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RECOVERING THE BRIDE

An Introduction

Most people are familiar with William Shakespeare. You probably had to read him for high school, or you at least watched the DiCaprio movie. I love Shakespeare's work, and not just because of the flowery language or iambic pentameter. I have always admired the breadth of his audience. The aristocracy and the poor all came to see Shakespeare's plays because there was something for each of them.¹ In the Globe Theater of London, poor people had the best view of the play. They paid a penny to stand in a dirt pit in front of the stage, so they were called "penny stinkards" or "groundlings." Sometimes, God's groundlings have the best view of grace in the Theatre of Redemption.

This book is written for groundlings, the common saints of Christ's church. There are astounding theology books out there. Systematic theologies by men like Berkhoff and Bavinck, Turretin and Calvin have influenced my work (as my footnotes bear out). There are innumerable others who have influenced my thinking; some are even still alive and writing. I love their works despite how long it took me to understand them. I am not the *Next Great Theologian*, but I want to write a book that everyone in my congregation (and other congregations) can read and enjoy. I want to help people fall in love with Jesus all over again. I want to help you see more of a God who loves beyond measure, gives grace to his people beyond comprehension, and saves groundlings like me.

Why I Wrote This Book

Years ago, I had a conversation with a friend from seminary about modern Christian music. He commented that, when working with young people, he encouraged them to avoid music with lyrics in the "Jesus is my boyfriend" genre. Nicolas Alford makes a similar statement regarding worship: "Worship songs shouldn't be able to be sung to a boyfriend or girlfriend with minor

¹ Shakespeare had a knack for humor, which was mostly for the common people. I have the same sort of humor, but I will keep most of that in the footnotes.

edits to the personal pronouns.”² You have probably heard songs like this, where the sovereign, holy, omnipotent creator of the heavens and the earth is reduced to a teenage love interest. This is a major reason why Protestant theologians are hesitant to write about the church and its relationship to Christ in terms of the Bride. They have done what Christians do best: overreact to error. Overly sentimental pseudo-churches water down theology (the study of God) to prevent any kind of offense to the hearer. In a nutshell, it is immanence (God-with-us-ness) for them over transcendence (God-above-us-ness). It is the God-man without the God. They want to say, “Jesus is my homeboy.”

The other primary group that has twisted this metaphor is none other than Rome.³ In her claims to be both visible and invisible church, all in one bejeweled package, they have infected the beautiful Bride with all manner of unwholesome characters. Theologians talk about this idea regarding the visible/invisible church distinction, which is to say that becoming part of the visible church (walking an aisle, saying a prayer, and even being baptized and becoming a church member) does not make someone a Christian. Salvation makes Christians out of sinners by grace through faith. This is what makes someone a part of the Bride.

Rome also makes the Bride “brides” in the plural. These are the nuns, known to most of us for art history documentaries, an array of strange white hats, and the vigorous application of rulers. “After all,” says the papist, “if Jesus is our husband, we should save ourselves for Him and never marry.”

This way of thinking is so infamous for theologians that many, especially the Reformers and their intellectual offspring, are hesitant to do much work on this line. Personally, I was unaware of how bad this was until I started researching the subject during seminary. I was surprised to find only scant references in the books on my shelf. I only found a few books of extensive use even in the campus library. I have since been able to find more material, but in the Reformed community, references are still scarce.

You may be thinking, “Why is this subject so important?” I’m glad I made you ask. The Bride of Christ is the most extensively used metaphor in Scripture, providing a through line for the covenants and uniting God’s people.⁴ As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Something of the divine splendour

2 Nicolas Alford, *Doxology: How Worship Works* (Conway: Free Grace, 2017), 91–92.

On the other side of things, a lot of secular love songs have a disturbingly idolatrous tone to them, evidencing that subconscious need to fill a void left by our alienation from our creator with other people that fail to fulfill.

3 An inference drawn from the work of Claude Chavasse, *The Bride of Christ: An Enquiry into the Nuptial Element in Early Christianity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1911).

