

The Significance of «One Flesh» in Relation to Marriage

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INTRODUCTION

In our world of global changes the very foundations of society are being shaken; the church and its moral standards are no exception. While conservative churches could earlier be identified, in addition to other characteristics, by their strong and permanent marriages, more recently a lack of unity between spouses and even divorce have become far from unusual. In order to help hurting couples the church of Christ will need, first of all, to define anew an understanding of the nature and purpose of marriage, and then from these definitions attempt to find answers to current questions. This article will limit itself to analyzing the significance of the expression «one flesh» and applying it to a definition of marriage.¹ Some remarks will



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¹ When discussing the biblical teaching about marriage one should also touch upon other questions, such as the nature of marriage as a covenant commitment between two parties; whether marriage is a social institution or is instituted by God; and whether biblical statements about marriage are limited to the context in which they were made, or are intended to be universal prescriptions for all societies. Fundamental significance is attributed to the question of the destructive influence of sin on the institution of marriage and on relationships in general, and also to the question in what ways and to what extent the redemptive death of

touch on the consequences that result for marriage from the Fall on the one hand, as well as from the death of Christ on the other, and on divorce as a characteristic of a fallen world. Unfortunately, the limits of the article will not permit us to look at all the teaching and practice of the Old and New Testaments — these topics have been covered in other publications.

Some stipulations seem important before entering the discussion. When one touches on this emotionally-loaded topic, it is difficult, if not impossible, to escape some pre-conceptions and prejudices, especially because every one of us in some way, more or less closely, has been or is in contact with people — friends, neighbors, relatives — who have tried to work through marriage problems, and sometimes ended up in a divorce. All analysis, including the interpretation of the Bible, will be influenced in some way by the author's perception of these people and their suffering. The description of the biblical ideal of marriage is likely to cause agitation, anger, bitterness and disappointment in biblical ideals or, on the contrary, lead to an extremely strict view concerning the impossibility of divorce.

One also needs to note that no interpretation of Bible texts on marriage (neither the narrow, «conservative» interpretation, nor the «liberal,» in the sense of allowing for cultural influences) will help to restore harmony between spouses, or be able to eliminate divorce as such.² It is one thing to clarify the meaning of a biblical text and often quite another to help find a solution in the

Christ is able to annul the influence of sin and restore the ideal envisioned by God. When discussing marriage and divorce one cannot avoid speaking about the responsibilities of husband and wife and the appropriate actions to be taken when these are not fulfilled and when promises are not kept. The role of the church as a witness at the marriage ceremony and her responsibility (teaching, caring and counseling) toward the spouses must be taken very seriously.

² Although theoretically this approach is possible. The problem of divorce can be eliminated from the church, for instance, through ruling

out its possibility while excommunicating each and every divorcee, and in this way keeping the church «pure.» One can also eliminate the problem by declaring the «innocent» spouse righteous and having no responsibility for the occurring divorce and by excommunicating the «problematic, sinful» partner, and with him or her also the question of divorce. Or the emotional pain and suffering from the impossibility of reconciliation are considered to be a sufficient punishment for the couple; therefore the church concentrates more on accepting these people without discussing biblical teaching in all its fullness.

confused situation of a specific unhappy marriage. The two processes involved in Bible interpretation — study and application — are very closely connected with each other, and impossible without each other, but still remain two different processes, each of which needs to be completed thoroughly and responsibly. If one concentrates primarily on biblical teaching, one can end up as a scribe who has answers for all questions but is very far removed from life. On the other hand, undue emphasis on the «reading» of a problematic contemporary situation should not lead to «corrections» of biblical teaching in such a way that it is declared to belong to some other ancient culture and therefore not applicable to today's issues, or receives a different meaning by re-defining certain key words, or the teaching about the love and all-forgiveness of God is set higher than the standards he hoped to see in his church.

1.1. General Overview

The expression **בשר אחד** («one flesh») is not used very often in Scripture. The first and probably most important occurrence of it is in Ge 2:24: «For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.» This reference is then cited by Jesus in his discussion with the Pharisees about the legitimacy of divorce (Mt 19:1-12; Mk 10:2-12). The Pharisees attempted to get Jesus' opinion on whether, and under what conditions, a man could get divorced from his wife. Jesus, pointing to the beginnings in Genesis, to the original order established at creation, underlines that because of a unique unity between a husband and a wife, the marriage bond should not (and cannot) be dissolved. He even adds: «Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate,» this way again stating that the permanence of marriage is God's will. The apostle Paul in Eph 5:31 also refers to Ge 2:24, comparing the relationship between Christ and the church with the unity between husband and wife. In a somewhat strange reference in 1Co 6:16 Paul alludes

to the dynamics of becoming «one flesh» in the context of sexual relations outside of marriage.³

As all of these four usages of «one flesh» in the New Testament are full or partial quotations from Ge 2:24,⁴ this reference seems foundational for securing the meaning of the phrase and will be analysed first, before a brief discussion of its citations in the New Testament and an attempt to come to some conclusions concerning marital relations.

1.2. Ge 2:18-23

The passage Ge 2:18-25, as the context for v. 24, is part of a larger narrative that describes the Garden of Eden, the creation of Adam and Eve and the Fall. This narrative presents anew the process of creation which was already described in Ge 1, but from a different perspective and with different foci of attention.⁵ While Ge 1 describes the creation of the world from a cosmological point of view, the narrative of the next chapter concentrates on the creation of humanity and their life circumstances, on an explanation of human nature and their relationship with

³ In this verse two different words are used (σῶμα and σὰρξ), which is also followed in the translation (body and flesh). In the first instance Paul describes physical sexual relations (σῶμα is often used to describe the physical body), and in the second he quotes literally from Ge 2:24, leaving the σὰρξ used in the Septuagint.

⁴ Jesus, in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, and Paul in his epistles cite Ge 2:24 following the Septuagint, which, in contrast to the Masoretic text, adds δύο (Greek: «two» or «these two») before «one flesh,» as if underlining the hardly imaginable fact that one whole unit can come from two different personalities.

