As all societies, civil and religious, originate from families; so families derive from that first and most important of all social connections, the conjugal relation.—Samuel Stennett

Baptist memory of the Reformation is somewhat myopic, being usually restricted to the Protestant rediscovery of the way of salvation—by Christ alone, through faith alone—and renewed access to the Scriptures for the man and woman in the pew. However, one of the most important gifts of the Reformation to the various traditions that stem from that era was the concept of Christian marriage as a vocation and the fact that there is no intrinsic value in a celibate life.

This subject really needs a monograph to do it justice; but, for now, an article will have to suffice. In what follows three texts/sets of texts are discussed: first, a key confessional statement on marriage, that of the Second London Confession, which helped define the boundaries for many Baptists with regard to marriage in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; second, the systematic theological reflection of two important Baptist theologians, Thomas Grantham and John Gill, on what constitutes a true marriage and why God has given marriage to humanity; and third, the correspondence of Samuel Pearce to his wife Sarah Hopkins Pearce in the final decade of the eighteenth century in which this couple modeled for those who knew them—and now for us—the beauty and glory of a Christian marriage.

A BAPTIST CONFESSION TALKS ABOUT MARRIAGE

Contrary to the received wisdom of some twentieth-century Baptist authors, the early Baptists were convinced that the Christian life should be robustly confessional. Various confessions of faith were thus drafted in the seventeenth century, of which the most influential has to have been The Second London Confession of Faith, published first in 1677 by a group of Calvinistic Baptist churches and then reprinted in 1688 as the doctrinal standard of this body of churches in England and Wales. It followed...
closely the wording and structure of the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) and the Congregationalist Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order (1658). After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, there was a prolonged attempt by the state church to enforce religious uniformity upon the English nation. In order to present a united front with their Reformed brethren in the Presbyterian and Congregationalist denominations over against this persecution and its violence against the conscience, the Calvinistic Baptists employed the aforementioned confession as a beginning point for their own doctrinal declaration.7

There are four articles in the Second London Confession that deal specifically with marriage. It is noteworthy that none of these articles seek to define marriage either in terms of its covenantalism or its overtly typological relationship to Christ and His Church. This lacuna is typical of Reformed confessions. For instance, the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), which has one of the longer statements on marriage, chapter XXIX, fails to define it, as does the Westminster Confession, which lies at the base of the Baptist statement of faith.

The Baptist confession begins with the statement that marriage is “to be between one man and one woman” and that neither party may have more than one spouse at a given time, which especially guards against polygamy. This was of concern to these English Baptists as the charge that they were Anabaptists carried with it the implication that the English Baptists also practiced polygamy, as the Münster rebels had done under the leadership of John of Leiden (c.1509–1536). The Calvinistic Baptists were happy then to take the opening article against polygamy from the Westminster Confession, which helped to emphasize a further area of likeness with their fellow English Protestants and distance from the continental Anabaptist radicals. The proof texts for the opening article are Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:5. The former explains the original intent of marriage in creation—that of one man and one woman—while the latter is the Lord’s reaffirmation of the Genesis statement. It is worth observing, though the confession does not state this explicitly, that the Baptists are affirming the continuity between the sexual ethics of the Old Testament and those of Jesus.

The Second London Confession also cites in this regard Malachi 2:15. In its context, this verse from the final book of the English Old Testament concerns the way Israel had broken covenant with God through idolatry and God’s hatred for their divorces. God desires godly “offspring” from Israel, and thus commands them: “[L]et none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth.”8 It is noteworthy that the mention of divorce in the Malachi text did not prompt those who drew up the Second London Confession to frame a paragraph on divorce and remarriage. Contemporary Baptist theologian Samuel Waldron, in his commentary on the Second London Confession, thus expresses some dissatisfaction with its failure to treat this subject.9 By contrast, the chapter on marriage in the Presbyterian Westminster Confession includes two additional articles on divorce (see 24.5–6), which emphasize that it is permissible only in the case of adultery or desertion. One explanation for the omission of these articles in the Baptist text is that its framers felt that the biblical proof text of Malachi 2:15 was sufficient to direct readers to Scripture’s teaching on divorce. However, in 1697 the London Baptist Benjamin Keach (1640–1704), the leading pastor in this community in the final quarter of the seventeenth century and a signatory of the Second London Confession, drafted a statement of faith for his church. It also omitted divorce in its article on marriage and did not even cite Malachi 2 as a proof text.10 Did the Baptist leaders disapprove of divorce in toto? Further research is needed on this subject.

