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MUTUALITY AND PARTNERSHIP

Theological Norms

While Thom is at work and the children are in school, Donna spends hours alone each day. Yet when Thom returns from his blue-collar job, he is not interested in talking or watching movies together; he prefers to play with the kids until bedtime and then drink beer and listen to music alone. When Donna expresses her loneliness and asks about his distance, he becomes defensive and says, "I'm just tired, Donna! Why are you always focused on yourself? Can't you give me some space?" Thom always apologizes after an outburst like this, but Donna's initial anger has become bitter sadness; she is convinced that she has done something to ruin their relationship.

Malik'a and Alejandro function well as partners and as parents of Alejandro's children from another relationship. But nine months into their marriage they are discovering that the little frictions of living together are creating significant tensions—Malik'a squeezes the toothpaste from the middle, Alejandro uses clean plates from the dishwasher rather than putting them away, and neither is used to sharing space instead of enjoying solitude. To top it off, their extended families are less accepting than expected of their cross-cultural marriage; when the couple was dating, their cultural differences seemed exotic and fun, but now those differences are a source of conflict and protracted negotiations about family expectations. In short, marriage is harder than Malik'a and Alejandro expected, and they are frustrated by the relationship and disappointed in each other and in each other's families. Tensions are growing.

Jay was devastated when he discovered that Lisa and a coworker had an affair while traveling together on a business trip. He

> forgave her but experiences major anxiety each time she travels for work, which she does nearly two weeks each month. Meanwhile, Lisa has grown distant and self-critical, spiraling into depression that prevents her from keeping up with her household chores or attending to Jay's increasingly desperate sense that their relationship has failed. More and more, he seeks emotional comfort from a single coworker when Lisa is traveling, a fact that Lisa seems to ignore.

Intimate partnerships are at risk around the world. Couples colonized by the logic of the global market (as all of us are, to one degree or another, in this second decade of the twenty-first century) tend to treat relationships as means to happiness rather than as ends in themselves. At the same time, the impersonal forces of modernization and globalization create intense social, political, and economic dynamics that tend to work against couples who work at caring with fidelity for each other and for their families (Browning 2003). Economic instability, heterosexual privilege, cohabitation and other alternatives to marriage, the consumptionist-consumerist values of global capitalism, and the growing influence of critical social theories that unmask power and inequality in relationships are just a few of the forces that create challenges and possibilities for couples. Despite these challenges, however, many people have higher—and more idealistic—expectations for marriage and other partnerships than at any time in history.

Shifting needs are part of the reason. "For longer than not," family therapist David Schnarch (2009, 1997) writes, "marriages were arranged for social, economic, and political reasons. Yet, at no time in history have people expected as much gratification and fulfillment from their relationship" (ibid., xvi) as they do now. As social historian Stephanie Coontz writes:

> Because men and women no longer face the same economic and social compulsions to get or stay married as in the past, it is especially important that men and women now begin their relationship as friends and build on it on the basis of mutual respect. You can no longer force your partner to conform to a predetermined social role or gender stereotype or browbeat someone into staying in an unsatisfying relationship. (2006: 311)

Isolated from extended family and other forms of social support, individuals expect their partners to provide intimate companionship that satisfies all emotional, social, sexual, and spiritual needs (Coontz 2006)—yet marriages (and other intimate partnerships) can rarely meet these expectations, as attested by the highest divorce rates in history. In the United States alone, there is one divorce for every two marriages, and on every continent there is evidence of increased distress among couples, including more frequent violence against intimate partners (Browning 2003). The number of marriages in the United States has declined, especially among the poor and the working class, says University of Texas sociologist Mark Regnerus (2012). "[M]arriage is in retreat," he concludes.

But this sort of social analysis—as compelling as it might be—is insufficient for the work of helping professionals, including spiritual caregivers and religious leaders. It is insufficient in part because it is cold and distant, removed from lived experience; it glosses over the particular struggles and sufferings that intimate partners endure, erasing the people behind the statistics.

