

The Redemption of Love

By Carrie A. Miles | Reviewed by Christine Carlson-Thies

Carrie Miles' well-written book should be read by all who cherish the institution of marriage and wish to understand (and stem) its decline. Miles, who has a PhD from the University of Chicago, is Associate Director of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture. Using the tools of socioeconomic analysis, her book explores two large questions: (1) What biblical norms should anchor marriage and family in every time and place? and (2) What material forces either support or undermine people's ability to live up to those norms?

But how does a socioeconomic perspective advance our understanding of marriage? Is today's crisis not a simple moral problem? Miles argues that unless we understand the material environments within which marriages take place—both historically and today—we are unable to distinguish between the God-given norms for marriage that we should follow and the (often un-Godly) traditions and practices that inevitably arise as a response to the brokenness and harsh demands of our post-fall world.

Miles devotes two chapters to illuminating the material forces that have fundamentally shaped marriage and family. In "The Economics of the Fall and the Subordination of Women," she provides a detailed analysis of how, having lost the abundance and bounty of Eden and finding themselves in the toilsome world of scarcity, men and women became harnessed in sexually distinctive ways to the harsh work of survival. Scarcity produced large families, the sexual division of labor, and the cluster of institutions and behaviors we have come to know as "patriarchy." Scarcity also, Miles shows, required strong controls on sexual behavior outside of marriage.

In a chapter entitled "Love in an Age of Wealth," Miles turns her attention to the sorry state of marriage and family today. Ours is an economy of abundance, and yet marriage remains broken. In fact, abundance has led to a host of new problems, including widespread divorce and the treatment of children as objects of consumption. Furthermore, controls on sexual behavior that were essential to survival in the pre-industrial economy no longer function today. As a consequence, the very necessity of sexual complementarity for marriage and family is increasingly regarded as irrelevant. Together, these two chapters illuminate how human sin radically distorts marriage, though in very distinctive ways in an economy of scarcity compared to an economy of wealth.

What, then, are the biblical norms that should always govern marriage regardless of the underlying material conditions? Miles shows that Scripture never ceases calling humanity to live up to the creational ideal, an ideal characterized as *one flesh* (unity), *naked* (no physical defenses), and *not ashamed* (no emotional defenses). To make her case, she explores Genesis, the Song of

Songs, the teachings of Jesus, and Paul's teachings from Ephesians. The strength of Miles' biblical analysis is the way she draws out the marriage implications of passages that typically are not consulted in this debate, such as Jesus' teachings about lust and power, his conversation with the rich young ruler, and his words about putting our faith in God's abundance and being free to seek first his kingdom. Believing that the Song of Songs can not be understood merely as an erotic love poem, or as an extended metaphor for Christ and the church, Miles devotes an entire chapter to mining the Song for biblical guidance on how to "reclaim the Garden" for our marriages.

The book's final two chapters are very practical and take on such issues as Christian sexual morality, how to balance career and family, and ways for couples to manage decision making and conflict. When she turns her attention to the public square, Miles appears to have difficulty seeing the possibilities of an authentically discerning Christian view of justice, and thus cautions, wrongly in my view, against strong Christian political action in defense of marriage and family.

A driving conviction of this book is the view that, unless people explicitly make their decisions about marriage and family based on the transcendent values of Scripture, they will fall into whatever behaviors are most rewarded by their material environment. By illuminating how the economics of scarcity as well as the economics of wealth have exerted powerful distorting pressures on marriage and family, Miles sharpens our ability to build marriages shaped by the one-flesh unity of Eden rather than the material forces of our time.

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