

The Mystery of One

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“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh.” -Genesis 2:24

In Ephesians 5, Paul ruminates on the concept of marriage as symbolic of Christ’s relationship with the Church. Quoting Genesis 2:24, Paul considers what it means for a husband and wife to become “one flesh,” and how that relationship relates to our connection with God. He responds by admitting that “this is a great mystery” (Ephesians 5:32). The mystery of oneness—the belief that two or more distinct people can become one in heart, mind, and even flesh—is perplexing. The belief that it has anything to do with our understanding of God is even more perplexing. Religious theologians have grappled with this mystery for centuries, early modern poets and playwrights wrestled with it in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, latter-day saints relied upon it to help them understand polygamy in the early days of the church, and we still grapple with it today.

As a mystery, the notion of two becoming one sits shrouded in secrecy; it surpasses the capacity of common intellect or understanding. As 1 Corinthians 2 expresses, mystery hints at God’s hidden wisdom, a thing which eye cannot see, nor ear hear, but which the Spirit can testify to our hearts is true. *Mystery*, as the American Webster 1828 Dictionary, the dictionary contemporary with Joseph Smith, suggests, is a “character or attribute of God . . . which is not revealed to man.” In the scriptures, Christ clearly states that “I and the Father are one,” and prophets similarly testify of unity as a godly characteristic (see John 10:30, John 17, D&C 93:3, and Mosiah 15). As members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we’ve interpreted this oneness to mean that, like the people of Zion, Jesus Christ and his Father are able to be one in heart and purpose—though distinct in personage. We allow the divine possibility of distinction amidst unity, and further accept the mortal possibility that we might achieve something similar in our relationships with others—specifically in marriage relationships.

Marriage holds a unique place in the church. Even beyond our polygamous heritage, our conviction that husbands and wives can be married for eternity, and that marriage is required for exaltation to Godhood, sets us apart. We conceive of God in terms of plurality, linking Heavenly

Father with a Heavenly Mother. We further believe, as Elder Holland has articulated, that marital intimacy “is the ultimate symbol of total union, a totality and a union ordained and defined by God.”¹ However, when it comes to unveiling how we are supposed to act in marriage, and why marriage matters to God in the first place, we are almost always referred back to Genesis 2:24 and its declaration of a husband and wife who cleave to each other to become “one flesh.” But what exactly does it mean to become one flesh? Can two become one in mutuality and equality without requiring an erasure of self and individuality?

Following in the steps of Paul, many writers during the early modern period grappled with these questions of “one flesh.” For writers such as John Milton, and even William Shakespeare, marriage was commonly understood as a reflection of Adam and Eve’s uniting flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones (Genesis 2:22), a reciprocal pairing. As Alan Macfarlane explains in his book, *Marriage and Love in England 1300–1840*, “the married couple are partners and companions; separated from kin, from children, from friends, yet united with each other, they form an indivisible and mutually supportive pair.”² Many early modern writers explored this concept of loving mutuality through language, which portrayed a giving and taking of selves.

In Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*—for example—Portia finds herself tongue-tied in explaining her love for Bassanio. In a puzzling statement, she says, “One half of me is yours, the other half yours—Mine own I would say—but if mine, then yours, And so all yours” (*Merchant of Venice* 3.2.16–18).³ At first, this statement seems confusing and antithetical to a notion of one flesh as mutually supportive. It may appear that Bassanio possesses all halves since Portia pronounces that “all is yours,” but considering the shared unity of companionate marriage, we can untangle the mystery. For if one half of their whole is Portia’s, the other is Bassanio’s, and both give of their selves (or halves) to the other, then both Portia and Bassanio possess all halves. It is a cycle of giving and receiving that never ends and never empties, with both sharing in the fullness of the other. As Bassanio “come[s] by note to give and to receive like one of two contending in a prize,” Portia reciprocates by committing “myself and what is mine to you and yours is now converted” (3.2.140–41, 166–67).

While this type of reciprocal vocabulary underlies much of the poetry, prose, drama, and religious sermons of the time, the mysterious concept of two becoming one continues to leave many contemporary early modern scholars disenchanted. They approach companionate unity seeking to unearth a suppression of asymmetry, and expose a homogenous patriarchal culture which required Eve (and all wives) to lose her identity. For many, the belief that two distinct people could become one flesh is a nice ideal, but impractical—if not impossible—in practice (especially

¹ Jeffrey Holland, “Personal Purity” (October 1998 conference address), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1998/10/personal-purity?lang=eng>

² Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England 1300–1840* (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 1987), 176.

³ Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. *The Norton Shakespeare* 3rd ed. Gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt. Norton, 2016. pp. 1339-1393.

in a patriarchal culture like Elizabethan England, or even in modern America). Inevitably, they believe, one of the two must lose their “self” in order to unite with the other, resulting in a lack of equality and freedom. The mystery, for them, is mere myth and pure misogyny.

And yet, contrary to popular belief, this two-in-one, companionate marriage model was not merely idealized in literature as a mystery to explore, but actually practiced in early modern England. Letters exchanged between husband and wife, and between those already betrothed, allude to marriage as the union of two people, a yoking. During 1538 to 1539, while absent on trial, Arthur Plantagenet (Lord Lisle) exchanged copious letters with his wife, Honor, in which he addresses her as “Mine Own,” “Sweetheart,” and signs himself – “your loving husband.” In response, Honor Lisle hails him as “Mine own sweet heart” and signs, “By her that is both your and her own.”⁴ Like Portia, Honor considers herself both her own and also her husband’s, a somewhat shared self. This idea is further confirmed in a letter from the couple’s friend, who writes, “because ye be both but one soul though ye be two bodies, I write but one letter” (qtd. in 196). What these letters spotlight for me is the the companionate nature of Honor and Arthur’s relationship, the real possibility of being one soul, but remaining twain.

But how exactly did Honor and Arthur accomplish that, and how can we do the same? That is the mystery still to be solved. The contemporary Romanian Orthodox priest and theologian, Dumitru Stăniloae, writes that “the great mystery of love is the union which it realizes between those who love each other, without their dissolution as free subjects. ... the two are not only thinking pleasurably of each other, but each receives the other into himself” (Stăniloae 310). Receiving another into oneself seems essential in becoming one-flesh, but it is only half of the equation. There must be a giving in return.

The Song of Solomon, often read as an allegory of Christ and his church, highlights similar reciprocal language found in the early modern literature—“my beloved is mine, and I am his” (see Song of Solomon 2:16, 6:3, 7:10). Although strongly possessive in tone, the combining to be “one flesh” paradoxically demands selflessness and deep loyalty. In 1998, while counseling the young men of the church to be fiercely loyal to their future wives, President Hinckley used comparable language to encourage spousal fidelity: “She will be yours and yours alone, regardless of the circumstances of your lives. You will be hers and hers alone. There can be eyes for none other. There must be absolute loyalty, undeviating loyalty one to another.”⁵ The arrival at oneness, in this case, necessitates becoming one flesh only with one other. As the people of Zion, we may be encouraged to become one mind and heart with a multiplicity of others, but when it comes to flesh, we are counseled to commit to only one.

⁴ Quoted in Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love*, 196.

⁵ Gordon B. Hinckley, “Living Worthy of the Girl You Will Someday Marry” (October 1998 conference address), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1998/04/living-worthy-of-the-girl-you-will-someday-marry?lang=eng>

Intriguingly, however, Orson Pratt used the notion of “one flesh” as a rallying cry in advocating plural marriage.⁶ Like the early modern writers, Pratt is puzzled by Paul’s discourse in Ephesians 5:28–31.⁷ However, instead of settling on companionate monogamy, he interprets these verses to evidence the plausibility for polygamy. Orson Pratt reads Paul’s epistle in a literal sense, that Eve was created from Adam’s flesh, but also in a metaphorical sense, implying that all wives could be one with their husbands through the covenant of marriage. Provocatively, Pratt claims that Adam and Eve were “one flesh in this respect, not in identity: they were two distinct persons, as much so as the Father and the Son are two distinct personages.” This distinction of identity is key for Pratt’s findings. He goes on to argue that if Adam and Eve were still independent identities, if Christ and the Father could be one and remain distinct personages, and if all believers were invited to be one with them without losing their individual identities, then this meant that the oneness of marriage could extend to more than just two people.

While Orson Pratt’s argument for polygamy pushes unsettlingly against modern sensibilities and feelings regarding marriage, I think his point is a fascinating one. It gestures toward oneness as a distinct aspect of God and marriage, positing polygamy as a method of unifying people together, sealing them into the family of God. Furthermore, it points to a belief that there might be a complete and fulfilling unification of persons, without the wiping away of distinctiveness. While I personally believe polygamy, as a practice, fell prey to misapplied Victorian concepts of marriage, Orson Pratt’s writings reveal that its purpose may have stemmed from a desire to be one, coupled with the belief that perfect oneness would not require a loss of identity.

