Then I asked: Does a firm persuasion that a thing is so, make it so? He replied: All poets believe that it does, and in ages of imagination this firm persuasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm persuasion of anything. (From William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*).

Marriage is a very serious matter in almost all respects, whether it is a young couple preparing for their wedding day, or a couple, married for 50 years, who has gone through many trials and difficulties. Through marriage, people make a difficult world habitable and create meaning in their lives. Our approach to marriage can be naïve, fatalistic, power-driven, cynical, detached, and obsessive. It can also be selflessly mature, revelatory, and life giving; mature in long-reaching effects, and life giving in the way it gives back to the spouse.

Bryan Salminen

*A Firm Persuasion*

Dr. Bryan Salminen, Professor of Practical Theology, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, is a licensed marriage and family therapist and a licensed professional counselor. He is the co-founder, developer of Zoe, a Christ-centered, on-line premarital counseling tool. (zoescore.com). salminenb@sl.edu
There is no hiding from marriage. In the United States, 96 percent of all people marry “for better or for worse.” These people begin their married lives with many hopes, dreams, and expectations. They plan their lives and their futures together, dreaming of what life will look like in the future. Under the great sky of their endeavors they live their married lives, growing (they hope) through its seasons toward some kind of greater perspective. Any perspective is dearly won. And the only way it is won is the result of dedication, application, an indispensable sense of humor, and above all a never-ending courageous conversation with themselves, their spouses, and most importantly their God. It is a long journey; it calls on both the ardors of youth and the perspectives of a longer view. It is achieved through life-long pilgrimage.

William Blake, that unstoppable creator, as both poet and engraver, seemed to have a direct and conversational relationship with many things, especially the well-springs of work. Blake, over a lifetime, exhibited a continual inspiration, a profound vision, and an indomitable ability, despite his poverty, to follow through with the tiniest details of his art. Blake called his sense of dedication “a firm persuasion.”

I would like to suggest, however, that having a “firm persuasion” is precisely what marriage entails. Blake’s concern for endless details and his continual inspiration need to be applied to marriage as well. To have a firm persuasion in marriage—to believe that what we do is right for ourselves and our spouses and good for the world at the same time—is one of the great triumphs of human existence. When we know what marriage is, that it is designed, designated, and described by God as something good, our lives are enriched enormously. It is then that our married lives take on a sense of cosmic significance. When we remember that marriage is not simply a human ordinance, but one created by God for the civilizing and socializing of people, we begin to understand that we are players in a cosmic drama.

Of course, as men and women redeemed by Christ the crucified, our marriages take on an even greater significance. For as St. Paul says, regarding marriage, “this is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the Church” (Ephesians 5). Paul says that marriage is a great wonder because it is a picture, a glimpse into the marvelous mystery of God’s love in Christ for the whole world. When I love my wife as Christ loved the church, and when my wife loves, honors, and respects me, we bear witness to a supernatural reality. Our marriages become living witnesses to the goodness of God who loves all people and has proven this in the sending of his Son. Every husband and wife needs a “firm persuasion” that their marriage is something beautiful from God. Every couple needs the sense of wonder and enchantment of what it means to be married to this particular spouse. Every marriage needs a sense of belonging, a conversation with something larger than themselves, a felt participation, and a touch of spiritual fulfillment and the mysterious generative nature of that fulfillment. Blake might have said they need a conversation with angels.

This article will address a number of areas where the church has taken a “firm persuasion” on marriage. I will first of all discuss the importance of the permanence of marriage. Secondly, I will attempt to explain briefly the Church’s understanding of marriage in terms of who is to be married and what this means for the homosexual debate. Thirdly, I want to address the issue of cohabitation from a biblical, pastoral perspective.

**Marriage: Its Contours**

There is, of course, a sense in which each spouse is indeed, “an angel of God,” for the other. Each person in the marriage is a living, life-giving message and messenger to the other. In Christian marriages, we bring the message of forgiveness from Christ to our partner. When we fail our spouses, and we all do, we then turn to each other and bring the message of hope, forgiveness, and healing to our partners. Indeed, each day provides a new opportunity to see our spouses as “angels” sent from God to help us become all that God has intended. Or as Dan Allender wrote, “God’s intention is for our spouses to be our allies—intimate friends, lovers, warriors, in the spiritual war against the forces of the evil one. We are to draw strength, nourishment, and courage to fight well from that one person who most deeply supports and joins us...
in the war—our soul mate for life.” Or, better yet, as St. Paul said, “We are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” We are called to approach marriage from God’s divine perspective and maintain the grace to have a “firm persuasion.” Marriage provides a metaphor of spiritual truth. The bond uniting husband and wife symbolizes certain aspects of the relation between God and God’s people. The Old Testament prophets found in marriage an appropriate vehicle for telling the story of Yahweh’s faithfulness in the face of Israel’s idolatry. The New Testament authors drew from this Old Testament imagery (e.g., Romans 9:25, 1 Peter 2:9-10). They spoke of marriage as a picture of the great mystery of salvation—the union of Christ and the church. Marriage illustrates Christ’s self-sacrifice for the church as well as the submission to Christ (Ephesians 5:21-33) of a people who anticipate the future coming of their Lord (Matthew 25:1-13; Revelation 19:7; 21:2, 9-10).