4 It is through these masculine and feminine counterparts that we come to understand the masculine self-revelation of God. God is pure spirit, and obviously does not contain a Y chromosome, reproductive organs, or any other biological metric for male sex. So why does God

is here reflected in our earthly relationships, and this reflection is something we should recognise and honour.”⁵ It is the source metaphor for two other highly used metaphors: the Children of God and the Body of Christ. The Bride of Christ also sheds a great deal of light on our ecclesiology (the study of the church), the nature of Christ’s immanence to His people, and union with Christ. Understanding this metaphor affects how we live our Christian lives, evangelism, and even eschatology (the study of Christ’s return and the end times). If Scripture spends so much time on it, we should too. In his book *God’s Unfaithful Wife*, Ray Ortlund Jr. writes about one aspect of this metaphor:

The biblical theme of spiritual harlotry is not the whole of theology. It is only one strand woven into the fabric of Scripture, along with others, all of which are needed for the whole tapestry to shine forth in its complexity and fullness. But this strand of God’s marital love and of his people’s presently harlotrous but ultimately faithful response is too much neglected. And it is the overlooked themes of Scripture to which any given age of the church must pay special attention, for it is precisely there that we most urgently need to hear the Word of God again.⁶

God values the marriage covenant as *His* institution. He teaches doctrine and His attributes through that metaphor. Together these form the meta-narrative of human history.

On the Limits of Metaphors

In literature, we have allegories, metaphors, and similes, and we try to keep them quarantined from each other. The challenge is that the Bride of Christ is used as all three at different points in the Bible. Paul’s usage covers metaphors and similes, but Hosea cannot be anything but an allegory because of its sheer

identify Himself as male? Because it is in the divinely created male roles that God has revealed Himself; i.e., God created the role and gender of “male” in order to reveal Himself. So God does not conform to gender, gender conforms to God’s purposes. We are as much born of a father as a mother, but it is from the church’s womb that we proceed. The Son is the Bridegroom who counts Himself as incomplete without His Bride the church, protecting, leading, and loving her. The Son is also the exact imprint of the Father, as Hebrews tells us, so with the Son revealed as masculine, it befits the Father to reveal Himself as the same. As for the Holy Spirit, we see the noun in Hebrew, Ruach, is feminine, but its form in Greek, Pneuma, is neuter, neither masculine nor feminine. We might add that another title for the Holy Spirit, Parakletos, is masculine. So clearly, the “gender” in the text is dictated only by the noun in the given language.

5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Glasgow: Fontana Books: 1962), 152.

6 Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *God’s Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press. 1996), 176.

volume.⁷ In scriptural matters, we talk about this as *sign and thing signified*, or *type and antitype*. Historical narratives, poetry, and all the rest can have a literal meaning while pointing forward to Christ and His church.⁸

But first, we need to talk about limitations in metaphors. Any time we use metaphors, similes, and allegories, we must acknowledge that these figures of speech eventually break down. Some metaphors extend further than others, but it is important to find that termination point to avoid error.

For example, when Christ says that He is the Shepherd and that we are His sheep, we learn about His sovereignty, the constant care He gives to us, and how foolish we can be as creatures. There is more to it, but there are boundaries.

While this may seem like common sense, it is important to always keep in mind that a metaphor has its limits. When dealing with the church as the Bride, we need to be careful not to make the church into something it is not. Perhaps the most significant error we wish to avoid in this vein is perceiving the church as *equal* to Christ. A wife is no less valuable as a human being than her husband, but the church is not intrinsically equal in significance or importance as her Savior.

I may come close at times to violating the principle of singular meaning.⁹ There are layers of meaning that exist within certain texts, though not all. Many of the psalms were simultaneously recording the author's experience and prophesying about Christ. Certainly, we want to avoid the use of the Quadriga¹⁰ interpretation principles, but we do not want to over-simplify the text. The Reformation ESV Study Bible points out that "although today's Western world often regards using words that carry a double sense as confusing and ambiguous, in NT times such wording was commonly used to add weight and enrichment."¹¹ Arthur W. Pink, writing on Hebrews 12, says, "We feel it safest to regard the clause thus, for God's commandment is 'exceeding broad' (Ps. 119:96), and very often a single word has a twofold or threefold

7 Admittedly, this conflicts with Louis Berkhoff's definition of allegory because the elements are historical and not fictitious. Louis Berkhoff, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 89.

