

Marriage and Possible Alternatives: The Pursuit of Wholeness and Holiness* (Fr. John H. Erickson)

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Vegas Wedding

No apology is needed for the theme of the seminary's 2004 Summer Institute: "Does Christian Marriage Have a Future?" Practically daily we hear in the media how "traditional" concepts and definitions of marriage are being challenged. In recent years the focus has been on same-sex marriage - legalized in Massachusetts in 2004 and thereafter in six other states and gaining vocal support in many quarters, Christian churches included. But the challenge to "traditional" concepts and definitions of marriage is not limited to this latest headline getter. A few decades ago the term "open marriage" entered our vocabulary. We also learned about "prenups," i.e., marriage qualified in various ways by formal prenuptial agreements. These days we barely blink when we hear about couples living together or when we encounter marital breakdown ending divorce - divorce often followed by remarriage and (then even more frequently) by another divorce. If TV ratings and star salaries offer any indication, we as a society see nothing

amiss in sex and marriage as these are presented on *Friends*, where sex has become a recreational activity and marriage a running joke.

How are Orthodox Christians to respond? It's easy to speak of the need to maintain or restore "traditional" values of marriage and family. All around us we find people doing so - including not a few televangelists and politicians. It's easy simply to jump on the bandwagon, to repeat what so many other folks are saying. It's harder - but much more necessary - to examine more closely our own understanding of Christian marriage. Do we have a distinctive and compelling vision to offer today's society, rather than just denunciations? What constructive challenge can we pose to the world of *Friends*?

I believe that we do have a compelling vision to offer. But I also believe that this vision will be at odds not only with the world of *Friends* but also with some of the "traditional" understandings of marriage that we encounter in our society and that we also may repeat without appropriate critical reflection.

I'd like to begin with some aspects of the historical record - and not just because I am a historian. It is important to examine our preconceptions, what we take for granted, what we in turn often believe to be common to human beings of every culture, of every historical epoch, and therefore normal and normative for all human beings. We often lapse into thinking that the past was very much like the present, though maybe a little less spoiled. We look back with nostalgia to the "good old days" - of the Eisenhower administration. We look back at the way that marriage and family were understood and practiced when *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave It to Beaver* were our television favorites. That's where we find our "traditional" family values and the "traditional" understanding of marriage. It is important, methodologically, to question this shortsighted understanding of what is "traditional." Before we as Orthodox Christians can recover our own distinctive vision and voice, before we can present that vision as a credible challenge to the world of *Friends*, we have to be aware of how different the past was. In particular, we have to be aware of the enormous differences between pre-modern traditional societies and modern society as it emerged especially in the last century. The realities that impinge on people today who marry or don't marry, who have children or don't have children, are not necessarily the same as those of a thousand or two thousand years ago or even a hundred years ago. Several important factors may be overlooked.

First of all, the place of marriage in life and society itself is different. We today have a lot of choices thrust upon us - e.g., to marry or not to marry. In most pre-modern societies, there were far fewer options, far fewer choices when it came to life and

lifestyle. In the relative absence of social and even physical mobility, a great deal more was taken for granted. Your life would be very much like that of your parents. If your father was a farmer, you would be a farmer – or farmer’s wife. Barring some calamity, you would remain in the same village; you would remain in the same social class. You would marry, and marry relatively young, especially in the case of women; and within marriage you would have very clearly delineated roles, prescribed by custom and tradition right down to acceptable positions for sex. You would have children if you could, because you needed them for economic reasons, to help in the fields or in your trade. And in the absence of a civil society offering some measure of protection to individuals, your very survival depended on having a close network of family and clan, an extended family often domiciled together, people who could help you in times of adversity or take revenge on someone who had wronged you.

Certainly in the Roman world, where Christianity first spread, “family values” were very important. Roman law offered many powerful incentives to marry and have a family, and it imposed penalties for not doing so. But this was mainly for utilitarian reasons, to maintain social structures and assure the economic wellbeing of the empire. Men and women were expected to place their bodies at the service of society, as it were, men by governing a household – and here keep in mind that this was very definitely a patriarchal, androcentric society – and women by bearing children. So too in ancient Judaism, “family values” were important. Men had to have children as a means for survival in life – and beyond. Offspring provided your only immortality. Hence the levirate, which provided that if a man died without issue, his brother should take his wife and raise up children for him. In general, then, whether in Roman society or ancient Judaism, you could not expect to find divine favor or human respect if you didn’t marry and have children. No place for singles here, or for the barren! Those who were unmarried generally were subordinate elements within the extended household – slaves, unmarriageable daughters, widowed grandmothers, and others who helped provide necessary services for the household, from child-care to elder-care.

