

# God and the Family

## CHAPTER ONE

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## Background to the Book

In 1980 university lecturer Paul Marston was in his early-mid-30's, happily married for 10 years and with two children aged three and one. He wrote *The Biblical Family* (Published USA) and *God and the Family* (Published UK) because of a dissatisfaction with existing Christian books which seemed over patriarchal and/or too influenced by accidents of culture. The objective was to try to look at biblical teaching independent of particular cultural context, and reapply it in our own.



In 2000 Paul Marston has been happily married for 30 years, and his son and daughter are now also active Christians as adults and final year students at the Durham university. A special new edition of the book has been produced for the millennium year. This remains from a thoughtful evangelical perspective of the Bible – but also in a belief that biblical teachings ‘make sense’ even for those who have a different view of the inspiration of Scripture. It is also from a conviction that there are many misunderstandings of Biblical teaching both amongst those who believe in Biblical authority and amongst those who do not.



The book which to some seemed radical in the 1980's is now very much mid-stream amongst Christians – though very little of its core has had to be altered to meet changes in our culture. The author's views have moved slightly on issues of women in church authority, but in general little basic change should be expected in a book that sets out to discover from Scripture what is the divine pattern for humanity in general rather than to try to justify our present culture from it.

The book originally grew out of a dissatisfaction with existing material. The author went back to trawl through the local Christian bookshop again early in 2000, stimulated by an involvement in National Marriage Week. This brought surprise and disappointment that as far as concerned a basic framework of closely studied biblical material on these issues, there remained a paucity of literature. This has led to the revisiting and revision of the earlier work, in the hopes that it may still form a useful foundation of thinking.

## PROLOGUE

# Discovering True Humanity

**Reading: 2 Timothy 3:1-4,5**

“In the last days there will come times of stress. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it.”**(1)**

Thus the Apostle Paul censured nominally religious people who behave wrongly in their relationships with others. Whether his words apply more to our generation than to previous ones is beyond us to determine. The world, after all, has always had to endure religious people whose behaviour reflects a lack of genuine faith.

Our times may or may not be marked by more wrong *behaviour*; but they surely are marked by more debate about the delineation between what is wrong and what is merely a matter of custom or personal taste. Of course, thinking people have always recognized that *some* norms of any society are merely social custom, and deviations from such norms have no real moral significance. But there are those today who claim that many lifestyles departing radically from the “traditional” norm should likewise be regarded as matters of unusual personal taste rather than as moral issues. “Why”, they ask, “should we assume that the only right form of family life is a nuclear family of father, mother and children? Why not group marriage? Temporary alliance? Homosexual marriage? Might not adultery actually improve a marriage? What difference does it make to get married if you already have a good partnership? Other issues are raised by those in the women's liberation movement, who claim that much traditional thinking about marriage is based on a myth of male supremacy. “No self respecting modern woman”, they say, “could agree to accept a husband as head of the house, or give up all her rights to a career of her own”.

What is the Christian to make of all this? A few, professing Christianity but wanting to join the “liberty” bandwagon, have abandoned virtually all standards except a vague banner of “love”. Others, frightened by the tide of change, have clung tenaciously to a narrow patriarchal system which they were taught in their youth as “proper” family life, denouncing all other patterns as wrong. But most of us who are Christians avoid anything as extreme as either of these. Unconsciously, therefore, our minds and lives often become a centre for the warring influences of upbringing, secular fashion, and the teachings of

the Bible. Yet this last phrase, indeed, separates us from those who profess no faith. For we have an absolute standard of what is moral and right in family life. We do not need to rely on taste, intuition, upbringing, or fashion. Nor do we need to follow the common practice of the humanistically minded mass media and simply assume as though self evident some basic value judgements which are never questioned or made explicit. For we, unlike the secular world, believe that properly human family relationships are those which follow the pattern laid down by God, the Creator of humanity. We follow the design actually revealed to us by God. This becomes increasingly difficult as society (or at least its voiciferous leaders) has slid deeper into a postmodern relativism in the final decades of the last millennium.

Paul says, “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”<sup>(2)</sup> It is by the standards in the Bible that we, as Christians, should form our ideas and test our own life-styles. Within the framework laid down in God's revelation there may be much room for differences of culture, and within these wide limits we must tolerate any cultural differences within the world-wide church. But this basic framework for being “truly human” needs to be studied very carefully. It is all too easy to read into scriptural passages things about family relationships which are simply not there. In this way, it is easy to fool ourselves into thinking that our own cultural prejudices or ideas are God's standards for all true Christians. No one, indeed, can be sure that he or she is free from this problem. The present book, which is a close study of biblical teaching on family relationships, may well share the fault. But it has been written in a deliberate attempt to avoid it, checking and rechecking to try to avoid reading into the text rather than letting it speak to us.

This book, then, which originally grew out of a collaboration, attempts an unprejudiced study of scriptural teaching on family relationships. But there are two things which it does not attempt. It does not claim to be a comprehensive legislation giving specific instructions for solving every variation of family problem. Human situations are too complex and varied for this; in fact, the Bible itself does not attempt it. Rather, the book gives broad guideline within which pastoral counselling (under the Holy Spirit's guidance) is needed for individual problems. Neither does the present work attempt to present masses of case histories in the hopes that one or other may strike a chord and answer someone's need. This is a valuable thing to do, but there are other books which do it well. What has been attempted here is something that is, in a sense, more basic. It is to give the basic framework of biblical teaching, within which all cultural and personal variations in behaviour are equally acceptable in God's sight. Properly speaking, it is only within such a framework that the experience and case-history approach should illustrate for us the human possibilities.

In following such a study, it is essential to have clear in our minds the proper

approach to Scripture. We take the Old Testament as authoritative because of the witness of the Spirit to our hearts, and because of Jesus' own attitude toward it. When it says that God spoke to someone, we believe he did. But we must remember two things. First: many of the actions of its characters are reported without comment, God expressing neither approval nor disapproval. Great care, then, must be taken in drawing any conclusions about these. Take, for example, polygamy. It was practised by Abraham,(3) by Jacob,(4) by Samuel's father Elkanah,(5) by King David,(6) and many others. It was a part of the universally accepted culture of the times, and God never actually forbade it. But silence did not mean consent, and it is noteworthy that nowhere is God said to have commanded a bigamous union. From Jesus' teaching we see that polygamy is inconsistent with God's plan in Genesis.(7) God is a realist. His education of his people into standards of right and wrong was gradual; he concentrated first on the more important points, and did not expect too much at one time.

This brings us to a second point. Most of God's pronouncements were made to specific individuals at particular times. We must take great care in extending the implications of those commands to ourselves today. We see, for example, that Abraham was told to get a divorce,(8) Joshua to slaughter a city,(9) and Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman.(10) None of these are for us to copy!

But, granted that we wish neither to copy patterns laid down for others, nor to write them off as irrelevant, is there a third alternative? Yes, there is. We need to begin with a thorough understanding of the situation and context in which God spoke. In nearly every instance, advice is given within existing social constraints. The exception to this is the account in Genesis 1-3 of God's original intentions for man. The revelation of this, obviously, was made with no social constraints (other than the limits of our understanding). For this reason, the account is of paramount importance to our understanding of God's purposes in human relationships, and the present work relies heavily on it.

But in nearly every other instance, God's instructions are given with particular conditions in mind. When we have understood these, we need to try to discern some of the motivation for particular divine commandments. We need to try to relate them to God's unchanging ideal. This may, admittedly, not always be easy to do. Nevertheless, such an abstraction (if it can be called this) is necessary. Then, having made this abstraction, we may try with God's guidance to reapply the principles to our own society and culture.

A good illustration of all these principles is seen Jesus' view of Old Testament divorce law. When asked about this, what did Jesus say? First, he went back to the account in Genesis 1-3, which is the only statement of God's ideal for man outside of particular cultural contexts.(11) Second, he understood the particular context in which God spoke (i.e., in a society with many wilful and un-loving people).(12) Third, he discerned God's motives (i.e., to allow divorce as the

lesser “evil in such a society).(13) From all this he obtained an implied abstraction of God's principles (that marriage is ideally permanent, but divorce necessary in an imperfect world where sometimes things go very wrong in a marriage). Thus, finally he could reapply these principles in his own day (that divorce, *whether sought by man or woman*, was a serious step, not lightly to be undertaken).(14)

This is the kind of approach attempted in this book.

**New Millennium Note:**

Thanks are still due to my friend and co-author of many years Roger Forster who collaborated on early original drafts of this book. Thanks also to other friends, particularly to Steve Gaukroger who commented on it. Thanks above all to my wife and now adult family who are still teaching me about family life.

– *Paul Marston.*

**NOTES**

1. 2 Tim. 3:13.
2. 2 Tim. 3:16, 17.
3. Gen. 16:3, 4.
4. Gen. 29:21-28
5. 1 Sam. 1:2
6. 1 Sam. 25:43.
7. An implication from Mark 10:11.
8. Gen. 21:10, 12.
9. Josh. 8:2.
10. Hos. 1:2.
11. Matt, 19:4, 5; Mark 10:6, 7.
12. Matt. 19:8; Mark 10:5.
13. Matt. 19:8.
14. See Chapter 11 of this book.

## CHAPTER ONE

## On Being Human

**Readings: Genesis 1: 1, 26-3 1; 2:18-25; 3:15, 16**  
**John 1: 1- 14**

“In the beginning God...” So reads the majestic opening of the record of God’s dealings with us. In the eternity before our material world was made, there was a personal God. What do we mean by *personal*? The term, in a sense, is un-definable. Each of us experiences a material world (which we describe in physical terms of weight, length, atoms, etc.), and each of us experiences a personal or spiritual world (which we describe in the non-physical terms of love, hate, desire, right and wrong, etc.). Both realms are real (though, inevitably, there have been those who denied one or the other) and are connected together in ourselves. Yet they are on different levels, and the two kinds of ideas should not be mixed. What we mean by *person* cannot be defined in terms of the ideas and language of the material world, nor can it be described in terms of science (for these relate to the material world). The meaning of *person* relates to the personal or spiritual world, and it must simply be experienced *directly* as we become aware of our own self-consciousness and relate to other persons.

But the Bible does give some further guidance about what it means to be a person, as John sheds the richer New Covenant light on those first words of Genesis. He expands and parallels them thus: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made.... The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us.”(1) There is, then, an eternal “Word” or “Self-expression” of God the Father, and that Word became incarnate in Jesus. He was not created, but is the means of all creation. He is distinct from God the Father, though sharing the Godhead, and is in an eternal relationship with the Father. Before any creation, only the personal God existed; but an important aspect of that personhood was that God was a *social* being. It is not possible to be a person, in the true sense, on one’s own. To be a person means to relate to other persons.

What kind of relationship existed between the persons of the Trinity? We can understand something of this in seeing the relationship between God the Father and the Word made flesh in Jesus. What we there see is that each magnifies the other. (2) Jesus voluntarily follows his Father’s direction, even to the extent of making the Father his “God”.(3) But the Father seeks to glorify the Son, (4) and proclaims him “God” on his throne.(5) The Son has all things subjected to him by the Father, but in turn subjects himself to the Father - only to find that they are sharing the same throne anyway!(6) This mutual

self-giving is part of the essence of God who is love, and its result is a creative dynamism so that God is all and in all.(7)

Genesis 1 indicates that this personal God created our world. All the persons of the Trinity were involved. The phrase, “And God said...” indicates that God’s creation was done through a word, which the New Testament identifies as *the* Word which became flesh in Jesus.(8) During creation, the Spirit brooded over the face of the waters, from which life would be brought forth.’(9) The social nature of the person of God is reflected in this, and was extended when God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”(10) It was a joint decision arising out of the relationship of the Trinity, and the created image reflected that relationship: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.’(11) As though to emphasize that being personal implies being social in nature, God built in the most basic social relationship (the family) as an undeniable feature of humankind.

In any relationship there must be communication. A basic feature of the personal relationship, according to Genesis, is the use of speech in communication. The first thing God does in either account of the creation of man (or representative humankind) is to speak to him. The content, moreover, of God’s first speech to humankind is a moral command, showing that the communication concerns such concepts as right and wrong.(12) The second thing God does is to encourage man to begin to use his own powers of using words.’(13) To these words Adam (or “the man” since the Hebrew word *adam* does not become a proper name until at least chapter 4 and probably chapter 5 of Genesis)(14) associated concepts, consciously recognizing in his naming of Eve the difference in unity which makes up the marriage relationship for man.”(15)

The central point here is that we are *designed*. Men and women are not the result of any accidental development. God made us in his image, intending us to share relationships like those found within the Godhead. When, therefore, Christians speak of right or wrong actions or relationships, we mean those that do or do not conform to this design. There is, of course, much freedom left by God to humankind. God did not wish Adam to be a blind puppet. He wished them to be persons able to create and make decisions in their own right though within a general framework of God’s design for humankind.

Genesis graphically portrays this by showing God as offering all the trees of the garden *except one* for human choice. A tremendous range of activities were open to choose, so long as they stayed within the framework of self-sacrificing love relationships which reflect God’s nature. Yet humankind sinned and marred that image of God in them, with immediate consequences in those relationships. These consequences began with their family life, as the man and woman ceased to be open with one another; they ceased to be open with God;



**(16)** and they later found jealousy among their children.**(17)** The fall brought a need for redemption of a marred creation and marred relationships-a redemption found only in Christ.**(18)**

It is worth here exploring a little more what God says about the effects of the fall. To each of the three involved, God gives notice of his own judicial action and also of further consequences. God's words to the woman and man imply that, in particular, the fall will make much more difficult their two God-given tasks of "replenishing" and "subduing" the earth.**(19)** Let us look at God's pronouncements in reverse order.

To the man he says, "Because you have hearkened to the voice of your wife ...(and disobeyed me)... cursed is the `ground on your account in painful labour shall you eat of it..."**(20)** We should note several things about this. First, God does not say that man should *never* hearken to his wife. Sometimes it is right to,**(21)** but this does not remove man's own responsibility. Second, this is not an instruction to *adam*, but a prophecy. If we took God's words as an instruction to *adam*, it would be wrong to use farming aids! None of God's words to *adam*, *eve*, or the serpent are instructions; they are judgment and prophecy. Third, the Lord deals in generalities. Obviously, not all men labour hard; but the point is that in general the task of "subduing" the earth is made a very painful labour. The Lord knew that (historically) the woman's involvement with childbearing would leave the man with the brunt of this work. This is why (we suppose) this comment was addressed to him, although no ban was given on women working in agriculture.**(22)**

God's words to the woman are: "I will greatly multiply your painful labour and your groanings.**(23)** In painful labour you will bring forth children and your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."**(24)** In terms of labour and time, the woman has the major part in childbearing and - nursing. This aspect of family - the "replenishing" part of their task - will also be "painful labour".**(25)** There are also consequences of the fall in husband-wife relationships. It would be quite wrong to take God's words here as an instruction about husband-wife roles. The Lord is not instructing, but pronouncing judgment and warning. What does it mean? The word "desire"**(26)** means neither subjection nor (as some have said) insatiable lust. Its precise meaning is, however, debatable. One possible interpretation is that in the painful labour of childbirth and nurture the woman naturally turns to her husband. Yet instead of being a loving support, he "rules over her" like a despotic king.**(27)** Speaking prophetically and (again) in generalities, this has all too often proven true.