8 John Owen provides a great summary of this: *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews Vol. 2* (Evansville: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1960), 133.

9 WCF I.9, 2nd LBC I.9— "... the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold but one) . . ."

10 Named after the Roman chariot pulled by four horses, this system of interpretation extracted literal, anagogical/ eschatological, typological/Christological, and tropological/moral interpretations from a text whether they were there or not. It was pioneered by Origen, though his was a three-fold interpretation. See Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Vol 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 521.

11 Reformation ESV Study Bible, ed. RC Sproul, Notes on Romans 1:17 (Lake Mary: Ligonier, 2005), 1613.

reference, and therefore we need to be constantly on our guard against limiting the meaning or restricting the application of any utterance of Holy Writ.”¹² So also Thomas Goodwin, “It being a rule I have always measured the interpretation of Scripture by, as I have oft professed, to take Scripture phrases and words in the most comprehensive sense; yea, and in two senses, or more, that will stand together with the context and analogy of faith.”¹³ And finally, regarding Paul’s use of Psalm 68 in Ephesians 4, Lloyd-Jones writes:

The difficulty reminds us of something which we must always bear in mind when we read the Bible. If we fail to do so our reading will often be unintelligent and confused. It is that we will often find a double meaning in statements in the Old Testament. This is so in many of the Psalms; it is equally true of many of the prophets and their writings.¹⁴

In preaching and in writing, I have repeatedly found these layers of meaning to a text, but there is always a danger in seeing what is not there. My test throughout has been whether the deduced doctrine or idea can be proven from clearer texts in Scripture. That way, even if I have erred in seeing a doctrine in a passage, the doctrine itself stands as true.

The Conflicting Views

While the theological ideas and principles I am presenting in this book are extensively well-documented and supported by orthodox theologians throughout history, there are many who view the use of the metaphors differently. Like Claude Chavasse and Benjamin Keach, some see the metaphors as connected and treat the church as the wedded bride.¹⁵ Many have treated each occurrence of the bridal metaphor as unique to the context, so the bride in Hosea is not meant to be connected to the bride in Ephesians. They would not regard the children metaphor as connected to the bridal metaphor.

Perhaps the greatest contrast is with those who hold the church to be in a state of betrothal but not marriage to Christ. In the ancient Near East, betrothal was covenantal and not easily broken, as we see in the case of Joseph seeking to put Mary away quietly even though they were only engaged. Michael Horton puts it this way:

Once more, the eschatological aspect must be recognized: the visible church is the bride of Christ; the invisible church is his wife, the

12 Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 1006.

13 Thomas Goodwin, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Evansville: Sovereign Grace Book Club, 1958), 90.

14 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:1-16* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 150.

15 Benjamin Keach, *Preaching from the Types and Metaphors of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972), 327.

church as it exists on the other side of the marriage supper of the Lamb. The “already” of union with Christ must always confess the “not yet” of the nuptial wonders that yet await Christ’s bride, arrayed in the precious garments and jewels he gives her.¹⁶

What Dr. Horton describes in the above quote is not theologically in conflict with the unfolding of the metaphor in this book. Rather than placing the current earthly church as somewhere between betrothal and marriage, I am placing her as between marriage and consummation, which is the language Scripture uses to describe her. As for the betrothal covenant, it is the covenant of redemption outside of time, not the covenant of grace.

So with all that said, let us take a walk through Scripture, trailing behind Christ the Bridegroom and His Bride, the church. We will follow them from her birth in Genesis to the suspense-filled “to be continued” of Revelation. We will trace her through the cycles of history, her reflections in Ruth and Esther, while hearing her songs in the Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon. We will stand in the crowd at the bridal feast and wedding before hearing Paul’s instructions to the Bride from Ephesians.

16 Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 726–727.