One more thing to note: In the Graeco-Roman world, as in many other traditional societies, you did not look to marriage and family to fulfill all your needs in life – at least if you were a free man. Marriage was important for your economic wellbeing and material support – certainly you valued your wife and children just as you did your other possessions. But for emotional support you looked to friendship, which by definition was possible only with peers, with other respected male members of society, and certainly not with women or slaves or other inferiors. And often you did not look to marriage even for major sexual satisfaction. A very revealing ancient saying goes something like this: The gods have given us our wives for

legitimate children, men for friendship, and courtesans for pleasure.

Could someone – for whatever reason – opt out of the social demands of marriage and family? This would have been very difficult in antiquity, whether Jewish or Greco-Roman, and indeed in most pre-modern societies. But Christianity offered the ancient world a very different message, a very different view of marriage and family – one that was truly revolutionary and truly liberating. Christianity told men and women that you do not have to marry and procreate to be saved – to have a sense of self-worth accompanied by a sense of divine acceptance and acceptance by those other human beings who mean the most to you. Christianity accepted and honored marriage, but it also accepted and honored celibacy. It valued children, but it also saw the barren – Joachim and Anna, Zacharias and Elizabeth – as blessed by God. In short, Christianity relativized the importance of both marriage and family. It did so by placing marriage and family – and indeed all human relations – in a new perspective, a perspective made possible by Christ’s self-giving love. The ancient world valued marriage and family very highly, but for the wrong reasons. It valued them because they were thought to be a hedge against death – one’s own death, the death of society. But Christ showed that love is stronger than death.

Before turning to this new perspective, however, I would like to return to the subject I raised earlier: the difference between the world of antiquity, the traditional world of pre-modern society that we have just surveyed, and the modern world, the world in which “traditional” notions of marriage and family are being challenged in so many ways.

Certainly in the modern world, we have greater economic and social mobility. No longer is it taken for granted that your life will differ little if any from that of your parents. Quite the opposite! Here in America we like to believe that the son or daughter of a poor immigrant coal-miner can become a doctor, a lawyer, a successful businessman. We also emphasize the dignity and the rights of the individual, giving less importance to the group, the clan, the wider society. And we place enormous importance on personal fulfillment, making this the goal of life. We are encouraged to discover what is really important to *me*, what really makes *me* happy, what really satisfies *me*. And given modern affluence, we can usually figure out some way to finance our self-gratification.

In this modern world, there is no longer a self-evident relationship between marriage and the maintenance of subsistent daily life or even mundane happiness and satisfaction. In economically developed countries, marriage is no longer an economic and practical necessity. You don’t have to marry and stay together and have children in order to scratch a living from a meager plot of land. You don’t

have to be married to enjoy a comfortable life. You can find many avenues for fulfilling, enriching personal experience in careers outside the home. In this modern world, to marry or not to marry, to have children or not to have children, requires more self-conscious decisions than was the case in traditional societies.

But here is the irony. In this modern world, very much as in traditional societies, marriage and family (now reduced to the nuclear family) very often is held up as the norm for the normal, well-adjusted human being. Certainly through the 1950s and even beyond, it was generally expected that anyone worthy of respect would get married, have kids, buy a nice suburban house, acquire a car and a dog, join the PTA, and be an active church member in the bargain. (Of course, not everyone fit this pattern, but these were viewed with some suspicion and distrust.) Often, from our present perspective, we look back on this as “traditional” marriage, normal and normative – the way things always have been, the way they should be now. But the element of necessity attendant on marriage in past ages and other societies was absent: the goal had become personal fulfillment, with marriage presented as the place where personal fulfillment can be found. The ideal marriage, as presented in popular literature from the 1920s-30s onward, comes to be “companionate marriage”: the bliss of husband and wife together, as helpmeets, lovers, best friends, soul-mates. In contrast to earlier times, marriage comes to be seen as the place where the normal, well-adjusted human being, male or female, can expect to find virtually every satisfaction – sexual, emotional, spiritual. This is asking a lot of marriage!