The second article turns to the biblical purposes of marriage. First of all, it is for the “mutual help” of the husband and wife. This affirmation is drawn directly from Thomas Cranmer’s (1489–1556) marriage service in The Book of Common Prayer (1549), where, for the first time in Christian history a marriage liturgy claimed that among the purposes of matrimony was “the mutual society, help and comfort” of the spouses for one another.11 By affirming Cranmer’s insight, the confession seems to go beyond what is often stated in theological discussions of the purpose of marriage. In sections on the duties of husbands and wives by theologians of this period and following, the wife is typically called the “help-meet” with the stress laid on her helping role. While the proof-text cited by the confes-
The second purpose for marriage is procreation, “the increase of mankind” through legitimate children. This view of the purpose of marriage had been especially emphasized by the enormously influential patristic theologian Augustine (354–430). Commenting on Genesis 2, Augustine was convinced that Eve would have been no use to Adam if she had not been able to bear children. The combination of Augustine’s view of the married estate with the highlighting of the celibate monk in late antiquity as the pinnacle of spirituality led to the situation in the medieval church where the central purpose of marriage was simply procreation. The mutual help that spouses gave to one another was a clear support for the idea of “mutual help.”

The Second London Confession cites 1 Corinthians 7:2, 9, where the apostle Paul says that husbands and wives should enjoy a sexual relationship to keep them from stumbling into the sin of lust. By extension, marriage provides sexual satisfaction for both spouses, because it is such satisfaction that helps to keep a spouse from straying. This was important for any tradition stemming from the Reformation, where a major critique of the Roman church had been that its clergy were celibate but not chaste.

In its third article of the marriage chapter the confession expresses a socially radical view of marriage by saying that it is lawful for “all sorts of people” to marry based upon mutual consent. As Waldron comments, the general rule of the confession is “liberty,” that is, all kinds of people may marry if they so choose; presumably from across all ethnicities, cultures, classes, or countries.

The only limit for Christians is that they must “marry in the Lord.” The confession defines this limitation: “[T]herefore such as profess the true religion, should not marry with infidels, or idolators; neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked, by marrying with such as are wicked, in their life, or maintain damnable heresy.”

By implication, this definition sees as unbiblical such limits to marriage as race or class. For the Christian, the only limit is that a Christian may not marry a non-Christian. The language of “unequally yoked” comes from 2 Corinthians 6:14, though the Confession does not cite it. Instead it refers to 1 Corinthians 7:39 where Paul tells a widowed woman that she is free to marry, so long as it is “in the Lord.”

The fourth and final article on marriage states negatively that two persons of blood relation are not to marry: “Marriage ought not to be within the degrees of consanguinity, or affinity forbidden in the word.” It defines such a marriage as “incest” and says that it can never be made lawful by man or “consent of parties.” Anyone who cohabitates in such a relationship is not to be considered “as man and wife.” The confession cites the entirety of Leviticus 18 as a proof-text that says in v. 6: “None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness.” The phrase “uncover their nakedness” is a euphemism for having a sexual relationship. The chapter goes on to stipulate against this practice in detail, listing those who are considered “near of kin,” including a “father’s wife” (v. 8); “sister” (v. 9); grandchild (v. 11); aunt (vv. 12–13) and other blood relations. If a society were to legally allow for incest, it would still remain unlawful before God. The confession cites two biblical examples of a forbidden union: the Baptist’s criticism of Herod for having his brother’s wife (Mark 6:18) and Paul’s rebuke of the Corinthian church for allowing into their membership a man who was sleeping with his stepmother (1 Corinthians 5:1).

THOMAS GRANTHAM’S THINKING ON MARRIAGE

Among the earliest reflections on marriage by a Baptist theologian are two texts written by the General Baptist Thomas Grantham (1634–1692), a prolific author who wrote what can be described as the first
systematic theological treatise by a Baptist, his classic *Christianismus Primitivus: or, The Ancient Christian Religion* (1678). In the third book of this massive folio Grantham dealt with Christian ethics and touched on marriage in two places. There is also a postscript in his *Truth and Peace; or, The Last and most Friendly Debate concerning Infant-Baptism*, published in 1689.\(^{16}\)

After stating that “marriage is a solemn and honourable ordinance of God,” which God instituted for “the modest and orderly propagation of mankind,”\(^ {17}\) Grantham spent a considerable amount of space in *Christianismus Primitivus* detailing what entails a lawful marital union, much of going over similar ground as the *Second London Confession*.\(^ {18}\) He then turned to what constitutes a biblical reason for divorce and observed that apart from “pollution of the marriage bed,” there are no legitimate grounds for divorce. He particularly pointed out that Christian men should not harden their hearts against their wives if the latter lose their beauty.\(^ {19}\)

In a second portion of *Christianismus Primitivus*, Grantham stressed that Christian husbands are to exercise their God-given authority as the heads of their households, and their wives are to be obedient to their husbands’ rule.\(^ {20}\) The husband’s authority, however, brings with it “great duties; for the husband is to love, defend, and provide for his wife.” Thus, the “Christian man’s greatest care, should be to live with his wife, as a joint-heir of the grace of life, and therein to help her.”\(^ {21}\)

His care for his wife must be rooted in a deep affection for her. As Grantham wisely stated:

> [I]t is an insupportable sorrow, when a woman hath forsaken all relations in the world to consort with her husband, and then finds not his heart with her; this is called “a treacherous dealing,” and reproved by the prophet Malachi 2:14, 15. ...he that putteth his wife out of his affection, dealeth no better than he that divorceth her. This want of love between husband and wife, is a grievous iniquity, a treasonable impiety, hateful in the sight of God; and yet it is that which Satan prevails to ensnare men with, to the provoking of the majesty of heaven against them, to the evil example of their families, and to the perdition of their own souls. God will be avenged on this generation for this iniquity. Jer. 5:7, 8, 9. “How shall I pardon thee for this?—every one neigheth after his neighbour’s wife: Shall I not visit for these things, saith the Lord? Shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?”