The same sort of erasure occurs in a culture of professionalism that privileges diagnosis, intervention, and expert knowledge. Such assumptions tend to frame relational issues as intractable, pathological dilemmas that require the intervention of trained experts to make things better. In the face of such disempowering discourse, couples can feel small, weak, and helpless.

But troubled couples are anything but powerless. They need not wait for professional helpers to rescue them. Most of all, they are more than statistics. Religious leaders, mental-health professionals, spiritual caregivers, and couples workers are all too familiar with the people behind the numbers. When reading the anecdotes that opened this chapter, our culture-bound tendency is to focus on the couples' deficits and perceived pathologies. We overlook their strengths and resources. Thom, for example, is quick to repair his defensive interactions with Donna. Malik'a and Alejandro function in strong, positive ways as parents and in other important dimensions of their partnership. Jay and Lisa manage to maintain their relationship in spite of anxiety and depression, and the decision to forgive Lisa's infidelity has allowed them to remain together despite a major threat to their shared covenant.

This is not sugarcoating the problems these couples face. Those problems are very real. But caregivers must recognize that these couples struggle *and* succeed, have problems *and* have unique strengths—all at the same time. Their struggles and problems do not have to outweigh their successes and strengths; they can learn to use the unique powers of their partnerships to improve their relationships, even without professional intervention.

This book makes the couple relationship—not the individual partners, a religious leader, a spiritual caregiver, or a therapist—the locus of power and change in a troubled partnership. It offers a five-part process by which helping professionals can decenter themselves to become "helpful sidekicks" to heroic couples who are empowered to address their own concerns.

Each chapter describes a part of the approach I am advocating, illustrating it with a particular issue that can insinuate itself between partners, pushing them apart and creating tensions that threaten a relationship. Before describing the approach, however, I need to establish two standing stones as a gateway to a model of care that empowers partners: a *vision* of healthful, mutual partnership that is sufficient for couples navigating the first half of the twenty-first century—that is, a critical utopia of sorts (more on this later)—and a general *account* of what causes distress between partners, what it is that can go wrong in a relationship that requires a focused effort to get things "back on track" and headed in a positive direction for both partners. To that end, this chapter offers a critical theological vision of healthful, mutual partnership; chapter 2 offers an account of what causes distress between partners.

Starting with a normative theological vision is important, theoretically and practically, because spiritual caregivers need—for themselves—a clear and critical place to stand when they care for couples. Some spiritual caregivers (such as chaplains, imams, ministers, rabbis, and others) officially stand between a religious or spiritual tradition, its theology, and a particular partnership in need (Patton & Childs 1988). They listen to both the lived experience of a couple and their own faith tradition, aware that the faith tradition is shaping how they hear the couple. Other spiritual caregivers have a less formal relationship to a particular religious or spiritual tradition but nonetheless have embedded ideas about covenant partnership, ideas shaped by their attitudes toward and experiences with the transcendent dimension of life. Those

embedded ideas should be examined and explicitly *chosen* as norms to influence spiritual care, rather than remaining implicit and therefore shaping care without the caregiver's awareness.

Theologies and spiritualities always emerge from particular experiences, values, and commitments, of course. Therefore, the theological norm and vision I advocate here are expressed from a Christian perspective; they are expressed this way because I write as a Christian pastor in the Reformed tradition. My identity leads me to think about marriage and covenant in unique ways. Other Christians will disagree, and people of other religions might find my proposal confusing. I offer this reflection, then, not as a universal theological truth about covenant partnerships, but as one way of thinking about partnership that is congruent with a particular theological and spiritual tradition. I hope it is useful as you think critically, from the perspectives of your own spiritual and religious traditions, values, and commitments, about the theological and spiritual understandings of marriage and other covenant partnerships that inform your approach to empowering couples.