Christians have bought into this understanding of marriage in a big way. This has been especially true in evangelical Protestantism, where marriage very often is presented as the only appropriate state for a good Christian, as God’s highest calling for all men and women. But we Orthodox have done so also. Quite rightly, no doubt, we have spoken about the goodness of God’s creation of the human being as male and female. Perhaps in reaction to an earlier and possibly unhealthy preoccupation with celibate life, we have ransacked patristic literature for remarks favorable to marriage and sexual activity and have complained, on the other hand, about those many patristic texts that do not seem quite so enthusiastic. In much of our popular literature on marriage, an unmarried life – celibacy in whatever expression, monasticism included – is not really presented as an option. Here are a few remarks culled from student mini-essays in a course on marriage that I gave at St. Vladimir’s Seminary for several years: “For their spiritual health, people need to be channeled into an accountable way of life” – the context here suggesting that unmarried people are shirking responsibility. “For the never married, the Church and priests should work to help people find mates.” The Church should “give confidence to the unmarried and dispel fear of marriage through sermons, talks,

retreats and seminars.” These remarks may not be altogether representative. Some mini-essays over the years have noted that “marriage is not for everyone” and that we should not regard the single state as only an interim before marriage, something temporary, an abnormality in need of correction. But the overwhelming tendency is to present marriage as the norm for Christian life.

This of course places enormous pressure on the unmarried. Consider the comments that one often hears: “I can’t understand why an attractive young girl like you has not found herself a husband.” Or: “How many children do you have?: Reply: “None, I’m not married.” “Oh, I’m sorry...” But this also places a lot of pressure on the married. Very few real life marriages reach the levels of bliss and personal fulfillment that we have come to expect – yea, to demand – from marriage. This can become a source of frustration. We think: Something must be wrong with my marriage. It doesn’t measure up. Contrary to what society has promised, contrary even to what the Church has promised, it’s not making me happy right now, and maybe it never will. We want our marriage and family to be as warm and fuzzy as what we found while watching *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave It to Beaver*. What we get is *Married with Children*.

We do a disservice to the world – to the world of *Friends*, to the world in which we ourselves must work out our salvation – if we put forward a glossy, idealized, unrealistic and unattainable picture of marriage as the ultimate end of human life. If we really want to challenge the world of *Friends*, we cannot simply rely on what those around us may regard as “traditional marriage.” We need to offer a different perspective – the perspective that we find, first of all, in the New Testament. There, as I suggested earlier, we find the importance of both marriage and family relativized. Marriage was good, but so was celibacy – and neither was an end in itself. Both marriage and celibacy were ordered to a higher good. Both therefore could be considered as being instrumental in nature – as leading to this higher good, as means of bringing us closer to God, who is good in Himself and the source of all goodness. The goodness of marriage – or of celibacy – in a given case depended on how well it served a higher purpose, the purpose of salvation.

We find this perspective set forth most clearly in the epistles of St. Paul, and particularly in I Corinthians chapter 7, where marriage is treated at length. The chapter begins by considering whether it is better to marry or not to marry. Here Paul gives counsel but no command. He wishes that all were as he himself is, i.e., in a single state, but he recognizes that “each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.” Ultimately it doesn’t matter if you are married or unmarried, as long as you don’t fall into immorality. The text goes on to consider divorce and the special case of believers who are married to unbelievers. Paul then

comes to what I would regard as his “bottom line”: “Only, let every one lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him.” Are you Jew or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised? It doesn’t matter, “for neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.” Paul then repeats: “Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called.” He continues immediately “Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ.” Note here how both slave and free are encouraged to view their status from a new perspective. And then Paul repeats yet again: “So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God.”

Why is it so important to remain in the state in which you were called, to lead the life which the Lord has assigned to you? Paul isn’t arguing for maintenance of the status quo. He certainly isn’t defending the abusive domination that characterized social patterns in his day. Rather, he is urging his readers to view all their relationships – marriage, family, ethnic background, social status – in an eschatological perspective – that is, in light of the ultimate destiny or purpose of mankind and the world. We see this in the verses that immediately follow:

Now concerning the unmarried, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the impending distress (i.e., the End Time that is coming upon us), it is well for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a girl marries she does not sin. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealing with it. For the form of this world is passing away.