Grantham’s comments here are to be read in light of the fact that England, along with other northern European nations, was dominated by the nuclear family model, a social reality that predated the Reformation at least by a hundred years or more. In such a familial context, if a husband spurned his wife, she did not have an extended household to which she could turn.\(^ {22}\) Grantham also has in view the flagrant sexual immorality of Charles II (r.1660–1685), his court, and many of the leaders of England of that day.

The other text from Grantham comes in the course of his explaining why Baptists did not use rings in their marriage ceremonies or kneel at an altar as Anglicans did—traditional Puritan issues—Grantham points out that the Scriptures do not actually prescribe any particular form for the marriage ceremony; “ceremonies are not of the essence of marriage.”\(^ {23}\) Even the presence of a minister is not required—“we can find no ground to believe that to celebrate marriage is a ministerial act.”\(^ {24}\) The essentials of marriage that Grantham derives from Genesis 2:23–24 and Malachi 2:14 are simply “a marriage-covenant between persons who may lawfully marry” and the presence of witnesses.\(^ {25}\) To require anything more than these basics is going beyond what Scripture requires and to suppose that God “has made this ordinance for the good of mankind, and yet left it defective in the very essentials of it; and sure it would magnify man too much to suppose him capable to mend this ordinance.”\(^ {26}\) From this assertion it is clear that Grantham is convinced marriage is intended for the benefit of humanity. He can even call it an “ordinance,” a word usually used by seventeenth-century divines for a means of grace.\(^ {27}\)

**JOHN GILL ON CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE**

The doyen of Baptist theologians in the eighteenth century was the autodidact and Particular Baptist pastor...
John Gill (1697–1771). In 1719, John Gill became pastor of a Baptist congregation that met at Goat Yard Chapel; in 1757, the Goat Yard congregation needed more space and began meeting on Carter Lane, where Gill continued as pastor.

John Gill (1697–1771). He was a voluminous author, and, in the words of his early biographer John Rippon, if Gill's works were all put into one series of volumes, they would add up to over "ten thousand folio pages of divinity." Not surprisingly, Rippon noted that Gill "considered not any subject superficially, or by halves. As deeply as human sagacity, enlightened by grace, could penetrate, he went to the bottom of everything he engaged in." Compared to other parts of Body of Divinity Gill's discussion of marriage is relatively short, but this does not mean that it is treated lightly. The following section of this article obviously cannot do justice to the entire range of Gill's reflections on marriage. What it seeks to do is to elucidate the major points of his teaching, following the structure of his Body of Divinity, comparing it with relevant selections from his commentaries, and an example or two from his own married life.

He began by pointing out that the respective duties of husbands and wives to one another are "summed up in these two general comprehensive ones: love on the one part, and reverence on the other, Eph. v. 33." This is based on the "conjugal union" and "marriage relation" between the husband and wife. This union is between "male and female," "one man" and "one woman," based on the original creation of Genesis 1:27. The conjugal union makes the husband and wife "one flesh," according to Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:6. Of the latter biblical text, Gill observed: "They were two before marriage, but now no more so." The union is "indissoluble" except by death or by infidelity on the part of either party, whether by adultery or fornication (Rom 7:2; Matt 5:32). In his comment on Romans 7:2 he included desertion, based on 1 Corinthians 7:15, in what is permissible for divorce. Both adultery and desertion are "equal to death." Commenting on the exception clause in Matthew, Gill argued that "fornication" includes adultery, incest, or "any unlawful copulation." He also pointed out that Jesus' permissibility clause for divorce is directly contrary to the Pharisaic understanding, based on Rabbi Hillel's teaching, that "admitted of divorce, upon the most foolish and frivolous pretenses whatever." Marriage is to be entered into, not by compulsion, but "mutual consent" and with the consent of the parents or guardians of the couple: "[N]one are to be forced into it against their wills; no, not by their superiors; it must be their own voluntary act and deed." Citing Hebrews 13:4, Gill emphasized that marriage is an honorable state, and is so because God instituted it at creation. The marriage between Adam and Eve was constructed by God who "made the woman for a help-meet, and brought her to the man, proposed her to him...and she became his wife...it was the Lord's act and deed." Likewise, in his comment on Genesis 1:28 he insisted that marriage is an ordinance instituted in paradise, and as such is honorable. It is also honorable because "Christ honored it by his presence, and at such a solemnity wrought his first miracle, and manifested forth the glory of his Deity" at the wedding feast of Cana recorded in John 2.