A slightly different interpretation might be made if we note the great similarity of the language here and in Genesis 4:7: "Sin lies at the door; its desire is for you, but you shall rule over it." Sin's way is to manipulate us, making us think that we are in control of when really it is possessing us. Cain

is told here to master and dominate it. If this were the meaning of God's prophecy to Eve, then it would have very often proven true. Women have often wanted to have manipulating possession of their husbands, and men to have a dominating mastery of their wives. This may bear some resemblance to what seems to have been God's plan for love and headship in marriage.(28) But it is a perversion of it, a marred image.

The other divine pronouncement, that to the serpent, which in the New Testament and throughout church history has been seen not just as a physical snake but as a symbol and embodiment of evil - as '*satan*' or the opponent to divine plans. God words to the serpent (which may be taken as to 'Satan', leaving the reader to decide whether this is a literal person or a symbolic embodiment) contains a germ of hope. God says, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall crush you on the head, and you shall crush him on the heel.'"(29) Through the woman, the designs or evil for humanity scored their first success, but through her "seed" Satan and his designs would be crushed. This prophetically refers to Christ.(30) Her seed (Christ) would confront "Satan's brood" (or the 'brood of vipers' as John the Baptist called some of those who later plotted against Jesus)(31) but the final showdown would be between Satan and Christ himself.(32) The bearing of "*the seed*", or "*the childbearing*",(33) was a contribution made by woman alone. This offers her (and us) the redemption of Jesus in the new humanity.

Christ was the second *adam* crushing Satan's head. But this second Adam is also collective-redeemed man restoring the full image of God in mankind.(34) The collective body of Christ would share in the crushing of Satan underfoot.(35) But its task would also involve restoring other parts of God's design. This means restoring an open relationship with God himself (through Christ). It means recognizing again the essentially social nature of humankind, in the family of the church. It means restoring in the new humanity the self-sacrificing love which exists in the Trinity, the living of others as oneself.(36) All these are restorations of the marred image of God in humankind. They will not be complete before Jesus comes again, but the New Testament makes it clear that we need to get to work on them now. And one of the most central aspects of this is the relationship between husband and wife. We have touched on the way in which the complete human unit of male-female in marriage was meant to reflect the Trinity. That love-unity was marred by the fall, but Christians seek by grace to restore something of that true image in their marriages.

We have so far concentrated on the social aspects of being human, for this is primary both to our theme and to Genesis. But what makes up a human individual? Our bodies, according to Genesis, are made of ordinary chemicals.(37) But mankind, like other animals, was given the "breath of life, and became a living Soul.(38) The word "soul" simply means "being". The

Bible does not say that man *has* a soul. Rather, man *is* an embodied soul or being, and that being is in the image of a personal God.(39)

Our discussion, at this point, still leaves unmentioned the “spiritual” side of the human individual. A person’s spirit is the aspect of him or her (i.e., of his or her true self or inner consciousness) that relates to God. As a result of sin,(40) our spiritual nature remains dead unless regenerated through God’s Spirit. The physical is born of flesh (including body and soul or being), but the spiritual is born of Spirit.(41) The power for this regeneration is, of course, through the work of Jesus in death and resurrection. Thus, it is written that the first man became a living being, but the Man Jesus became a life-giving spirit.(42)

The Christian’s life, then, is on three levels: physical (relating to his/her body); humanly personal (relating to the soulish side of his/her being); and spiritual (relating to the spiritual side of his/her being - i.e., relationship to God). The Bible never gives any reason for a person to be ashamed of being embodied. Allusions to “the flesh” often emphasize our human frailty, and that we should not let ourselves be ruled by bodily impulse.(43) The body, if given back to God,(44) is holy and pure, and its natural functions were part of his design. It is important only that we control it and not let it rule us. But, as the Christian knows, we ourselves should be led and directed through the Spirit.(45) The Christian, then, should always be aware of the spiritual dimension; he sets his mind on the things of the spirit.(46) To set spirit over soul over body is to be human as God intended.

Becoming a Christian is an individual thing; yet it has immediate implications for all human relationships. Henceforth no one is to be regarded on only a human level, but as a divine creation made in God’s image.(47) The close relationships between husband, wife, and children are now seen in this light, and the mutual responsibilities under God’s declared ordering are now recognized. General social relationships change, and in particular God adds the new believer to the church in a close union of spirit. All this is to become truly human; for it is the spiritual person who is normal, not the unspiritual.

To be truly human, then, is to be what God intended. It means being a spiritual person, born anew by God’s Spirit and attuned to spiritual realities. It means being a social person, reflecting the love of the Trinity in our relationships. It means being family person, reflecting in that most intimate of relationships the unity of the Trinity - one unit in several persons, It means showing ever more clearly the image of God through his redeeming power in our lives.

## NOTES

1. John 1: 1, 2, 3, 14.
2. John 8:49, 54.

3. John 20:17.
4. John 13:31-32.
5. Heb. 1:8.
6. 1 Cor. 15:28; Rev. 22:3.
7. 1 John 4:8, 16; 1 Cor. 15:28.
8. John 1:3; Col. 1:16.
9. Gen. 1:2.
10. Gen. 1:26.
11. Gen. 1:27.
12. Gen. 1:28; 2:16
13. Gen. 2:19, 20.
14. See Roger Forster and Paul Marston *Reason Science and Faith* (1999) p. 284ff.
15. Gen. 2:23..
16. Gen. 3:7-8.
17. Gen. 4:5.
18. Gen. 3:15.
19. Gen. 1:28.
20. Gen. 3:17-19 (a literal rendering).
21. See God's words in Gen. 21:12.
22. Prov. 31:16; Ruth 2:3.
23. The *LXX* (ie early Greek translation) rendering of it as "groanings" is adopted since the usual modern rendering of the Hebrew has no obvious sense and would be an odd phrase to use.
24. Gen. 3:16 (literal).
25. The Hebrew word translated "painful labour" is used to man and to woman (*LXX* has *lupe* in both).
26. Used only in Gen. 3:16; 4:7; Song 7: 10. (*LXX* uses "turning").
27. See, e.g., "rule" in Isa. 19:4; Dan. 11:3
28. See chapter 7
29. Gen. 3:15 (literal).
30. We may take this as Paul (Gal. 3:16) takes the later word to Abraham.
31. Matt. 12:34; 23:33.
32. Gen. 3:15, last two clauses.
33. 1 Tim. 2:15.
34. 1 Cor. 15:22, 45.
35. Rom. 16:20, but note the active agent.
36. Matt. 19: 19.
37. Gen. 2:7.
38. Gen. 2:7; 6:17; 7:15. also see 1:21, 24 (creature = soul).
39. On this see See Roger Forster and Paul Marston *Reason Science and Faith* (1999) ch 3.
40. Rom. 7:9; Gen. 2:17.
41. John 3:6.
42. 1 Cor. 15:45.
43. 1 Cor. 9:27; cf. Phil. 3: 19; see also Acts 2:17; John 1: 14; 1 Tim. 3:16.

44. Rom. 12: 1; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20.
45. Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:18.
46. Rom. 8:6; Col. 3:1, 2.
47. 2 Cor. 5:16.
48. Acts 2:47.

Discussion One

# On Being Human

**Readings:** Genesis 1: 1, 26-31; 2:18-25; 3:15, 16  
John 1: 1-14

**Thought:** Christianity is the only world 'one-God' religion which sees God as inherently relational because God is a Trinity. The special wife-husband relationship involves a deep 'knowing' of each other, which is part of their reflection together of the image of a trinitarian God: 'Let us make humankind in *our* own image... male and female he created them...'

## Discussion Questions

1. How far did previous generations lose the biblical understanding that both male and female are fully in the image of the personal God, and how far has this generation recovered it?
2. What forms society's images of what it means to be a rounded and fulfilled person?
3. How far does our own image of what it means to be a rounded and fulfilled person relate to
  - ❖ Influences in society?
  - ❖ Views in our church community?
  - ❖ The example of the person of God?
  - ❖ The bible teaching on what we were intended to be?
4. How far does the meaning of human love relate to divine love?

## CHAPTER TWO

# The Basis of Marriage

**Readings: Genesis 2:18-25**  
**Ephesians 5:21-23**

The fundamental starting point in Christian thinking is that God designed us to behave in a particular way, and that a central part of this design was that we should bear the image of God. As remarked in the previous chapter, the image of God in the family was marred when Adam and Eve sinned, and Christian marriage attempts to restore that image. What is the image?

God is a Trinity of Persons, dwelling in a unity of Godhead. Each Person of the Trinity has his own will, and yet each seeks in a love relationship to magnify the other. Thus, each member of the Trinity glorifies the others.(1) When God said, “Let us make man in our own image.... In the image of God he created him; male and female he created them”,(2) he showed that he intended marriage to reflect a similar love-unity of more than one person.

Genesis 2 takes a second look at the creation story, with a particular emphasis on the position of humankind. Man was given a very wide choice of activity in Eden, but one thing God did *not* intend for him was self-sufficiency. God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a *helper* fit for him.”(3) The word “helper” is most often used of God himself as a “helper” of his servants, and is also used to mean “ally”.(4) It never means a servant or an inferior, but speaks of a comradeship of an equal or superior. The phrase “fit for him” (“meet for him” KJV) is literally “corresponding to him”. This re-emphasizes a comradeship of equals. It was this specifically *human* kind of intimate comradeship which God said it was not good for man to lack. This was in spite of man’s capacity to relate to the lower animals, and in spite of his undoubted spiritual capacity to relate to God himself. For all the wide choice of life-styles available to man, he had a definite lack of a particular kind of intimate companionship. He lacked the companionship of two allies, where each is a source of comfort and strength to the other. He lacked a close relationship with one who was as fully in the image of the creative God as himself, and so had creativity, individuality, and ideas on a level with his own.

The next part of the account (though the differing chronology from Genesis 1 shows its writer did not intend it to be taken “strictly literally”) shows just how much God wanted to enter a dynamic *relationship* with man as a friend. He wanted man to *invent* names for the animals. He also wanted an awareness of a need for human companionship of a particular kind to spring up within man himself. The account of the way in which God took a rib (or literally “side”) to make woman has two allegorical meanings: God took something

*from* man's side, to make a companion to be *at* man's side, for this is the kind of companionship man lacked. But having taken a part of man's side, God "closed up the ... flesh", leaving man incomplete. Woman was not designed to be a duplicate man, but to complete what is missing in man and to add far more. Man and woman are alike, yet different. Masculinity and femininity coexist in all of us, as they do in God himself. But ideally the femininity should predominate in a woman and the masculinity in a man. Together, in the married unit, the perfect balance can come, as the two mingle into one.

This has further implications. First, concerning the unmarried. To remain unmarried may be best for some people or in some circumstances (see Chapter 12). This was, for example, true of Jesus himself. But there will always in these instances be a loss, a missing of the kind of intimate human companionship which God said it was not good for man to lack. The unmarried or celibate state is not to be exalted for its own sake. Neither, we should note, is a true male identity or true female identity to be found in isolation. The self-sufficient male is not truly male, nor the self-sufficient female truly female. True liberation then, for either sex, means finding an identity in relation to the other.

A second implication is that only the married man-woman couple (the basis of what is now called the "nuclear family") can form a complete and balanced human unit. Any form of polygamy, group marriage, homosexual marriage, etc. cannot do this. The "one flesh" such a unit would form would not be a complete "body", but a monstrosity. Genesis itself goes on to draw out this implication. It is *because* woman and man make a complete unit that the nuclear family is God's norm. It is because a man recognizes that the woman makes up the missing part of him that God expects him to seek a wife. So Genesis says, "Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh."<sup>(5)</sup>

What exactly does it mean to leave and cleave?" The word "leave" is a strong one, meaning a definite abandonment or forsaking. The word "cleave" is the same as that used when the Bible says that Ruth "clung to" Naomi.<sup>(6)</sup> In that context, it meant not only that Ruth had an emotional attachment to Naomi, but that she determined to make her connection with Naomi stronger than any other and to operate as one social and economic unit with her. Her words to Naomi indicate a total sharing of faith, people, and destiny.<sup>(7)</sup> This is what is involved in marriage. At the time of marriage, the couple deliberately sets out to make the marriage tie stronger than all other family connections. They commit themselves to live together as one social and economic unit. This "leaving and cleaving" is absolutely essential.

It is better if the "leaving" is physical, setting up a new physical home together. But, more important, it is an emotional and mental "leaving". In a Christian family, a single person's natural close ties are with his parents and family. This may mean that they are his closest confidants. But more



fundamentally, it means an identification with the family unit involving a mutual commitment to stick together for better or worse. Close friends may share and confide, but seldom have that kind of commitment. At marriage a person's main emotional orientation and commitment changes to the new marriage partner. This is leaving and cleaving.,

But Genesis goes beyond the leaving and cleaving to say, "and the two shall become one flesh". What does this mean? Paul interprets it in two ways. At one level he sees it as sexual intercourse - as when he says that sexual intercourse with a prostitute, in a sense, makes her "one' flesh" with her client.(8) But he also sees a deeper meaning. He says, "Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies.... For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it.... For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."(9) "One flesh" means that the partners see each other's bodies as extensions of their own. This implies, of course, that socially and economically they must be one unit, in a much more fundamental sense than in any other relationship such as that of Ruth and Naomi or of, say, close flatmates. Two parts of one body are unlikely to keep separate financial and social relationships. But seeing each other's bodies as extensions of their own must also mean a total physical intimacy, a lack of embarrassment at each other's nakedness.

This aspect of a totally open relationship is seen in Genesis 2:25: "The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed." The openness was marred at the fall,(10) but it can be restored in Christian marriage. The Christian husband and wife have total physical intimacy. Moreover, the physical also symbolizes an openness on a deeper level of "baring their souls" to each other. They should be sharing thoughts and ideas, ambitions and aims together. They should be telling each other their reactions. Yet we must remember *since* the fall to add that openness means "speaking the truth *in love*", as Paul says. If that is true in a church situation, how much more so in marriage? Any criticism made should be constructive and accompanied by indications of unqualified love and acceptance. The aim of openness is to build up, to encourage, to help.