The form of this world – with all its empires and self-serving power structures and abusive relationships – is passing away. What is important in this penultimate chapter in human history, is – as Paul says a few verses later – “your undivided devotion to the Lord.” So “lead the life which the Lord has assigned you” – as Jew or Greek, slave or free, married or unmarried – but always keep your eyes on the prize, look to the coming End. Orient your life – and all its relationships – to this End. Live out your life in anticipation, hope and expectation of an Ultimate beyond

the institutions of the present age, marriage included. Let all aspects of your life, all your relationships, serve this End and lead to this End – the complete fulfillment of God’s plan for His creation.

This eschatological perspective was important for the Corinthian church to keep in mind. It also is important for us to keep in mind today. We are called as we are – conflicted, weak and sinful human beings, with an incredible range of gifts and an even more incredible range of hang-ups. But we are called to a life of wholeness and holiness. We are called to participate in God’s holiness, to become holy ones, even as God is *the* Holy One. We are called to love in ways beyond our own limited human capacities, to freely accept the self-sacrificing love that God has revealed in Jesus Christ and to express this love throughout our own lives, in whatever state the Lord has assigned to us.

This eschatological perspective may also be helpful as we try to address concrete issues related to marriage and family today.

First of all, marriage itself in real life is not a static phenomenon, contrary to the idealized picture so often presented to us (e.g. in those advertisements that promise great sex ‘til you’re 70). Ideally marriage involves growth. Inevitably it involves change; it goes through stages, just as human beings themselves go through stages in life. Certainly a major change comes with the birth of a first child, when wife becomes Mommy and her attention is largely diverted from her husband to the baby that he has fathered. Another major change comes when Mommy and Daddy finally become empty-nesters, their attention no longer on carpooling for the kids’ soccer matches. Will they rediscover each other in a new way at this new stage in their married life? And for more and more married couples these days, another change occurs when one or both eventually becomes incapacitated, by Alzheimer’s Disease or Parkinson’s Disease, for example. What are billed as the “golden years” can be very difficult indeed for even the happiest married couple. The basic question at each of these stages is whether they will be seen in instrumental terms, as pointing to an End beyond this or that immediate situation, beyond this or that relationship – whether each stage will be greeted as a fresh opportunity for growth in holiness. Or will each new stage become a source of frustration because right now this particular relationship doesn’t measure up to our idealized picture of what married bliss should be. (Ironically this was often less an issue in past times. Not only was life expectancy shorter. There was a sharper delineation of the stages of life: infancy, childhood, youth, adulthood, old age. After social obligations of adulthood had been met, after children had been begotten and reared and sent off on their own, husband and wife had reached old age, when they were free to retire to a monastery or lead a comparable life at home. They

were not expected to behave like newly-weds.)

Let's consider children and family life. What does an eschatological perspective have to offer here? We often idolize our children, do everything for our children. In fact this may simply reflect our own egotism. Children are a great source of pride! We should keep in mind that childbearing and nurture is not an end in itself. *A fortiori*, it is not for our own gratification. We often worry excessively about how our children will "turn out," to the point that this can become our sole preoccupation. This shouldn't be the case. Raising children, like other aspects of married life, should be viewed in instrumental terms: It should point us to an End beyond how the children themselves turn out. Don't put your children first. Put God first. Your love of God, your trust in Him, your orientation of the whole of life toward Him, will not diminish your love for your children. Rather, this will purify your love for them, turning it from self-gratification into an expression of Christ's own self-sacrificing love.

And children are not the only possible instrument in our pursuit of holiness in marriage. St. John Chrysostom addresses the subject of childlessness with great sensitivity. Within childless marriage, other instruments of virtue can be cultivated: hospitality, service to others, common creation. In any case, we must resist the temptation to live simply for each other, without concern for growth in holiness, without concern for God and for our fellow human beings.

What about alternatives to marriage? In the developed and developing world generally, unmarried persons are a growing percentage of the population. In the United States approximately 50% of adults are unmarried. The profiles and concerns of these unmarried persons are, of course, diverse. Some are deferring marriage until certain personal goals – educational, professional, economic, emotional – are met. Some will never marry. Some are divorced. Some are separated – and not always in anticipation of divorce – e.g., they may be separated because of imprisonment. Some are widowed. The problems that unmarried people face are also diverse. The problems of an elderly widow or widower – health care, for example – will not be the same as the problems of a younger divorced woman trying to get into – or back into – the labor market while at the same time managing children and other responsibilities. And these will not be the same as the problems and concerns of a never-married person of whatever age. But there are some common concerns. In surveys and interviews, loneliness is often mentioned – the loneliness of the prepackaged meals for one that now are so common in our supermarkets. And singles of whatever profile and category often suffer other anxieties, many of them culture-induced. There are a lot of pressures for "singles" to fit into the expectations and values of a culture that continues to idealize and

idolize the family model of husband, wife, two kids, three cars and a dog.

