no

reason for him to establish his covenant into eternity with them. And yet he does so anyway.”
(Gospel Transformation Bible, 1074)
[vv62-63]

“I’m gonna take care of it all! My unfaithful wife...I will win her back to myself and I will pay for all of her debts, and cover all of her failings.”
And this moves us to...

Act 3: The Pursuing Groom

God never gives up on his bride...EVER! He pursues. He woos. He chases. He never leaves. Never walks out of the marriage. And he promises to win his unfaithful wife back. There are several places we could go to show this, but I want us to go to the main promise of the NC in **[Jeremiah 31:31-34, pg. 618; “though I was their husband”]**

I had the privilege of attending a remarriage ceremony years back. The wife left her husband after he had become a Christian; he really wanted to stay married, but she didn’t. He continued to love her, and she saw that he was a different person. And then she got saved!

They started dating again, and he re-proposed, and I was there at their remarriage ceremony, listening to the pastor describe how their situation was a unique picture of the way God pursues his wayward bride and there's ALWAYS hope for second chances (or 70th chances).

And as the pastor explained, he asked, "Does that make sense?" And I was thinking, "Man that's good. That makes a lot of sense." Then I looked back at the cloud and saw they were gushing with tears, overwhelmed by the grace of God in pursuing them in their unfaithfulness, and how their marriage pictures that!

God pursues. He keeps pursuing his wayward bride and he does so by making a new covenant with them that will keep them in his love. It will KEEP them committed to him. And we see that promise fulfilled in...

Act 4: The Beautified Bride

Do you see, now, that there is so much more going on in Ephesians 5 than just a helpful analogy for human marriage? It's so much more. Ephesians 5:25-32 is mainly about Christ's love

for his bride, the church. It's NOT MAINLY husbands' love for their brides. That is profoundly secondary to the point Paul is making! Let me show you this by drawing out the emphasis of the love of Christ for the church (**pg. 919**). Five ways of describing Jesus' love for his bride.

1) The love of Christ is a sacrificial love. [v25]

That's the language of sacrifice. Christ loved the church...how do we know that? He gave up his life for her! Why? You need to be thinking about all that took place in the OT—his bride was running, wandering, unfaithful; and God promised to WHAT? ATONE for all her unfaithfulness (Exek. 16:63). How did he do it? By taking the punishment upon himself.

[GOSPEL]

2) The love of Christ is a sanctifying love. [v26]

What does that language remind you of? Ezekiel 16! Paul, no doubt, is alluding to Ezekiel saying, "In Christ, and in his atoning work, he fulfills what Ezekiel promised. The bride is cleansed."

The love of Christ is not a sentimental love, it is an effectual love that cleans up our mess. And that's what Jesus did when he died for the church—when he died for you! He cleansed you of all your idolatry.

Think of what you've done. Sin is way worse than breaking some rules. Sin is breaking covenant with God and cheating on him, essentially. Think of how dirty sin makes you feel; how shameful it makes you feel (just like Adam and Even in the garden).

Now, receive the amazing gospel truth in Eph. 5:26, "The love of Jesus cleanses every single spot of filth." Would you receive that cleansing today? **[Appeal to non-Christian and Christian]**

3) The love of Christ is a beautifying love. [v27]
That is the view Christ has of the church now. No doubt, Paul specifically has in mind what will happen when Jesus returns—the church will be presented to him pure and spotless, like a bride on her wedding day. (Isn't that imagery?? A wedding day? It is!)

But v26 already said he cleansed her, so that means she IS clean before him. And she's just waiting to be presented before him pure and spotless. That's how he sees you (and the person sitting next to you), right now, if you're trusting him.

4) The love of Christ is a nourishing love.

[vv28-30] Do you hear the intimate connection between Jesus and his people? The way he loves his people is no different than his love for himself. There is such a profound union between Jesus and his people, that it can be said, as Jesus takes care of himself, he's taking care of his people.

I remember when I was a kid, there was a teenager in our neighborhood that presented himself as a super tough guy and all the girls liked him. On one occasion, some of the younger kids were touching his new bike, and to show how tough he was, he said, "You mess with my bike, you mess with me." Apparently, there was a very profound union between him and his bike.

This is what Paul is saying about Jesus and his bride, the church. Jesus says, “When you’re messing with my bride, you’re messing with me.”