THE FUNCTION OF INTIMATE PARTNERSHIP

For most of the premodern and modern periods of history, patriarchal dominance—male headship, female submission—was the primary form of covenant relationship, including marriage, in the North Atlantic regions. This hierarchal structure remains the dominant form of intimate relationship in many (if not most) regions of the world today. These statements are sweeping generalizations, of course; they do not represent the nuances of particular times and places—early Christian marriage, for example, seems to have been a challenge to the male-dominated households of the Greco-Roman period of the Mediterranean region (see Osiek & Balch 1997). Nonetheless, the pattern of male headship and female submission informs many of the legal, economic, religious, and cultural norms for covenant relationships around the world.

As a result, some contemporary debates about marriage and family tend to be framed in terms of *family structure* and *gender-role competence*. These frames carry two implicit assumptions: first, that covenant partnerships should be structured hierarchically (and usually patriarchally) to promote sociocultural and religious ends; and second, that successful relationships require

partners who comply with cultural expectations about gender, power, and relational roles so that the needs of social institutions are fulfilled. These assumptions have shifted in the past fifty years, of course, but they are still deeply embedded in U.S. American subcultures and in broader gender assumptions, as well as actively promoted by some religious, political, and social organizations. They can be one source of tension in contemporary covenant partnerships.

Another source of tension is the shift from sociopolitical and economic reasons for marriage to the primacy of intimacy and love as motivations for joining together. As companionate marriage—that is, partnership established to satisfy relational needs rather than societal requirements—became the contemporary norm, *relational competence* became more essential than *role competence* (Taylor 1999: 62–63). Yet many people never learn the relational skills to maintain intimate partnership; they are socialized into role competence. As a result, a couple's energy and attention turn inward as they learn new relational skills to maintain emotional connection. This erodes the role that covenant partnerships once played in the public sphere; their function has become primarily private: serving the intimacy needs of each partner.

In the Christian traditions, however, covenant partnerships have both a communal and private function: the care of generations (Patton & Childs 1988: 12). Helping couples care for themselves, their parents, and their children should outweigh concerns about family form or structure, argue pastoral theologians and marriage-and-family therapists John Patton and Brian H. Childs:

> "What is normative, or essential, for human beings is the care of the generations that immediately touch our lives—usually the generations before, one's own generation, and the generation after. . . . The quality of care for the generations that are closest to us by choice or circumstance is more important for Christian family living than the present form or structure of our households" (ibid., 13).

They base this assertion on the biblical and theological understanding of humans as relational and temporal beings created in the image of God. From this perspective, they state that a marriage (and, I would add, any other covenant partnership) "endures and

fulfills its purpose when the human capacity for caring is continually expressed and developed through it" (ibid., 99).

I embrace Patton and Child's proposal that *the care of generations* serves as a functional norm for Christian covenant partnership. It fits a biblical understanding of the human being, positions covenant partnership as vocation, allows for a variety of relational and family forms, and nicely identifies a couple's private and communal obligations. It further emphasizes that ongoing care for the covenant partnership must be prioritized if a couple is to care successfully for the generations before and after. Because of these strengths (and others), the function of *the care of generations*, rather than the form or structure of a partnership, is a primary norm for covenant partnerships in *Empowering Couples*. This book focuses on helping partners learn to care more effectively for their own generation to sustain their care for the generations closest to them.

However, I disagree with Patton and Childs when they suggest that the function of a covenant partnership can be distinguished sharply from its form or structure. Even if partners provide effective care to others, an unjust marriage or covenant partnership should not be commended; to do so would condone injustice and risk its replication in older and younger generations. Rather, the quality of a couple's caring will be determined in part by the nature and form of their relationship—how power is allocated and used, the meanings and values shared by the partners, the quality of the covenant partnership, and so forth. These dimensions of a couple's relationship are embodied through the form and structure of their life together, which exist in a reciprocal relationship with the functional norm of the care of generations.

Therefore, spiritual caregivers need criteria by which to distinguish helpful and healthful covenant partnerships from those that might be harmful and less healthful. A theology of mutuality in covenant partnership can provide key criteria for this purpose.