⁵ Previously, in connection with the documentary hypothesis, it was thought that the first two chapters of Genesis were written by different authors (see the history of the interpretation of these chapters of Genesis in Westermann [1984, 186-190]), because it seemed impossible to explain the differences in these chapters otherwise. For example: 1) two different names for God are used; 2) the sequence in creation differs (according to

Ge 2, animals are created after humans); 3) the description of humanity is diametrically opposed: in Ge 1 humans are the crown of creation, image and likeness of God, while in Ge 2 Adam is created from dust (that is, dirt, nonentity); 4) in Ge 1:1 Elohim, as is said, creates «the heaven and the earth,» and in 2:4b, which is considered to be the beginning of the second account, the sequence changes and Yahweh creates «the earth and the heavens.» Shchedrovitskij (1994, 43—44), in an attempt to explain these differences, resorts not to the documentary theory, but to a different, somewhat strange, «spiritual» interpretation: God had created two Adams, a spiritual one in Ge 1 and a «fleshly» one in Ge 2, into whom the spiritual Adam was then breathed (Ge 2:7). These two chapters must be analyzed together, without an attempt to find some chronological sequence between them. Ge 2 cannot stand on its own and cannot be considered an independent account of creation; it does not carry full information and readers must already be familiar with Ge 1 and know some basic information, which is then supplemented by the next chapter (Sarna 1989, 16).

God. While in Ge 1 God the Creator receives primary attention and is the main figure, Ge 2 prepares the scene for the events that will follow in all of Genesis (Sarna 1989, 16). This approach fully conforms to characteristics of Hebrew literature, where devices such as repetition, parallelism with expansion, and summaries with additional material, only underline the importance of narrated information.

The creation of a human is mentioned in only one verse (Ge 2:7), while the narrative continues to describe the environment in which Adam was put. This context is suddenly disrupted by v. 18, which introduces the next scene with an unexpected statement. Although all creation made by God is «very good,» God notes that the human, as the crown of creation, seems unsatisfied in his nature. Created as a social being, he feels lonely and cannot find an adequate partner.⁶ In order to satisfy this need God decides to create⁷ a «helper suitable for him.» While the term עֵזֶר («help») occurs in the Old Testament quite often, in regard to humans as well as in regard to God, the phrase עֵזֶר כְּנֶדְוֹ («suitable help») appears only here and in Ge 2:20. The meaning of the phrase will, therefore, need to be derived from the specific context of this passage.⁸ The literal translation of כְּנֶדְוֹ «suitable» can

⁶ It is important to point out here that God clearly states that he did not intend loneliness for a human — «it is not good for the man to be alone» is a very strong contrast to all creation which is described seven times as being «very good.» This is confirmed in other passages of Scripture (for example, Ecc 4:9-12) that concern not only marital relations, but all kinds of interpersonal relationships. The fact that Jeremiah was not permitted to start a family (Jer 16:1ff.) is considered a sign of approaching judgment and a very negative phenomenon. To legitimately avoid fellowship is possible only in a few limited situations; this way, however, still points to the abundant life, which is a life in fellowship (Westermann 1984, 227). When, in Ge 1:26, God considers the creation of humanity that will reflect the image of God, God is mentioned in the plural: «Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.» To ensure a fitting and true reflection

of this image God creates humanity as a pair, as male and female; this becomes clear in Ge 1 as well as in Ge 2. They are created in order to have fellowship, much like God in his triune nature enjoys fellowship. Neither animals, which God introduced to Adam, nor even — which is very interesting! — the fellowship of a sinless Adam with God himself was able to satisfy this need.

⁷ The Septuagint and Vulgate (as also the Russian Synodal translation) read «create» here in the plural, possibly in order to harmonize 2:18 with 1:26.

⁸ The primary meaning of עֵזֶר is «help» (cf. Isa 30:5; Da 11:34 and others). The translation of the term as «help» or «helper» depends on the preference of the translator who will consider the relevance of the term in the immediate context, as one could also translate עֵזֶר in Ex 18:4 as «the God of my father was my help.»

also mean «matching him,» «beside him,» «like opposite of him» (Wenham 1987, 69),⁹ that is, Eve was intended to ideally complement those characteristics that Adam believed missing in his personality. God does not simply create an identical person; a human needs someone different who would be similar to him/her, who would complement missing traits, who would help and be alongside him/her.¹⁰

In the process of searching for a friend Adam is presented with various animals; he chooses names for them — that is, he becomes acquainted with them and points out their significance for himself — and realizes his position as one responsible for creation.¹¹ But only when God introduces the woman to Adam does he recognize in her an equal, a perfect match, a fitting and compatible creature. Adam's exclamation in v. 23 is in poetic form¹² and contains parallelisms («bone of my bones» and «flesh of my flesh»); a chiasm («this [she] will be called woman» and «from man was taken this [she]»); and a threefold repetition of the feminine demonstrative pronoun הַזֶּה («this») in the beginning of the first, and in the beginning and end of the second line. These devices clearly underline the intensity of the exclamation and the joy at finding this specific compatible person. Adam speaks about Eve in the third person, addressing God, and in this way expressing his gratitude to God for the gift of

⁹ The medieval Jewish scholar Rashi explains this expression in the following way: «If he is worthy, she will be a help; if not, she will be against him.» (cit. in Yamauchi 1978, 248).

¹⁰ There are many differing opinions concerning the areas in which the woman should become a help for the man: for example, in agricultural work, in working the Garden of Eden (Keil 1996, 54); in bearing children (Augustine); «in forming a spiritual world» (Gerts 1999, Ge 2:18); and in managing many other tasks. Delitzsch believes that not only the woman has been created as helper, but that each person cannot reach his/her destiny other than in mutual help for each other (cit. in Westermann 1984, 227).

In the discussion concerning the equality or subordination of women the term «help, helper» often receives opposite meanings. Some insist that a helper usually fills a subordinate position, that is, simply follows the commands of someone in

authority. Others, in contrast, based on the fact that God is often called helper (cf., for example, Ex 18:4; Dt 33:17; Ps 33:20; 115:9-11; 146:5, and others), underline that this is an honored position which expresses the advantages of a stronger partner. But neither one nor the other is intended: the question lies not in status and strength, endurance or preparedness for the difficulties of life, but in the fact that a human needs help and that God wants to fulfil that need (Bilezikian 1989, 28).

¹¹ Animals were envisioned by God as a help for humans, but Adam must himself define who, more than others, is fit for this task; that is, where he sees his need, and who will be able to fulfil it.

¹² *Biblia Hebraica* indicates the poetic form in structuring this verse. The words are grouped in two lines: the first is a two-beat tricolon, and the second a three-beat bicolon.

a companion. The circumstances of the creation of woman point out how significant the sameness of nature of man and woman is, which is described by the term «one flesh.» God takes a part from the body of man¹³ and from this part creates¹⁴ the woman, in this way underlining that in essence they are one and the same.¹⁵ This is the reason why the man immediately recognizes the woman to be «bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,» noticing the similarity and understanding the fact that the new creature fully correlates with him, and he with her.

