

Village Church Theological Commitments

Village Church, Maple Plain, MN * www.villagechurch.com

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Here we, the Elders of Village Church, set out our theological commitments which augment the EFCA 2008 Affirmation of Faith, endorsed by us and adopted in our Village Constitution (2016). While all affirmations go beyond the Bible, and these are not contained within the EFCA Affirmation, they are intended to express the intent of the Bible, and make explicit what is either implicit or not addressed by the EFCA document.¹ The issues that we touch on are those which are necessary in our context, culture, and church priorities. After prayer and much discussion, we trust these are pleasing to God.

Article 1. Marriage

We affirm that marriage is a unique relationship between one man and one woman, instituted by God, and that it reflects God's own Trinitarian diversity and unity, the very character of his being.

What is marriage? The institution of marriage is as old as the relationship of people with God. It is one of the first positive commands of the Bible (coming after 'cultivate and keep' and 'do not eat'). It is also the unanticipated (and for many still, the unrecognized!) conclusion to the twin creations accounts in Genesis. It is also the basis for the first recorded sermon of the Bible. For when Moses wrote, 'Therefore a man shall leave ...' (Genesis 2:24), he spoke the first sermon, or teaching or explanation, of the Bible. The narrator was not speaking to, or even about Adam and Eve, but to us, the People of God. We have human fathers and mothers, unlike the way Adam and Eve are represented in the text as without parents. In this first teaching we learn that marriage represents a unity in diversity, 'they (the two) shall become one' (Genesis 2:24). In this, marriage made them like God; this is the culmination of image. In the first account of creation, God created Man, male and female, a reflection of his image (Genesis 1:26-27), but they are two, and not yet one. So, to perfect imaging of God in them, more was needed. This explanation of this significant change brought about through marriage reveals that the two are also one. In this God completes the image of his own nature in people: one and many. And in so doing he defined

¹ Recognizing that church creeds and affirmations of faith are always changing, one could wonder if such changes imply that our faith is malleable and plastic, changing with the times. On the contrary, since the days of the Gnostics of the second century and later of Arius in the third and fourth century, the church has often had to struggle to make what is implicit in our creeds, explicit. That is, what was understood, if a bit unclearly, and held dearly, but not fully expressed, is forced into clarity when challenged. That was the case for the diversity and unity of Christ who is the God-man, the nature of the Trinity, and the nature of nature which is created by God as Good, but fallen into the chaos of what we now see. For example, only when Arius said that Jesus is *like God*, but is *not the same as God*, and so he does *not partake* of God's nature in its fullness, only then did the Church need to specify words and affirmations which made this explicit. That same explicitness of previously held biblical beliefs is our intent here.

marriage: the making of two, as also one. This treasure of marriage is given to God's People, for the sake of the world. It is a sacrament that reveals his nature to all who will see.² It is worth noting that after the Fall, when the image was distorted in people – though not erased, marriage continues to be a sacramental image of God's grace. Throughout the Bible, marriage images God's faithfulness, his love, and his covenant to his people, anticipating the day when we will be presented to God, a redeemed people and the virgin bride of Christ. So, in perfection and in restoration, marriage is an image of unity in plurality, as the Trinity enjoys. In the time between creations (Heaven & Earth and the Recreation of Heaven & Earth), it represents God's faithfulness to an unfaithful people.

Today this glorious sacrament is challenged by our culture. What should be the response of the Church? The Church rightly argues against a redefinition of marriage by the State. But if that battle is lost, temporarily or permanently, the war is not lost. Marriage, the Garden institution, which was given to God's people by God, is not identical with the State institution of licensed marriage. That means that marriage is what God says it is. Indeed, historically marriage *belongs* to the People of God, and the State has only recently involved itself in licensing. Yet even now, with State licensing in effect, the Church continues to be free to perform and record weddings according to the biblical and historical definition. Nothing requires us to participate in State licensing; it is merely customary. For licensing we may send people to State authorities, such as a Justice of the Peace. Though we have not usually exercised this distinction, this would follow the 'rule' of separation of Church and State.³ So, we also affirm that the Church is free to unilaterally preserve God's definition of marriage by continuing to marry and keep records of marriages, and also free to participate or not to participate in the witnessing and filing State marriage licenses.

This may seem strange to some, or worse, may seem if we are withdrawing from society. This is not the case. This position is historical, supports the State, and highlights the difference between covenant and contract.⁴

² We use the word sacrament with caution. The usual word for our tradition is 'ordinance' and marriage is not included! However, the traditional definition of a sacrament is (with minor modifications) is this, 'a drama, commanded by God, which reveals his grace and leads us into sanctification.' Distinct from the Roman Catholic Church, we do not believe that saving grace is in any way conferred to the participants in sacraments (something that was made explicit in the Council of Trent, 1555), but rather the drama of the sacraments displays God's grace to all who observe. Indeed, with this important distinction, marriage fits well in this definition and sacrament is a gift to the church and the world. By using this word, we are not however adopting this terminology distinct from the EFCM affirmation of faith, but rather recovering a valuable and historic term for selective use to help us understand the meaning of marriage.

³ Such is the case in Canada and other countries, where the State marriage is a separate action of the State that augments what happens in the church. In the U.S. the responsibility is most often combined into the pastor in a dual role as an agent of the State.