Gill further discussed the relationship between marriage and Christ by arguing that the marriage in Eden typifies "the conjugal union of Christ and the church, Eph. v. 32." Adam is a type of Christ while Eve is a type of the church: "Adam was first formed, and then Eve; Christ was before the church and, indeed before all things; Eve was formed from Adam...the church has her original from Christ, and her subsistence by him." As the Lord brought Eve to Adam, so the Church is brought to Christ "and given to him by his Father, to
be his spouse and bride, who he liked, accepted of, and betrothed to himself; and her consent is obtained by the drawings and influences of his Father’s grace.” This prelapsarian prefiguring of Christ’s relationship with the Church—argued in a fashion not surprising for Gill—is an illustration of “the supralapsarian scheme”; Christ had an interest in his Church before she fell in Adam. Gill admitted, however, that “this is no direct proof” of supralapsarianism, but only served to illustrate it.

There is a problem, however, with Gill’s allegorical interpretation of Eve as a type of the Church. He cited Ephesians 5:32 as a proof-text, though Paul is not making a typological connection between Eve and the Church, but rather wives and the Church. Surprisingly, Gill did not refer to 1 Timothy 2:15. Neither did he make this connection in his commentary on this passage nor in that on Genesis 2:22–24. On the other hand, Gill’s interpretation of Eve as a type of the Church was common in church history. John Flood shows that it was held by patristic and medieval theologians like Tertullian, Augustine, Bonaventure, and Nicholas of Lyra. In Flood’s words, “it is the spirit of Tertullian, which, to one degree or another, presides over the history of subsequent Genesis exegesis.”

Gill was on surer ground when he rooted the original intent of marriage in creation. The command to “increase and multiply” remains in effect, but since the fall marriage also serves to protect against sexual sin: it is “to prevent incontinence, and to avoid fornication.” In his discussion of Eve’s creation from Adam’s side in Genesis 2:22 Gill linked the purpose of marriage to companionship and love—and also affirmed the ontological equality of man and woman:

It is commonly observed, and pertinently enough, that the woman was not made from the superior part of man, that she might not be thought to be above him, and have power over him; nor from any inferior part, as being below him, and to be trampled on by him; but out of his side, and from one of his ribs, that she might appear to be equal to him; and from a part near his heart, and under his arms, to show that she should be affectionately loved by him, and be always under his care and protection.

Continuing with Ephesians 5:23 in his Body of Divinity, Gill now explained the respective duties of husbands and wives. Paul first tells husbands that they are to love their wives. Gill divided husbandly love into three parts: the nature of love; the manner of loving; and the reasons for love. A husband’s love for his wife, first of all, must be superior to the love he has for “any other creature.” His love for her, therefore, must supersede love for neighbor, parent, or child because “a man’s wife is himself, and loving her is loving himself, the other part of himself.” Elsewhere he says, “[T]hey are, as it were, glued together, and make but one.” A husband’s love should be rooted in delight; he should take pleasure in his wife’s “person, company, and conversation.” This is so because Christ’s delight is the Church, “his Hephzibah.” His love is to be chaste and singular, which bars against polygamy: “a man should not have more wives than one, whereby his love would be divided or alienated, and hate the one and love the other, as is commonly the case.” Gill thus reaffirmed the stance of the Second London Confession against polygamy and distanced the Baptist community from the memory of the continental Anabaptists.

In a most tender-hearted section, Gill wrote that the husband is to express his love not only in words, but also “in deed and in truth” because facts “speak louder than words.” This is done by providing for her material comforts, including food and clothing. He is also to protect her from harm and is to be a “covering to her, as Abraham was to Sarah.” His protection of her is to extend to such a point that he would “risk his life in her defense and for her rescue.” The husband should do “every thing that may contribute to her pleasure, peace, comfort, and happiness” and be devoted to ways in which “he may please his wife.” Finally, he is to seek her spiritual welfare, especially her conversion if she is not a Christian, and her “spiritual peace, comfort, and edification.” When it comes to a husband’s demeanor towards his wife Gill was insistent: “Be not bitter against them; not giving bitter language, threatening words, sour looks, and especially bitter blows; which is cruel, churlish, barbarous, and brutish, unbecoming the man and the Christian.”
Gill modeled this tenderness with his own wife. Early in his ministry, Elizabeth experienced a miscarriage, and Gill devoted much time and energy to see that she was comforted. This became a cause of some trouble in the church, as a number of the women believed that he was spoiling her. In her final years, Elizabeth was an invalid, and Gill spent much of his time caring for her. Elizabeth died on October 10, 1764, and eleven days later Gill preached her funeral sermon from Hebrews 11:16. At the end he had planned to give a short account of her life, “but it seems he was so very overpowered at the end of the sermon, where the account might have been given, that he was not able to deliver it.”

