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College Baptist Church

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### **Family: What God Has Joined Together**

Mark 10:1-16

Since the beginning of the year we have been studying together on Sunday mornings the theological affirmations of the Doctrinal Statement of the Baptist General Conference, the new denomination with which we voted last September to affiliate.

This week I'm inserting an added topic into the sequence of these Affirmations so that we can think together about what we might call a "doctrine of the family" or a "theology of the family."

There are two reasons I want to make this addition to this doctrinal sequence. One is that I suspected on Parents Weekend at the college we might have more than the usual guests who would find themselves stepping into the middle of a series, and, because family is what has brought them to Hillsdale, family might be the most appropriate thing to talk about today.

The other, more important reason is that this question of the theology of the family could more or less be taken for granted back when the BGC's list of Affirmations was being composed and might not have been necessary to express. That state of affairs has begun to change somewhat imperceptibly but also massively in our culture in just the last decade or two. And now we need to begin thinking very intentionally and very deliberately about the Bible's view of the family. The family has come under a full frontal assault in our courts, in our legislature, in our schools, and even in the church. That much probably is perceptible.

Groups like the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family have been keeping the politics of this question before our eyes enough to make it pretty perceptible at that level. What is more imperceptible is what we hear less about, and that is the attack on our understanding of God in all these cultural wars. And it's that theology that I want us to see in scripture today. We need to begin building a theology of the family so that we don't let these important questions in our culture just be addressed or solved by politics. There are political implications of every theological issue. At the root, though, we need to see that what is ultimately at stake is not just the health of our families but what we understand and what we say to the world in and through our families about God.

So here's the major point I want to communicate out of our Biblical text this morning. If you don't get anything else, get this: the family is not just a political unit whose integrity needs defending in culture; the family is not just a social unit that needs counseling to hold it all together; the family is certainly not just a biological unit that can be strengthened by genetic engineering and test-tube reproduction. Look at v.9 in Mk 10. The family has been joined together by God. And God has a purpose for joining people together in families.

The family is first and foremost a theological unit that exists to fulfill a divine and eternal purpose. Every single one of us is part of a family. You might be unmarried, but you were born into a family. We all have had parents, even if they were adoptive parents. Family is our first and most important earthly context. And if we're not thinking about why God joined us together in families, we are missing one of the most fundamental principles of life and one of the most fundamental doctrines of scripture.

Think about it. God created us. God could have created us as person and person rather than the way v.6 says, quoting from Genesis 1:27 -- male and female. He could have made us to reproduce like amoebas or earthworms. We might have just cut off a finger and waited for it to grow into another human. Those biologists who want to clone us by extracting some genetic material are proposing in effect that maybe God would have done better to have us reproduce exactly like that.

But God made us male and female and joined us together this way into families. What was the reason for that? It's something of a mystery. At least Paul calls it that in Eph 5:22. In that verse he gives us the biblical answer to the question of the purpose of marriage and says, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

God has joined male and female together to "refer to," to draw a picture of, to portray what the relationship of Christ and the church is supposed to be like. That's what's at stake in being joined together by God as a family: not just

companionship, not just reproduction, not just providing a stable basis for society, but teaching the watching world theology. Whether we like it or not, the way we live, joined together by God as male and female into families tells the world what we believe to be true about the relationship of Christ and the church.

If we love one another, we preach to all who see our marriage that Christ and the Church share a relationship of love. If we fight and argue, we preach a theology that tells the world that being in a relationship with Christ means conflict. And if we divorce, Jesus says here in Mk 10, we preach to the world that Christ has a hard and unforgiving heart.

Why does Jesus say, and why do we say in every marriage ceremony, "What God has joined together, let not man put asunder"? Because, as we've seen several times in studying the doctrines of Christ and of the Church these past several weeks, Christ the Bridegroom and the Church, his Bride, will not be put asunder. They have an appointment at the marriage supper of the Lamb for a union of love that is going to go on joyfully into eternity. That's what we look forward to each time we celebrate the Lord's Supper. It's also what we say every time we display our faithfulness to our marriage partners for all the world to see and understand. By faith our marriages can be a means of grace to us and to others. In that respect they truly can be sacramental. And they surely are doctrinal.