Perhaps the mystery of God’s oneness is that it requires an expansion of self, instead of a loss of self. The marital incorporation of two into one should not produce a hermaphrodite— one breathing, thinking being resulting from the lustful amalgamation of male and female, void of all distinction—but an androgynous whole made of two people choosing together to form a unified “us” and “we” out of love and charity for each other. As Staniloae suggests, “It’s understood that the new image of the two together carries not only the traits of the one or the other, but is a synthesis of the two, so that it isn’t an egotistic victory of one ego, but of ‘ours’ over my or your egotism, and my, and your growth.”⁸ To become whole, then, we must give our selves, our feelings, and our thoughts into another and be willing to receive that other fully into our now open heart and mind. We must not believe that our self is lost, but found in another being, in the being of “us” instead of “me.”

⁶ Orson Pratt, “Polygamy” (A Sermon by Elder Orson Pratt, Sen.). Delivered in the Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, July 24, 1859. Reported by G. D. Watt. <https://jod.mrm.org/6/349>

⁷ “So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.”

⁸ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality : a Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar* (St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2002), 317.

Receiving fully means receiving all. It is in the acceptance of difference and distinction that we find the unity that permits us the freedom to love fully and be accepted wholly. John Zizioulas, the Christian theologian, believes that “if we love the other not only in spite of his or her being different from us but because he or she is different from us, or rather other than ourselves, we live in freedom as love and in love as freedom.”⁹ Similarly, President Henry B. Eyring has suggested that “a man and his wife learn to be one by using their similarities to understand each other and their differences to complement each other in serving one another and those around them.”¹⁰ For President Eyring, this method of love and unity practiced in the marriage bond is the exact manner in which we can unite with those who do not accept our doctrine but share our desire to bless the children of our Heavenly Father. I would further suggest that it might also set the pattern for becoming one within ourselves and with God. I lend my “amen” to Staniloae’s belief that “love for others grows from the habit of love for God and especially from living it as ecstasy on the culminating step of prayer, now love for God is made easier for us by the practice of loving our neighbors.”¹¹ Becoming one flesh with our spouse, and becoming one mind and one heart not only with our spouse, but with our neighbors, undoubtedly prepares us to become one with God in love.

Christ suggested that when we strive to be one, as he and the Father are one, we “may be made perfect in one” (John 17:22–23). As Elder Holland wisely said, “we may not yet be the Zion of which our prophets foretold and toward which the poets and priests of Israel have pointed us, but we long for it and we keep working toward it.”¹² We may not yet fully understand the mystery of God’s unity and multiplicity and why it is so important that we strive for it here on Earth, but we try to live it anyway. I, like the many poets and thinkers of the early modern period, grapple with the idea of oneness and try to solve the equation $1 + 1 = 1$. I try to decipher how a oneness with a spouse may be different, and yet entirely the same as my oneness with God and with others. The early modern female writer, Margaret Cavendish, attempted this in her own letters. She wrote:

My love to my husband was not only a matrimonial love, as betwixt man and wife, but a natural love, as the love of brethren, parents, and children, also a sympathetical love, as the love of friends, likewise a customary love, as the love of acquaintances, a loyal love, as the love of a subject, an obedient love, as the love to virtue, an uniting love, as the love of soul

⁹ John Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 10.

¹⁰ Henry B. Eyring, “That We May Be One” (April 1998 conference address), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1998/04/that-we-may-be-one?lang=eng>

¹¹ Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 324

¹² Jeffrey R. Holland, “A Handful of Meal and a Little Oil” (April 1996 conference address), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1996/05/a-handful-of-meal-and-a-little-oil?lang=eng>

and body, a pious love, as the love to heaven, all which several loves did meet and intermix, making one mass of love.¹³

For Cavendish, the divine oneness of marriage is boundless. It encompasses and engenders all kinds of love into one mass.

It seems to me that God provides us copious ways to practice this Godly attribute: we strive for oneness in unifying our spirits with our bodies to create a soul, in taking the name of Christ upon us and partaking of his flesh and blood inside us, in sealing our body and soul to a spouse forever, in sealing families together in one great familial chain, in communing together as the kingdom of God via worship, and in becoming one with God by submitting our will to his. Elder Holland teaches that any time we seek to attain this mysterious oneness, when we unite our will with God's, "at such moments we not only acknowledge His divinity but we quite literally take something of that divinity into ourselves."¹⁴ Marriage is, of course, only one part of the equation, but a seemingly essential one. We are taught that it is vital to our exaltation, to becoming Gods and Goddesses, and to understanding the mystery of One.

¹³ Margaret Cavendish *CCXI Sociable Letters Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious, and Excellent Princess, The Lady Marchioness of Newcastle*, 1664, pg. 394.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Holland, "Personal Purity." (October 1998 Conference address) <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1998/10/personal-purity?lang=eng>

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