In his comment on Ephesians 5:25, Gill stated that “many are the reasons why husbands should love their wives” and proceeded to list them—for instance, they are companions, covenant partners, and their own bodies. Likewise, in Body of Divinity he noted the fact that they are one flesh as the first reason for the “nearness” between spouses. The wife is “his self” and she is to “be loved as his own body.” Second, she is his “help-meet” and companion “in prosperity and adversity” and shares the joys and sorrows of life. A third reason is that she is the glory and honour of her husband which makes him respectable among his peers. The fourth reason Gill considered to be “[t]he strongest and most forcible argument of all”; this is the fact of Christ’s love to his Church, “which is the pattern and exemplar of a man’s love to his wife, and most strongly enforces it.”

Gill stayed with Paul in Ephesians to enunciate seven duties that wives have toward their husbands: reverence; submission; obedience; assistance; curtailed authority; and steadfastness. Reverence is to be both internal and external: a wife must outwardly show her husband respect as well as think highly of him in her heart because he is given to her by God. Gill’s statements on submission and obedience, which are so controversial today, are both balanced and warm. He took Paul’s words in Ephesians 5:33 about wives submitting in “everything” to mean “relating to family affairs” only. The husband does not have absolute control over his wife. More than this, a wife is not to go along with her husband if he does anything “contrary to the laws of God and Christ,” because God is to be obeyed over men. Subjection of the wife to her husband is not to be servile—she is not to be treated like a servant, and even less like a slave. Rather, Gill deemed the picture of the body following the head to be a better analogy; the head governs, but it is to govern wisely, with tenderness and in a “gentle manner” as Abraham did with Sarah. In his comment on Ephesians 5:22 Gill stressed that a wife is subject to her husband only, “not to any other man, nor to her children, nor to her servants, or any brought into her house.” Due to this, the wife should render her subjection more easily, wilfully, and cheerfully.

The main marital function of a wife is to help her husband in the affairs of the family, the “original end of her creation.” She has rule over the home, including the servants (if there are any), and citing 1 Timothy 2:14, Gill pointed out that she is to manage “all domestic business with wisdom and prudence.” At this point it might have been useful for Gill to cite Proverbs 31 and the industrious wife who serves her family in business ventures. As English historian Sharon James rightly observes, Gill’s treatment of wives omitted any discussion of Proverbs 31. When he did interpret it, he fell to allegory: “[T]he whole chapter is seen only as a picture of the Church; and thus he loses sight of the reality of the ideal presented: a powerful woman indeed!” Since the woman is to have no authority over her husband in family affairs, she is to “do nothing without his will and consent, and never contrary to it.” Rather, she is to go “with him wherever God in his providence, and his business in life call him,” just as Sarah did with Abraham in Egypt and Ruth did with Naomi.

In their marriage, Elizabeth Gill took similar charge of her home so that her husband could devote his time to his ministry and writing. In the introductory biography to the Sermons and Tracts, possibly written by John Rippon, Gill’s sentiments about Elizabeth are described thus: “The Doctor was always of opinion, that his marriage with this excellent person, was the principal thing for which God in his providence sent him to that place [the church where Gill met her]: and he ever considered his marriage to her, as one of the capital blessings of his life. For she proved affectionate, discreet, and careful: and, by her unremitting prudence, took off from his
hands all domestic avocations, so that he could, with more leisure, and greater ease of mind, pursue his studies, and devote himself to his ministerial service.\footnote{66}

These uxorial duties are then followed by six reasons—though Gill was sure these are only “some”—as to why she is to perform them. The first is the role given to women at creation. Following Paul in 1 Timothy 2:13, Gill argued that because Adam was formed first, and because Eve was made from Adam, she has a functionally subordinate role, though in his comment on the creation of Eve in Genesis 1, she is fully his equal before God. Second, Eve was deceived by the serpent in the fall and drew her husband into it, and so earned part of the curse for herself. Then, the wife is subject to her husband because he is her head. Sharon James observes that for Gill, male headship “is not to be exercised for the good of the husband, but for the good of the wife; just as Christ, the head of the Church, sacrificed himself for her good.”\footnote{67} The value of male headship for the wife is seen in his comment on Ephesians 5:24: “[B]eing wholly dependent upon him, and entirely resigned to him, and receiving all from him; who is alone all her expectation of provision, protection, comfort, and happiness, wherefore she has respect to all his commands, and esteems all his precepts concerning all things to be right.” Thus she “yields a cheerful, voluntary, sincere, and hearty obedience to them; arising from a principle of love to him, and joined with honor, fear, and reverence of him.”\footnote{68}

Fourth and in this connection, a wife is to recognize that she is the weaker vessel and as such is in need of protection, which is provided by her head. Fifth, female honor demands that she act in a creditable way. Decency is an ornament to women, “and the best ornament they can deck themselves with.”\footnote{69} Gill’s sixth and final reason for the wife’s duty to her husband is regarded by him as “the chief argument of all”: it is the subjection of the Church to Christ. In Ephesians 5:22-24, Paul lays out a typological relationship between husbands and wives, and Christ and the church. Since the wife typifies the Church in her marriage, she is to model godly submission to her husband, who typifies Christ.