The essence of marriage, then, is leaving, cleaving, and oneness of flesh. Marriage is not exalted by being spiritualized; and a marriage which has spiritual unity without the biblically emphasized unity on the physical and social level is not really a marriage at all. Spiritual unity is essential to all Christians who work together-especially in as close an association as marriage-but it does not constitute the essence of marriage as stated in Genesis.

The relationship of marriage is compared in two ways to that between God and his servants. In one analogy, God is seen as a husband and his covenant with Israel as a kind of marriage vow. He longs for the pure love of his spouse, but fickle Israel is continually going astray after illicit loves.(11) Yet he is

willing to receive her back even after her unfaithfulness, as a loving husband forgives the wife who repents.(12) The other analogy is contained in the word “helper” used in Genesis 2.18, 20. In the other nineteen instances of its use in the Old Testament, three times it means “ally” and sixteen times it is used of God himself as “helper” of his servants.(13) They look to God to give them (as a wife gives her husband) guidance, help, and comfort.

The husband-wife relationship is compared by Paul to the relationship between Christ and the church. Christ and the church, like the marriage partners, are pictured as one organic whole, but in each case there is a difference of role. Husbands are to head the unit as Christ heads the church. But husbands should, on this basis, be prepared to make themselves servants of their wives as Christ made himself the servant of the church. This is the secret of the kingdom of Heaven. The one with any authority is thereby made the greater servant, yet without losing that authority.(14)

Moreover, the headship of Christ over his church does not mean that he smashes his followers’ personal identities. God leaves us a wide choice of creative activity within his plan for us (as he left Adam a wide choice of trees in the garden). Likewise, the headship of the husband should never mean that the wife has no individuality or choice of creative activity. The husband should love the wife as his own body, and so of course will wish her to fully develop her potentiality in her own way. She is his companion and “help” or “ally”, not his slave. There will be self-sacrifice, not domination, as the husband loves his wife and wishes he to develop fully as a person and she him loves and respects him his concern for her wishes.(15)

The question of the difference between man and woman’s roles in marriage will be looked at later. But it is interesting to note here that the New Testament teaching about man’s headship is not at all specific in Genesis. At most, it is hinted at in Chapters 2, 3, where Adam seems to be God’s first point of contact with the unit. But the emphasis is on the companionship and unity intended, *not* on the headship of the unit. Perhaps this aspect could only safely be made explicit after Christ’s demonstration to us of *what* headship implied. This we will look at later.

As far as the method of selecting a partner is concerned, the Genesis account is silent. In many countries even today, it is the parents (especially the father of a daughter) who are responsible to choose even if with the girl’s consent. This was the practice in ancient Israel, as also in Greece. It is referred to in Old Testament legislation,(16) and in Paul’s advice in a particular situation,(17) but it is neither encouraged nor condemned in Scripture. Our modern Western custom of the couple choosing for themselves also applied to certain groups in the New Testament.(18) But the *principle* of marriage itself evidently does not depend on how the partner is selected. *A* mutual attraction is a good start for a relationship, but is not the basis of a marriage. Romantic love

is a wonderful and exciting thing, but is not the foundation of marriage. A feeling of compatibility is a useful asset, but is not the basis of marriage. The basis of marriage is mutual commitment, a deliberate “cleaving together” as one unit. Husbands are *commanded* to love their wives, and wives to love their husbands.(19) This is not a command to have a particular feeling. It is a command to act in a particular way-to forge a relationship of openness and sharing and caring in which the partner is seen as part of oneself. This is even an art which can be taught!(20)

The basic truth about marriage is that it is a commitment to work together to sort out any differences in an attitude of mutual love and respect. This is a commitment without reservation; it is not something one can enter into on a trial basis to see if one’s feelings change later. There can, of course, be extreme circumstances which cause a change in that commitment (insanity, cruelty, etc.); but this is not merely a question of changing feelings, but something far more drastic. The norm is that marriage is for keeps, and that within the security of a committed caring relationship, romantic love can flourish and feelings can grow. But the romance and feelings depend on the commitment, not the other way around.

## NOTES

1. John 8:49, 54; 13:31, 32.
2. Gen. 1:26, 27.
3. Gen. 2:18.
4. See Note 13.
5. Gen. 2:24.
6. Ruth 1: 14
7. Ruth 1: 16, 17.
8. 1 Cor. 6:15, 16
9. Eph. 5:25-31.
10. Gen. 3:7
11. E.g., Isa. 1:2 1; Jer. 3, especially v.20; Ezek. 23, especially v.5; Hos. 2:16-19; 4: 10.
12. Jer. 3:11-13; Hos. 2:19, 20.
13. *Of God*: Ex. 18:4; Deut. 33:7, 26, 29; Ps. 20:2; 33:20; 70:5; 89:19; 115:9-11; 121:1, 2; 124:8; 146:5; Hos. 13:9.  
*Of allies*: Isa. 30:5; Ezek. 12:14; Dan. 11:34.
14. John 13:13, 14.
15. Eph. 5:33; Titus 2:4.
16. E.g., Ex. 22:7
17. 1 Cor. 7:36-38
18. 1 Cor. 7:39.
19. Eph. 5:25; Titus 2:4
20. Titus 2:4

Discussion Two

# The Basis of Marriage

**Readings: Genesis 2:18-35  
Ephesians 5:21-33**

**Thought: Christianity is the only world 'one-God' religion which has a model for the married unit within God himself. Marriage should surely therefore be all the more precious and sacred to Christians.**

## Discussion Questions

1. Do people today fully grasp what the Genesis account meant when it said 'A helper fit for him'?
2. What does it mean practically to 'leave and cleave'?
3. What can we learn about marriage as a love-cemented one-body relationship from the picture of Christ and his church?
4. How far does modern society see 'commitment' as the basis of a marriage? What other things may be seen as its basis.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Positive Sex

**Readings: Genesis 2:18-25**  
**Song of Songs 3:4, 5; 7:6-12**  
**1 Corinthians 7:3-5**

A too common view of the church's attitude to sex is that of the sociologist who wrote, "The traditional Christian doctrine has stressed the inherent sinfulness of sexual behaviour."<sup>(1)</sup> This may be a sweeping and rather naive statement, but unfortunately it is not totally without justification. When the church, as centuries rolled by, began to lose many of its original New Testament teachings, a number of false ideas about sex were introduced. St. Augustine, for example, taught that the sex act was always shameful, and its sole motive should be to produce children. Both these unbiblical ideas lingered on far too long. The shame over the sex act is reflected in Victorian prudery, while the overemphasis on procreation may have influenced the priorities implicit in the old marriage service which made marriage, "First ... for the procreation of children ..."

But we must insist that the Christian view of sex be judged by biblical teaching, not the mistakes of past theologians. God's own stated motives for creating woman (i.e., for creating sexual difference) was for her to be a "helper"<sup>(2)</sup> or "comrade" to man. She was, therefore, created as a sex partner first for mutual help and companionship, to make partnership an essential part of being human. The production of children was a secondary feature of sex, for God saw sexual intercourse as an expression of and part of the oneness of companionship and intimacy of marriage. The very phrase, "Adam knew his wife Eve" shows that sex was seen as a way of knowing more intimately; it was the language of companionship.<sup>(3)</sup> In English we sometimes speak of sexual intercourse as being "intimate", and this is precisely what it was intended to be.

Sex was intended to be within marriage, and in this context Christian marriage (through divine grace) is to restore the picture of marriage intended in Eden. God intended them to 'cleave' back into one body, and to 'multiply'. Sexual enjoyment was intended, and the sin in Eden cannot have been anything to do with sex since there was no one else around with whom to have it illicitly! At that time, Adam and Eve were unashamed before each other, and likewise the married couple need have no shame in showing each other their bodies. This unashamedness should also extend to talking about sex openly to each other – neither physical nor mental fig leaves are necessary! A loving couple will want to know what gives their partners pleasure – and should ask.

There is, of course, nothing whatsoever shameful in the sex act itself within marriage, for “marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled”.<sup>(4)</sup> The Bible always sees sexual enjoyment within marriage as pure and good. For example, the language of the Song of Solomon is in no way inhibited as the lovers describe and long for each other’s bodies. The Song of Solomon is, on one level, an allegory about Christ and his bride, the church. But this makes it all the more remarkable how unashamed the writer is of sexual enjoyment. The girl longs to be in a love position, lying with her lover’s left hand under her head while his right hand caresses her.<sup>(5)</sup> The man longs to lay hold on her breasts as on clusters of ripe grapes.<sup>(6)</sup> This is in keeping with the advice given in Proverbs to “rejoice in the wife of your youth.... May her breasts satisfy you always; may you ever be captivated by her love.”<sup>(7)</sup> This kind of passionate lovemaking is heady, strong; it makes lovers say that they are “sick with love”.<sup>(8)</sup>

Marital sex is not only high, holy, and sacred. It is not just passionate. It is also meant to be *fun*, for this is a part of companionship. The King James Version captures this rather nicely when it speaks of Isaac “sporting with his wife”,<sup>(9)</sup> a good rendering of the phrase used. Take sex too seriously and it can become a chore—either a religious duty or else a kind of religion in itself, with all the dreary modern preoccupation with technique rather than relationship. God meant it as a thing of fun, to be shared by two people who love each other.

Sex is to be enjoyed. Paul’s advice in 1 Corinthians 7, for example, sees sex as something man and wife want to share because they enjoy it. The context of the passage is not at all concerned with producing children, but with giving each other the mutual pleasure of sex. We see, moreover, that Paul is just as concerned that the man not rob his wife of her enjoyment as that the wife not rob the husband of his.<sup>(10)</sup> It never seemed to have occurred to him that sex might be something to be enjoyed only or primarily by the man. The Old Testament likewise assumed sex to be pleasurable to both sexes, and the woman in the Song of Songs is as enthusiastic as the man and longs to make love. Those people and cultures who have seen sex as something to be enjoyed by men and borne patiently by women have been taking an unbiblical and unspiritual attitude. The equality of sexual enjoyment expected today is just catching up with the biblical view, not abandoning it.

Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 7 have other implications as well. The mutual enjoyment of sexual activity is to be suspended only for special purposes and by mutual agreement. It should never be withheld as a punishment, nor given as a reward; to give sex in return for other benefits would be a form of prostitution within marriage. Sex is a sharing in order to know each other more intimately. It is to be given freely from both sides as a symbol of continuing marriage commitment. It cannot, of course, replace a verbal openness, nor be used to paper over the cracks of an uncommitted relationship. But it can help one say, “I care, I am committed” at times when putting this into words might

be difficult. Also, the language of “giving” sex is significant. Those genuinely in love usually experience a desire to give themselves.(11) This is the opposite of lust, which seeks to take gratification at any cost. To truly give conjugal dues, as Paul says, means that one is concerned that the other person’s sexual enjoyment be complete. Husbands, as we have seen, should be as anxious about their wives’ sexual enjoyment and fulfilment as wives are about husbands’.(12) As for any times of temporary abstinence., these are strictly restricted to short times of special prayer if *both* partners are in full agreement.(13) Other than that, the giving of oneself in the sex act, as in the giving of oneself in the marriage commitment, is a command. It does not depend on feelings, though certainly any normal marriage will find the deepest feelings stirred by it. Sex is about giving, but not about demanding rights.

The Bible says very little about what is permissible in married lovemaking and what is not. Its only specific prohibition is on intercourse during menstruation. This ban, seems intended generally, for it is not given in the context of Israel’s ceremonial laws, but rather comes in a list of sins (e.g., incest and homosexual acts) for which the *Canaanites* were censured.(14)

It is, however, the only specific piece of biblical guidance on right or wrong in marital love practices. Some general points, though, are clear enough.

Since the wife owns the husband’s body and vice versa,(15) there is obviously no cause for shyness or embarrassment. The lovers in the Song of Solomon admire each other’s naked bodies. It is also clear that, to them, caressing was a normal part of lovemaking, and there seems to be no reason why such caresses should not extend to stimulating the sex organs if both partners enjoy this. Similarly, the Song of Songs seems to imply that the couple enjoys open-mouthed kisses.(16)

What about stimulation of sexual organs using the mouth and tongue? Even in the early eighties, an American survey showed 77 percent of Christian ministers and 73 percent of Christian doctors saw nothing wrong in married couples doing this (technically, cunnilingus and fellatio).(17) Some Christians have found it unacceptable, though one wonders how far this is based on upbringing rather than theology. Since the Bible itself says nothing about it, it is perhaps best regarded as a matter of personal conscience.(18) Sex should be fun, and variety of activity may help. There has, of course, to be some kind of line between variety and perversion. It is hard, for example, to see how any sado-masochistic practice could be seen as a part of a healthy mutually pleasuring lovemaking. But Christians will have to work out for themselves the exact line. If they can’t talk to God about it, then avoid it, if they can then ask him.

Two more points need to be made.

First, whatever activity goes on, both partners must have a clear conscience over it, and one should not become impatient with the other's scruples or try to override them. This is both because in the love act selfishness has no place, and because it can often lead to guilt which harms both the sex life and the relationship in general. The second point is that whatever forms of love play are held, a climax God surely intended was when the man's sexual organ enters that of the woman (in a visible symbol of the oneness of flesh), and leaves something of himself there (symbolizing the fact that their intimacy has left permanent marks). Surely this God-given climax to sexual love should play a central part in the many and varied activities lovers may enjoy – though it need not happen in the 'missionary position'!

It may, perhaps, be useful to distinguish "making love" from "having sex". The focus of someone "making love" is the other person; the sex is a beautiful and gratifying expression of that love and commitment in sharing. The focus of a person "having sex" is the sex act itself and the techniques of maximizing physical satisfaction. The Christian is convinced that it is more deeply satisfying to make love rather than merely to have sex. Within the positive commitment of marriage, making love can be a time of fun, enjoyment, and sharing, free from any anxiety about sexual success or failure. This is even true for newly married couples. Practical sexual experience before marriage may give better technique, but at the expense of devaluing sex and perhaps also leaving a legacy of guilt and mistrust. It is a far greater thrill for the newly married couple to explore love making together, with their focus on each other as they do.

Yet, though we should recognize all this, there is no reason to value ignorance for its own sake. Lovemaking was meant to be mutually physically satisfying, and married lovers owe it to themselves and to their partners to learn the basic facts about the working of their bodies in this respect. Courting couples should know something of this, to avoid unnecessary temptation of their, courting partner. Ideally, both partners will be virgin when they make their commitment to each other in marriage, but they should know something about how sexual pleasure works before they actually begin their sex life together. It is not something which will 'just come' afterwards, nor can it be gained by reading the Bible and praying. The Bible is not a sex manual any more than a cookery book, but there are adequate other books which cover both!<sup>(19)</sup> Usually today the problem is more likely to be an overload of sex information rather than a lack, but the point is that such information is in itself good in the right context. A balance should be sought: the focus is on love, sharing, and having fun not on technique – but knowledge can be help in this.