Remember his words in Matthew 25:35-40, “[When] I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”

Or remember what Jesus said to Paul, who was killing and imprisoning Christians? He knocks him off his horse with a blinding light and says to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting...” WHO? He doesn’t say, “The church?” or

“Christians.” He doesn’t even say, “Why are you persecuting MY people?” He says, “Why are you persecuting ME?”

Or how about what Jesus said to Peter in John 21? “Peter, do you love me?” And Peter says, “Yes I love you, Lord.” And Jesus responds, “Feed my sheep.” If you love me, you’ll take care of my people! Your love for them is an expression of your love for me.

When you mess with the church, you mess with Jesus! There is an unbreakable union between Jesus and his people. It’s like a one-flesh union. Which leads to...

5) The love of Christ is a mysterious love. Notice the verse Paul quotes to support the intimate union between Christ and the church. **[v31]**

Where’s that from? Gen. 2:24! But wait, he was just talking about the unbreakable union between Christ and the church, and then he quotes a verse about the first human marriage? WHY? Gen. 2:24 isn’t merely about the intimate

relationship between a man and a woman in marriage. **[v32]**

What's the "it"? What's the "it" that refers to Christ and the church? Gen. 2:24! He's saying that when the writer of Genesis penned those words, that the ultimate reality it was talking about was the marriage between Christ and the church.

How is that possible? The church wasn't even around yet! Christ hadn't even come to this earth as a man yet, to lay down his life?

The point is: Human marriage was never meant to be an end in itself. It was always meant to point beyond itself to something far greater—Christ and the church.

The relationship between Christ and the church is not an illustration for human marriage; human marriage is an illustration for the relationship between Christ and the church! In other words, God created human marriage so that we could have somewhat of a taste/idea of what it means that Christ loves his people .

Do you see why we shouldn't play around with marriage? Why should it be honored? Why is it so wrong for singles to try to experience the benefits of marriage without the covenantal commitment? Why is it so horrible for a spouse to go outside that covenantal union and become one-flesh with someone else? Do you see how these distort the amazing picture marriage is supposed to represent?

But do you see how amazing the love of Christ is towards all of us who have failed in these ways again and again and again? Listen, for those of you who know your wretchedness and guilt and filth before God, would you consider even more the power of the love of Christ for you? A sacrificial, sanctifying, beautifying, nourishing, and mysterious love for his bride.

Implications

Let's close with just a few implications as this theme pertains to our life in the church.

1) Because Jesus will never give up on the church, neither should we. Kevin DeYoung puts it like this in his book *Why We Love the Church*, "If

we truly love the church we will bear with her in her failings, endure her struggles, believe her to be the beloved bride of Christ, and hope for her final glorification....[So,] Don't give up on the church. The New Testament knows nothing of churchless Christianity. The invisible church is for invisible Christians. The visible church is for you and me." (DeYoung and Kluck, 226)

2) Because Jesus is long suffering towards the church, so we should be. Dustin Bengé, in his book *the Loveliest Place* (a book on the church), puts it like this, "If we accurately grasped the church's beauty and loveliness in all its glorious richness, how dramatically our lives would more appropriately reflect God's plan and purpose. How quickly we would reject petty squabbles that mar our snow-white garments. How lovingly we would serve one another by following the self-denying footsteps of our bridegroom." (Bengé, 28)

3) Because Jesus is jealous of his bride (the church), we should be very careful in our criticisms of it. You've heard many people say, "I love Jesus, but I can't stand the church." And

you've probably heard the correct response, "That's like saying to a guy, 'I love you brother, but I can't stand your wife.'" How well do you think that'll sit with a guy who is deeply in love with and fiercely protective of his wife?

4) Because Jesus loves the church, we should strive to love her as well. I could be wrong, but I have found that many times (not all the time) when people say, "There's no perfect church," what they really mean is, "There's no church that suits all of my preferences." It is true that there's no perfect church because every church is filled with imperfect people. But be careful not to equate a church's imperfections with its lack of meeting your preferences. Strive to love the church in all its imperfections AND lack of meeting your preferences.

Conclusion

I want you to stick around for the member meeting right after the service. One of our members, who's been here for a long time, is going to share her love for Kinney Avenue and share how God continued to keep his hand on

this church. It's an illustration of how his love is a pursuing love.

No doubt, Jesus loves you, as an individual Christian. But his love is much more than that. It's also love for the person sitting next to you. It's a love for everyone here who is part of Kinney Avenue. It's a love for every believer everywhere. It's a love for the collected whole of all the saints. Jesus LOVES the church! So, let us view the church from the perspective of her groom, and may that shape the way we view one another in this church called Kinney.