It is clear from Gill’s concluding reasons for the duties of the husband and the wife that the gospel is the bedrock of Christian marriage. Since marriage typifies Christ’s relationship with the church, Christians are to strive toward love, companionship, humility, and balance in their marriages. The witness of the gospel is at stake. And from the little that we know of his own marriage to Elizabeth, we see that Gill strove to that end.

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John Rippon (1751-1836). After John Gill’s death in 1771, John Rippon succeeded Gill as pastor of the Baptist meeting-house on Carter Lane. In 1833, this congregation moved to New Park Street Chapel, where Charles Haddon Spurgeon became pastor in 1854.

**SAMUEL AND SARAH PEARCE, A MODEL FOR CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE**

A perusal of the minute books of a number of eighteenth-century English Baptist congregations would soon reveal the reality of some of the Baptist marriages in that era: marriages marred by sins such as fornication and adultery, wife beating and gossiping. What these records do not reveal is anything about the solid marriages that displayed the reality behind the confessional
stance of these Baptists (as seen in the *Second London Confession*) and their theological reflection (as seen in the corpus of Grantham and Gill), since such were not the subject of formal congregational discussions or discipline in local churches. For such materials we need to turn elsewhere. Thankfully, we have a rich resource about one Baptist marriage in this period in the form of letters from Samuel Pearce (1766–1799) to his beloved wife, Sarah Hopkins Pearce (1771–1804). Samuel Pearce, a close friend and confidant of the well-known William Carey (1761–1834), had one pastorate in his short life, that of Cannon Street Baptist Church in Birmingham in the Midlands. It was there that he met Sarah Hopkins, a third-generation Baptist whose father was a deacon, soon after his arrival in Birmingham. Pearce was soon deeply in love with Sarah and she with him. As he wrote to her on December 24, 1790, about the impact her letters had on him:

> *We are averse to writing, ... one of your dear Epistles could not fail of conquering the antipathy and transforming it into desire. The moment I peruse a line from my Sarah, I am inspired at the propensity which never leaves me, till I have thrown open my whole heart, and returned a copy of it to the dear being who long since compelled it to a voluntary surrender, and whose claims have never since been disputed.*

They were married on February 2, 1791. With delight, Pearce wrote the following day to a friend of his and Sarah’s:

> *The occasion of my writing is a source of joy inexpressible to myself—a joy in which I know you will participate. I am no longer a bachelor. Your amiable friend permitted me to call her my own yesterday. One dwelling now contains us both, and Paul’s Square contains that dwelling.*

Later that same year, during November, she was baptized by her husband. Pearce’s understanding of what should lie at the heart of their marriage found expression in a letter that he wrote to his future wife a little over two months before their wedding: “may my dear Sarah & myself be made the means of leading each other on in the way to the heavenly kingdom and at last there meet to know what even temporary separation means no more.” Husband and wife are to be a means of grace to one another in their earthly pilgrimage. In that joint pilgrimage, they are to be, as a recent book on marriage has put it, “intimate allies.”

One sees the way in which Pearce sought to help his wife spiritually in the following passage from a letter written on December 2, 1791: “I trust this will find you expecting a good Sabbath & waiting for the day of the Lord with ardent desires after his tabernacle—may your enjoyments equal your desires.” He then went on to give his wife some advice about conversing with a Mrs. Briggs, who appears to have fallen prey to Socinianism. He told Sarah:

> *Avoid any religious controversy with Mrs Briggs—I fear she has more studied system than yielded herself to the influence of truth—you my love I believe have been better employed... I have been much afraid lest she should distress your mind—I am under no apprehensions of her altering your sentiments—I believe you have been taught them by the Holy Ghost who dwelleth in you—and that you will be kept therein by the power of God—but it will pain your mind to hear your Lord degraded & the blood wherewith you were sanctified accounted an unholy thing.*

In another letter, this one written from Northampton, where he had gone to preach for John Ryland, he encouraged Sarah in a postscript: “Let us both live near to God and our separation from each other will be the less regretted—O be much in prayer for your own S.P.”

Pearce’s love for his wife clearly deepened with the passing of the years. In 1791, only a couple of months after their wedding, he told her that he was more desirous “of enjoying your friendship than the admiration of crowds of Helen’s, or Venus’s, or Cleopatra’s, or all the females of Egypt—Greece—Rome or Birmingham.” He concluded this letter by telling her: "when I add..."
all the respect, the gratitude, the tenderness, & affection
of which my nature is capable into one sum—I feel
the whole comes vastly short of what I owe to you my
lovely friend! My inestimable Sarah!""31 In a letter that
is undated but that was probably written in early 1792,
 Pearce concluded it by telling Sarah, "O that you were
now within these longing arms & then there would be
no occasion to write to you more than ever affectionate
S. Pearce.""32 And writing on a preaching trip to Wales
in July of 1792, he told his wife, "How often have I
longed for your Society since I left you...every pleasant
scene which opened to us on our way (& they were very
numerous) lost half its beauty because my lovely Sarah
was not present to partake its pleasures with me." He
had to remind himself, though, "to see the country was
not the immediate object of my visiting Wales—I came
to preach the gospel—to tell poor sinners of the dear
Lord Jesus—to endeavor to restore the children of mis-
ery to the pious pleasures of divine enjoyment.""33