## NOTES

1. Stephen Cotgrove, *The Science of Society* (England: Allen & Unwin, 1972; U.S. edition 1978), n.p.



2. Gen. 2:18.
3. Gen. 4:1; Hebrew *yada* is normal word for "know."
4. Heb. 13:4, KJV.
5. Song 2:6; 8:3.
6. Song 7:8.
7. Prov. 5:18, 19.
8. Song 2:5; 5:8.
9. Gen. 26:8.
10. 1 Cor. 7:5.
11. 1 Cor. 7:4; Song 2:16; 6:3; 7:10, 12.
12. 1 Cor. 7:3, 33, 34.
13. 1 Cor. 7:5.
14. Lev. 18:19, 26; 20:18, 23; Ezek. 22:10.
15. Eph. 5:28-31.
16. Song 4:11.
17. Tim and Beverly LaHaye, *The Act of Marriage* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1976), p. 276.
18. Rom. 14:23.
19. We recommend Tim and Beverly LaHaye's *The Act of Marriage* (Zondervan, 1976), but choosing cookery books is more a matter of personal taste.

Discussion Three

## Positive Sex

**Readings:** Genesis 2:18-35; 18:12; 26:8  
Song of Songs 3:4-5; 7:6-12  
1 Corinthians 7:3-5

**Thought:** God designed sex, so possibly he knows how we can best enjoy it.

### Discussion Questions

1. What kind of idea do most people in society today have about the Christian/Biblical view of sex?
2. How much is there a generation gap today, especially within churches, about embarrassment in talking about sex?
3. Is it right to talk as openly about sex in a church context as the Bible does in the Song of Songs?
4. In what positive ways can married partners seek to discover how to enhance each others' pleasure in sex? Does it matter?

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Dating and Choosing a Partner

**Readings: 2 Corinthians 6:14-16**  
**1 Corinthians 13**

This chapter deals with two different but related issues: dating and the role of sex within it, and the process of selecting a marriage partner which in our Western culture also involves dating.

People ‘date’ at different stages in their lives, and the issues are not all the same. In the first stage dating is not seen as a possible preliminary to marriage. It is simply for present boy/girl companionship/enjoyment. This can be in early and mid teens, but as more go on to higher education may be later as well. In thinking about this, we may strongly disapprove of ‘good old days’ thinking, but we should still be aware that some social changes have taken place. In the closing decades of the twentieth century the average age for first marriage went up. At the same time, the average age for first sexual intercourse in this country fell (from 19 to 17), and since this is just an *average* it means that much larger numbers of young people are sexually active from a much younger age. Sexual expectation may therefore be strong before permanence of relationship is really a consideration. At the same time even general magazines are now full of sex-talk, sex technique, and ways of gratifying with or without full intercourse. Moreover, surveys tend to show that Christian young people differ little in this from the unchurched. What are churches doing?

Unfortunately, many churches seem locked in a fear of saying *anything* either from embarrassment or from nervousness of parental comeback. In days when young people get sex education from secular schools – and in explicit magazines passed around the playground – we are too nervous to speak out in anything but veiled terms. The minister is more likely to be embarrassed by talk of a ‘blow job’ than the younger youth group. If churches do address it, all that many can offer is legalism: don’t do it because the minister/parents/Bible/God says not. This kind of ‘authoritarianism’ works less and less effectively in a society increasingly taught to question. So what can be said?

The Bible does give us certain basic guidelines about sex. Firstly, as explored in the last chapter, sex is a good thing. God invented it, and he meant us to really enjoy it throughout our married lives. Secondly, sex is best enjoyed as part of that deep knowing which comes from total commitment. For bible-based Christians, full intercourse outside a committed permanent partnership is ‘wrong’, but it is wrong because real love involves a deep caring for the welfare of the other. Sex is meant for and best enjoyed by those who ‘really care’ for each other. But ‘really caring’ means waiting until real commitment to

each other is possible. There is a big difference between ‘having sex’ and ‘making love’. God wants what is best both for the young person, and the one with whom they may think of having intercourse. This should be the focus rather than mere gratification – whether self-gratification or gratifying the lust of a girl/boyfriend. Love involves commitment.

This, however, leaves a lot of questions. As already mentioned, whilst girl/boyfriends of (say) 16 may be aware that *some* childhood sweethearts do go right through to get married, this is not often much in their minds. Theirs is what we may call ‘social dating’. Since this simply did not exist in Bible times, the Bible offers us no direct guidelines for it, so what can we say about it?

Some past books have suggested that ideally such dating should be confined to going out in groups. Not only is this wildly impractical in our present culture, but it is not necessarily desirable. It can be useful for boys, and girls to get to know each other, and to discover more of the way that the opposite sex thinks in their particular culture. This may be more difficult in a group. There is also the problem that in communities where people choose their own partners and social dating is discouraged, there is likely to be much more pressure on a young couple who do date to extend courtship all the way to marriage. We have known young couples who were pressured in this way, when really it would have been better to have broken it off. It is dangerous to start married life feeling trapped into it. Rather than risk this kind of outcome, it may be better to encourage social dating even though it may bring its own problems.

What are the primary objects of such social dating? The objects may be social normality, companionship, and pleasure. Dating should, of course, involve affection. Certain types of physical contact (e.g., holding hands, linking arms, or the “holy kiss” (1)) are seen in a particular society as symbols of affection rather than as “sexual”. Social custom will dictate the normal contexts for such actions. We rightly enjoy doing them, but their object is not sensual gratification. In our culture, then, some physical contact between boy/girlfriends is accepted. The more difficult issue concerns physical contact which is quite definitely linked to sexual pleasure. Couples kiss with passion not primarily as a symbol of affection but because they enjoy the kissing itself. So how far should they go, short of full intercourse? Prolonged kissing? Dry riding? Naked embraces? Mutual masturbation? Full blow jobs? Many Christian parents of ‘exemplary’ youth might be surprised at what is actually going on – whilst churches are too shy to speak of such things.

There are no obvious clearcut lines. Any physical contact with an attractive member of the opposite sex, even if mostly ‘symbolic’ of affection, is likely to be pleasurable. On the other hand, to the Christian no contact (even in marriage) should ever be *only* for physical gratification without also being a symbol of affection and commitment. Perhaps some sensible basic guidelines could be as follows:

1. Specifically *sexual* enjoyment must clearly have been intended to be expressed within a married relationship.
2. The focus should be on what is best left until in a committed partnership, rather than what one can legitimately ‘get away with’
3. The more explicitly sexual the contact, the better it would be to leave it until with one’s life partner.
4. All mutual pleasuring should be in a context of care for the boy/girlfriend, and not purely a selfish gratification or based on emotional blackmail.

Faithfulness in committed partnerships does tend to be an ideal for many secular couples, and restraints on unfaithful casual sex accepted. But it is less fashionable to urge restraints for couples who are ‘not serious’ but where sex would imply no unfaithfulness to some other established partner. Some may conclude that if we urge such restraints we are prudes or harbour some deep sexual psychosis. But we are simply trying to look beyond what happens to be fashionable in Western society today, to the basic ideas of sexuality as God designed them. Young Christian boy/girlfriends may be confident that God wants for them the best out of their sex life – but that he takes a longer view of things. Self restraint is not an end in itself, but a means to greater fulfilment – and this applies in sexuality as in many other things.

Let us now move to consider the distinct but related issue of moving into finding a permanent partner. In Bible times, the choice of a marriage partner was generally the function of the parents. Yet, we should note several things about this. First, it is not in any way a part of the fundamentals of marriage as given in Genesis for this to be so. It is not, therefore, necessarily a desirable method, even if it were possible to copy it for our Western society today. Second, there are clearly many departures from it in the Bible itself. Jacob chose Rachel himself because he fell in love with her.(2) Moses seems to have made a heroic impact on Zipporah (perhaps because she had already had an even more devastating effect on him!) and eventually he married her.(3) Ruth seems to have selected her own second husband, though one may suspect that the Lord had a hand in it! Saul’s daughter, the princess Michal, fell in love with the dashing David(4) and was eventually given to him in marriage. Of course, not all the Bible characters who chose their own partners made a wise choice. One thinks of Esau and Samson.(5)

What criteria were used in choosing a partner? One clear criterion is that the one chosen should share the faith of the one choosing. Abraham and Isaac both emphasized this, and Solomon, Samson, and Ahab showed the folly of ignoring it.(6) Paul makes the point in a graphic analogy: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? ... What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?”(7) This really is a common-sense command. The picture is of an ass and ox yoked together on a plough. The two animals have so different a gait and movement that such a partnership would lead to chafing and irritation, and so is forbidden in

Deuteronomy 22:10. This is what happens in the marriage of a keen Christian to an unbeliever. Their life-style and direction in life are so different that it leads to chafing and irritation. More specifically, one of three things may happen. One is for the keen Christian to live a quite separate life from his/her partner, which means that the true and deep sharing of life in marriage is missing. The second is for the unbeliever to become a Christian, which can happen, but cannot be counted on. The third is for the keen Christian to become merely “nominal”. For this reason, though Paul makes it clear that if someone becomes a Christian he or she should stay with an *existing* unbelieving partner, **(8)** the Christian should not *choose* one who does not share his or her faith.

A second point which is clear is that a Christian should seek guidance from God. This was shown in Genesis 24:14 when a wife was sought for Isaac. The Christian is one who has said to God, “Your will be done in my life”; (s)he is God’s servant. But we should look carefully at this. God has a general plan for each our lives, but he does not want puppets. He wants to be our Father, not our puppet-master. A good father has a general view of right and wrong within which he wishes his children to act. A father will gladly give advice to his children if asked, but no good father wants to crush originality and creativity in his children. He wants them to create their own beautiful things. Of course, when they are babies they may have to rely very much on his continual advice. But he hopes that they grow into daughters and sons, who talk to him about various matters, but who create for themselves. In fact, he is likely to incorporate into his room decoration, say, some of their paintings which were not originally in his mind at all!

God is a good Father. If we talk to him about any little thing, he will be pleased to chat. But he really does not want to decide for us what colour wallpaper to choose. We may call ourselves his “slaves”, **(9)** but he himself calls us his ‘sons’ **(10)** his ‘friends’. **(11)** God’s final plan for a new humanity is, of course, unalterable by any human act of will. But part of that plan is that the individuality of those who serve him will be worked into the final “new Jerusalem”. *Each* Christian will show a different facet of Christ. This is like the Temple in the Old Testament. It was David’s idea, not God’s, yet God worked it into his plan and purpose and accepted, the Temple as his own. God did slightly redirect the building of it (asking that it not be built until Solomon’s day), but this shows the dynamic of the situation. **(12)** God wants (incredibly enough) to be a co-worker with us. **(13)** His plan for our lives is worked out in a two-way relationship.

These are fundamental points about the Christian’s relationship with God. But the specific application of these principles to the selection of a life partner must depend on the cultural setting. The great majority of Christians today (at least in Western cultures) choose their own life partners. How then should they choose? The basis of marriage is commitment, not compatibility; yet it

obviously does make things easier if the couple have interests in common and naturally find pleasure in each other's company. Since we do choose our own partners, the obvious way to decide whether these features exist is by some kind of exploratory friendship or contact. But the *kind of* contact which is proper must depend to some extent on the cultural setting. In many cultures, however, it involves some kind of dating, and it may be useful here to think about this. We will, on this as some previous matters, find little or no direct biblical guidance on this, since their culture was really different and most of the issues did not arise.

There are stages in life where young man and women (or older single people) are aware that a date could turn out to be a permanent partner. If they are Christians they should be praying that the Lord will guide them in their forming relationship. But they need not expect a sudden visionary 'yes' or 'no' on whether this might be the right partner for them. One of the ways in which the Lord may guide is for them to begin to see some kind of basis for a bond, or to see a basic divergence of interest which indicates that other better partnerships could be formed. The advice of respected Christian friends or pastors may help, though it should be treated with care. An inner conviction may grow, either that the relationship should continue to develop or that it should stop. Perhaps the Lord will even answer, "Yes, that's fine if you really like each other." But there is a danger in expecting too firm an answer too quickly. Ironically it is the spiritually immature who need the most definite guidance (as with any sons or daughters); but it is the spiritually immature who would be the most likely to mistake what God is saying if they are looking for something dramatic. Sometimes they think that they have received a yes answer in the first week; but as their relationship develops, it becomes obvious that they are, really unsuited. This can lead to heartache, hurt, and perhaps even loss of faith or resentment against God when the thing eventually runs into serious problems.

We cannot limit God, though he may sometimes give quick and definite guidance. The more common pattern, we believe, is that a couple may begin to go out together and gradually get to know each other better. At each stage as it develops, three things increase. One is their openness with each other mentally. They confide their thoughts to each other more and more. The second is their commitment to each other. The longer mutual confiding increases, the more they feel committed. The third is physical involvement. At some stage, either it should become clear that they love each other and will carry on to the ultimate commitment on all three levels in marriage, or else it will become clear that marriage is not right for them after which, the sooner it is broken off, the less hurt will come. But there is a delicate balance here. Some kind of physical affection is natural as the other two aspects increase. But if it outstrips the other two, then it can only be harmful and may even prevent true closeness from developing. It may also "run away with them" and lead them far deeper into sexual exploration than they intended, leading to guilt and perhaps a feeling of

commitment based on the physical rather than a love which is based on personality.

In a sense this is a social dating with added potential for permanence, and many similar guidelines may apply. It is also a good idea for a young Christian couple to pray together, and if they cannot obtain peace about their actions they should stop. A further thought should be whether they would mind if the (as yet unknown) person they will one day meet and marry were at that moment doing similar things with someone else. Unfortunately, however, we all tend to underestimate our jealousy over such things. But what is certain is that after marriage, any sign of affection and love will be more precious if it has not been shared with a number of previous girl/boyfriends. It may be difficult to picture this at the time of a hot-blooded early courtship, but countless numbers of married people can testify from firsthand experience that it is so. In this sense, some self-control during the short years of early boy/ girl relationships can help to preserve an enhanced view of sex for all the later years of married life. The modern “liberation” in sex may lead to much less enjoyment of sex in the long run.