God has joined families together to display a doctrinal affirmation. The real question is not whether doctrine can be practical. The question is whether our practice is properly and sufficiently doctrinal.

Ask yourself -- make a date with your spouse and ask each other --What does our marriage tell the world that we believe about Jesus Christ and his relationship with the church? How's our doctrine of the family?

And notice that Jesus' doctrine of the family doesn't just stop with God's joining male and female. When God joins male and female together, a natural outcome of that marriage is children.

Two gospels give us this account of Jesus' quoting from Genesis 1:27. The other account of this passage is in Mt 9:3-12. And both gospels follow Jesus' discussion of God's joining together male and female with the same account that is here in Mk 10:13-16 about children. There's doctrine of the family here, too. And both gospels seem to intend for us to hear these two accounts one right after the other.

There's a family connection here. If children are a natural result of God's joining male and female together, then what is God's reason for joining children together into families of male and female. Why does it take 16, 18, 21 years to grow a human up into a fully developed human being?

Think about it. God could have designed this human race any way he wanted to. If he could have had us reproduce like amoebas, he might have just created us able to divide ourselves or clone our replacements in full-grown form right from the beginning. For that matter he could have just created a race that never experienced mortal death and never had to reproduce to keep the species going. But instead he joined male and female together and then joined children to their families: little, helpless babies that can't survive without their parents to nurture and feed and take care of them. What was the purpose of that?

And Jesus gives us another direct answer to that question by telling us that children teach us something doctrinal. He told his disciples to "let the little children come to him and not to hinder them, because to such belongs the kingdom of God. Notice he didn't say, to these children themselves belongs the kingdom of God, but "to such" -- to ones who resemble children -- belongs the kingdom of God.

God ordained that families should consist in part in children -- helpless, dependent children -- because he wants to demonstrate visually and tangibly and audibly and sometimes even irritatingly to the world that dependence is the condition for belonging to the kingdom of God. The involvement of children in the family is a doctrinal declaration of God. That's why he joined the family together. What God has joined together, for the purposes he has joined it together, let no one put asunder.

But our culture is trying very hard to put all this doctrine asunder. In some cases the cultural pressure can be overt and politicized, but in most cases the pressure has come, as I said, more imperceptibly, as subtle and otherwise innocent-seeming changes have begun--and relatively recently--to take place.

I'll just mention a few of the changes that have been welcomed as useful or necessary in their narrow circumstances, but that in their wider application have contributed unintentionally to a weakening of the design and integrity of marriage.

One is an easing of divorce laws. It's easier now and there's probably less stigma attached to ending marriages that seem to have failed. In their narrow circumstances these have helped the way Jesus said Moses' permission for divorce had done earlier. Our hearts can grow hard, and without the escape valve of divorce some marital couples could come near to the brink of destroying one another.

But a readier access to divorce does weaken the bonds of marriage. Some hard hearts will resort to it when the better course would have been to work through the difficulties and the pain. The promise that marriage is "till death do us part" has come to be treated by many today as a nice, idealistic tradition, but one that we never really expect to take altogether seriously if the going should get tough.

Another relatively recent fact: a growing availability and legality of contraception has allowed an increasing separation to be made in our minds between marriage and having children. This can have some welcome effects for many in keeping family size within a family's financial means or adjusting the timing of children around career plans or other priorities. There are important discussions to be had about natural family planning, and there are means of contraception that can't be honestly distinguished from abortion, but there are natural and some mechanical means of postponing children that do seem in their narrow circumstances quite defensible.

Still, the effect of more readily available means does have the wider effect of making children more and more an optional element of a family, a chosen more than a natural or necessary ingredient in a family, and that too may weaken our sense of the designs for which God joined the family together and meant for its children to teach us about the kingdom of God.