⁴ A more extended explanation of this position can be read in Shenk, 'Is Marriage among the Sacraments', in Michael Parsons (ed.), *Reformation Faith. Exegesis and Theology in the Protestant Reformations*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster.

First, this position is not a withdrawal from society, but a declaration of victory. We do accomplish the mission of God by passing laws, but we ‘win’ when, with gentleness and respect, we instruct those who oppose us so that God may grant repentance and a knowledge of the truth. This move frees us to declare the truth about God and marriage, apart from a focus on changing laws. That good laws are good for us and good for our community is without dispute. Some Christians will be tasked by God’s Spirit to participate in government or participate in public dissent in order to seek change. That is good. But the *fundamental* mission of the church is not to change laws, but hearts. In fact, laws have not changed hearts. And realizing that we are free to do what is good, without waiting for a laws to change (and not by means of changing laws), frees us to have a greater impact on marriage, on our community, and for the Gospel. So, this move in regard to marriage is not giving up, but discerning the path which produces real change. We hold marriage as a trust from God, a sacrament which displays God’s unity in diversity and God’s faithfulness to his people. We are the keepers of marriage and we must live out our marriages in purity (as well as our singleness). State licensed marriage is a separate institution meeting trivial goals of taxation and shallow legalities. By focusing on the holiness of marriage and the value to family, and also the sacramental nature of marriage and so witnessing to God’s commitment to his covenant, rather than merely on law and the passing of laws, we offer a challenge to the State and to State licensed marriage for which they can have no answer. In this, State licensed marriage will, over time, be shown to be as it is, empty of any real utility or meaning.

Second, this position is historical. From the beginning, marriage was the domain of God's people, not any government. This continued for thousands of years: marriages were performed and recorded by families and religious institutions or implicitly by the community. But not by governments -- or at least not successfully so. In the West, the State did not record or control marriages until the mid-nineteenth century. Then, coincident with changes in immigration and in regard to inheritance laws (and perhaps taxation), State marriage licenses became significant and necessary validations of marriages – an addition to the Church. Historically marriage ‘belongs’ to the Church and we are yet free to uphold the sacrament of marriage, an image of God who is many and one, a promise of God’s faithfulness to his people. This may be one of the most effective ways to ‘fight’ the battle for the definition, live it well before the community.

Second, this position supports the State. By accepting only God’s definition of marriage, and performing weddings and supporting marriage under that definition, yet we can and do continue to encourage all who are married to obtain a State marriage license. We do this for good order of the State, legal protection of the couple, and the safety of the children. In this we retain the right and privilege to declare what is true about marriage, while supporting good order in the State.

Third, this position highlights the distinction between the covenant of marriage and the contract of state licensed marriage. A covenant is the response of a servant to the requirements of the one who has authority. In this sense, the covenant of marriage exists only in the acknowledged presence of God, in agreement with his definition, and under his authority which includes duties and responsibilities and his blessings. In distinction, the State licensed marriage is a legal contract for the purposes of the State.

The State agrees to uphold the terms of the contract between the parties and no more; it is not personal. However, in a religiously pluralistic State in which there is division between church and state, it seems unavoidable for there to be a distinction, even a disagreement about marriage. Though all cultures began in the Garden, marriage and the meaning of marriage has diverged significantly. Though perhaps it should be noted that in the case of defining marriage as between a man-and-a-man, our State has gone further than any culture has ever gone. This is a new experiment! Yet it is essential that States accommodate diversity and protect all of its citizens. This 'accommodation' may also be, or seem to be, an attack on the church, because our values are the longest held in our society. Yet, in the distinction that arises because of accommodation, we have the advantage: we have something the world needs and the distinction and difference is an opportunity.

What is that opportunity? It is the mission of God. Rather than argue about the definition, as if it were up for debate or as if we could lose the debate, we can freely perform weddings by God's definition, and support marriages, while declaring and teaching what is true. That is, in our culture, church officers voluntarily participate in State marriage licenses and we have never been required to do so. As noted above, some Christians will be called to affect those laws and argue for truth. That is good. But in this pluralistic religious world which our State has become, how much better to recognize the distinction and disagreement. God will use the disagreement to highlight the distinction, and draw attention to himself. When we celebrate and uphold the beauty and glory of the Covenant of Marriage before the world, and when the beauty is seen by some, we win by drawing people to God, rather than regulating laws. While creating good laws is worthy and enhances our community, it would not change hearts. Better to live out the truth and glory of Christ by treasuring marriage as we live out our marriages, not simply how we perform our weddings. In this, we can win the debate about marriage, and even more, win hearts and minds to the God who is many and One and who lives in covenantal faithfulness to his people – many of whom are still lost and do not realize he has died for them.

Article 2. Christ's Return

We affirm the personal, bodily return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In agreement with the EFCA, all of our current Elders affirm that the pre-millennial return of Christ is biblical and orthodox and that it is our position. However, recognizing that over most of church history and in most parts of Christendom, other views prevail, we are more than hesitant to affirm a pre-millennial return in a way that would necessarily separate us from working with others who would disagree. This issue falls, for us, in the area of freedom, rather than essentials. It does not rise to the level of other sections of our affirmation of faith. Though in agreement, we understand the pre-millennial position to be of less importance than other affirmations such as the Trinity, and never a reason, in itself, to preclude people from teaching or leadership..