The one guiding principle which is clear above all others is that in all friendships and relationships we must be aware that a girl/boyfriend is a *person*, not a “thing”. When we become Christians, we should never again see anyone else simply as an object, but as a spiritual being for whom Christ died.**(14)** Our new orientation is to think of the welfare and happiness of others rather than ourselves.**(15)** If we are to love others as ourselves, we must imagine ourselves in their place and act accordingly.**(16)** All these things apply with even greater force in boy/girl relationships. A Christian should be careful (without getting conceited) that the girl/boyfriend is not getting too involved, when the Christian her/himself has no serious intention, A Christian should never exploit another for sensual pleasure, or for the social normality of having a girl/boyfriend, when the other person gains nothing from the relationship. The Christian laws of love must operate here in every respect.

We will leave to the next chapter the issue of pre-marital sex, ie sex between couples committed to each other but not yet married.

## NOTES

1. 1 Thess. 5:26; Rom. 16:16.
2. Gen. 29:20.
3. Ex. 2:16-22.
4. 1 Sam. 18:20.
5. Gen. 26:34, 35; Judg. 15, 16.
6. Gen. 24; 28; 1 Kings 11: 1, 8; Judg. 15, 16; 1 Kings 16:3 1.
7. 2 Cor. 6:14-16; 1 Cor. 7:39.
8. 1 Cor. 7.



9. Rom. 1: 1, Tit. 1: 1; Jas. 1: 1; 2 Pet. 1: Jude 1; Rev 1:1 (servant = slave, Greek *doulos*).
10. Rom. 8:15-17 (that the term 'sons' applies to females as well here can only be to emphasize their equal status in the kingdom).
11. John 15:16.
12. 1 Chron. 17:1-12.
13. 1 Cor. 3:9.
14. 2 Cor. 5:15, 16.
15. 1 Cor. 10:24; Phil. 2:4.
16. Matt. 19:19., Luke 6:31.

## Discussion Four

# Dating and Choosing a Partner

**Readings: 2 Corinthians 6:14-16  
1 Corinthians 13**

**Thought: Yesterday, today and forever Jesus is the same – but society may change and bring new and different pressures on people living in it. We need more than ever to discern the essential from the purely cultural.**

### Discussion Questions

1. **Who is more embarrassed in your church talking about sex, the youth, the youth leader or the pastor?**
2. **How can a church take seriously dealing with sexual teaching for its young people without upsetting anyone? Is it better just to do nothing and leave it to schools, peer groups and parents (do they talk to their parents?)**
3. **What should we say to a young person who asks: “If we like each other and would enjoy it why shouldn’t we go as far as we can without actually having sex?”?**
4. **Abraham did not just ‘leave it up to God’, he actively sought a bride for his son. Should the church today be doing more to put christian young people in touch with each other – or would this be ‘unspiritual’?**
5. **Is a Christian dating agency a modern equivalent to arrangement marriages in bible times?**

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Marriage and Wedding

**Readings: Genesis 2:18-25  
Deuteronomy 22:22-29  
John 2:1-10**

According to Genesis, the essence of marriage is the decision of a man and woman to leave their parents, to “cleave together”, and to become “one flesh”. As we have

seen, this involves:

1. a commitment to set up a single social and economic unit;
2. so close an identification with each other that the other person's body is seen as an extension of one's own;
3. the development of intimacy, of "knowing" one another, one highlight of which is in regular sexual intercourse.

These three points seem to be the essence of what the Bible means by "marriage". But in most societies there is also a specific wedding ceremony in which the initiation of a marriage is proclaimed and/or registered. Is this essential to marriage or not?

In Western culture today this is no academic question. Increasing numbers of couples in our society are living together as committed partners but without 'marrying' ie without going through a wedding ceremony. Sometimes this may be because they 'don't believe in marriage', sometimes because they are waiting for divorce, but most often it is as a kind of prelude to a marrying officially. What should be our attitude toward such arrangements?

In considering this, we should note that the essence of Christian marriage is the same for all human societies; it is the three points given above. But the wedding ceremony can, quite validly be different in different societies; the Bible gives no instructions about wedding ceremonies. It might, however, be useful to look briefly at what usually happened in Jesus' society. There, the first step was usually for the parents of the bride and groom (though not without their consent) to negotiate a "betrothal",<sup>(1)</sup> This could be done in three ways:

1. by a ceremony in which the groom handed the bride a small coin;
2. by a drawn up betrothal contract;
3. by the bride and groom beginning to live together.<sup>(2)</sup>

The first two of these were the usual ones, and the third, though valid, was considered blameworthy. In a normal betrothal, the bride's father would provide a feast, and the groom would give him a betrothal gift. From that time, the couple were considered as bound to each other, and could even be called "man and wife",<sup>(3)</sup> though at this time they had neither had intercourse nor lived together. The actual wedding came some time after betrothal, and consisted basically of the bridegroom conducting the bride in a procession from her father's house to his own, at which there would be a feast.<sup>(4)</sup> A benediction would be said, but the ceremony was primarily legal rather than religious. The focus was not on any kind of "magic formula" without which a marriage was invalid, but on a dramatic portrayal of the simple act of leaving father and mother and cleaving to a spouse. Thus, when Jesus said "What God has put together let no man separate",<sup>(5)</sup> his emphasis is more likely to have been on the reality of married life than on the ceremony of wedding as creating divinely sanctioned bond. Paul actually confirms this by applying Jesus' words to

marriages contracted under pagan ceremony;(6) so clearly it was not the religious aspect of the ceremony which made it “valid”.

This background is useful as we consider the relevance of various Old Testament laws for today. Those laws, of course, were designed for a particular society. Like any society, it contained imperfect people and existed in a less than ideal culture. Jesus himself said that the divorce law was to allow for imperfections in Israel’s society.(7) He also indicated that in God’s ideal, there should really be no hint of the implied double standard for men and women which had existed.(8) Thus, no one could or should advocate a simple copying of the Old Testament laws into a modern culture. What we should try to do is to understand the principles involved, and how these relate to God’s most basic statements of design in Genesis. Then we can try to reapply these principles into our own society and culture.

We find that in Old Testament times, adultery was viewed very seriously and was punishable by death. This was because it implied the breaking of a permanent relationship. The sole exception was in the case of rape, where only the man was punishable.(9) But we find that sexual intercourse between two consenting single people was not seen in the same light. Rather, it was seen as a kind of betrothal (albeit blameworthy). Thus, provided the girl’s father agreed, the couple had to go through the formalities of wedding and become man and wife.(10) If marriage was not agreed on, then the man was fined.

The details of these laws relate to that particular society. The necessity of the father’s agreement (assuming that any normal father would love and care for his daughter) was for the protection of the girl in a culture where she would be the weaker party. But the principles, though not the details, of these laws can be applied today. Those who commit adultery are breaking God’s fundamental design for a marriage to be a unit. Although Jesus could forgive such people,(11) he saw this as a serious sin (12) Similarly, those indulging in casual sex (fornication) were seen by Jesus as committing serious sin (13) by treating lightly one of God’s greatest gifts to us. But those couples who do share a committed, caring relationship, without being legally wed, cannot be seen (if we follow the Bible’s guidance) in the same category as adulterers and fornicators. If we follow the Old Testament attitude to unmarried lovers, we see them as having established an unauthorized bond, but their sin is primarily social rather than sexual. Society has a right to know (through an accepted public ceremony or sign) when a new man-woman social unit has been formed. But though some kind of wedding ceremony or registration is important to society (and has benefits to the couple as well), it is not the essence of marriage. The essence is leaving and cleaving”, a mutual commitment to live as one unit. It is possible for a couple to” experience such one-unit commitment without going through any wedding ceremony. The wedding ceremony is not some kind of ‘magic’ without which a partnership cannot work. It is also possible for a couple to go through a wedding ceremony

without ever really making the emotional commitment to each other. Thus, one couple experiences the reality of a marriage relationship without being wedded, while the other becomes wedded without ever experiencing a real marriage partnership. This is the difference between marriage and wedding. Wedding is a public pronouncement; marriage is the reality of a committed relationship which society rightfully expects to be announced through a wedding. Our understanding, then, of the Bible's teaching is that a couple living together in a committed permanent partnership without being wed are committing a social rather than sexual wrong.

Now as we turn to our own western society (in particular in Britain), there is actually increasing confusion about marriage and wedding from a social and legal viewpoint. At one time, a wedding initiated what was expected to be a permanent partnership and had legal status – whilst living together had none. Now, however, established partnerships have increasing legal status and establish rights eg to share property, adopt, or inherit tenancy. In a sense, society is coming to regard such partnerships as a kind of 'marriage'. On the other hand, wedding vows are seen in some special sense as violable without loss of integrity. So if a politician breaks a solemn promise made on his wedding day, or deceives a spouse whilst committing adultery, this is not a problem and he can stay party leader or foreign secretary – presumably because 'everybody's doing it'. If he lies about who paid a hotel bill he can go to prison. Bizarre. But it all means that there is no simple line anymore between what is a legally recognised and permanent partnership (ie a 'marriage') and what isn't. About 25% of U.K. first marriages now take place after cohabitation, which is therefore more a celebration than a 'rite of passage'.

So does this mean that it is acceptable to forget all about wedding ceremonies? Certainly not. The wedding ceremony (whatever form it takes) has a number of important functions:

Rightfully, a wedding ceremony should not be (as it too often now is) just an opportunity to show ostentatious wealth for a partnership which has existed for several years. It should be a 'rite of passage' in which friends and family can give prayers, presents and good wishes for the setting up of a new partnership – recognised legally by society.

The wedding is (most fundamentally) a declaration to society that the couple are henceforth one economic and social unit. Henceforth, a reference to "my wife" or "my husband" immediately conveys the relationship. Today the term 'partner' is freely applied to mean something like the same thing – though it is not always clear whether the partnership is intended as permanent or not. The wedding lets others also know that the two are now committed to each other, and so no longer open to approaches by anyone else.

The wedding also makes it totally clear to the couple themselves that both are making a commitment to a permanent relationship. It is all too easy for any of us to forget the exact content of a privately made promise, but publicly made wedding vows cannot be forgotten or ignored. There can be no misunderstanding between the couple about the nature of their bond – even if society chooses to adopt double standards about the violability of such promises.

To the Christian, the ceremony is a declaration to God (actually around 2/3 of first marriages are still religious ceremonies – the percentage is not dropping much). It is also an opportunity for friends to come and pray for the couple concerned, and the practice of bringing gifts to a wedding helps the couple to set up a home surrounded by practical tokens of caring friends.

The ceremony also definitely and clearly secures the various legal rights of the partners, for example to inherit in the event of the other's death. This is another side to the issue of letting society know that the new unit has been formed – and in our view society should expect it.

Most of these are positive reasons, and should be approached positively. But even if the couple do not wish to be positive, the Christian believes that society has a right to know of the new unit. This is the implication of the Old Testament law we considered.

So why, with so many positive reasons for wedding, do so many want to live together without it?

In some cases, of course, there may be legal or financial reasons, but let us address the majority for which there are not.

For those who are pretty sure that they are setting up a permanent partnership, we can really see no sensible reason for not declaring this by registering a wedding – even if just at a registry office.

Perhaps other couples may be less sure that they are into a permanent arrangement. Sometimes it is suggested that living together provides a kind of “trial marriage”, but there are a number of problems with this. Firstly, it doesn't actually work - statistics clearly show that those who get wed after living together are more likely to get divorced than those who do not, and those who just live together are more likely to split than those who have officially married. Secondly, a marriage is, by definition, a firm decision to *be committed* to the new partner. It is not a kind of feeling which might wear off, but a commitment to learn to love each other in a practical way. One cannot make a trial commitment; one either makes it or one doesn't. The Christian does not regard people as pawns whom fate might make compatible or incompatible, but as responsible beings who and choose together to let love

grow. If ‘compatibility’ is a potential problem, then a sensible approach to engagement is as likely to show this up as living together.

All this offers a biblical basis for a balanced Christian view in a society where unwed partnerships are now common, but where wedding is to be valued.

For Christians, then, the “leaving and cleaving” of *Christian* marriage will normally imply:

1. setting up a new relationship, with emotional commitment ‘stronger than any other’;
2. setting up a new social and economic unit;
3. having regular sexual intercourse;
4. making a declaration (in “wedding”) to society that this new bond exists.

To a Christian, “getting married” should surely involve all these things in some form or other, whatever culture (s)he lives in. If a couple lack any of the four things when they become Christians, then they should put this right before entering the fellowship of a church. This much seems clear. But what of a couple where one seeks release from the tie? Which of the four things should be regarded as crucial and binding? In our view, there can be no simple “codified” legal answer to this, and the Bible does not give one. It is a matter of moral discernment on individual cases, and any simple rules suggested are in our view misleading. Take, for example, the suggestion that only the wedding ceremony really binds. St. Augustine lived for fourteen years with a faithful mistress, having everything but the legal ceremony. Surely if ever moral responsibility to legalize the tie existed, it did then? It surely cannot have been right for him simply to throw her out, to marry a younger virgin of higher social standing after his much publicized conversion? A moral responsibility can surely exist without the ceremony?

Yet, at the other extreme, we cannot agree with those who say that in every case where sexual intercourse has taken place (or perhaps in every case where the girl is pregnant) the couple are morally bound to marry. If we look to the Old Testament law for guidance, we find that in such circumstances the Lord did *not* command marriage as the only decent alternative, but left it to the discretion of the girl’s family.<sup>(14)</sup> This particular emphasis was related to the customs of the time, and a need (in a culture where women were underprivileged) to protect the weaker party from exploitation. But it does show that sexual intercourse in *itself* did not constitute a morally binding tie – they were neither regarded as already married nor legally bound to become so. This fact should be recognized, however we reinterpret the rule for our own society. Whatever our views on a case of this kind, we must remember that it begins from a situation already less than ideal. It is a question of discerning what will be the “lesser evil” and to some extent this must be culturally based. In our culture, we choose our partners and often delay marriage for various

reasons. Thus, while a couple who have had sex in a casual relationship should be encouraged to *consider* marriage, an unwanted marriage resulting from immoderate social pressure may well create a resentment which makes it a failure. Such situations, therefore, call for careful discernment in pastoral counselling, not a rigid legal ruling.

The last question to consider is one sometimes asked by engaged couples. "Since", they say, "we really are already committed to each other, then surely it is as though we are married, and it is all right to have sex before the wedding ceremony?" In answering this, we must admit that sex in such circumstances is not to be classed with casual sex or adultery. There are, however, good reasons why on two major counts such premarital sex should be avoided. The first is the possible effects on the couple themselves. Even assuming that they are both absolutely clear that they are entering a permanent commitment and so "feel" already married, there may be a lingering feeling in one or other partner that what they are doing is wrong. This can cause suppressed guilt, which can adversely affect their later relationship and even lessen their later sexual enjoyment. They must recognize, moreover, that however much they themselves feel committed, others in our present society will not see engagement as a permanent commitment. This means that if they are open about their sexual activity, this is very likely to bring unnecessary disrepute on the gospel. The alternative choice is for them to keep their actions secret, and so begin their sex life together in concealment and fear instead of the openness and joy which God intended for them. Experience has so often shown that the pleasure of the stolen moments of premarital sex is simply not worth the legacy of nervous guilt which it can leave in the mind.