Again, when his wife was away on a trip to Shrop-
shire, Samuel wrote: "I feel myself such a poor dull
solitary thing without you that I fly to my pen that I
may at least feel some relief in writing to the dearest
Friend I have whilst I am deprived the felicity of her
presence and conversation." Three and a half years after
their marriage, he wrote to her from Plymouth: "O,
my Sarah, had I as much proof of my love to Christ
as I have of my love to you, I should prize it above
rubies.""34 When Pearce was away from his wife the
following year, 1795, on a preaching trip in London,
he wrote to tell her, "every day improves not only my
tenderness but my esteem for you. Called as I now am
to mingle much with society in all its orders I have
daily opportunity of making marks on human tem-
per & after all I have seen and thought my judgment as
well as my affection still approves of you as the best of
women for me.""35 On the same trip he called her "the
dearest of women—my invaluable Sarah.""36 In another
letter written about the same time he informed the
one whom he called the "partner of my heart" that his
letter was a "forerunner of her impatient husband who
weary with so long an absence"—he had obviously
been away from home for a few weeks—"[longs] again
to embrace his dearest friend.""37 The following year,
when he was involved in an extensive preaching trip in
Ireland, he wrote to his wife from Dublin on June 24:

Last evening ...were my eyes delighted at the
sight of a letter from my dear Sarah...I rejoice
that you, as well as myself, find that "absence
diminishes not affection." For my part I com-
pare our present correspondence to a kind of
courtship, rendered sweeter than what usually
bears that name by a certainty of success ...Not
less than when I sought your hand [in mar-
riage], do I now court your heart, nor doth
the security of possessing you at all lessen my
pleasure at the prospect of calling you my own,
when we meet again." And then towards the
end of the letter he added: "O our dear fire-
side! When shall we sit down toe to toe, and
tete à tete [sic] again—Not a long time I hope
will elapse ere I re-enjoy that felicity.""38

That Sarah felt the same towards Samuel is seen in
a letter she wrote after her husband's death to her sister
Rebecca. Rebecca had just been married to a Mr. Har-
riss and Sarah prayed that she might "enjoy the most
uninterrupted Happiness...[for indeed I can scarce
form an idia [sic]...this side of Heaven of greater) equal
to what I have enjoyed.""39 It is a shame that none of
Sarah's letters to Samuel have survived, though Sarah
did admit she had "a natural disinclination" to writing
letters,"40 which may mean that there was considerably
less correspondence from her to Samuel than there was
from him to her.

One final word about Samuel and Sarah's mar-
riage needs to be said. What especially delighted
Pearce about his wife was her Christian piety. For
example, he told Sarah in the summer of 1793 in
response to a letter he had received from her: "I can-
not convey to you an idea of the holy rapture I felt at
the account you gave me of your soul prosperity.""41
Close friends of Sarah noted that since her conver-
sion she had had "a strong attachment to evangelical
truth" and "a longing desire for the universal spread
of the gospel.""42 And by her own admission, she was
"deeply interested in all that interested" Samuel."43
A CONCLUDING WORD

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Baptist talk and thinking about marriage was not merely that and no more. It was translated into concrete reality and truth by marriages like that of Samuel and Sarah Pearce. Today we desperately need such models—and the thought that undergirds them—for our world supposes marriage to be but an artifact that has been shaped by the hands of human culture and hence can be re-shaped at will. The Baptist authors whose writings and doings have been examined above, however, remind us that marriage contains both an esse and a bene esse, and that both are divinely given.

ENDNOTES

1 Samuel Stennett, Discourses on Domestick Duties (London, 1783), 140. In this article, seventeenth-century texts have been modernized with regard to their spell and capitalization.

2 Prompting this statement was Alan Hayes’ recent comment that “the vocation of clergy wife was one of the significant gifts that the Reformation gave the Church” (“In Memoriam: Margaret Eleanor Allman Stackhouse,” Insight 73 (Summer 2012): 11.


4 This essay will cite the rendition of this confession in William L. Lumpkin, Baptist Confessions of Faith, revised edition (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1989), 235294. For a modern reprint, see A Faith to Confess: The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689: Rewritten in Modern English (1689; repr., Sussex: Carey Publications, 1982). This confession was adopted with very slight modification by the Philadelphia Association—the oldest Baptist Association in the United States—and renamed the Philadelphia Confession (1742). It was also used by the influential Charleston Association in South Carolina and so exercised a huge influence upon Southern Baptist life and thought. The Abstract of Principles (1858) of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is a summary of this confession. See Michael A.G. Haykin, Roger D. Duke and A. James Fuller, Soldiers of Christ: Selections from the Writings of Basil Manly, Sr., & Basil Manly, Jr. (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2009), 36–40.


