

Notes in Response to Gil Bailie on *The Cradle of Civilization*

Mimetic Theory: I'm surprised that mimetic theory was so little used in this essay. It was referenced from time to time, but the primary source of the papers' argument was the doctrine of natural law.

Natural Law: Natural law has been discredited by philosophers these days, including Jeffrey Stout and Alasdair MacIntyre. Odd that Bailie has made so little reference to the arguments against natural law in this paper. If he wants to make a case for natural law, he ought to have a response to its critics. It is discredited, as I understand it, for two reasons: first, because it is based on metaphysical principles, culturally determined (despite the denials of its proponents), and second because it is unenforceable. Even natural law requires cultural powers to enforce it (otherwise, why would Bailie be arguing for legal sanctions against gay marriage?) Such powers, being deconstructed by the gospel, lack the capacity to bring about conformity.

Marriage in the Bible: It isn't obvious in the Bible that marriage is a great thing. 1 Corinthians 7 suggests that it is less than the ideal arrangement for the Christian life. Jesus wasn't married. Luke 14:26 would seem to subordinate the value of marriage to the value of following Christ. Marriage is an impediment rather than a sacrament. Celibacy became an ideal early in the church. Peter Brown suggests that sexual renunciation was an early response to the promise of the Kingdom of God. According to Brown, sexual renunciation was a protest against the empire's imperative to put people's reproductive capacity in the service of "civilization." Mark 10:1-12 can be read as *against* marriage as much as for it. The New Testament makes marriage at best a provisional condition for life rather than a saving one.

A reading of Mark 10:1-12. It begins with the pharisees "testing" Jesus. Typically, when the religious leaders ask a question to "test" Jesus, they are hoping to put him in a double bind. For example, when they ask him whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13-17 and parallels), they know that he will be in trouble whether he says either "yes" or "no," because either answer would place him in a political camp. He escapes by answering in a way that transcends politics.

What is the "double bind" in this case? If it is simply that they suspect him of being against divorce, and therefore in opposition to the law of Moses, then there is no double bind; because he could escape this by simply saying that he has no problem with divorce. If this "test" indeed follows the pattern of all the other "tests" put to Jesus, then there must be a disadvantage to Jesus of openly favoring divorce.

The disadvantage lies in the underlying assumption that celibacy was the best way to prepare for the Kingdom of God (Matt 19:10-12; Luke 14:26; 1 Cor. 7:1-17). If this is true, and divorce is legal, then those who remain married are to be considered less faithful to the call of Christ, and those who abandon their wives for the sake of the Kingdom (and no doubt many had already done so) are the more faithful ones.

Jesus avoids the double bind by using Genesis 2:24 as a means of arguing that the married state is not a second class condition, but a means of grace. He repeats the phrase "one flesh." "They

are no longer two, but one flesh” (Mark 10:8) He is arguing that marriage is a kind of subtraction of “flesh” – flesh being the thing that opposes the Spirit (Romans 7-8, Galatians 5-6).

This explains the disciples reaction, asking him about it again. In private, he explains that it is remarriage that is the greatest sin. Why? Because divorce for the sake of the kingdom might be considered faithfulness to Christ, but remarriage is unfaithful to the original wife as well as to the Kingdom. It is “adultery” – a prophetic metaphor for idolatry.

Thus Mark 10 need not be read as a sanctification of marriage so much as a concession that marriage can be an acceptable way of life, even in the face of the imminent Kingdom of God.

Sexuality: The romantic vision of the mystical union of a man and a woman in marriage seems to be hardly more than a cultural ideal. It is not necessarily true. It makes much more sense as a product of mimetic rivalry than of the essence of human nature. Evidence for this is not far to seek. One need only ask, “what about ugly people?” Research has been pretty unequivocal that unattractive people have less sex than attractive ones, whether they’re married or not. Unless you buy into that superstition called evolutionary psychology, it seems that human sexuality is so firmly linked to mimetic rivalry as to be nearly unredeemable. Marriage doesn’t redeem sexuality, so much as limit the damage it causes. Augustine’s formulas on original sin were not far wrong: there is no such thing as healthy sexuality – there are only more and less successful ways of managing the misery that sexuality produces.

The Prelapsarian nanosecond: However sublime it may have been, it obvious lacked two things: stability and forgiveness. If the Logos in John 1 is grace, then the prelapsarian nanosecond is not necessarily the true essence of our humanity. Our true essence requires forgiveness. Prelapsarian is not “non-lapsarian.” When we start making moral rules based on metaphysical ideals, we arrive at a violent utopianism.

Gay marriage is an oxymoron: Gays seek legitimacy for their sexual orientation by appropriating the cultural forms of legitimacy: ordination, marriage, etc. But paradoxically, the more they appropriate the cultural forms of legitimacy, the less meaning those forms possess, since as sacrificial institutions they require exclusion in order to retain their meaning. The more inclusive marriage and ordination become, the less meaningful they are.

For example: what’s next? Bisexual marriage? Transgender marriage? By the time these become normal, the term “marriage” will be an absolutely meaningless anachronism – as opposed the the relatively meaningless one it is now.

But we must accept the fact that if indeed it is the gospel that breaks down sacred institutions, then we have ultimately only the gospel to blame for the decline of marriage.

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