A VISION FOR COVENANT PARTNERSHIP

Mutuality and partnership are primary qualities of a helpful and healthy covenant relationship, one that is consistent with the values and commitments of the God of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Christian traditions. These qualities have been named and valued for centuries in the church's conversations about

marriage, and in the past twenty-five years they have been given new life by theologians, biblical scholars, and spiritual caregivers who are working toward more accurate and nuanced understandings of marriage, family, and covenant relationship for Christian contexts. I call the emerging consensus of these scholars a "theology of mutuality," and I offer it here as an ideal, contemporary vision for covenant partnership.

As a vision of what is possible, a Christian theology of mutuality stands as a corrective to covenant partnerships in which patriarchy, hierarchy, and unilateral submission are the implicit (if not explicit) norms. These harmful beliefs and practices are more accurately considered sociocultural artifacts than legitimate Christian foundations for covenant partnership, and empirical research suggests that behaviors associated with these norms contribute to failed marriages. A theology of mutuality, however, promotes positivity, mutual influence, negotiation, and a sense of "we-ness" in a relationship—factors that contribute to the longevity and success of covenant partnerships.

Mutuality as a foundation of covenant partnership has its roots in the Bible itself. The apostle Paul establishes mutuality as a norm for Christian marriage in Ephesians 5:21-33, which begins, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." This passage, central to Christian understandings of marriage and family, has been used historically to support patriarchy and promote the submission of women. But contemporary scholars argue that the word usually translated as "submit" or "subject" carries the connotation of giving oneself to another voluntarily for the purposes of influencing and meeting the needs of the other (Taylor 1999: 77). "Thus," writes pastoral theologian Charles W. Taylor, "the passage suggests mutual self-giving as the Christian guideline for marriage" (ibid.). From his perspective, "Paul asks each partner to sacrifice equally by devoting him- or herself to meeting the difficult needs of the other." Thus, Taylor argues that mutual submission, mutual self-giving, and mutual support are three practices, or behavioral norms, that allow a couple to sustain their covenant partnership (ibid., 79).

These practices point toward behaviors a caregiver would expect to see in a partnership being measured against the broad criterion of "mutuality." But caregivers find it helpful to have several specific criteria that, taken together, help assess the ways in which a covenant partnership manifests particular aspects of

a theology of mutuality. Three characteristics named in recent scholarship, and two that I propose, can serve as criteria for such assessment, helping caregivers distinguish helpful and healthful covenant partnerships from those that might be unhelpful or less than healthful. These characteristics are relational justice (Graham 1992), equal regard (Browning et al. 1997), mutual empowerment (Breazeale 2008), respect for embodiment, and resistance to colonization. I address each in turn.

Relational Justice

Pastoral theologian Larry Kent Graham (1992) makes "relational justice" a central concern for spiritual care, calling caregivers to promote relationships of shared power, shared opportunity, and shared rewards among all people. Such relationships, he argues, are marked by reciprocity and mutuality rather than dominance and subordination. Andrew D. Lester, a pastoral theologian, and Judith L. Lester, a marriage and family therapist, suggest that marriages based on relational justice are characterized by freedom, fairness, mercy, forgiveness, and peace (1998). A covenant relationship that embodies relational justice does not favor one person over another, but functions as a true partnership that equally benefits (and allocates equal responsibilities to) each partner.

Equal Regard

Equal regard describes "a relationship between husband and wife characterized by mutual respect, affection, practical assistance, and justice—a relationship that values and aids the self and other with equal seriousness" (Browning et al. 1997: 2). For scholars in the Family, Religion, and Culture project at the University of Chicago, the equal-regard marriage includes public and private dimensions, and it is ideally supported by a social ecology that protects marriages and families from market forces and other systems that work against equal regard and human flourishing.