6 Benjamin Keach, The Articles of the Faith of the Church of Christ (London, 1697), 35.

7 Lumpkin, Baptist Confessions of Faith, 284.


12 Lumpkin, Baptist Confessions of Faith, 284–285.

13 Lumpkin, Baptist Confessions of Faith, 285.

14 See also White, English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century, 140–143, for further discussion of Baptist thinking about this issue.

15 Lumpkin, Baptist Confessions of Faith, 285.

of Thomas Grantham's Leadership among the Seventeenth-Century General Baptists” (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 2008).


18Christianismus Primitivus III.6.1−2 (pages 37−40).

19Christianismus Primitivus III.6.3 (page 41).

20Christianismus Primitivus III.12.1−2 (pages 61−66).

21Christianismus Primitivus III.12.3 (pages 62, 63).

22MacCulloch, Reformation, 615−619.

23Truth and Peace; or, The Last and most Friendly Debate concerning Infant-Baptism (London, 1689), 80.

24Truth and Peace, 80, 83−87. Quote from page 86.

25Truth and Peace, 75−76.

26Truth and Peace, 76−77.

27Later, Grantham lists marriage among God’s “holy ordinances” (Truth and Peace, 90).


29Rippon, Memoir, 111.

30Rippon, Memoir, 137.

31While there are a number of recent reprints, this essay quotes from the third volume of John Gill, A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity; or, A System of Evangelical Truths, Deduced from the Sacred Scriptures New Edition (London: W. Winterbotham, 1796). It is noteworthy that in terms of sources for the section on marriage, Gill refers only to Scripture. The only non-biblical reference is a footnote where he quotes Seneca.

32Gill, Body of Divinity, 3:400.


36Gill, Body of Divinity, 3:400.

37Gill, Body of Divinity, 3:400.


39Gill, Body of Divinity, 3:400.

40In his comment on Genesis 2:21 Gill notes Adam’s surprise at awakening to meet Eve for the first time: Adam was put to sleep so “that he might be the more surprised at the sight of her, just awaking out of sleep, to see so lovely an object, so much like himself, and made out of himself, and in so short a time, as whilst he was taking a comfortable nap” (Exposition of the Old Testament, 1:19).

41Gill, Body of Divinity, 3:400−401.

42Gill, Body of Divinity, 3:401.


44Gill, Body of Divinity, 3:401. Gill did not come down strong on whether “increase and multiply” is an express command. At the very least it is advice for the increase of mankind and the filling of the earth. Gill Exposition of the Old Testament, 1:10.


46Gill, Body of Divinity, 3:401.


49Gill, Body of Divinity, 3:401.

50Gill, Body of Divinity, 3:401.


52Gill, Body of Divinity, 3:402.


54Gill, Body of Divinity, 3:402.


57Rippon, Memoir, 10. The sermon was printed in Sermons and Tracts, and includes a footnote reprinting


15 James, "Weaker Vessel," 219.


17 James, "Weaker Vessel," 217.


Her father was Joshua Hopkins (d.1798), a grocer and a deacon in Alcester Baptist Church, Warwickshire, for close to thirty years. Her maternal grandfather was John Ash (1724–1779), pastor of the Baptist cause in Pershore, Worcestershire, and a noteworthy Baptist minister of the eighteenth century.

21 [Andrew Fuller?], "Memoir of Mrs. Pearce", *Theological and Biblical Magazine* 5 (1805), 1.

22 Letter to Sarah Hopkins, December 24, 1790 (Pearce-Carey Correspondence 1790–1828, Angus Library, Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford).


24 “Memoir of Mrs. Pearce”, 1.


28 Letter to Sarah Pearce, August 23, 1792 (Samuel Pearce Mss.).

29 Letter to Sarah Pearce, April 1, 1791 (Samuel Pearce Mss.).

30 Letter to Sarah Pearce, April 1, 1791 (Samuel Pearce Mss.).

31 Letter to Sarah Pearce (Samuel Pearce Mss.).

32 Letter to Sarah Pearce (Samuel Pearce Mss.).

33 Letter to Sarah Pearce, July 11, 1792 (Samuel Pearce Mss.).


35 Letter to Sarah Pearce, September 7, 1795 (Samuel Pearce Mss.).

36 Letter to Sarah Pearce, August 31, 1795 (Samuel Pearce Mss.).

37 Letter to Sarah Pearce, September 7, 1795 (Samuel Pearce Mss.).

38 Letter to Sarah Pearce, June 24, 1796 (Samuel Pearce Mss.).

39 Letter to Rebecca Harris, March 29, 1800 (Samuel Pearce Mss.).


41 Letter to Sarah Pearce, June 14, 1793 (Samuel Pearce Mss.).

42 “Memoir of Mrs. Pearce”, 1–2.

43 Sarah Pearce, Letter to William Rogers, June 16, 1801.