The expression «bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh» occurs quite often in the Old Testament (Ge 29:14; Jdg 9:2-3; 2Sa 5:1; 19:12-13, and others) and has been called the «kinship formula» (Reiser 1960, 1–4).¹⁶ When Jacob, running from Esau's death threats, comes to Laban,

¹³ In the literature one finds differing opinions as to whether it is significant that a rib (or the «side,» as some prefer to translate, see Hamilton 1990, 178) was used in the creation of woman. Compare, for example, the discussion in *Bereshit Raba* (Midrash on Genesis) on how Eve may have turned out if God would have used other parts of Adam's body to create her (*Agada* 1993, 13). Possibly one should pay attention not only to the rib (bone), but also to the flesh that God used to close up the wound. In this way, the exclamation of Adam that Eve is «bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh» is already anticipated in Ge 2:21 (Sailhammer 1990, 47). This intends, first of all, to underline the fact that man and woman have the same nature physically and spiritually, that together they comprise an indissoluble unit, and that they stand alongside each other (not higher and not lower), supporting each other from the side. Possibly already here the foundations for the explanation of marriage and marital relations are laid (Ge 2:24).

¹⁴ Here we do not find the verb בָּרָא (as in Ge 1:1), which is used only to describe God's creative activity resulting in things which have not yet existed and whose appearance fully depends on God (Sarna 1989, 5), but the verb בָּנָה, used only here and in Am 9:6, which also describes the process of creation (although in Akkadian and Ugarit this is a usual term to describe the creation of something [Wenham 1987, 69]).

¹⁵ This unity cannot be understood as meaning that at the beginning there was some bisexual creature from which God then extracted the woman.

Such an interpretation may have resulted from the speech of Aristophan in Plato's «Symposium» about the desire of humans to find their imagined previous completeness. A similar idea was expressed, probably under the influence of this speech, by later Jewish interpreters (Hamilton 1990, 178). But these speculations do not conform to the biblical account of the creation of humanity. God took only «one of the ribs,» one part of the body, and by an active, creative act made woman as something completely new. It is not Eve who is taken from Adam, but the material from which Eve was created. In Ge 1:27 humanity stands before God already in its two persons and together they receive the mandate to care for creation.

¹⁶ Other commentators, for example Brueggemann (1970), call it a «formula of covenant.» The issue lies not, as he sees it, primarily with common ancestors (relatives), but in a mutual loyalty, faithfulness toward each other. When, for example, in 2Sa 5:1 the tribes of Israel come to David at Hebron and say: «We are your own flesh and blood,» they do not try to underline their common biological origin from Jacob (Israel), but state a willingness to serve David as king and be faithful to him, whereupon David makes a covenant with them (v. 3). It is difficult to draw a clear dividing line between whether a covenant or a blood relationship is meant when dealing with a society such as Israel, that derives its genealogy from one and the same patriarch. However, in no way can one eliminate the idea of covenant and faithfulness either from events where this formula is used, or from the marriage relationship described by the same formula.

the latter, having heard his story and being persuaded that Jacob is the son of his sister, makes a similar statement: «You are my own flesh and blood» (Ge 29:14). The statement, therefore, underlines close relational ties¹⁷ with all the consequences that would arise from it in a Semitic context.¹⁸ In their commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, B. Malina and R. Rohrbaugh (1992, 121), who analyze Bible texts from a social-critical point of view, make the following statement:

Jesus looks upon the married couple as «no longer two, but one flesh.» This indicates that marriage is a blood relationship rather than a legal one. As a blood relationship, like the relationship to mother and father or to one's siblings, marriage cannot be legally dissolved. And just as it is God alone who determines who one's parents are, so too it is God who «joins together» in marriage.

Adam expresses the closeness, or relatedness, to Eve also with a play on words when he seeks for a name to describe her: in ancient Hebrew the term אִשָּׁה (woman) sounds similar to אָדָם (man), they are also closely connected in v. 23 by way of a chiasm.¹⁹

1.3. Genesis 2:24

In Ge 2:24 we finally find the summary statement that attempts to recollect the main theme of the narrative.²⁰ Having described some important aspects of the creation of humanity and having included the summary conclusion of Adam, the author now tries to clarify the significance

¹⁷That which in our culture is described by «blood relationships,» Hebrews understood as being «one's 'flesh and bone'» (Wenham 1987, 70).

¹⁸Wenham and Heth, who are followed by many evangelical theologians, believe that on the basis of this formula, one can consider husband and wife to be the closest («blood») relatives. This is the reason for them to relate the somewhat strange command in Dt 24:1-4 (a husband cannot remarry his previous wife if, after divorce, she has lived with another man) to the regulations in Lev. 18 about unlawful sexual relations with certain close family members. To remarry one's previous wife could be compared to a marriage with one's own

sister, which would be «detestable in the eyes of God» (Dt 24:4) (Heth and Wenham 1984, 106–111).

¹⁹Probably there is no etymological connection (Wenham 1987, 70 and others), although Shchedrovitskij (1994, 51) assumes that אִשָּׁה has been derived from vyai by way of adding the feminine suffix h'.

²⁰עַל־כֵּן («therefore») is used several times in Genesis, sometimes explaining the origin of a saying (10:9), of a name (26:33), or of a custom (32:32). Here the expression leads up to principles for all human marriages, based on the particular example of Adam and Eve (Wenham 1987, 70).

of these events, which is not readily obvious. As von Rad insists, the passage in Ge 2:18-24 is intended to explain the «extremely powerful drive of the sexes to each other.» Man and woman «were originally one flesh. Therefore they must come together again and thus by destiny they belong to each other» (von Rad 1956, 82—83). Although the term «marriage» does not explicitly occur in the passage, it is usually assumed that the meeting of opposite sexes and the development of unity between man and woman takes place in this specific context.²¹ In this way, Ge 2:24 describes the nature and purpose of marriage. Following the example of the first marriage instituted by God, the author presents foundational principles for all future marriages.