In this manner, marriage provides a picture of the exclusive nature of our relationship to God in Christ. Just as our marriage is to be an exclusive, inviolate, and hence holy bond, so also our relationship to God must be exclusive and holy, for as God’s covenant people we can serve no other gods but the one God. By extension, the exclusive love shared by husband and wife reflects the holiness of the divine love present within the triune God, which in turn overflows from God to creation.

To have this type of “firm persuasion” in our marriages, we need help. As the importance of marriage has declined, the number of depressed, despondent, downcast people has mushroomed. Currently, many people, instead of a “firm persuasion” have what I call a “weak persuasion” regarding marriage. Amato and Rogers reported that today’s more divorce-accepting attitudes contribute to the decline of marital satisfaction. “The belief that an unrewarding marriage should be jettisoned may lead some people to invest less time in their marriages and make fewer attempts to resolve marital disagreements.” Thus, “greater freedom to leave unsatisfactory marriages may ironically increase the likelihood of marriages becoming unsatisfactory. Divorce acceptance feeds marital unhappiness which feeds divorce.

The 20th century began with Nietzsche’s lament that God had died. Time Magazine finally got around to running the obituary in 1967. And now, sadly, many people in our culture proclaim the death of marriage. Not in the sense that marriage is not valued. It still is. But what is no longer valued is the permanence of marriage. Ages ago, it was thought that men and women who were married would stay married “til death do you part,” as the wedding vows say. But today, other commitments, namely the rise of the self and the therapeutic man and woman whose own personal needs are more important than the commitment and responsibility one has to the marriage and/or to children, take precedence. Indeed, there is no longer a firm persuasion. And so we desperately are in need of help and resources to change the way people view marriage and the family.

God in his Word provides these resources and the very foundation by which every couple can revel in the wonder of their marriage. God’s Word provides the very power necessary to help a couple remain faithful to their vows in spite of the difficulties in doing so. God’s Spirit, working through Word and Sacraments, is able to help couples love one another and remain faithful to their vows, not because they can do this on their own strength and power, but because God has loved them and remained faithful to them in the sending of his Son. This is not to suggest that people who base their lives on the Word of God will not have problems. Quite to the contrary. Many Christians have a variety of problems in their marriage. Stress affects all couples, and sin rears its ugly head in every marriage. For love to be sustained in marriage requires radical acts of forgiveness. Just as God repeatedly pardons our sinful waywardness, so do married partners sustain their love through repeated reconciliations. Nuptial love is such a difficult endeavor which prompted one of Luther’s jauntiest sayings: “It takes courage,” said Luther, “to enter both marriage and tournaments.” Luther was speaking not of our modern athletic engagements, of course, but of those fearful medieval jousts where knights carrying lances hurtled full tilt at each other on horseback. Such headlong conflict, Luther suggests, often characterizes marriage. “Think of all the squabbles,” Luther
joked, "that Adam and Eve must have had in the course of their 900 years. Eve would say, "You ate the apple," and Adam would retort, "You gave it to me."

In order for marriage to have a "firm persuasion," couples need to develop the habit of showing love to their spouses without regard to personal feelings. This, as we all know, is terribly difficult over the long haul, and yet this is precisely what love entails. We seek the good of our spouse, not because we are in the mood, but because it is good, right, decent, and, of course, the loving thing to do. Many modern marriages fail because people have come to regard marriage as an extended form of dating. They work only as long as the couple continues to "like" each other, have fun together, and find each other interesting and entertaining. But a "firm persuasion" in marriage means loving one's spouse precisely when he or she is unlikable, often even unlovable. In other words, cupid must grow up. Romance needs to ripen into mature love. Young minds and bodies harden, and the fantasies of what might be must conform to the limits of a single possible life. Love is not strawberry fields forever. We learn to wait, to work, to weave patient threads of care, to husband and till the land, to bake bread, to change diapers. As a firm persuasion takes over, romance grows into commitment, and it is often called upon to sacrifice immediate pleasures, forego spontaneous impulsive passion, and pledge fidelity from which hope blossoms. Love must finally put on work gloves and an apron.