But there is a second count on which premarital sex should be avoided. This concerns not the individuals, but society and others. If they themselves have indulged in such activity, then they can hardly (without hypocrisy at least) advocate general avoidance of pre marital sex. This could, in the short run, influence others into following their lead when it would be much more clearly wrong. Paul says that law of love in such circumstances means that the Christian should avoid leading others into sin. But their attitude could also, in the longer run, contribute to a changing of standards in society as a whole, so that premarital sex became more common. If it did indeed become general practice for "serious" couples, then there would certainly be many cases of misunderstanding between couples about the permanence of their commitment. This is exactly what the public vows of a wedding ceremony avoid. There will also (human nature being what it is) be many more cases of people being deceived and used by members of the opposite sex who really have no intention of marrying them. The norm of restricting sex to those who are "properly" married is not an arbitrary device of God to prevent people from enjoying themselves. It is a wise provision for fallen human nature, to lessen emotional suffering and increase fulfilment by protecting and directing. Any action which lessens the force of such a wise norm is, in our view, wrong. Even



if the couple themselves are not affected, it is a selfish act in view of its contribution to changing the values of society.

None of this implies any lack of sympathy with young engaged couples today and the pressures which they may face. For two young people very much in love, a long engagement can be a great strain. But if this is the case, then the answer is not premarital sex, but earlier marriage. Paul fully recognized the power of passion, but instead of suggesting surreptitious sex he said, “It is better to marry than to burn.”<sup>(16)</sup> Alas, often Christian parents today say it is better to burn than to marry. Reasons for this reversal of Paul’s advice vary. It may be to wait until the couple stop being students, or get a job, or can afford an ostentatious wedding. None of these reasons are good. Today, for example, students often share flats anyway – so a married couple can do this as well as flatmates. If a big white wedding is important, then why not have a registry office job quickly and a church blessing ceremony when funds allow? This would be better than putting your Christian couples under pressures which often lead to surreptitious premarital sex, and sometimes pregnancy (especially if the sex is unpremeditated but they get ‘carried away’).

In summary, it is possible to experience something of the commitment of marriage without going through a wedding ceremony, though there are good reasons for preserving weddings. But it is also possible for a couple to go through a wedding ceremony without really understanding what God intends in marriage. This may be more respectable, but it is hardly any less a violation of God’s plan. The norm for the Christian is to have both. We need the ceremony, but we must make sure also of the reality of marriage. Ideally, a couple wed as virgins, with the wedding setting up a lifelong committed ‘one-body’ partnership with the prayers, good wishes and presents of friends seeking the blessing of God on the couple. The present writer experienced it and can recommend it – it’s a realisable ideal even today.

## NOTES

1. Gen. 34:12; Ex. 22:17; 1 Sam. 18:25.
2. *Mishnah Kiddushin* i: 1, see also secondary sources: Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Life* (Grand Rapids. Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974); Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1973; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); K. E. Keith, *The Social Life of Jew in the Time of Christ* (London: The Church’s Mission to the Jews, 1959).
3. Matt., 1: 18, 20.
4. Gen. 24:67; John 2: 1 -11.
5. Matt. 19:6; Mark 10:9.
6. 1 Cor. 7: 10; see Chapter 11 of this book.
7. Matt. 19:8; Mark 10:5.
8. Matt. 19:9.

9. Deut. 22:25-27.
10. Ex. 22:16, 17; Deut. 22:28, 29.
11. John 8: 1 -11.
12. Matt. 15:19.
13. Matt. 15:19.
14. Ex. 22:16, 17
15. Rom 14:15.
16. 1 Cor. 1:9.

## Discussion Five

# Marriage and Wedding

**Readings:** Genesis 2:18-25  
Deuteronomy 22:22-29  
John 2:1-10

**Thought:** Having the essence of marriage – a lifelong, loving, partnership – may be more important than have the outward form but in a loveless relationship. Fortunately we don't have to choose – God wants us to have both the essence and the outward form!

## Discussion Questions

1. How should we regard those of friends and acquaintances who are cohabiting? Is it different from being promiscuous?
2. What would you say to your son/daughter/friend who says:
  - “We know we love each other and know we are committed, so why should we get married”
  - “I know people who got married and it killed the relationship”
  - “We have an open relationship. Each of us wants to be free to leave if we want”
3. What would you say to an engaged couple who say: “We really love and are committed to each other, so it's like being married really – in which case why shouldn't we make love?”?
4. What can churches/parents/friends do to help lessen strains of long engagements? Can we take Paul's advice about burning with passion (1 Cor 7:9) seriously?

## CHAPTER SIX

# Sex and Purity of Mind

### Readings: Philippians 3:17-19

Lust, pornography, and masturbation are issues which at one time or another concern most men and not a few women in their desire to be “pure in heart”. This chapter tries to look at the moral issues involved, and to think about the line between the acceptable and unacceptable roles of sex in our thought processes. As Christians we look, of course, to Scripture for our knowledge of what is right. Yet on these issues, as many others, we need to take care to avoid reading into Scripture anything which isn’t really there.

The issues will be dealt with in two sections.

### LUST AND PORNOGRAPHY

Jesus said that whoever looks lustfully at a woman has already committed adultery with her in his heart.<sup>(1)</sup> “Lust” is not a legitimate longing for sex with a spouse or fiancée, but for someone unavailable. To “lust” does not mean simply that one is aware that such a person is attractive, but that one longs for sex with that person and perhaps even daydreams about it. Since it is only the opportunity and not the intention which is lacking, Jesus rates this as sin.

The most obvious way to define “pornography” is “a written or pictorial representation which induces lust”. From our point of view, it seems of little importance whether it is mass-produced or “art”, in films or glossy magazines, is serious” or “commercial”. It is the effect which matters. When Jesus spoke of lusting for a (married) woman, he obviously thought in terms of a real woman, not a picture. So how can we apply this to porn? Lust for a photo is more abstract than lust for the girl next door – but the pictures still treat real people as mere sex objects. The desire is for the person in the picture – not the picture itself – and Jesus’ comments surely apply. Today pornography is an increasing problem. Erotic photographs (with explicitness illegal in the UK) are freely available on the internet, where involvement lacks the element of premeditation and risk of being seen which might deter the purchase of magazines. On the other hand, normal mens’ and womens’ magazines in newsagents can carry cover pictures which are more erotic (though clothed) than the ‘soft porn’ on the top shelf. Purity is harder than ever – yet Jesus words about lust are not cancelled because they are difficult to follow.

There are also, perhaps, more ‘grey areas’. A painting, or more likely today a computer generated moving image, can be of no particular person. Is it ‘lust’ to harbour sexual arousal based on such pictures? For a married person it may

well be, for it would involve sexual desire for ‘someone’ (even imaginary) other than a wife. But what of the unattached person who fantasizes being married to the person portrayed? Whilst it may seem a poor substitute to the real thing (though computer simulations will become increasingly ‘real’ and interactive) can we say that it is wrongful lust? Written material is also a more complex issue. Where it portrays promiscuity in graphic detail, it must surely encourage the reader to fantasize himself or herself in similar situations. This would be wrong. But some erotic literature might portray marital lovemaking. It would be hard to argue that it was sinful to imagine oneself in a situation of married lovemaking. Admittedly, it might be inadvisable for the unmarried reader to dwell on pleasures at present denied them. Also, *some* erotic literature could leave too high an expectancy in *some* married readers. But some erotic literature might encourage married couples in expressing marital love. In other words, erotic literature need not necessarily be pornographic. The Song of Songs is not pornographic but it is certainly erotic. Perhaps the bottom line is whether or not a particular situation of desire based on visual or verbal images involves desire for illegitimate sex, and whether such activity is conducive towards real partnership sex. The problem, for example, with a computer simulated playmate could be that unrealistic expectations are engendered.

A different form of pornography is what the Bible calls “foul talk”(2) or “filthiness, silly talk, levity”.(3) Some people (including some television comics) think it sophisticated to make continual sniggering references to sex. It reminds us, perhaps, of the giggling immaturity of children who have recently found out about sex, but are not old enough to understand the loving marital relationships in which it should be used. Of course, sex can sometimes be funny, but to harp on it in this fashion soon removes it from any context of love and sharing and degrades it to a merely animal act. The Christian knows that some people approach sex on a level of animals, but would rather dwell on things which are positive, pure, and lovely.(4)

## MASTURBATION

Masturbation is defined as a deliberate stimulation of sexual organs, which leads towards or into an orgasm. Stimulating oneself or one’s partner during sex can be a normal part of lovemaking, but we are here referring to it as a solitary exercise. In this context it is not referred to in the Bible in any explicit way. Some have tried to include it in the word “uncleanness”, etc.,(5) but this begs the question of whether or not it is unclean. Others once tried to read it into a condemnation of Onan’s failure to raise seed for his brother,(6) or into “abusers of themselves with mankind”.(7) Neither are in any way relevant. The absence of any clear biblical directive seems to have become generally accepted by Christian authors by around the 1980’s.. Yet there was still a wide divergence of opinion on the issue itself, ranging from total rejection to qualified acceptance in some situations.(8) Even in today’s ‘liberal’ climate, the question still troubles many people and often comes up in counselling; so it

will be useful to consider it carefully here.

We might begin by taking a look at the reasons advanced by those who claim that masturbation is wrong in itself, irrespective of its context or its effects on the person doing it. Some comments can be made on each reason suggested.

1. *“Is it unnatural?”*

This argument obviously hinges on the meaning of “unnatural”. We believe that basically it implies a departure from God’s plan for Nature, which he himself regards as unacceptable. Could this apply to masturbation?

God’s stated design in Genesis 2 implies that he intended marriage to be the norm for mankind. Ideally, then, all adults would have regular sex in marriage. But we do not live in an ideal world, and it is for God to tell us which alternatives are acceptable as a “least of the evils”, and which are unacceptable violations of his design.. Homosexual activities for example, were pronounced wrong and unnatural by Christ’s apostle.(9) But, on the other hand, the single state is one we all pass through, and Jesus and Paul both imply by word and example that to *remain* single may sometimes be the best option in a less than ideal world.(10)

An unmarried person, however, or an unavoidably separated spouse, cannot follow God’s intended norm for regular sex in marriage. So what should he or she do? To sublimate the sexual drive (through sports, etc.) is not using sex as God intended. To grit one’s teeth and “pray for victory” is not what God intended, for he did not mean sex to be fought against but used in marriage. For a man to “rely on” nocturnal emissions is not what God intended for sex; he designed it for conscious acts of love in marriage. Masturbation departs from God’s intentions for the same reasons.

In a sense, *any* of these alternatives might be called ”unnatural” in that they depart from God’s design for sex. It is quite open to an individual to subjectively decide that masturbation seems “more unnatural” than the others. But there is nothing to say ‘so in God’s revelation to us. Without such a word from God, there is no objective basis to pronounce anything unnatural. Why, for example, should nocturnal emissions be “more natural” than masturbation because involuntary? In fact, their association with erotic dreams may make some men (after prayer) prefer masturbation so that their thought-life during orgasm can be consciously controlled.

The main point is that God only tells us his ideal for sex. To- those unable (either temporarily or permanently) to follow this pattern, he gives no specific guidance on the next best alternative. They should pray it through with God individually, but not legislate for others.

2. “When Paul says that it is better to marry than to burn, does this exclude masturbation as an alternative?”

We must look here at the context of Paul’s words. In Corinth, there were literally thousands of prostitutes,(11) and it was a normal and accepted way of life for men to use them. Paul had been attacking this practice,(12) and it is in this context that he says that it is better to marry.(13) The Corinthian converts, used to fornication, would have found masturbation a poor alternative to sexual intercourse. If it were really comparable, then its cheapness would soon put all prostitutes out of business. Paul neither suggests nor condemns masturbation as an aid in resisting fornication; we can attribute this either to disapproval or to unquestioned acceptance. But Paul is concerned not with offering the ex-fornicator a less satisfying sex life, but with offering a more satisfying one through transformed attitudes towards *marital* sex.

3. “Surely it is just self-gratification of the flesh?”

Underlying this question there usually lies a misunderstanding of the Christian view of pleasure. The Christian does not say that seeking *pleasure* is wrong, but that seeking *illicit* pleasure is wrong. The mere fact that masturbation is sought because pleasurable does not make it wrong. Lustless masturbation is not necessarily wrongful self-gratification. More about this is given below.

4. “So many people feel guilty about it, so surely it must be wrong?”

We should be careful here (and some past books are not) to distinguish guilt and guilt feelings. If we knowingly break a law of God, we have guilt, independent of feelings. On the other hand, a person can have guilt feelings (e.g., about enjoying marital sex) when there is no guilt at all. So one can have guilt but no guilt feelings and guilt feelings but no guilt. Our consciences depend on our upbringing and are not always reliable guides. The Apostle Paul mentions some who preach abstinence, whose consciences are seared.(14) We can only be sure that our consciences are in line with our guilt or innocence when we compare our actions with God’s revealed laws. Since he has said nothing about masturbation, we cannot be sure in this case. Our guilt feelings could reflect our upbringing rather than indicate any real guilt.

5. “Is masturbation associated with lust?”

Masturbation can be accompanied by or lead to fantasy about illicit sex with other individuals. Whether this involves real acquaintances or pornography, it is wrong. But someone might have in mind merely an idealized image of man or woman, or be thinking of nothing at all. A fiancée might be consummating his/her marriage in his/her heart (to adapt Jesus’ phrase), which could hardly be

called adulterous. A husband or wife might be thinking lovingly of a spouse unavoidably absent for a time. Masturbation need not, always involve illicit lust. It must be for the individual to work out with the Lord whether or not in his or her situation it does.

6. *“Could masturbation lead to obsession?”*,

Tales about masturbation leading to mental illness are long since discredited. But can it lead to an ever-increasing frequency and obsession with sex? It is hard to see why people suggest that masturbation might do this, but never suggest that marital intercourse might do so. Perhaps masturbation might make some individual obsessed because it fails to satisfy in any deep way. Possibly it might lead some individuals into fornication in frustration at failing to obtain satisfaction. But we are sceptical about generalizing over this. The male anatomy especially is such that the physical release of orgasm normally causes an ebb in erotic feelings for a time. The sexual urge becomes much less pressing. Regular orgasm (in intercourse or masturbation) may therefore cause *less* obsession with sex. At the very least we must say that this is an individual thing.