In an equal-regard relationship, partners elevate mutuality as a central moral value of their life together:

> Equal regard . . . is a strenuous ethic: one respects the selfhood, the dignity, of the other as seriously as one expects the other to respect or regard one's own selfhood. One also works for the *good*—the welfare—of the other as vigorously as one works for

> one's own. But one can expect the reverse as well, that the other works for one's own good. Self and other are taken with equal seriousness in a love ethic of equal regard. This is the meaning of the command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:19). (Ibid., 153)

Loving the other as oneself, however, is not a solitary, ethical practice. Love as equal regard is an intersubjective activity, something two (or more) people achieve together through ongoing dialogue. It demands close attention to the narrative of each person's life, a concept we will discuss in chapter 3. Thus, "*to love the other as oneself means to regard and empathize with the narrative identity of the other just as one regards and empathizes with one's own*" (ibid., 282; emphasis in original). (Narrativity, as we will see, is central to the process of empowering couples through spiritual care.)

Finally, equal regard has a strong social component; marriages and covenant partnerships are socially interdependent, relying on rich social ecologies to sustain them. Browning and his colleagues argue that the government, the community, the religious congregation, the family, and the individual all have roles to play in ensuring the equality and flourishing of covenant partnerships and their families (ibid., 304).

From my perspective, advocates of equal regard place *eudaemonism*, or human flourishing, at the center of contemporary marriage. Flourishing as a theological concept is a relational dynamic that involves both external conditions and internal attitudes (Browning 2010). Yet the equal-regard movement recognizes that, from the perspectives of most world religious and spiritual traditions, human flourishing is a finite good—a relative means toward a greater end, never an end in itself.

Mutual Empowerment

Seeking to end violence against intimate partners and to redeem couples from constraining gender roles and expectations, theologian Kathlyn A. Breazeale (2008) proposes mutual empowerment as an ideal for Christian marriage. Mutual empowerment, the "creative transformation of the partners and their community toward the greater good" (ibid., 3), occurs through the practice of relational power—that is, the ability to influence and be influenced by one's partner and the capacity to sustain relationship—rather than by

imposing one's will on another through dominance, submission, the exercise of individual power, or the allocation of power to one partner or another (ibid., 9–10). "The power to receive influence," Breazeale writes, "is found in one's strength to consider the values and desires of another without losing one's own identity and sense of self; in contrast to passive reception, one is openly active to including the other in one's own world of meaning and priorities" (ibid., 13). Relational power is an active choice. This concept resonates with recent marital research that correlates an ability to receive influence from one's partner with successful marriages (Gottman 1999).

Gender roles and expectations endemic to the male headship-female submission model of marriage, Breazeale argues, give rise to power arrangements that constrain who each partner can become, individually and together, within the relationship they are creating (2008: 15). She seeks instead to make the covenant relationship a "locus of empowerment" (ibid., 10), dismantling hierarchy so that partners can chose whether to manifest the possibilities available to them. Because partners bring unequal gifts and strengths to a relationship, equality is impossible; thus, the goal of mutual empowerment is mutuality or right relationship. Within this framework, sin is understood as a violation of interrelatedness.

Respect for Embodiment

Partners informed by a theology of mutuality respect each other's bodies. Violence cannot be an option, and they recognize the body and spirit as an integral whole—the "bodyspirit," as it were—for to disrespect the body disrespects the soul. They know that the body's experience can be trusted as a source of information about self, other, world, and Spirit. Physical intimacy and sexuality—as defined and negotiated by the couple—are dimensions of mutuality, mutual empowerment, and equal regard (Breazeale 2008).

Respect for embodiment includes recognition that mutual empowerment, equal regard, relational justice, and mutuality are not simply ethical values or theological ideals; they are embodied practices, ways of being, that must be enacted wisely throughout daily life—while packing lunches, nurturing the elderly, vacuuming the living room, negotiating carpool duties, and scrubbing toilets. As an incarnational faith, Christianity understands that our deepest convictions and our understandings of the holy are expressed through action, which in turn shapes our convictions

and understandings. Our values are expressed through the actions of our body. A disembodied theology of mutuality misses the mark and leads us astray.

