

The “One Flesh” Union in Genesis 2:24

By Renee Duffy

I was visiting with a friend, and we were talking about marriage. Not marriage in a general, hypothetical, or idealized way. We were talking about *our marriages*. When I asked her a question, "What does worshiping God look like in a “one flesh” marriage?" This dear friend of mine reacted almost immediately, but not to my question. She reacted to the phrase "one flesh." She loves Jesus like I do. She stands next to me as a sister whose life is hidden in Christ, and I know she believes her Bible. But this phrase, which comes directly from our Bibles, seemed to wound her. I suspect such a reaction is really about the wounding that people have caused by adding to Scripture and claiming biblical authority for damaging attitudes and practices. God’s words in Scripture are meant to illuminate our steps (Ps. 119:105) and to bring us blessing (Ps. 1:1-2). Of course, it's also true that God’s words are compared to a sword that can wound us if we are resistant to its teaching (Heb. 4:12). Before we can know if we are being righteously wounded or are a victim of unbiblical teaching, we have to listen to what Scripture is telling us. So, I’m digging into these two words, “one flesh,” as it’s used in Scripture to better understand what these biblical authors meant when they employed it. What was the author of Genesis emphasizing when he described their relationship as “one flesh”? Why did Jesus and Paul pick up on this statement from Genesis when they taught about divorce and marriage? And, of course, how does it apply to *my marriage* and *her marriage* and *all marriages*?

The phrase “one flesh” first occurs in Genesis 2:24. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” (NASB) Jesus quotes these words from Genesis (Matt. 19:5,6; Mark 10:8) and so does Paul (1 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:31). We find this verse tucked into the creation account, but the statement isn’t part of the narrative. It’s an aside from the author. The author tells the reader that the preceding moment in the creation narrative, the creation of the first woman (Gen. 2:18-23), is important for understanding marriage today. The aside begins with the infamous words, “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him’” (Gen. 2:18).¹ Surprisingly, God doesn’t get right to creating the woman. First, he creates land animals and birds from the dirt, shows them to the man, and lets the man name them. After naming these dirt creatures, the man realizes that none of these animals would be a suitable helper for him (Gen. 2:20). First God knew that the man was alone in the garden. Now the man knows that he is alone in the garden. After this revelation, God creates the woman. He doesn’t create her out of the dirt as he did the man and the animals. This time he creates out of the man. The result is a creature who isn’t a man but is so like the man that he says, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23). The animals he’s been naming have bones as he does. They have flesh as he does. But this one, this one is so like him that she is nearly identical. “Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh.” He also knows immediately that she is different, and we know this because he gives her a name different from his, but remarkably similar. The Hebrew word for man is “Ish,” and the man calls her “Isha.” Immediately following the man’s declaration of her sameness (bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh) and recognition of her otherness (she shall be called woman), the author turns aside to us and delivers this

¹ Much can be said about this statement regarding what it means for the man to be “alone” and why that’s “not good” and what a “helper” is. All of that is part of an important discussion for another day. For our “one flesh” discussion, we can hold the general categories of “alone,” “not good,” and “helper” as sufficient.

helpful tidbit, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” (Gen. 2:24). Then he returns to the narrative, wrapping it up with one final statement, “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25). The brevity of the author leaves us to puzzle over his words. What *is* the reason he refers to at the beginning of verse 24? And what *is* this “one flesh” thing that they become?

For This Reason

There is obvious continuity between Adam’s statement immediately preceding verse 24, “Because she was taken out of Man,” and the author’s assertion, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become ‘one flesh.’” The woman was taken out of the flesh of the man; therefore, they are each a part of the same flesh. So then, it is right that a man and a woman would come back together in a corresponding way to be “one flesh” in marriage. The connection the author is making is that the “one flesh” union of husbands and wives points to the creation story. It points to both the method of creating woman, (from the man’s flesh,) and the reason for creating woman (because the man was alone.) This too is a reason for a man and woman to come back together as “one flesh” because both of them are in a state of aloneness without the other. I want to be clear, though, that this is *not* saying that only married people are complete. The narrative of Genesis is first about the creation and completion of humanity. The woman’s creation completed humanity. When only the man existed, it was not good. God created the woman and with her creation, he completed the creation of two-sex humanity making it good. This larger narrative is true and meaningful for all people regardless of their marital state. Humanity needs men and women together to flourish in God’s world. However, the “one flesh” concept in verse 24 is a description of marriage specifically. The author is bringing to our attention that marriage is not a man-made concept of preference for each other or convenience. It is the coming together of two halves of a whole. When a man and woman marry and become one flesh, their union is pointing back to God’s creation and his wisdom in making two-sex humanity.

One Flesh in the New Testament

The way that Jesus and Paul use this verse in their teaching sheds additional light on the concept. Paul uses Genesis 2:24 and its application to marriage in his letters addressed to the Corinthian church and the Ephesian church. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul confirms that there is a connection between sex and the creation of a “one flesh” union. Paul argues that the Corinthians’ participation in prostitution joined them to these prostitutes in a “one flesh” union (1 Cor. 6:15-17). This is an abhorrent thing considering they were members of Christ’s body. Here we see Paul linking two different biblical concepts, the redeemed becoming members of Christ’s body and two humans becoming “one flesh.” Paul affirms these concepts are not *merely* metaphorical but are pointing to *realities*. If they were only metaphorical, such as when Jesus called himself the door in John 10:7, then connecting them this way would be meaningless. Instead, the redeemed become unified with Christ in a way that is comparable to a part of the body being unified to the rest of the human body. A husband and wife become bonded together in a way that is compared to sharing a single body. When considering what these Corinthians are doing, these two realities collide for Paul creating an incomprehensible affront to the Lord Jesus. Paul’s use of Genesis 2:24 affirms the reality of the “one flesh” union described by the author of Genesis. It teaches us that what the author of Genesis is describing isn’t just a feeling of closeness or a sharing of similar

personalities. It is not merely a close relationship. Instead, there is a reality beyond emotion and behavior that characterize the “one flesh” union.