**Marriage: Who Is to Be Married?**

The church has also had a "firm persuasion" that marriage is between a man and a woman. Although this may seem obvious to many, this issue has now become highly debated, particularly in academic circles. It also needs to be stated that homosexual conduct is not a major theme in the Bible. However, certain Bible passages do in fact speak to this issue. The central texts are relatively few: the story of Lot and Sodom (Genesis 19:4–11) as informed by other references to the sin of Sodom, together with the incident in Gibeah (Judges 19); the prohibitions found in the Holiness Code (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13); and Paul's inclusion of homosexual practices within his condemnation of gentile society (Romans 1:26–27) and in his list of moral infractions (1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10).

However, because of the current political climate and the small but vocal homosexual movement, many people suggest that marriage is simply a man–made institution. Because it is man–made, people should be free to marry whomever they desire, even when those desires and those marriages are contrary to the Word of God. Regardless of the many issues surrounding this topic, and there are many, we need to do what Jesus himself did—go back to the original Word of God. In the Book of Genesis, we read that God created man and woman, "male and female he created them, and he named them Adam" (Genesis 5:2). Traditionally, the church has found in these texts a clear rejection of all homosexual behavior. Based on these texts the church has also said that marriage entails the coming together of male and female to form an exclusive sexual bond. The Scriptures connect this human relationship with procreation and child rearing. The second creation narrative and the stories of the Hebrew patriarchs suggest that marriage also serves as a focal point for companionship as husband and wife share intimacy and friendship.

Admittedly, there are numerous arguments against the Church’s historical position. However, if clearly examined and debated, these arguments are frivolous. It needs to be said that most people never debate what the Word of God actually says regarding this topic. Most people who remain objective, and I would add, fair–minded, who examine the Scriptures will agree that the biblical perspective states that homosexual behavior is sin and not to be condoned. Arguments made by advocates of homosexuality which undermine the relevance of Scripture or state that the Scriptures do not understand the contemporary context and situations raise issues that need to be addressed. However, the Scriptures reject homosexual behavior as a violation of the gendered existence of male and female ordained by God at creation.

We also know that God acted freely in creation. He could have created a different universe than He did, but He did not. We do not
know what might have been. We have no categories for thinking about it. The only categories to us are the ones provided by the Scriptures and the nature God has made. We know that whatever God in his uncreated goodness creates is good. Marriage is indeed good, and God’s design of uniting man and woman in marriage is His will.

I mention this only because it seems to be a real obstacle for many people regarding marriage and the fact that marriage is designed for a man and woman, not for a man and a man, or a woman and a woman. The problem is, of course, that many people don’t want the freedom of the creature, but the freedom of the creator—not freedom to be good but freedom to determine what is good. This, of course, is nothing new, for it was the first temptation, “to be like God, knowing good and evil.” G. K. Chesterton remarked, “The modern world is insane, not so much because it admits the abnormal, as because it cannot recover the normal.” Although this article certainly cannot do justice to the issue of homosexuality, suffice it to say that the Word of God clearly states that marriage is designed by God for a man and a woman, for their mutual joy and their love and nurturing of children when the good Lord permits. The subject of homosexuality is enormously complex, touching on many aspects of human existence: biological, psychological, and spiritual. I recognize the debate continues regarding what issues are at stake concerning homosexual desires. Nonetheless, as Jeffrey Satinover (1996) said, “We can draw a number of conclusions regarding these arguments.”

I quote Dr. Satinover at length as he is considered to be one of the world’s leading experts on the topic of homosexuality:

1. Homosexuality is not a true illness, though it may be thought an illness in the spiritual sense of ‘soul sickness,’ innate to fallen human nature. Its treatment thus opens directly into the domain of the cure of the soul.

2. Because deeply engraved behaviors are so difficult to modify, homosexuals, like all people, have two choices: to capitulate to the behavior and its consequences or to depend on others, and on God, for help.

3. A pastoral understanding of the cure of the soul, which unfolds progressively over a lifetime, is more than the alleviation of particular symptoms; it consists of growing ever more closely toward the divinely ordained configuration that God intended for us from the beginning—and which is largely unnatural, not only in the area of sexuality. This process is without question a reality; it is a reality that occurs in secular settings as well as in religious ones. It is a reality no less pertinent—and life-giving—to every person, whatever his particular brokenness, than to those struggling with homosexuality.

4. The modern change in opinion concerning homosexuality, though presented as a scientific advance, is contradicted rather than supported by science. It is a transformation in public morals consistent with widespread abandonment of the Judeo-Christian ethic upon which our civilization is based. Though hailed as progress, it is really reversion to ancient pagan practices supported by a modern restatement of Gnostic moral relativism.