The first principle, mentioned in the text, is the importance of «leaving.» Literally the key term עָזַב («leave») also means «forsake, loose, reject, regard as invalid.»²² A radical change in priorities becomes obvious. One of the most important responsibilities for an ancient Hebrew man, after undivided worship of God, was to honour and love his parents. By entering marriage he cuts the ties of unity and relationship with them²³ and leaves his responsibility toward them in order to enter into a new union with his wife. The question was not necessarily one of geographical distance — the Hebrew son usually stayed in his parents' home together with his previous family while the woman left her home and became part of his family,²⁴ — but of psychological distance. «Leaving»²⁵ required a clear and definite decision by both partners to free themselves from all dependencies that may have existed between them and

²¹ However, Westermann cannot see, in this instance, either the institution of marriage, or a definition of monogamy as God's order (Westermann 1984, pp. 232, 234). Jesus, on the other hand, uses exactly this passage as the one presenting foundational principles for marriage and its permanence (Mt 19:5).

²² «Leave» is in Qal or Impf., which denotes a usual, continuing action.

²³ It is important to note that it is not the house of the parents that is left, but certain close people, to whom, so far, all loyalty belonged. Even with geographical distance the dependency on parents can continue.

²⁴ Some commentators suggest that a man is usually

already more emotionally distanced from his family of origin, while for a woman all relationships in which she is involved are very important, so that it is more difficult for her to harmonize the change in priorities involved in exchanging her emotional attachment to her parents for a marital relationship. This is nicely expressed in the saying: «A son is a son till he gets him a wife, a daughter is a daughter all of her life» (Hamilton 1990, 180).

²⁵ This term is often used to describe how Israel left unfulfilled its covenantal obligations to God (Dt 29:25; 31:16; Jos 24:20; Isa 1:28; Jer 1:16; 2:13, and others), or God's promises not to leave Israel (Dt 31:6; Jos 1:5; Isa 42:16, and others).

their parents and be joined in a union, each part of which looks after the benefit of the other.

The literal translation of the second principle *וְרַב־בֵּקַבְּ אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ* («and cleave to his wife») reads «clinging, cleaving, staying together». Other usages, such as «glue together», «stick together» (Job 38:38) point to a very strong connection between two parts, to attachment and faithfulness.²⁶ This image of «both passion and permanence should characterize marriage» (Wenham 1987, 71). The term «cleaving» is often used as a term for covenant, for example, when Israel receives the command to be faithful to God and «hold fast» to him (Dt 4:4; 10:20; 30:20; Jos 22:5; Isa 14:1, and others). The covenant between God and Israel is described in terms of love and a marriage relationship (Eze 16; Jer 3). It is an eternal covenant and it encompasses certain blessings and curses. Even though Israel very often did not keep the covenant and God punished them for it, the covenant was not annulled, but fulfilled by the death of Christ.²⁷

God's covenant with Israel is the model for the marriage covenant,²⁸ where partners also «declare their perpetual allegiance to one another in a loving relationship, usually in the presence of witnesses who act as guarantors of their oaths or promises» (Guenther 1990, 85). Malachi 2:10-16 clearly uses the term «covenant» in regard to marriage (v. 14 says literally, «the wife of your covenant») and denotes God's discomfort with, and even hatred toward, divorce.²⁹

²⁶ Laney (1981, 20), who prefers this translation, uses a comparison between glue and short-lived scotch tape. When two pieces of paper or other material are pasted together with glue, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to separate them without causing damage. In a similar way, divorce is the destruction of something which does not let itself be separated in its constituting parts anymore. Other commentators, though admitting the legitimacy of this translation, doubt that it is possible to define the nature of marriage and the legitimacy or illegitimacy of divorce based on the translation of only one word (Blomberg 1990, 167).

²⁷ Although some commentators, who argue the legitimacy of divorce, believe the opposite and insist that Israel had so often broken the covenant that God had to annul the previous covenant and, according to Jer. 31:31-33, make a new covenant with the «faithful remnant» (Stedman 1987,

247—248). Grabe (2000, 3—48) believes that the covenant, made with Abraham and then renewed with the people of Israel, is the same in its essence throughout all of the OT and NT, although it experiences constant renewals. «The covenant is not annulled, it is ... lifted up, it rises to its true level» (Kraus, *Der Erste und der Neue Bund* [65, cit. in Grabe 2000, 45]).

²⁸ That marriage in biblical understanding is a covenant and not just an agreement, a memorandum of understanding, or contract, which are made and dissolved (with the application of certain punishments) when certain obligations are neglected or not fulfilled, is an assumption of this article. Parallels between God's covenant and the marriage covenant were demonstrated, for example, when discussing the expression «bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh» and the terms «leave» and «cleave».

The author attempts to revive the wonderful feelings of the first youthful love, of comradeship («partner»), of faithfulness («covenant») (v. 14) and unity (v. 15, literally, «has God not made one [one flesh]?») and confront it with their treachery,³⁰ which probably consisted in divorcing their legal wives as well as marrying women of other nations and religions (v. 11). Against this negative background, aspects of attachment, responsibility for each other, and unity, that are expected in marriage, come out very clearly; it is expected that continuing faithfulness and sincerity to covenant commitments will be displayed.³¹

The third part of Ge 2:24, then, presents the nature and goal of marriage, that is, because of priority changes made for the benefit of the spouse, and full covenantal dedication of the partners to each other, they are enabled to become one flesh.³² There are many interpretations for this expression, some are quite foggy and mystical, others define the concept more clearly. Luck (1987, 16), for example, cites Allen Ross who believes that to become one flesh means to create a spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical unity, and includes the opinion of Carl Laney that although marriage partners remain two personalities, they reach some mystical spiritual unity. Bailey even believes that husband and wife «become an amalgamation in which the identity of the constituents is swallowed up and lost in an undifferentiated unity» (cit. in Garland 1986, 37).

²⁹ The Malachi reference poses great difficulties textually and translations differ significantly. The editors of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, for example, believe that errors were introduced into the text during copying and suggest emending the third person of the word «hate» to the first person, which results in the following reading: «Indeed, I hate divorce (lit., «let [the wife] go,» cf. Dt 21:14), says Yahweh, God of Israel.» Rudolf (cit. in Smith 1984, 324) believes that this meaning can be confirmed even without the proposed emendation: he considers the term אָשַׁח; to be a «verbal adjective with the meaning of a participle, ‘I am hating divorce.’»

³⁰ The term בָּגַד «act treacherously, faithlessly, deceitfully» appears in the passage five times (vv. 10.11.14.15.16).

³¹ As Atkinson (1979, 91) states, «Marriage is not a metaphysical status which cannot be destroyed, but rather a moral commitment that needs to be fulfilled.»

³² Cf., for example, the position of Heth (1995, 83): «In the words of Ge 2:24, the covenanted and consummated marriage witnessed (Mal 2:14) and joined by God (Mt 19:6; Mk 10:8b–9) results in God making husband and wife into a relational unit.»