Resistance to Colonization

Finally, a covenant partnership informed by a theology of mutuality becomes a site of resistance, in which partners work as a team to keep their psyches (and their relationship) from being colonized by constraining or harmful cultural beliefs. These beliefs usually manifest as social norms and unquestioned expectations about gender, sexuality, violence, relational roles, family dynamics, psychopathology, parent-child relationships, and so on. As an aspect of equal regard, each partner advocates for, supports, and sustains the other's efforts to escape these limiting or distorting discourses; both work to resist the effects of these discourses on the partnership. Mutual empowerment and relational justice entail the couple's active participation in release from cultural constraints that prevent the full expression of the image of God inherent to each person's being. Resisting colonization can also be an aspect of a couple's care of generations, as they support the efforts of other family members to escape the effects of harmful dominant discourses.

LIMITS OF THE VISION

We should not equate a theology of mutuality and its constitutive elements with the goal of spiritual care with couples. Total mutuality and perfect partnerships are beyond our grasp; they are ideals we cannot achieve because of human limitations, systemic evil, distorted visions, and economic, social, and cultural forces (Taylor 1999) that work against mutuality and equal regard. For couples, and for those caring with them, a theology of mutuality functions not as a realistic goal but as a critical utopia (Miguez, Rieger, & Sung 2009); in this role, it serves three ends: (1) it establishes a norm for assessing partnerships; (2) it clarifies criteria that allow us to evaluate the ideas used to support or question a particular relationship; and (3) it orients action and behavior (ibid., 105).

Thus a theology of mutuality creates a horizon of possibility, a transcendent vision of a perfected covenant partnership. This vision cannot be achieved by human effort but represents the way

things may be when God's purposes have been achieved. Its transcendence is practical in that it allows us to think concretely about how to intervene with couples toward an existential ideal, while recognizing that the vision cannot be wholly realized in history (ibid., 116). In theoretical and practical ways, then, this vision both orients and limits the care we can provide.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SPIRITUAL CARE AND COUNSELING

When providers of spiritual care have a clear, critical awareness of their ideas about the purposes of covenant partnership and the qualities of a healthful relationship, they are well positioned to begin empowering couples. Of course, merely being aware of primary theological and spiritual values, commitments, beliefs, and practices cannot be a sufficient foundation for providing spiritual care. But this awareness makes visible the ethical and theospiritual assumptions that caregivers bring to their work. That way they can make sure their practices are consistent with their values, and they can be alert to when their assumptions are different from a couple's assumptions. This reduces the chance that caregivers will unintentionally impose their values on the couples they seek to empower.

But all practices are value-laden, and the practices presented in this book seek to be consistent with a theology of mutuality and partnership that is informed by liberation theologies. The practices here support the premise that there is no normative structure or form for Christian covenant partnerships but, rather, a normative *function*: the care of generations. This function assumes that covenant partnerships have both public and private dimensions; that they are embedded and participate in social ecologies and therefore should not be approached in isolation; and that communities of faith and spiritual practice should actively promote the public-communal dimensions of marriage and other covenant partnerships.

The criteria suggested for helpful, healthful covenant partnerships privilege the values of mutuality, respect, and teamwork (or functioning as "one flesh"). Grounded in biblical, spiritual, and theological principles, these criteria are also consistent with empirical evidence about the qualities of successful marriages. Practical theology considers and incorporates the insights of

cognate disciplines, especially the social sciences; this means the proposed theology of mutuality is informed by the interactions, physiologies, and interpretive frameworks of real couples. In this way, the theology of mutuality is an earthy, embodied, realistic theology, one accountable to human experience—not an abstract, theoretical, or impractical set of ideas.

The norms of this earthy, embodied theology suggest that spiritual caregivers need an approach to care that attends carefully to power; emphasizes the agency of partners by privileging their choices and values; strengthens the covenant friendship; respects and accounts for embodiment and the ways in which partners live out their values and choices; and helps couples resist sociocultural norms that impose harmful beliefs, expectations, and practices on their covenant partnerships. The narrative approach suggested in this book is sensitive to all of these concerns.

Before turning to a method of care, however, we need an account of how problems happen in a covenant partnership. This is the focus of chapter 2.