

BOOK REVIEW
THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE
by Timothy Keller
(New York: Dutton, 2011)

In 1991 Keller preached a nine-sermon series on marriage—surprising when you discover that his Manhattan congregation is about 80% single adults. But he found that singles had deep fears and questions about marriage which were dissuading many from entertaining the prospect of marriage. And others were approaching the search for a mate with toxically self-centered criteria. This book, then, is founded on that sermon series and is enriched by the intervening two decades of study, counseling, friendship, and Tim and Kathy’s own marriage journey.

What sets this book aside from most other Christian marriage books? First, as a former college professor, Keller brings a level of research to the book that is unusual. For example (and this is a startling contribution of the book), he debunks the broad application of the oft-quoted statistic that half of all American marriages end in divorce. Actually the greatest number of divorces occur in marriages contracted before age eighteen between high school dropouts who have had a child out of wedlock. Keller then adds this endnoted quotation: “*So if you are a reasonably well-educated person with a decent income, come from an intact family and are religious, and marry after twenty-five without having a baby first, your chances of divorce are low indeed.*” This is significant because what people think is “common” emboldens them to emulation. In other words, people think “If half the people in my church are doing it, it can’t be that bad.” Second, he sets the discussion of marriage in a broader context of history and world cultures. Something profoundly self-centered happened to the marriage concept with the Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries. *Marriage used to be about us, but now it is about me.* Thus marriage values have moved from covenantal to commodification. Men “shop” for physical attractiveness and sexual chemistry, while women search for a mate with wealth. Both genders are looking for idealistic perfection in a mate for purposes of one’s own self-realization. Third, he addresses issues of singleness with unusual depth. Fourth, he compellingly exposes the fallacy of the supposed benefits of cohabitation. Fifth, he italicizes the uniqueness and the power of the covenantal nature of marriage.

Keller avers that *...the heart of the Biblical idea of marriage is the covenant.* Of all earthly covenants, this one is the deepest. That is because it possesses both horizontal and vertical dimensions. In a wedding ceremony couples express public promises (the “I do’s”) which are vertical commitments to God. They also express personal promises to each other which are mutual horizontal commitments. Because these are covenantal promises, they are unconditional and are thus not rescindable due to fluctuations of emotion. As C. S. Lewis argued, *Do not waste time bothering whether you “love” your neighbor; act as if you did.* In time, chances are that you will grow into love as your emotions catch up with your behavior. Here is a rather stunning supporting statistic: *...longitudinal studies reveal that two-thirds of unhappy marriages will become happy within five years if people stay married and do not get divorced. Two thirds! What can keep marriages together through the rough patches? The vows.*

Refreshingly, Tim and Kathy espouse a traditional (i.e., biblical) position on the gender distinctions of Ephesians 5. They develop all the appropriate caveats pertaining to male abusiveness and the tempering of male leadership with Christlike sacrificial love. Tim wisely turned the chapter on the wife’s submission (“Embracing the Other”) over to Kathy. In the appendix there is a delightful personal description of how Tim and Kathy handle their marriage decision making. While most of their decisions are healthily collaborative, Kathy reflects on the major career decision Tim made in leaving his professorial position to accept the invitation to plant a new church in Manhattan. Because she was resistant to the idea, he intended to defer to her. She responded with “*Oh, no, you don’t! You aren’t*

putting this decision on me. That's abdication. If you think this is the right thing to do, then exercise your leadership and make the choice. It's your job to break this logjam. It's my job to wrestle with God until I can joyfully support your call." Tim made the decision to come to New York City and plant Redeemer Presbyterian Church. The whole family, my sons included, consider it one of the most truly "manly" things he ever did, because he was quite scared, but he felt a call from God.

The final chapter is on "Sex and Marriage." The Genesis 2:24 "one flesh" terminology is described in fresh and practical terms. Particularly noteworthy is the thesis that the marriage sexual relationship is a "covenant renewal ceremony" which facilitates unique self-disclosure and self-commitment, as well as being a "uniting act." I Corinthians 7 is cited as calling for frequent and reciprocal sex, and as calling for a greater concern for *giving* sexual pleasure to one's spouse in contrast to *getting* pleasure for oneself. While acknowledging that sex doesn't work in a strained marriage (it is a test of the health of your marriage), Tim and Kathy emphasize that marriage sex is an urgent friction reducer. *Kathy and I often liken sex in a marriage to oil in an engine—without it, the friction between all the moving parts will burn out the motor. Without joyful, loving sex, the friction in a marriage will bring about anger, resentment, hardness, and disappointment. Rather than being the commitment glue that holds you together, it can become a force to divide you.*

Along the way there is a chapter that rehashes the Gary Chapman "Love Languages" and some great material on the friendship dimension of marriage. Marriage is also described as life's best lab for spiritual growth. *No one else is as inconvenienced and hurt by your flaws as your spouse is. And therefore your spouse becomes more keenly aware of what is wrong with you than anyone else ever has been.* Using a most vivid metaphor, your spouse is a ten-ton Mack truck *driving right through your heart.* Marriage is thus the ultimate venue for the practice of Proverbs 27:6, *Wounds from a friend can be trusted...* The Kellers salt the book with refreshingly transparent glimpses into their own marriage struggles and successes. Other helpful anecdotes are drawn from Tim's extensive pastoral counseling. If you love C. S. Lewis, you will be happy with the frequent quotations. Speaking again of the professorial bent of Keller's writing, the endnotes number 181. Chapter two alone boasts fifty-six citations. And this is one book where you will want to actually read through the endnotes for rich supplemental material.

This is now my "first choice" recommendation for a marriage book. I love it because it is replete with Scripture, research data, and illustrative color. But I mostly appreciate the book because of its maturity and muscularity. Most readers will resonate expectantly with the opening words of the first chapter: *I'm tired of listening to sentimental talks on marriage. At weddings, in church, and in Sunday school, much of what I've heard on the subject has as much depth as a Hallmark card. While marriage is many things, it is anything but sentimental. Marriage is glorious but hard. Amen!*

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