As probably most married couples will confirm, there is a certain metaphysical aspect to marriage. There is the feeling that we belong together and to each other; there is a certain unity that is impossible to express in words and definitions; there are also some sudden enlightening moments and an explosion of joy, as with Adam and Eve when they realized their relatedness, closeness, and compatibility with each other. But to speak of full identification or amalgamation, of losing one's own personality with the goal of reaching unity or becoming one new creature is impossible and inadmissible.

In this sense אֶחָד («one») will still need to be understood symbolically, not necessarily as a cardinal (one) or ordinal (first) number. In the Old Testament the term is often used to demonstrate the oneness of the people of Israel: the people «with one voice» promise to keep the covenant (Ex 24:3); they act «as one man» (Jdg 20:1); prophets predict that in the bright future God will work inside the people a «singleness of heart and action» (Jer 32:39; Eze 11:19). But the desired unity is always under threat of division and separation: very soon after Adam joyfully exclaims at his unity and closeness with Eve (Ge 2:23-24), he is ready to push off the guilt for the Fall on her alone (Ge 3:12) (cf. Jenson 1997, 349—350).

Often the expression «one flesh» is understood in physical terms, limiting it to marital sexual relations.³³ Sometimes this is based on 1Co 6:16, where even a single, accidental sexual relation with a prostitute is said to create «one flesh.» Or, when adultery is considered to be the only legitimate reason for divorce, the argumentation insists that illegitimate sexual relations have destroyed the «one flesh» of the marriage, which at some time was consum-

³³ Sometimes it is affirmed that the couple becomes «one flesh» in a child, the fruit of sexual relations (von Rad 1956, 85, and others). But not all married couples have children; children, in addition, very soon develop their own life and become independent of parents, while the unity in marriage should not be contingent on outside circumstances, but rather permanent and strong. Calvin in his *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of 1561

lists reasons for which he would allow a divorce and remarriage: adultery (based on the Gospel of Matthew); impotence (based on «one flesh» in Ge 2:24); extreme incompatibility in questions of religion; and desertion (based on 1Co 7:15) (cit. in MacLeod 1992, 146). It seems that in this kind of evaluation of marriage and divorce, sexual relations receive a one-sided role in the establishment of «one flesh.»

mated by legally right sexual relations (cf. Blomberg 1990, 168).³⁴ Gene Getz, having pointed out that unity means more than simply intercourse, still continues to put (too) much emphasis on the fact that «in the eyes of God, a man and a woman become one the moment they enter sexual relations with each other, be they of permanent or accidental nature.» (Getz 1991, 136).³⁵

For a complete unity between two personalities, it seems, one would still expect the involvement of the whole personality and not only of one of its areas — whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. There must be a balance: in the Bible neither ascetic marriages are endorsed (1Co 7:1-5), nor marriages where other areas lack unity, such as, for example, the spiritual area (2Co 6:14; 1Co 7:39b). The Hebrew word *בָּשָׂר* («flesh, body») differs in its meaning from the Greek *σάρξ*, which can denote exclusively the physical body, sometimes even in contrast to the spirit or soul, or the sinful nature of a human.³⁶ The Hebrew word *בְּשָׂרָא* means the whole person (Westermann 1984, 318),³⁷ therefore Ge 2:24 speaks of a unity of two personalities in all areas of their lives. In those passages of the New Testament where the phrase *εἰς σάρκα μίαν* (one flesh) is used, one needs to remember the Hebrew meaning of the expression (see the article by H. Seebass «*sarx mia*» in Brown I, 678).

³⁴ Blomberg goes on to say that because the institution of marriage needs both components, the commitment and the consummation of sexual relations, a divorce cannot happen only on grounds of sexual unfaithfulness. A marriage is impossible to save only when the parties consistently refuse to fulfil their responsibilities to «leave» and to «cleave» (Blomberg 1990, 168).

³⁵ Without doubt, satisfactory sexual relations that enrich the marriage and further the becoming of one flesh are necessary. But an unbalanced, one-sided preoccupation with them leads to various perversions of the understanding of marriage in practical life, for example, that marriage is automatically considered inferior (even up to the point that it shouldn't continue) when there

are sexual problems, or invalid when the couple has not been able to consummate sexual unity.

³⁶ Cf., however, 1Ti 3:16, where, as Louw and Nida (1998, 94) point out, not only the physical body is meant, but possibly the whole of a human personality: «God appeared in a body.»

³⁷ Wolff (1990, 49–56), who provides an in-depth analysis of the Old Testament anthropology, defines *בָּשָׂר* as: 1) the meat (of animals [one-third of all references] as also of humans); 2) the human body, as such; 3) that which is common for all humans, that is, their spiritual and physiological relatedness (from here also the «kinship formula»: «bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh»); 4) human life in all its weakness and fallibility.

2. CITATIONS OF THE EXPRESSION «ONE FLESH» IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

According to 1Co 6:12-20, even accidental sexual relations can already create unique ties of attachment and intimacy fitting the description of «one flesh.» These relations, as Paul underlines, are already immoral for the reason that no commitment is intended between the partners. He strongly warns the Corinthians not to abuse their sexuality as if it belongs to and affects «only» the physical body, that is, the material world in contrast to the spiritual. One cannot regard sexual relations as if they would in no way influence the life of a person in general and his/her relationship with Christ in particular. The Corinthians had already entered into a union with Christ with all of their nature, and their bodies were considered «members of Christ.» Now, however, they had trespassed the covenant with Christ because they were entertaining relations with women who, very likely, were involved in sacred prostitution and had made a covenant with idols. To become «one flesh» (v. 16) with them meant to create a union which was totally incompatible with the spiritual union with Christ (Fee 1987, 260). The body, including the sexuality of a person, must, in contrast, be used for the glory of God within the limitations provided for it (Ro 12:1-2).