Matthew chapter 19 and Mark chapter 10 record a confrontation between Jesus and some Pharisees who try to trap him with a question about divorce (Matt. 19:1-9, Mark 10:1-12). Jesus responds by quoting Genesis 1:27 and 5:2 referring to humanity being made up of the two sexes and Genesis 2:24. He connects the two concepts, humanity consisting of the two sexes and the “one flesh” relationship of marriage, and concludes that because God joined them together, they should not be separated by human divorce. Though the union may begin with the human action of sex, God is the one making the union. Therefore, the union ought not to be ended by humans.²

So far, these New Testament references have taught us that the “one flesh” union includes sex, is accomplished by God, and is meant to be dissoluble by man. All of these elements are important for understanding the “one flesh” reference in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Paul uses the quotation from Genesis to emphasize the unity of Christ and his church. Then he uses that unity to instruct husbands on how they should be loving their wives (Eph. 5:25-33). Paul compares Christ to a husband and the church to a wife. Christ loved the church by giving himself sacrificially for her to make her into a bride worthy of his love so that Christ and the church can now be unified, Christ as the head and the church as his body. Of course, this description of Christ and the church being unified as one body is especially meaningful because of the “one flesh” union between husband and wife. “This mystery [the “one flesh” union] is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32). Paul uses his readers’ existing knowledge of the “one flesh” union to better explain their union with Christ. However, since these “one flesh” unions are currently being lived out in a fallen world by sinful people, Paul turns the comparison around to teach husbands that they should follow the example of Christ to make their marriages point to the union between Christ and the church as they should. “Nevertheless let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see to it that she respect her husband” (Eph. 5:33). These “one flesh” unions ought to reflect the character of the union between God and his church including sacrificial love and practical care (Eph. 5:25, 28-30).

One Flesh

What then can we say about the “one flesh” union between husbands and wives? In an obvious and straightforward way, sex is a key to the “one flesh” union. That’s why Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 to chastise the Corinthian church for participating in prostitution (1 Cor. 6:16). Sex bonds husband and wife and demonstrates the goodness of the wholeness of humanity as it consists of two sexes. We can also say that the “one flesh” union between husbands and wives is a reality that goes beyond feelings of emotional connection or physical practicalities of living life together. The “one flesh” union has substance and reality deeper than or beyond human’s subjective experiences. Finally, since God is the one who

² This statement is talking about God’s designs set forth from the beginning of humanity. Jesus also acknowledges the current broken state of humanity which is not able in its own power to live up to this ideal. “They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?’ He said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.’” (Matt. 19:7-8). He is not unaware or uncaring about the pain and tragedy of marriages that end in divorce, and his forgiveness is for the multitude of ways that we fail to live up to his perfect designs both in and outside of marriage.

binds the two the bond is meant to be dissoluble by human actions. The practical outworking of this union is a bond characterized by sacrificial love and practical care. These are illustrated for us by Christ's sacrificial love and care of his church. God intends for our "one flesh" unions to point to the realities of the church's union with Christ, so it is appropriate that we aim to follow his example as we live in these "one flesh" unions.

What does this mean specifically? What must we do and what must we avoid? We follow Christ's example in a host of individual and often culturally specific ways. For instance, here in the west, we imagine the author of Genesis is talking about a man leaving his parents' home to make a home with his wife when he writes, "... a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife." However, it was not the case in the ancient near eastern culture that a man and woman would set up an individual home together. It wasn't even the case that the man would leave his family's home. It was the woman who most often left her family's home to live with the husband and his family.³ So the author could not have been referring to living conditions when he wrote this, though we in this century and culture might assume that he was. There's a different leaving and joining which works itself out in culturally specific ways. In the west that usually looks like leaving the home to make a new one. What this means is that no one can prescribe the dos and the don'ts for "one flesh" unions in all places and times. In fact, we cannot even prescribe the dos and don'ts for our friends or neighbors who live near us. Just as individual people are varied, so are their marriages, and let's not forget the fallen world and our status as redeemed but still sinful people. We also cannot throw out "one flesh" unions as unachievable and therefore irrelevant. The union is real and meaningful. Such a union, if it is acknowledged and attended to, should affect the actions and decisions of both husbands and wives. For our own part, we can prayerfully consider the ways that we are (or aren't) adequately acknowledging the bond that God has made between oneself and one's spouse. Is there sacrificial love being practiced? Have we prioritized the health of this union like we prioritize the health of our own flesh? Are our decisions accounting for the unity that we've been given as part of our marriage? How would my spouse answer these questions? Just as God's creation of two sexes in humanity is good and praiseworthy, so is the individual bond between one husband and one wife. Have I praised God for it lately? And if we desire to encourage others in this way, we can encourage them to take the reality of a "one flesh" union seriously. Not by acting just like us, but by listening to each other and praying together that we would see evidence of the union that God has created and that he would move us toward sacrificial love and practical care.

³ Douglas Mangum, Miles Custis, and Wendy Widder, *Genesis 1–11*, Lexham Research Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), Ge 2:4–25.