One of the problems with the hard-line anti-masturbation approach is that some individuals spend so much time and effort seeking victory in the matter that it looms out of proportion in their lives. Instead of an all-around spiritual development, they become obsessed with this one thing. Instead of increased awareness of problems in their relationships with others, they become introverted. Surely, whatever our feelings about masturbation, it cannot be that important to God since he says nothing about it. Let us encourage young people to become obsessed with loving others, not with gaining victory in an area on which God is silent.

7. *“Does masturbation reduce the tendency to seek expression of sex in marriage?”*

Some christian books have carried careless generalizations on this. Let us first consider the unmarried person. The sexual urge is certainly one way in which God reminds us that “it is not good for man (or woman) to be alone”. Perhaps masturbation might reduce this drive. But so might a lot of other things, many of them suggested by books which condemn masturbation. If it is wrong to reduce the effect of the sexual drive, then to sublimate it in any way must also be wrong. Perhaps what we should do is try to ensure that the unmarried person suffers as much sexual torment as possible! Needless to say, this would be an absurd attitude. For one thing, many single people would very much like to marry, but our haphazard modern method of bringing partners together (unlike that of the Hebrews) has never given them the opportunity. For another thing, both Paul and Jesus imply that there are circumstances where some people would do better ‘to stay single, and they should not be hustled into



marriage by torturing them with sexual drives. In fact, if the sexual drive were really their main motive for marriage, they would probably be better single. Whatever Paul's personal advice to ex-fornicators in the difficult times of Corinth, couples in our society who select and marry partners with only sexual attraction in mind can easily later find their marriage is in trouble. Marriage offers a warmth of sharing and companionship with sex being just one aspect. If this is understood, then both masturbation and sublimation are poor substitutes, and one is sceptical about how far they genuinely discourage marriage. Perhaps it is possible that some severe introverts might find consolation in masturbation for their failure to form real relationships, but condemning them for it is more likely to aggravate than alleviate their real problem in this instance.

The extent to which masturbation discourages the unmarried from seeking proper marital expression of sex may be doubted. But there is a possibility that it could do so for those who are married. Marriage partners were meant to express their love in regular intercourse, and it would be wrong to lessen this through any recourse to masturbation. A couple who have quarrelled should not use masturbation instead of making up their differences. If there is an unavoidable absence of a marriage partner (e.g., in prison, hospital, or the armed forces), then it may be another matter. But masturbation should never (in Paul's words) make a couple "defraud one another".

#### 8. *"Could masturbation lead to guilt feelings?"*

We have distinguished guilt from guilt feelings. It is, however, quite possible that even if a person has considered his or her situation'.' prayerfully and has decided that masturbation is not wrong, he or she will still have guilt feelings. These are real, and they have to be reckoned with. Human emotions cannot be turned on and off at will. The effects of upbringing cannot be undone overnight. Take an example. A young wife and husband have a deeply satisfying sex life. Then the husband is called into military duty and sent abroad for several months. After prayerful consideration, they might decide that during their period of unnatural separation (in our imperfect world) masturbation would be better than obsessive longing, obsessive struggles for victory, etc. Yet one or other might still find themselves plagued by guilt feelings. These feelings, however unfounded, could themselves so inhibit spiritual life that it would be better to stop. This is a general principle. Similarly, there is nothing wrong with having money, but if possessions inhibit spiritual growth, then it might be better not to have any.

The above arguments seem to be the main ones put forward by those who regard masturbation in itself as wrong. They are unconvincing – though there are some legitimate concerns for individuals to consider in their situations. But one of the main arguments *against* a blanket condemnation of masturbation is the total silence of Scripture on it. Of course, there are many specific evils not

mentioned in Scripture, but masturbation (especially among adolescent males) is a very common practice. It seems odd that so widespread a practice is unmentioned in Scripture if the Lord really feels that a straight condemnation is appropriate.

Our conclusions, then, are these. It is impossible to substantiate from the Bible a straightforward rejection of all masturbation. An individual unable (temporarily or permanently) to express sex in marriage as God intended will have to prayerfully consider whether masturbation is an acceptable alternative in his or her case. The questions about lust, obsession, and guilt feelings (given above) are ones (s)he should ask, but his or her final decision must be reached in a context of an ongoing dynamic relationship with the Lord. But whatever the decision, the whole issue should not be blown out of proportion. If the Lord did not even feel the matter worthy of a mention in the Bible, then it must be because he has more important things for us to concentrate on in our lives. Our basic aim (to which all rules are aids) is to love God and love others,<sup>(15)</sup> and the priorities God sets for us will reflect this.

## NOTES

1. Matt. 5:28.
2. Col. 3: 8.
3. Eph. 5:4.
4. Phil 4:8.
5. Eg Gal 5:19. (*Akatharsia* is a very general word, including ritual and moral uncleanness; see Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3:102; Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:427; H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (London: Oxford, 1901; New York: Oxford, 1940), 1:46.
6. Gen. 38:8-11.
7. 1 Cor. 6:9, KJV.
8. E.g., the LaHayes in *The Act of Marriage* totally reject it; H. J. Miles in *Sexual Understanding Before Marriage* accepts it in some circumstances; John White in *Eros Defiled* says it isn't necessarily sin, but offers help for "deliverance".
9. Rom. 1:26
10. Matt. 19:12; 1 Cor. 7:26, 32.
11. See Strabo, viii:378; Dion Chrysost. 37:34; Horace *Ep*, i:17, 36; Athenaeus, xiii:573.
12. 1 Cor. 6:15-20.
13. 1 Cor. 7:2, 9.
14. 1 Tim. 4:2.
15. Rom. 13:9, 10; Matt. 22:37-40.

**Discussion Six****Sex and Purity of Mind**

**Readings: Philippians 3:17-19**

**Thought: There is little point in just bewailing how wicked things are getting – we would be better spending our time in prayer or in thinking about how to deal with any new situations and challenges.**

**Discussion Questions**

1. **How much more difficult is it today for a young person/older person to be ‘pure in mind’?**
2. **Is masturbation still an issue, or is it now ‘generally accepted’ as a normal part of life?**
3. **How can an unattached person draw the line between natural desire for an attractive (and single) member of the opposite sex, and ‘lust’?**
4. **Is it ‘lust’ to desire a fantasy person, eg created in computer virtual reality?**

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Head and Body in Marriage

**Readings: 1 Corinthians 7**  
**Ephesians 5:22, 23.**

In Chapter 2 we looked at the unity of marriage, and the way in which the partners were to act as “helpers”. We also touched on the ‘headship’ of the man in marriage. In this chapter we will expand on this and will look at the biblical view of the respective roles of husband and wife. As biblically based Christians we cannot simply float with the crowd when any form of headship is non “politically correct”. There are, of course, some aspects of New Testament teaching which relate specifically to their culture. But this cannot be assumed without careful scriptural study – and in our view ‘headship’ is not expendable in this way. On the other hand, there are still many Christians (and even more critics) who are seeing as biblical teaching what in reality is merely human tradition. We need to look carefully at what is actually said, discern what is eternal in it, and reapply this within our culture.

Paul says, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands.(1)

In the Christian family, the husband is appointed to headship and the wife to subjection. But much misunderstanding has arisen about this amongst both Christians and non-Christians, so we need to look carefully at the language used.

First, the husband’s headship. The Greek word “head” (*kephale*) does *not* mean ruler. It is a word used for the top of a pillar, the mouth of a river, the prow of a ship, or the head of a body.(2) In other words, it is not above and separate from, but is rather a unity with that over which it is head. The Bible, in adopting this word, therefore implies the kind of unity which a body and head share. It is an “authority-in-union”. Unlike a mere ruler, a head is an integral unit with the body over which it has authority; it identifies with that body so that if one part suffers, all suffer together.(3)

Scripture speaks of three headships, implying three unions. The Father is the head of the divine union of the Trinity; Christ is the head of the “one body” union of the church; the husband is the head of the “one-flesh” union of the marriage.(4) Moreover, headship speaks of a pre-eminence over an equality of kind. Thus, in the Trinity Christ could rightly claim equality with the Father.(5)

In the church, Christ is the firstborn of many brothers. (6) and is not ashamed to call them such.(7) In marriage, the husband and wife are “allies” or “helpers”, for she is a “help corresponding to him”.(8) Headship need imply *no* superiority, and (unlike rulership) it *does* imply union.

Now we should note that it is only in common secular usage that man is called the “head of the house”. The Bible itself never uses the word “head” in this way, but speaks only of the man as the head of the wife. The implied picture of sharing one body applies only to the husband-wife relationship, not to the looser ties of household.

Elsewhere, the husband is said to “preside over” (*prohistemi*)(9) his household, but the word used there does not mean to “rule” or “govern” in the normal sense. In fact, a stronger word is used of the wife in the same letter of Paul, when she is called the “despot of the household”!(10) The precise interplay of these ideas we may consider later. But neither in “headship” nor in “presiding” are there any concepts of absolute rulership.

If we turn now to the wife’s side of the arrangement, the word for “subjection” (*hupotasso*) means to “set in order under”.(11) Again the reference is not to unthinking obedience to an absolute ruler, but to voluntarily recognizing legal authority. It goes beyond mere obedience. In fact, the Bible tells children to obey their parents,(12) but has no explicit command for wives to obey their husbands. The nearest it comes is when Sarah’s obedience to Abraham, calling him “lord”, is given as an example (presumably in terms of her own culture) of Old Testament subjection.(13) But this is an indirect reference, and in any case Sarah clearly had ideas and initiative of her own and is far from the classic picture of a downtrodden wife capable only of unthinking obedience.

Not only is the language used not that of dictatorship-servility, but the headship-subjection idea itself becomes explicit only in the New Testament. There could, perhaps, be an *implied* headship in God’s prefall treatment of Adam and Eve. But between the fall and the coming of Jesus, wives are nowhere told to obey or even be subject to their husbands. Perhaps this shows that the meaning of headship-subjection is not conveyed by simple terms like “obey”, and that it became humanly comprehensible only after Jesus himself gave us an example of headship *and* subjection in his own life and work. It is in failing to look at Jesus’ example that the unspiritual have mistaken headship-subjection for dictatorship-servility. Let us study and follow our Lord.

What, then, Would be the meaning of headship-subjection in a spiritually mature Christian marriage?

If we consider first the husband’s function of headship, we find Paul deliberately comparing this to Christ’s headship of the church. Some Christians

have taken this to mean that the husband is somehow spiritually head of the wife; some speak of the husband as a kind of priest, based on Christ's high priesthood; and some even suggest that no one should spiritually counsel a woman without her husband's permission. But all this goes against what is indicated elsewhere in the New Covenant. Obviously, the comparison to Christ's headship cannot be valid at all points, or the husband would be an object of worship to the wife as well as her high priest!

To rightly understand what Paul means to convey by his parallel, we must look at the aspects in which he himself draws the comparison. In reading Ephesians 5, we find two aspects made very specific. The first is that the headship and authority of Christ meant a self-giving motivated by love.**(14)** In a sense, the husband's authority makes him his wife's servant. The second is that the use of the imagery of headship implies that the two partners identify so closely with one another that they are as much a single unit as is a human body. In such a unit, any suggestion of gratification of one partner at the expense of the other, or jealousy or rivalry between partners, would be absurd. Bodies do not behave like that. As Paul says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together."**(15)** In a body, each part in its own way may be creative, original, and make a valuable contribution if allowed to develop. No head would try to stop the hands from being creative, or be jealous of them. The head may give overall direction, and it may make the final decision based on the views of other parts (e.g., if the legs say, "We're tired!"). But its aim is the welfare and development of the whole body viewed as a unit. Jesus, as head of the church, wants friends and co-workers, not mindless slaves.**(16)** Thus, we are sure, he rejoices in the creation of wonderful art and music by his followers, and rejoices when Christians go on to spiritual maturity. This is the kind of picture bound up in the implied authority of the husband's headship.

The view we have of the wife's "subjection" must again be seen in light of the unity implied in "headship", which unity (as Paul reminds us) is at the heart of "leaving and cleaving" in God's design for marriage.' We have already noted that the word translated "be subject" (*hupotasso*) means to "set in order under", speaking of legal authority rather than absolute lordship. Thus, Christians are to "be subject" to secular authorities and to those appointed to preside over the church.**(18)** Slaves are to be subject to their legal masters, and children to their parents.**(19)** At one level, subjection has to do with the Christian's commitment to an orderly society. Authority is to be obeyed not because it is always right (as an authoritarian might believe), but because isolated acts of anarchy (except in the very direst situations) do not lead to either a better community or a better character in the Christian. Those who have recognized positions of authority are responsible to God to fulfil their divinely given functions, and those under them to obey except in genuine matters of conscience.

"Subjection" speaks of orderliness. But there is a deeper level at which

subjection is a basic feature of Christian character. Christians are to “be subject” to one another.(20) This certainly does not mean that they are to be uncreative, devoid of ideas of their own, or servile. What it means is that in an atmosphere of sharing, they are to be prepared to forego their own inclination if it is appropriate. Only against a background of this kind of general Christian mentality are wives told to “be subject” to their husbands.(21) Both the general mentality and the particular expression of it in wives’ attitude to their husbands’ authority may be foreign to the unspiritual mind. But it is Christlike, for he too was subject to his earthly parents and to his heavenly Father. Just as Christ teaches the husband the meaning of headship, he teaches the wife the meaning of subjection. It cannot mean that he was servile and lacked originality or opinions of his own. Neither should a wife have these characteristics. As a part of the same body with her husband, she will share fully with him her views and understandings.

But if there remains a genuine difference of opinion on some matter which concerns the marriage unit, then where should the final responsibility be for the decision? One cannot have a majority vote with only two people. Should they let the issue drag on as a bone of contention? Should they shout at each other until the weaker gives in? Should they toss a coin? God’s way in marriage is for the husband, as head, to be responsible for the decision, and for the wife to “be subject”. This does not mean that she pretends that she agrees when she does not. It means that she tries, with a genuine respect for her husband and his decision,(23) to make it work. To be subject in this sense is much more positive than mere obedience, for it is neither a lack of opinion, nor a sniping, tightlipped outward conformity while inwardly hoping that the decision will prove wrong. To be subject to the head of a body in which one shares implies an identification with that body, and so with its decisions. This, in a context of love and sharing, is a positive recipe for harmony in marriage.

Now we may ask whether this kind of view of headship-subjection could be called sexist or prejudiced. We should note first that the Bible *nowhere* says that God gave headship to the man because he was better fitted for it. There is absolutely nothing in Scripture to suggest that the woman is inferior mentally, spiritually, or psychologically. In many marriages we know very well that she is not. Could anyone seriously suggest that Deborah was inferior to Lappidoth?(24) That Huldah was inferior to Shallum?(25) That Abigail was inferior to Nabal?(26) The last is particularly absurd. Abigail was superior to Nabal in wisdom, initiative, beauty, charm, dignity, temperance, and faith. The idea that all women are by nature inferior is a foolish pagan idea (held, for example, by Plato and Aristotle(27)) and read into the Scriptures by men too influenced by pagan thinking and male chauvinism.