The context of the quote from Ge 2:24 in another New Testament text, Eph 5:31, completely differs from the previous reference, although some aspects (for example, the phrase «members of his body») reappear. The passage works through a comparison between human marriage and the relations between Christ and the church. Heth believes that because Ge 2:24 is used in the context of such a comparison, the question of «the permanence of marriage appears to be fundamentally a theological issue.» If human marriage reflects God's faithful, sincere and unshakeable love toward humanity, despite the unworthy and unsteady response to it, its significance cannot be overestimated (Heth 1995, 83).³⁸ Having

³⁸ Nor should one underestimate the necessity of constant efforts in marriage to maintain love and faithfulness and reach toward the unity described as «one flesh.» However, human efforts in themselves will not guarantee the desired result, that is, a happy marriage, because «unless the Lord builds the house,

its builders labor in vain» (Ps 127:1). Being imperfect people and still remaining under the influence of sin, Christians should be realistic as to their abilities in developing interpersonal relationships and live in dependence on God, not quenching the Spirit who works on the renewal of human nature.

demonstrated Christ's care for the church and, in comparison with it, having defined the responsibilities of each spouse in marriage, Paul, at the end of his instruction, also briefly addresses the question of unity in marriage. By quoting Ge 2:24, he alludes to the ideal understanding of marriage familiar to his readers and to the harmony of interpersonal relationships before the Fall, and then immediately returns to his main line of thought — the discussion of unity of Christ and the church. Being «members of his body,» that is, part of the church, Christians have some understanding of the unity that Paul attempts to underline with the use of the phrase «one flesh.» The fact that the quote in this case describes Christ and the church,³⁹ and not primarily human unity in marriage, is underlined in the next verse: the mystery of this allusion Paul would like to relate to «Christ and the church» (Eph 5:32).⁴⁰ However, having the example of Christ and the church, each human couple can define for themselves the importance, as well as the real feasibility, of implementing this unity⁴¹ in their relationship. The relations in all areas of marriage are this way becoming a continuous example of God's eternal love and of that redemptive tie that exists between Christ and the church.

In Matthew and Mark the Ge 2:24 quote is placed in the context of questions about divorce. The Pharisees, being familiar with varying interpretations of two rabbinical schools,

³⁹ Already in Eph 5:29b, the discussion has moved from general reflections about human nature to Christ and the position of Christians in relation to him. The end of v. 30 (an adaptation of Ge 2:23), as it appears in the Synodal translation, is absent in early manuscripts and was added later, probably in order to create a smoother transition to v. 31. It is difficult to support this expression theologically because it assumes some physical relatedness (see above about the «kinship formula») between Christ (already exalted and glorified) and the human race. One can speak only of spiritual kinship, or of a spiritual union with Christ which is expressed by being part of his body, the church (v. 30).

⁴⁰ It is possible that with this quote Paul is attempting to return the attention of his readers to the original order and harmony between the sexes which the redemptive death of Christ is supposed to restore, in this way annulling the curse of Ge 3:15 which predicted (but in no way commanded!)

the struggle between the sexes and the domination of the male (Garland 1986, 29; Bilezikian 1989, 55—56). In Christ's body the church, unity, mutual submission, and the cooperation between male and female are already starting to develop. They are guided by the love and care demonstrated by Christ who longs for unity in the church, between its members as well as between the Head and the church. In marriage, especially in Christian marriage, these characteristics must also be evident in order to make «one flesh» a reality.

⁴¹ If God was able to reconcile and unite even such hostile people as the Jews and the Gentiles, estranged religiously, culturally, and in terms of their worldview (the terminology in Eph 2:14-15 reminds one very strongly of «one flesh»), then, following the example of Christ, spouses are, with his help, also likely to experience this unity, independently of whether one understands the future tense «and they will become one flesh» as a command or simply as a description.

had incited a debate in order to catch Jesus on a wrong word or with a differing interpretation of the law.⁴² Jesus, as he often did, responds to the question with another question: «Haven't you read?»⁴³ — and in this way returns them to the beginning of creation. The issue here is that already the way the question is posed is wrong: the discussion should not concern reasons for divorce, but how God wants to see marriage, and, having clarified this fundamental question, whether the possibility of talking about divorce even exists. Describing the original condition of Adam and Eve, Jesus combines two references: Ge 1:27 and Ge 2:24. Both demonstrate that God created the two manifestations of humanity for each other and that, by uniting, they accepted certain responsibilities⁴⁴ of faithfulness, closeness, mutual dependency, and unity. The beginning of Mt 19:6 again repeats the consequence of entering a marriage: «So they are no longer two, but one.»

The conclusion (???? - therefore) of Jesus explicitly expresses that which was intended in the Old Testament: therefore, marriage was intended by the Creator to be lifelong, and people have no right to separate⁴⁵ that which was united by God; that is, to annul God's creative activity and destroy the new creation of «one flesh.» In this way Jesus rejects the existing practices, although they are even mentioned (though only in passing) in the Scriptures (Dt 24:1-4), and returns the discussion to the ideal.

Responding to further objections of the Pharisees, Jesus again underlines that divorce leads to adultery, so that even the disciples, having heard the whole discussion, decided for themselves that such exclusive requirements in marriage are far too difficult and that, therefore, it is better not to get married (Mt 19:10).⁴⁶ Thus, in the texts of Matthew and

⁴² John the Baptist had to pay with his life for his explicit statement about the illegitimacy of divorce and remarriage (Mt 14:3-12), and possibly the Pharisees were seeking for a possibility to get rid of Jesus by using the same trick.

⁴³ The problem is that they, as experts and the best interpreters of the law, had certainly read the Scriptures, but had not rightly understood them.

⁴⁴ Blomberg (1990, 169) emphasizes that the future tense used here is not descriptive, but has imperative aspects; partners must actively work toward becoming «one flesh.»

⁴⁵ A verb different from the one in Mt 19:3 is used here. Ἀπολλύω (v.3) is possibly the *terminus technicus* for a description of divorce. This verb is also used in the discussions of Hillel and Shammai, as described in the Mishna. Χωρίζω (v. 6) besides discussions on divorce, also appears in contexts where it carries the meaning «to separate, to isolate one from another» (Louw and Nida 1998, pp. 616, 457). Possibly, Jesus describes with χωρίζω any activity that leads to misunderstandings and estrangement in marriage and, then to an inner and, finally, to an official divorce.

Mark, one can notice that the meaning of the expression «one flesh,» as it was defined from Ge 2:24, is being maintained even in the quite different culture of the first century AD, where marital relations were already valued much lower by the Jews, and lower yet by the Greeks and Romans.

3. «ONE FLESH» AND CONCLUSIONS FOR MARRIAGE

The fact that man and woman belong together is expressed already in creation. Having created humans, God defined them as male and female, and only together as a whole, united person (Ge 1:27; 5:1-2) can they reflect the image of God.⁴⁷ They are different from each other in their personalities and feel inadequate or imperfect without each other. Each has at creation received part of God's personality, and therefore each needs the other to complement his or her personality.⁴⁸ Luck points out that «because each of the sexes reflects only partly God's person, each must participate in the other to reach psychological wholeness. The blessing of personal fulfilment... depends on the fellowship of the sexes» (Luck 1987, 3).