Again, I recognize the volatility of the issues. I know from working with many men and women in my counseling practice who have struggled with their homosexual desires how very painful and difficult their struggle is. I also realize that many homosexuals have been mistreated by many people, including Christians. Instead of finding a place of refuge, a place where they can be confronted, loved, and forgiven, homosexuals find among many Christians an absolute hatred. This ought not to be so. The Church of God must love them and minister to them. The church must struggle along with them and share their suffering. But like any other sinful behavior, homosexual behavior must be confronted with the Word of God in a spirit of love. The homosexual and lesbian are not the church’s enemy but people in need of the church’s help and support for restoring to wholeness their broken sexuality, through compassion, prayer, humility, and groaning together for the redemption of our bodies.
Cohabitation: A Pastoral Response

The third area where the church needs a “firm persuasion” is the topic of pre-marital cohabitation. This is a difficult topic because there seem to be many differing views of well-meaning people, pastors included, as to how to deal best with this problem. Two or three couples of every five coming to our churches for marriage today are already living together, in spite of our teaching and preaching to the contrary. Every new couple coming to be married seems to bring a whole new set of circumstances as to why their situation is unique, and that the church should, of course, allow them to stay in their current state. The end result: we find ourselves making yet another exception, bending the “rules” one more time to connect them to the church, believing they will grow in their commitment to Christ in the process. The fact is, however, that most new outside couples fade away from the church soon after the marriage ceremony. This leaves the clergy feeling compromised and wondering if they have helped the couple at all.

An even greater dilemma is posed for pastors when either or both of the couple’s families are active in the church. The families’ expectations are that pastoral pre-marital counseling will draw the couple further into the church rather than turning them away. In this context, our responsibility is to confront sin and to teach holy living while keeping redemptive doors open. Our first goal in pre-marital counseling is always to help people into a right relationship with God. A second goal is to help launch a couple into a lasting Christian marriage.

There are a number of ways to do this, but space does not allow addressing all of the issues. It does need to be said, however, that living together is not the same as marriage. It is not marriage. I have heard this line from well-meaning people who state that “After all, they are already living together in the eyes of God.” Not true. In John, chapter 4, Jesus says to the woman at the well, “Go call your husband.” She replies, “I have no husband.” Jesus says, “You have rightly spoken, for you have had five husbands, and the one you are now living with is not your husband.” Jesus clearly identifies “living together” as a problem, as an issue, as a sin.

The church has always understood that marriage is the public proclamation that a man and a woman are now husband and wife. When a couple lives together, they are not saying they are husband and wife. In fact, the very opposite is being said. They are not married, which is the very reason they do not have the marriage license.

I have also heard well-meaning pastors say, “Well, we have to get them out of a sinful condition.” This is true. But the real question is this: how do we get people out of a sinful condition? Confession and absolution is the only way to do so. Marriage is not a way to remove sin. Only through Christ’s forgiveness can a man and a woman be cleansed, washed clean, and then empowered to live faithfully as husband and wife.

I know that this is a difficult position to take. Many pastors have said to me that if they took a strong but loving position on this issue they would not have any couples coming to them to be married. But we need to think through statements such as this. Isn’t the real issue whether we have faith in the power of the Word of God to do its work? When we don’t believe that God will do what he says he will do, turn sinners from their sin, then we no longer confront with the full weight of God’s law. We become afraid that it won’t “work.” In other words, I circumvent the means God has given me to make changes in the lives of people on the basis of my own understanding of what might work. Of course, a related question is this: if I do not confront and deal with this sin when it is discovered, what sins will I deal with and not back down from? Do I bring people into the church, making them feel good, but never confronting them with the Law? If so, which sins will be “big enough” to deal with? As my dear colleague Dr. Norman Nagel has said, “We can only give that which has been given to us. We have been given Jesus Christ and the means of grace.” Pastors get to give everyone, including men and women who are living apart from God’s clear Word, the means whereby they can repent and receive the forgiveness of sins Christ has offered. The church not only needs a firm persuasion on this topic and many others, but we also need to realize that this is indeed what love does—tackles the difficult, sometimes pain-filled issues. However, the
church does so from the strength it has received in Jesus Christ and His Word and Sacraments.

This article does not do justice to the many issues presented. Marriage is so big, so wonderful, at times, so complicated, that all the books in the world never seem to do it justice. Nevertheless, the Word of God has a firm persuasion that marriage is indeed a great gift from God. It is a delight to both the husband and the wife when they remember the mystery, the marvel, not only of the other, but most importantly of Christ, who is to be the center of the marriage.

Let me conclude with words of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

Marriage is more than your love for each other. It has a higher dignity and power, for it is God’s holy ordinance through which he wills to perpetuate the human race ’til the end of time. In your love you see not only the heaven of your own happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal—it is a status, an office. As you first gave the ring to one another and have now received it a second time from the hand of the pastor, so love comes from you, but marriage from above, from God. As high as God is above man so high are the sanctity, the rights, and the promise of marriage above the sanctity, the rights, and the promise of love. It is not your love that sustains your marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.”

Notes

8 Ibid, p. 246