The unmarried are, as I said, a very diverse group. But often we take “unmarried” as synonymous with the swinging single presented in so much advertising. Certainly there are many people who might be described as “pre-married” – people who expect to get married (or remarried) someday, but who are now deferring marriage for a variety of reasons: fear of commitment, waiting for the “right” person to come along (a delusion, of course!), concern for a career, possibly even a very noble career. We shouldn’t assume that these people are real-life versions of the cast of *Friends*. But single life in America today is spiritually treacherous. With young and not so young singles, we find a kind of protracted adolescence. They have to make many more decisions than was the case in pre-modern societies – decisions about education, career, employment, location, living arrangements, lifestyle. In the past most people had no choice whatsoever in such matters. But young people often lack a sense of responsibility for their decisions, a sense of their ultimate significance. Sex, for example, can easily become a recreational activity, alongside dining out or going to the movies, altogether unrelated to self-giving love. This makes it very difficult for young people ever to settle down, in marriage or in any other state.

How can the Church minister to unmarried people? How in particular can it minister to young singles? For much of Church’s history, this has not been an issue. Today it is. We no longer live in the traditional societies of the past. We live in the world of *Friends*. In certain respects the answer is simple. Whether ministering to married people or unmarried people, the Church must present the eschatological challenge that St. Paul posed to the Corinthians. “In whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God.... For the form of the world is passing away.” In this perspective, each of us is called to ascetical struggle, whatever our state in life may be – struggle against self-gratification, for example, which can be as much a temptation for the married as for the unmarried, struggle to find ways to grow in God’s love in all the diverse situations and relationships in which we find ourselves. At any rate, we cannot assume that being single is an impossible obstacle to growth in wholeness and holiness any more than we can assume that being married is a guarantee of wholeness and holiness.

All of us are weak and broken human beings, damaged in one way or another by sin. This is the state in which we are called, to be saved by God’s grace. But we sense a need for healing and wholeness. The message of the Church on this point is simple and direct: We will find this healing and wholeness in God and only in God. This is not a message that we hear very often. More often we are encouraged to believe that we will find healing and wholeness in other ways – and, high among

these, by getting married. “The single state is treacherous,” we tell young people. But we then imply or even come out and say: “Marriage will solve your problems.” Is this true? Many people believe it. Consider the following statement, typical of what those who are involved in premarital counseling hear all too often: “Yeah, I get jealous and lose my temper, and maybe I get a little physical if I think she has been looking at other men, but when we get married that won’t be happening.” Hearing words of this sort, you know that this guy’s violent behavior is not going to improve. Likely it will get worse. Or consider this: “There are things that bother me about Brad’s behavior, but I know that when we get married my love will change him.” You know that isn’t going to happen!

We have reached the final TV season of *Friends*. They’ve paired up, married off. But quite clearly this isn’t going to insure fidelity and endless married bliss. Marriage is not going to cure everything that is wrong with these people – or with any of us. Marriage may be the context in which most of us will find healing and wholeness. But marriage itself is not the source of healing and wholeness. Marriage, just like the single state, can be spiritually treacherous – particularly when it becomes a false god. As we consider the challenges currently being posed to Christian marriage – challenges that we hear about in the media practically every day – , let us keep in mind that even “traditional” marriage can pose a challenge to our Orthodox understanding of salvation – by offering a false sense of security, by making false promises, by suggesting that marriage itself, and not God, is what can give us wholeness in a broken world. Some may find wholeness in marriage. Some may find wholeness in the single state. But they will not find this unless they turn first to the source of all healing, the source of wholeness, to the Holy One.

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* Presented as the keynote lecture for the 2004 Summer Institute of Music and Pastoral Practice, St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, Crestwood NY (June 20-25, 2004), whose theme was “Does Christian Marriage Have a Future?” At several points the lecture mentions the long-running television situation comedy, *Friends*, which in May 2004 completed its tenth and final year. In passing the lecture also mentions several earlier television sitcoms: *Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-66), *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-63) and *Married with Children* (1987-97).