The unity assumed by the expression «one flesh» is created by two very different individuals who bring into this union their personal qualities and abilities. Possibly, in the process of getting to know each other before marriage they, as Adam and Eve, realized their relatedness and compatibility with one another, which is a prerequisite for unity. On the other hand, it is important to consider marriage as a long-term, stable, and safe relationship so that this initial compatibility has a chance to be further deepened and developed. In their mutual life each personality is stren-

⁴⁶ As the question of divorce is not the main focus of this article, these verses in Matthew and Mark have received less attention.

⁴⁷ See the remarkable article by Stanley Grenz, in which he, besides other issues, argues that one should not view the image of God as reflected by each individual person, but only by men, as Augustine insisted, and, following him, the medieval theologians; nor by men and women equally, as those who struggle for the equality of the sexes try to prove. The image of God should rather be considered as «primarily a relational

concept» (1998, 620); that is, in its fullness it is present only in fellowship with each other, in human community.

⁴⁸ Compare, for example, what consequences van Leeuwen derives from this concept: «We are so unshakably created for community that we cannot even develop as full persons unless we grow up in nurturing contact with others. Moreover, the fulfillment of our sociability depends on fellowship with the opposite sex» (Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace*, 41; cit. in Grenz 1998, 621).

gthened and allowed to blossom; they also move closer toward each other to create a community, a unity. The idea of harmony and deep intimacy which encompasses all areas of life is very strong in this process, and the couple maintains it as their main goal for marriage.

Unity in marriage, that is, the ideal relationships described by «one flesh,» does not occur automatically and immediately after the union is created.⁴⁹ Or rather, it probably exists in a rudimentary form, as well as in the form of a promise for the future; entering marriage assumes that the couple will work toward the fulfilment of that promise (Atkinson 1979, 79). To reach unity will require extensive, effective communication and efforts to adapt individual personalities for mutual life. To discover and fulfil the needs and expectations of a partner, as well as learn to apply skills in conflict resolution, will certainly encourage the process of mutual growth toward unity. Atkinson (1979, 79) defines marriage as an all-encompassing union of one man who dedicates himself to one woman, who, in turn, does the same. At first the unity is expressed in form of a desire or goal; later, in the process of deepening covenantal relations, the desire is realized in specific acts. Although this definition speaks about the ideal, its components will be, to a lesser or greater extent, evident in each marriage. The destruction of such a union, be it through death or divorce, will cause much pain and suffering. It is very possible that both partners will never recover from these wounds; even if they enter a new marriage the influences of the previous marriage will be constantly obvious, and often not to the best of the existing marriage.

For the majority of people in our society, the possibility of unity with the opposite sex will become true in an exclusive relationship in marriage. For those, however, who for some reason remained or again became single, it is very important to develop deep and satisfying relations with representatives from one's own and the opposite sex in order to supplement missing qualities in one's own personality. It is remarkable that

⁴⁹ There is a myth that marriages are made in heaven (and that is why they must be perfect acts of God). It is true, on the one hand, because it

is God who unites the partners, but this does not guarantee the success of a marriage.

the greatest commandment in the NT as well as in the OT is to love God and the neighbor (including one's enemies) with all the practical consequences that follow. In the NT, although marriage is valued very highly, one can still notice the preference given to relationships in the body of Christ (that is, with brothers and sisters in Christ) before family ties (Jesus himself set a precedent for it, cf. Mt 12:46-50). This is a wonderful opportunity for all Christians to develop relationships that, in comparison to special marriage relations limited exclusively to two individuals, are not self-contained and always open for expansion. Exactly the freedom and openness of these relations outside of marriage demonstrate the missional dimensions of God's love: «God continually seeks to include within the circle those yet outside the boundaries of God's covenantal people» (Grenz 1998, 624). Due to Paul's hermeneutical freedom in applying the term «one flesh» to the description of the relations between Christ and the church (Eph 5:31-32), one can say that in the NT this expression means not only unity and kinship in marriage (although it is used more often with this meaning), but that its meaning is expanded to characterize unity and kinship in the community of believers. In the fellowship of opposite sexes, especially in a Christian context, and through the fulfilment of God's mandate about caring and ruling the earth (Ge 2:28), which is given to representatives of both sexes together, humans have the opportunity to understand God's nature more deeply and grow in the understanding of oneself and others.

If one follows the teaching of Paul, then singleness as well as marriage are gifts of the Holy Spirit, *χάρισμα* (1 Co 7:7).⁵⁰ In this way, characteristics and definitions used for spiritual gifts apply to them as well; that is, marriage and singleness are given with the purpose of serving one another

⁵⁰ Although Paul clearly preferred singleness, in light of Ge 2:18-24 singleness seems to require some special direction from God; it means a special position on behalf of the Kingdom of God, something new which appeared with the coming of the Messiah. Neither in Judaism nor among the Gentiles was the status of singleness appreciated or endorsed (Neusner 1999, 286—287; Gerts, Ge 2:18). Certainly there were also single persons in Jewish society, but this rarely

happened for some higher purpose (Mt 19:12). When Paul recommends remaining single, he clearly states that he has no command from the Lord for it (1Co 7:25). He provides this advice as someone who notices all the advantages of his own status and who has received from God the power (or grace) to live this way, that is, be faithful in the situation in which he finds himself. 1 Co 7:38 indicates that sometimes one gift may

(1Pe 4:10); for the benefit of the whole church (1Co 12:7); for the perfection of the saints so that they would be able to participate in the work of the ministry which builds up the body of Christ (Eph 4:12-16); for the glory of God. In marriage this means that the partners serve each other, and that in their mutuality and ministry God's grace (χάρισμα) is revealed, obvious to them as well as to those around them. But this is not all. Marriage can never be a goal in itself, or closed in on itself. The closeness and satisfaction of two individuals in marriage, the search for one's own happiness, or the attempt to make the partner happy cannot be the only goals for this union. On the contrary, partners are called to unite so that together they would fulfil God's will for their life. As mentioned above, marriage is intended to be a sign of God's love and Christ's redemption; in marriage God is glorified. To understand marriage as a gift from God means that, due to their oneness («one flesh»), the partners are able to serve God better; to offer others protection, care, love, and fellowship; are able to join God's work on this earth. Certainly, one can also live in marriage only for oneself. This means that the gift is not used according to its purpose; the manifestation of the Spirit is suppressed and quenched; the objective of God's grace is not reached.