When reproduction becomes less and less essential to our definition of marriage, think of the effects of that like this: Suppose that marriage never had anything to do with reproduction and with children at all. Would there have been any reason for the government to have become involved in regulating it or privileging it? Would we ever tolerate the government intervening in our intimate relationships if they were just relationships? Would we want the government to be defining the terms of who may and may not be your "best friend"? I think we'd all clearly say no to that.

And that instinct reinforces a conclusion that reproduction is a defining reason why a social definition of marriage and civil laws about marriage are so important. Marriage is only a public question because the raising up of the next generation of children within marriage is so definitive of what a family is. God made us male and female and joined us together exactly for these purposes and for the understanding of God himself that we see displayed in the family defined in this way.

A third development that has been relatively recent and both good in its own narrower sense but corrosive to the integrity of marriage as God joined it together has been the insistence, especially by feminist movements in our time, on the complete equality of the genders. What has been good and biblical about that insistence is the overcoming of a kind of patriarchal power dominance that says men are supposed to be in charge and make all the decisions.

In God's eyes, it is true that there is neither male nor female and that men and women are equally made in the image of God and equally valuable before God and equally entitled to all of society's privileges by the grace of God. But a second assumption often gets added together with that biblical truth that has had some of the most damaging effects of all of these developments.

When we add to the biblical truth that men and women are equal before God the further premise that equality implies interchangeability of every role, so that everything men do women should do and everything women do men should also do, then watch what that logic does to the nature and institution of the family.

If men and women don't have distinct masculine and feminine roles that correspond with equal but distinct masculine and feminine natures, if men's and women's roles are fully interchangeable in every respect, then if men can marry women, then women should also be allowed to marry women. Thirty years ago, far-sighted people used to make that objection to the premise of complete interchangeability that feminists added to the argument of equality, and the idea that it would eventually lead to gay and lesbian marriages was laughed at then.

Today it's a legal reality in Massachusetts as of last May 18. Today there is legislation pending in 4 other states that would allow gay couples to marry. Today in Canada, as a result of Court decisions in 1998, 2003, and most recently in December of 2004, not only is same-sex marriage legal everywhere but it is illegal for a minister to refuse to perform a same-sex marriage.

As a result of developments like these and others, the definition our culture has of marriage has been separated from any presumptions of permanence, or procreation, or even the premise that they should be made up of male and female.

In 1940, divorce affected 2% of the married population of America. By 2002, 43% of first-time marriages were statistically doomed to end in separation or divorce within the first 15 years.

In 2003, the Ontario Court of Appeal changed the common-law definition of marriage to "the voluntary union for life of two persons to the exclusion of all others." Gender is excluded from the equation. Two years ago an American Psychological Association article suggested that a family should just mean whatever one wants it to mean: "single parent, shared custody, adoptive, blended, foster, traditional dual parent, to name a few." A course at Tufts University last year on "Family and Intimate Relationships," defined a family broadly as "those with whom one shares resources and values and to whom one has a long-term commitment."

Next year, women's rights activists will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the progress they made in the Muslim country of Tunisia when a landmark decision in 1956 banned multiple wives and allowed only monogamous marriages. Today, ironically, the very freedom for which these activists kept fighting to define marriage in terms of equal and interchangeable rights for everyone has opened the door back up for others to ask why, if marriage can be defined any way we want to define it, people shouldn't have just as much right to choose polygamy as any other marriage arrangement. Those were just the words, in fact, of the president of the Canadian Society of Muslims, just as Canada was introducing its same-sex marriage legislation.

And if men can marry multiple women, then won't feminists demand equal rights for women to marry several men? Why not group-marriages of several men to several women? Is there anything to stop a person from marrying a pet dog? I read recently about someone who went to court to ask for the legal right to marry himself!

The most extreme examples aren't likely to threaten us too realistically, but the redefinitions of marriage that are underway around the world do have effects that go all the way down to our foundations as humans created male and female in the image of God, as Jesus describes us in Mark 10.

