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#### BOOK REVIEW

David J. Ayers. *Christian Marriage: A Comprehensive Introduction*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018. 473 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-6835-9254-9. \$29.99.

A perusal of catalogues from Christian publishers and book distributors suggests there is no shortage of books on Christian marriage. This raises the question: Why read this book? To begin, the fact that David Ayers is a sociologist (rather than a theologian, pastor, or Christian counselor) may pique the reader's interest and curiosity. Admittedly, Ayers is not the first sociologist to write about Christian marriage (e.g., Dennis Hiebert, *Sweet Surrender: How Cultural Mandates Shape Christian Marriage*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2005). As in the case of Hiebert's book, Ayers's approach to this subject is informed by the author's reflections on culture and the ways in which cultural trends and values influence the way Christians think about marriage.

Ayers identifies his concerns in the Introduction where he writes, "our treatment of the covenant of marriage and all it is meant to be and do has dishonored God, harmed and failed his people, and weakened our witness to the non-Christian world" (3). Having thus identified his premise, Ayers states that his aim is "to do honest reflection leading to sound diagnosis, constructive solutions, and lasting change" (3–4). To accomplish this task, Ayers organizes his text into four parts, each of which is intended to support his central thesis that Christian marriage is one-flesh marriage—i.e., a monogamous, heterosexual, lifelong, covenantal relationship.

Part 1, "God's Boundaries and Purposes for Marriage" (chapters 1–4), is intended to function as an apologetic for one-flesh marriage. Here Ayers makes his case for the what and why of Christian marriage. In chapter 1, he draws primarily on older and

classical Protestant—particularly Reformed or Calvinistic—writings about marriage to provide a theological definition of the structure and functions of marriage. This definition is expanded in chapters 2–4, where the author makes use of other theological sources, polling data (e.g., census data, Gallup polls, data drawn from the General Social Surveys [GSS]), along with selected other sources to support his argument that monogamous, heterosexual, lifelong, covenantal relationships are the best context for experiencing mutuality, friendship, reciprocity, authentic human sexuality, and the procreation of children.

In Part 2, “Before Marriage: Mate selection and Preparation for Matrimony” (chapters 5–9), Ayers considers what he describes as the “rampant premarital confusion and sinful conduct in modern professing churches” as well as their “causes, consequences, and solutions” (5). As in Part 1, Ayers employs data drawn from the GSS and other sources to highlight that culturally prevalent attitudes and patterns in couple formation are also held and practiced by individuals who identify as Conservative Christians, e.g., cohabitation before marriage; premarital sex; marrying someone from a different faith; and engagement with pornography. Chapter 9, the final chapter in Part 2, makes a case that has been made by researchers, marriage educators, and many pastors: marriage preparation programs such as Christian PREP, FOCCUS, PREP, PREPARE and RELATE enhance the chances of a couple having a successful marriage.

Ayer’s stated intent in Part 3, “Divorce and Remarriage” (chapters 10–12), is grounded in a conviction that a comprehensive understanding of divorce is needed to motivate Christians to build stronger marriages. Once again Ayers draws on a selection of scriptures and Reformed or Calvinistic writers to support his theological perspective—this time on the topic of divorce. His analysis of the extent and effects of divorce draws on the GSS and a variety of social studies about marriage. Considering the declared purpose for writing this book, his conclusions are predictable. Namely, separation, divorce, and remarriage have generally negative long-term effects on both adults and children.

Lastly, Part 4, “Marital Happiness and Success” (chapters 13–15), focuses on what Ayers believes a godly marriage can and

should be and considers practical ways to enhance marital satisfaction. In this section, Ayers returns to his premise that Christian marriage is a monogamous, heterosexual, lifelong, covenantal relationship. Chapter 13, “The Beautiful Order of Christian Marriage,” thus recapitulates his thesis that the structure of Christian marriage is one-flesh marriage, that its purposes are to provide life-long companionship, to bear witness to God’s covenant love, and to function as the context for authentic sexual relations. It is also the best context in which to raise children. Chapter 14, “Marital Satisfaction and Happiness,” reiterates his belief that Christian marriages begin with God’s plan and purpose for marriage. He restates his conviction that couples need to receive pre-marital counseling, and outlines what Ayers believes to be the practical benefits of marriage. In the final chapter of this book, “Recommendations for the Church,” Ayers provides a general roadmap to guide churches in their ministries to couples and families.

At this point, it is worth returning to the question raised at the beginning of this review, i.e., “Why read this book?” Aside from the fact that Ayers believes this book is needed, it is worth remembering that it is the task of Christian scholars to reflect deeply on current trends and to meaningfully reflect theologically on the questions raised by each generation. With this in mind, it is helpful to contemplate several questions when considering the contribution of this text to current discussions about Christian marriage.