When Paul compares marriage to the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph 5:21-33), he states not only that Christ gave himself for the church, but also that he cleanses and nurtures her. His goal is to prepare the church for the mission he has envisioned for her. Partners in marriage have the same goal, that is, to strengthen the partner and enable him or her, with all available means, to fulfil the tasks given to them by God - tasks that would be difficult or impossible to complete on one's own. Through the marriage relationship the partners reflect God's love and faithfulness and present to the world possibly the truest and strongest witness to God's nature.

be preferred to another: the one who marries does right, and the one who does not - even better. The defining factor is the situation in which one finds oneself and the necessity of certain actions, even up to the point that married persons should live as if they were not married (7:29). In this sense the phrase «desire the greater gifts» (1Co 12:31) can be applied to

marriage, that is, desire those gifts (marriage or singleness) that would better enable you «to live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord» (1Co 7:35). Although God has called marriage a better position for a human, the issue does not lie primarily with marriage or singleness (which does not automatically mean better ministry), but with more effective service for the Lord.

As Jesus points out in Mk 12:25, marriage is an institution of this age and will not continue after the death of the partners. God's Kingdom, however, will overcome all limitations of time and space and therefore has a greater significance. Being married does not free the Christian from involvement in the ministry of God's Kingdom. On the contrary, as Garland believes, close and empowering relations in marriage (that is, unity in the way of «one flesh») will «enhance their ability to go out from a home base of acceptance and love into the service and sacrifice for which they are called» (1986, 17).

Although Ge 2:24 does not directly state the purpose of marriage, from the creation narrative in Ge 1:26-28 it becomes obvious that God gave the first couple certain responsibilities. They receive the responsibility to cultivate and preserve the earth and all creatures. They are also involved in the creation of new life on earth, in that they should multiply and fill the earth. On the basis of the mandate of multiplication, some interpreters have concluded that the essence of «one flesh» are the children that result from the marriage. The purpose and meaning of marriage would therefore be procreation; sexuality, as is believed, is given by God to continue the race, and not for enjoyment. Although one can find references in Scripture that underline the importance of children and the happiness they provide, bliss in marriage does not (necessarily) depend on their presence. Even if a couple cannot have children, or for some reason decides not to have any, they can still reach God's purpose in marriage, that is, the unity of «one flesh.»⁵¹

In marriage, sexual relations are intended to convey love, acceptance and participation in each other. It is a way of complete openness with each other, and of full giving of oneself to the other. «The body can become a channel by which one communicates one's whole psychological, physiological and spiritual being to another» (Garland 1986, 135). In Hebrew, sexual relations are often described with the term «to know» the other person. This includes the idea that a person is sharing himself or herself and receives the gift of the other; it also includes the discovery of each other and working to over-

⁵¹ Garland, tongue in cheek, notes that while Judaism of the first century AD saw the purpose of marriage to be in two becoming at least four, for

Jesus the highest ideal for marriage was that two would become one (1986, 139).

come differences, becoming fully open and vulnerable, and developing a sensitive caution toward the vulnerability of the partner. «Knowing» includes meaningful communication, tuning in to the other, which happens in the process of developing close emotional and spiritual relations. Sexual relations, in this way, become the physical expression of spiritual unity. Sexual, emotional and spiritual closeness serve to mutually enrich each other, support each other's further development, and create an even deeper feeling of unity.

CONCLUSION

In attempting to analyze the expression «one flesh» we primarily concentrated on the narrative about the creation of humanity where this phrase occurs for the first time. God made unity between man and woman possible in the way he created them different from, but also complementary to, each other. In each of their personalities and through the union between them they are to present the image and likeness of God. Together they are to care for his creation and be co-workers in the Kingdom. God used various models to clarify the meaning of the term «one flesh» in marriage: in the OT it was primarily God's covenant with Israel, and in the NT it was the unity between Christ and the church.

God is the initiator of marriage and therefore acts as the guarantor and witness of each marital union. He unites a man and a woman by way of covenantal relations, with the result that an opportunity is created for them to develop a unique relationship of «one flesh.» In the ideal situation⁵² these relations include the whole personality of each partner and create the feeling of emotional, intellectual and spiritual closeness that is experienced also in sexual intercourse.

The ideal relationship, as described in Ge 2:24, was very soon shaken by the Fall, and since that time divorce is an undesirable, but always present aspect in society; in biblical Israel as much as in any other ancient or contemporary soci-

⁵² This article often alludes to the «ideal,» fully realizing that the Fall had certain negative consequences for the institution of marriage and the relationship between the sexes. One should, however, not neglect the fact that Christ's death

and the power of the Holy Spirit, living in Christians, is able to annul many of these consequences and that the achievement of the ideal has become much more realistic. And yet we still await the full perfection to come in the new Jerusalem.

ety. The sin of divorce, or rather, the sin of separation (Mt 19:6), consists in missing God's intention for marriage, designed at the creation of humanity and at the institution of marriage. If partners are not able to solve conflicts and continuously adjust their love relationship, a process of estrangement starts which will finally lead to divorce. This process is opposite to the process of becoming «one flesh.» Estrangement and divorce are so very painful because something is being destroyed that was already knit together: a new creation that had and still has an indelible influence on the partners, and which for some time deeply formed their personalities. Even after getting a formal divorce, partners cannot simply delete from their memories the previous marriage because the connection of «one flesh» continues to exist.

If marriage is a covenantal agreement, comparable to God's covenant with his people, then it is permanent, and the renewal, restoration, and adaptation of the covenant for the benefit of each partner is possible in case of a covenant break or if obligations are not fulfilled. The breaking of a covenant (for example, in case of adultery, which, as some assume based on Mt 19:9, is the only legitimate ground for divorce) does not mean that the relationship cannot be saved, but that instead of the blessings of a covenant, the curses come into play, and instead of a happy marriage partners experience the hell of betrayal. For Christians, having before them the example of Israel repeatedly returning to God with repentance, and the confessing church, as well as the example of God and Jesus Christ calling and accepting sinners, repentance and forgiveness are real and effective means for restoring interpersonal relationships. There is no doubt that in marriage, where relations between spouses are very intimate and close, each hurt is experienced in a very painful way, but also that the grace of forgiveness works here just as abundantly, cleansing and forming partners into Christ's likeness. It is never too late to start working on unity so that kinship ties established officially when entering marriage also would be experienced as such emotionally.

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