A British researcher named Kathleen Kiernan has studied marriage in America and Europe and has recognized four stages in the modern developments of marriage:

"In stage one, cohabitation is seen as a deviant or avant-garde practice, and the vast majority of the population produces children within marriage. Italy is at this first stage. In the second stage, cohabitation serves as a testing period before marriage, and is generally a childless phase. Bracketing the problem of underclass single parenthood, America is largely at this second stage. In stage three, cohabitation becomes increasingly acceptable, and parenting is no longer automatically associated with marriage. Norway was at this third stage, but with recent demographic and legal changes has entered stage four. In the fourth stage (Sweden and Denmark), marriage and cohabitation become practically indistinguishable, with many, perhaps even most, children born and raised outside of marriage. According to Kiernan, these stages may vary in duration, yet once a country has reached a stage, return to an earlier phase is unlikely. (She offers no examples of stage reversal.) Yet once a stage has been reached, earlier phases coexist."

America may only be at stage two in this process, but the effects on America's children of being disconnected from the protection of marriage as God has designed it to be joined together have already been severe.

A book I read this past fall simply called *Hurt* by Chap Clark goes "inside the world of today's teenagers" and discovers in the year 2004 that, in a way that is unlike most generations before us, adults today have grown so needy, ourselves, coping with these pressures that have increased so dramatically over the last 20 or 30 years that we have become less and less available to give care to the adolescent generation we're raising and that we're supposed to be parenting.

The effect of a generation of parents placing our own needs ahead of the needs of our own children, the effect of a loss to adolescents of meaningful relationships with adults is the central word of Chap Clark's book: abandonment.

David Elkind, who has also written several books about youth agrees with Chap Clark: "Today," he says, "adults have fewer standards, values and beliefs and hold on to them less firmly than was true in the past. The adolescent must therefore struggle to find an identity without the benefit of this supportive adult envelope." Kids today have more and more to grow up in a world where they can't depend on the adults around them, sometimes not even on their own parents.

As the framework of marriage as God's work in joining male and female together into one flesh as a picture of Christ and his church is disintegrating, so too as a result is the framework of the family as a context where we can learn from children depending on adults what kind of person God wants to offer entrance into his kingdom.

There are all kinds of social and political remedies that we might debate about how to restore integrity to marriages and families again. Those are debates we ought to undertake very seriously. My point this morning is not to recommend a social or political solution to these attacks on the traditional family. The conclusion I take away from Jesus' words in Mk 10 today is more basic and, I think, important than that.

First and fundamentally Jesus is calling us to understand that the family is joined together by God for a purpose. God put us into families to teach us something essential about himself. The roots of the family are theological and doctrinal.

I recently read that allowing gay marriage gives us an "opportunity to see that real families are helped and no one is hurt"[\[1\]](#) The reason why that is a subtle and terrible lie is not just because kids really are being hurt and abandoned in this social re-engineering of the family, but because it's throwing away the basic doctrinal reason why God created the family and put you and me and everyone on the planet into one. It leads us away from God.

God joined male and female into their equal but distinct and non-interchangeable roles in marriage so that we could understand better what our relationship in the church as the Bride of Christ is meant to be with Christ our Bridegroom. God joined male and female into families designed to nurture and care for children so that we could see vivid, unmistakable pictures of the childlike dependence on God that is the shape of our faith that alone unites us to God our loving heavenly Father.

Destroy those God-designed institutions and we don't just create social havoc and disorientation, we inadvertently but inevitably tell the world to go to hell because we draw for it heretical, misleading pictures of the character and nature of God.

Let's examine our homes and our families and make sure that our relationships and our definitions and our doctrines are telling the world loud and clear that God is a gracious God, abounding in steadfast love and overflowing in mercy to everyone who will depend upon him with the childlike faith of the little ones in our families that we love.

[\[1\] < http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/02/12/MNG8ABA7RC1.DTL >](http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/02/12/MNG8ABA7RC1.DTL)