First, does *Christian Marriage* reflect deeply on current social attitudes, values, and behaviours as they relate to marriage and family life? This book draws on and seeks to summarize a wide array of statistical information on social attitudes, values, and behaviors that impact marriage and family life. The author’s use of this data tends to be descriptive, i.e., “here are the statistics,” rather than analytical. While this approach to the data helps Ayers make his case that current attitudes towards marriage and current behaviours are not what they could be, the lack of analysis is problematic in at least two ways—both of which are pertinent to the following question.

Second, does *Christian Marriage* fulfill Ayers’s goal of pro-

viding a sound diagnosis of the state of Christian marriage? The question raises many questions, not the least of which relate to the criteria for creating a sound diagnosis. The following comments explore two important themes (the two problems related to Ayers's lack of analysis): the use of social science data to arrive at a sound diagnosis, and the tension between "held values" and "lived values." To merely list or describe attitudes and behaviors fails to engage underlying cultural and theological assumptions and values concerning marriage. Put another way: do the attitudes and behaviors he describes throughout this text devalue contemporary marriage? An affirmative response to this question would result in a diagnosis that the problem is behavioral and thus the solution is also behavioral. Or is it that the attitudes and behaviors he describes find fertile soil because the culture no longer values marriage as it once did? An affirmative answer to this question would result in a diagnosis that the problem stems from a faulty individual or corporate understanding of marriage. Another challenge that emerges from Ayers's descriptive use of statistics is that while he highlights the age-old tension between "held values" and "lived values," there was a need to move beyond identification and to reflect on the issue. There would have been merit in using a framework such as a secularization theory to reflect on his assumption that cultural shifts have resulted in value shifts with Christian communities, and that these new values have resulted in attitudes Ayers believes are inconsistent with his view of Christian marriage. In short, Ayers's diagnosis is, at best, an assessment that Christian marriages get into trouble when the structure and function of marriage is forgotten or lost.

Third, does this book meaningfully reflect theologically on current attitudes, questions, values, and behaviours about marriage and family life? To answer this question, it is helpful to consider different facets of the question. To begin, while the identification and discussion of underlying cultural values and assumptions could have been stronger, Ayers does identify a significant range of contemporary attitudes and behaviors that are relevant to a Christian discussion of marriage. Next, Ayers attempts to reflect theologically on the attitudes and behaviours he identified within this book. However, these theological reflec-

tions appear to be limited by his socio-theological location (i.e., Calvinistic-Reformed theology) and the fact he is not a theologian. Thus, his theological reflections are informed by a limited range of sources, most of which reflect the Calvinistic-Reformed perspective. As a result, a reader familiar with the theological literature will quickly note the absence of important theological texts such as Augustine's *On the Good of Marriage*, Barth's extensive reflections on human relationships, and Bromiley's *God and Marriage*. These omissions suggest that Ayers's theological reflections lack the breadth and depth required for readers outside his tradition. The limitations of Ayers's familiarity with the theological literature comes sharply into focus in his discussion of abuse and divorce. His dismissal of Imstone-Brewer's assertion that Exo 21 permits divorce on the basis of abuse overlooks a core idea in Exo 21:7–11, i.e., the actions of a man breaking faith with his wife (cf. Matt 19:8). It is worth noting that the linking of abuse and breaking faith (i.e., covenant breaking) was central to the Puritan poet John Milton's petitions to Parliament to be granted a divorce (Milton, John. *Complete Prose Works: Volume II: 1643–1648*, edited by Ernest Sirluck, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

Fourth, does this book result in constructive solutions that will lead to lasting change? Ayers's book suggests a diagnosis that Christian marriages get into trouble when the structure and functions of marriage are forgotten or lost. Based on this assessment, the best course of action is to correct the structure and restore the functionality of the marriage. Thus, Ayers argues for a restoration of monogamous, heterosexual, lifelong, covenantal relationships and advocates for church-based programs that prepare and support a couple to fulfill the functions of marriage in their relationship. The question, however, is not whether the solution fits the diagnosis but rather whether it will lead to lasting change. Programs such as those Ayers proposes typically result in first order change rather than transformational change, i.e., they work within an existing structure or relationship and focus on improving existing processes. Theologically, transformative change is neither the result of a cognitive process (i.e., education, a change in thinking) nor a matter of behavioral modification but

is evidence of a change of heart that occurs as a result of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individuals. Curiously, this perspective on change is absent from Ayers's book.

Lastly, can it be said that this book, as the title implies, is a comprehensive introduction to the subject of Christian marriage? Ayers's approach to the subject is an attempt to address the challenges that a diverse list of behaviors pose to creating healthy marriages. Nevertheless, the absence of key Christian writings on marriage means that this book does not provide a comprehensive Christian perspective, nor even a comprehensive Reformed perspective on the subject. Similarly, the lack of deep reflective and integrative discussion of both the sociological data and the theological material means that this text cannot be considered a comprehensive introduction on the subject.

In conclusion, Ayers's *Christian Marriage* is a book that appears to be best suited for readers within the Ayers's broader sociotheological community. Other readers, however, including members of other Christian communities, are likely to be disappointed by at least portions of this book.

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