The Bible, as far as we know, makes only one significant generalization about any inherent differences between the sexes. Peter says, “Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honour on the woman

as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life.”(28) The phrase used here is (literally) “the weaker vessel”. The word “vessel” is used here deliberately because it can only mean weaker in body in such a context.(29) As a generality this is true. It is illustrated if we compare standards in unisex sports such as tennis or track, where men and women develop through rigorous training to maximum capacity. But it is only as an observed generality that Peter mentions it in passing. He does not say that *every* husband is physically stronger than his wife. He does not say it is a basic part of God’s design. He certainly does not say that because men are physically stronger, they, should rule. In actual fact, his point is almost the opposite. He says that in things that matter, women are coequal heirs with men, and so no one should be misled into giving them less honour just because on average they have less muscle power.

There are, of course, Christians who assert that men are somehow “better fitted” to headship. This could, as a generality, be true, but it would have to be shown from psychological study, for the Bible does not say so. But to suppose that *in every case* the man is better fitted in some natural way for headship is both absurd and misses the point of the way God gives responsibility. He does not guarantee that a person’s natural ability is always sufficient for the task. He says, “My grace is sufficient for you.”(30) For marriage, God chase a simple, unambiguous pattern of responsibility. While there might be much argument in any marriage over who was better fitted to lead, there is no argument about who is the husband and who the wife! God explicitly appoints the husband to headship, and if he relies on Christ (who is his head) then God will make him equal to it. This is not a prejudiced view of men, but a realistic view of God. The Christian marriage should enable full use and development of the potentialities of both man and woman, but at heart it is neither man-directed nor woman-directed, but God directed.

The man, then, is appointed to headship and the woman to subjection. Yet any sensible husband recognizes that on some or many issues his wife’s judgment is more reliable than his own. On such issues, he may take her advice against his own inclination. We have here to recognize the difference between institutional leadership and inspirational leadership. A secretary of state, for example, has the institutional leadership of his department. But it is quite possible that he would habitually follow the advice of a brilliant political adviser. In a sense, the adviser would be the inspirational leader; sometimes the adviser might even be the better man. Yet this never alters the legal headship and responsibility of the secretary, and it is he who will be held responsible for the decision. Similarly, there is nothing wrong in a marriage where the husband often follows his wife’s advice and inspirational leadership. But in a Christian marriage he is always regarded as the institutional ‘head’ of the husband-wife organism and cannot use the advice as an excuse to escape this responsibility. The wife is, of course, responsible for the advice she gives, but he is responsible for the decision itself.



We remember also that the man is to “preside” (*prohistemi*). The word used designates a leader rather than a ruler.(31) There is a great difference between a president and a dictator. A dictator simply hands out autocratic instructions. A president is the head of a team which works together, and he needs qualities very different from those of a dictator. A good president is one who can bring out the best from his team members, helping them to reach their full potential in the areas where they can contribute the most. A good president knows when to take advice from a team member with more expertise in a particular area than he has himself. Yet none of this diminishes the president’s authority or institutional responsibility of leadership. The man, likewise, should seek to preside well over his family.

Perhaps at this point some husband may ask, “How can I act properly as head when my wife refuses to be subject?” Obviously it will be more difficult, but he has here the example of Christ. When the church refuses to be subject to its head, and refuses the joy of sharing as co-workers with him, Christ does not give up. He does not become bitter, or cease to love and act out his headship as best he can. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church, not expecting perfection.

Then, again, some wife may ask, “How can I be subject when my husband is so unreasonable?” The answer, again, is to be like Christ. Even in wrongful suffering under authority, Christ left us his example.(32) So, wives, “be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behaviour of their wives.(33) Note Peter’s words, “without a word”. It can be difficult for a woman to be subject, or to see her husband neglecting church or family (as she sees it), without nagging him. Of course, it is right to gently remind him of his responsibilities and to express her perception to him., But nagging never won anyone, whereas, a loving behaviour often wins. A wife is not authorised to disregard her husband’s headship in a matter of opinion as to what is the best path. Authority is to be disregarded and opposed only when it presses us to go against an explicit commandment of Christ.

Paul encourages both men and women to make the best of their marriages even to unbelievers,(35) though there will be obvious problems and such a union should not be sought.(36) Perhaps, of course, it might come to such a point of cruelty or unreasonableness that the marriage itself would be better dissolved. God himself recognized that we live in an imperfect world.(37) But it should not usually come to this.

In general, then, God appoints the husband to headship and the wife to subjection, in a one-flesh unit of marriage. None of us are perfect (whether Christian or otherwise), and we cannot expect perfection in our partners. We need simply to try to live our own lives in a living relationship with God - in the light of his revelation to us of what he wants, and of Jesus’ example.

## NOTES

1. Eph. 5:21-24.
2. See Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 2:156; Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:673.
3. 1 Cor. 12:26.
4. 1 Cor. 11:3.
5. John 5:18; Phil. 2:6.
6. Rom. 8:29.
7. Heb. 9: 11.
8. Gen. 2:18.
9. 1 Tim. 3:4.
10. 1 Tim. 5:14.
11. From *hupo* (= under) *tasso* set in order). *Tasso* originated as a military term in the Greek citizen armies; see Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1:476; Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 8:27; Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, has *tasso* on 2:1759 and *hupotasso* on 2:1897.
12. Eph. 6: 1; Col. 3:20.
13. 1 Pet. 3:6.
14. Eph. 5:25.
15. 1 Cor. 12:26.
16. John 15:15.
17. Eph. 5:28-3 1.
18. Rom. 13: 1; 1 Cor. 16:16; 1 Pet. 2:13; 5:5.
19. Luke 2:5 1; 1 Tim. 3:4; Tit. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18.
20. Eph. 5:2 1.
21. Compare Eph. 5:21, 22; 1 Pet. 3: 1; 5:5 (literal translation).

## Discussion Seven

# Head and Body in Marriage

**Readings:** 1 Corinthians 7  
Ephesians 5:22, 23.

**Thought:** It is very hard sometimes to discern what the Bible actually teaches on God's intentions for social and cultural norms. It is easier either to react to hostile critics who misread it, or else to read into it confirmation of our own particular cultural conditioning.

## Discussion Questions

1. How far did previous generations lose the biblical understanding that both male and female are fully in the image of the personal God, and how far has this generation recovered it?
2. Is any idea of 'headship' just out of date today?
3. What is the difference between being 'head of the house' and 'head of the wife'? How often is the organic unity involved stressed in 'headship'?
4. How often during a healthy marriage will the 'one flesh' married unit be aware of non consensus decisions having to be made?
5. Do biblical women like eg Sarah, Rachel, Abigail, Hannah or Priscilla give any impression of subservience?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**Male and Female in Marriage**

**Readings: Proverbs 31:10-31**

This chapter concerns a different aspect of husband-wife roles within marriage. It basically asks whether there are particular interests, characteristics, or roles which are “masculine” and “feminine”. Is it, for example, “unnatural” for a boy to play with dolls or a girl to like football? Would it depart from God's pattern for a father to keep house and look after the children while his wife went out to work?

To begin with, however, we should recognize the three possible sources of male/female roles. First, there are some inherent physical and psychological differences. The actual number are fewer than most people suppose, for most differences in character and outlook are due to conditioning. This is the second aspect: conditioning gives us most of our views of what activities we see as masculine or feminine. The third aspect is that God has revealed to us in Scripture certain differences in roles. Now where this is so, one should not assume that these necessarily correspond with inherent differences. Thus, the headship- subjection roles need not depend on any natural characteristic of men and women, nor on any innate instinct. If God says that this is what he had in mind, then Christian parents will deliberately condition their children to accept it. This is true of all moral issues. Christian parents condition their children not to lie, steal, or murder, though an observation of human behaviour would totally fail to demonstrate this as “natural” to humankind! Another word for “conditioning” is “training,” and that is exactly what parents are supposed to do for their children. But what Christians should be careful to do is to ensure that they insist only on features taught by Scripture; too often Christian teachers have been dogmatic over aspects of male/female roles which were merely their own ideas.

What does Scripture say about male/female roles. An obvious area to consider is that of parents' roles regarding their children. Paul seems to assume that there should be children in a family, and makes the reasonable assumption that it will be the woman who bears them!**(1)** Physically, only the woman is equipped to breast-feed the baby, and modern evidence seems to show that it is better physically and psychologically for the child to be breast-fed in its early weeks. The baby should relate to both parents, but the mother-child bonding which can be achieved in that most intimate and wonderful of experiences is particularly important. Classic women's lib advocates, such as Germaine Greer, tended to write off breast-feeding;**(2)** but if it is seen as important and enriching, then it would seem to point to a greater role for the mother than the father in the nurture of the young baby. Yet, even here we must be careful.

Although some Christian books once gave warnings of dire consequences if fathers become too involved in baby-care, there is nothing in the Bible to limit this to being a “female” activity. In fact, the King James Version speaks of “nursing fathers”.<sup>(3)</sup> The Hebrew word used may mean more a male guardian who (like Eli with Samuel<sup>(4)</sup>) had the care and responsibility of bringing up a child. But this paternal care could begin even with a babe.

Scripture definitely refers to child training as being partly the responsibility of the father.<sup>(5)</sup> There is, furthermore, no indication that the mother's authority over the child is in any sense a derived authority (as some Christians claim). The child is told to obey both father and mother, and Scripture assumes that the “instruction” or training given by the father is the same as the “law” (KJV) laid down by the mother.<sup>(7)</sup>

There is no evidence at all that looking after the children (apart, obviously, from breast-feeding) is seen as a specifically female role.

What of the question of who goes out to work? Again, some Christians say that man should be the provider, while woman keeps house. What evidence is there that this is God's ruling? Very little. The husband is supposed to “preside over” the household.<sup>(8)</sup> But a stronger word (literally “despot of the household”) is used of both the husband *and* the wife.<sup>(9)</sup> Paul evidently thinks that whatever is involved in being mistress of a household occupies enough of the woman's energies to prevent her becoming a busybody, but adds little to what is said in Proverbs 31 about the varied nature of her activities. The word translated “despot of the household” was, in fact, the normal Greek term for the master or mistress of a house.<sup>(10)</sup> But this, helps us little since Paul clearly rejected the Greek culture where a wife was a drudge and child-bearer while the husband sought pleasure and companionship from other women.<sup>(11)</sup> Elsewhere Paul suggested teaching young wives to be (amongst other things) “house-workers” (*oikouros*).<sup>(12)</sup> But his motive is given in the following phrase, “so that no one will malign the word of God.” The whole passage is in the context of the witness to the surrounding people. Where no fundamental inconsistency with the gospel was involved, Paul was all for keeping local custom.<sup>(13)</sup> But he surely would not have expected that an incidental reference to housework (contained in an instruction to Cretan housewives to have a good witness to the neighbours) would one day be used in an entirely different culture to suggest that women should never leave the household sphere.

The Bible, then, gives little specific instruction about the husband's or wife's roles. It may sometimes be incidentally assumed that women mentioned have certain roles, but it is never stronger than this. It may seem to us a sensible arrangement for a mother with a young baby to look after the home, while father goes out to work. If these roles continue when the child is older, well and good. But the arrangement is based on convenience . rather than biblical revelation, for the Bible says nothing about it. A wife who was the main

wage-earner would have to be content that her husband, as head, would have the final say on how the money was to be spent; but in the one-flesh love of marriage, this is quite possible. The man's headship does imply that he has the final responsibility to see that the family is provided for. But it is quite possible that the provision could be made through another member of the family (wife or son or daughter), provided of course that the arrangement is a result of love and not selfishness on the part of the husband.

But in all this, the Bible seems no more to condemn a career woman than a career man. In either case, love of God and one's family should take precedence over love for money. Paul's first convert in Europe was Lydia, a businesswoman in her own right, and it was in her house that he first stayed.**(14)** In Corinth, Paul stayed with his two co-workers Priscilla and Aquila, “because he was of the same trade, they were tent-makers.”**(15)** Both apparently shared in the employment, as both shared in giving spiritual instruction,**(16)** and there is no hint that it might be proper only for husbands to work at a trade. This is, after all, in line with the “good wife” of Proverbs 31, who seems to use her own initiative to engage in manufacturing, agriculture, and social work! Later, women seem to have been accepted to participate even in the construction industry.**(17)**

Yet some Christians have argued that man should be the provider. In doing so, they seem to forget that during Jesus' ministry his women followers acted as patronesses and provided for him.**(18)** Thus, though one might say that the man (as head) has the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the family is provided

for, the actual pattern of can surely be worked out by the couple in whatever way they agree. God does not specify for them. All that can be said is that a man who truly loves his wife (as Christ loves the church) will wish neither to patronize nor exploit her.

Now with all this background, one is astonished to find the classic feminist Simone de Beauvoir attributing to Paul the following view:

Since the husband is the productive worker, he is the one who goes beyond family interest to that of society. Opening up a future for himself through co-operation in the building of the collective future, he incarnates transcendence. Woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home—that is to say, to immanence. **(19)**

Paul admittedly assumes as factual (with good evidence to the best of our knowledge) that only women can bear children.**(20)** But where does he state any of the rest of all this? Nowhere we know of. It was certainly the pagan Greek culture at that time to assume such a pattern. There may have been some Christians in the past who assumed that it was the only pattern approved by God, but we repeat: we know of nothing in Scripture to support it. God's design

was for two “allies” or “helpers,” but he specified no particular pattern about who should provide which aspect of family need. The curse of the ground directed at Adam was a prophecy, not a prescription for action,(21) and agriculture is not seen as an exclusively male affair.(22)

All of us have been brought up in particular societies, and so see certain roles as male and others as female. If it helps our sense of personal identity to keep to these, well and good. But unless we can support them as a part of God's design revealed in Scripture, we have no right to press them upon others. The Bible does not teach that the man need necessarily be the “spiritual leader” in marriage. It does not insist on his being material provider. It does not give him any more basic claim to children's obedience than his wife. All that it says is that as the head of the “one-flesh” unity of marriage, man is to “preside”. The decisions are to be made by the whole unit, but in the event of a continuing difference of opinion, the husband has the chairman's deciding vote. It is his responsibility to determine whether to follow his own or his wife's judgment, and the wife is to be subject to the decision (unless it is contrary to a direct divine commandment).

One further point needs to be made. We do not believe that there is in Scripture any clear revelation about what some Christian writers call “spheres of influence” for husband and wife. We are free to work out our own patterns and areas of responsibility in a dynamic relationship with God. Nevertheless, we believe that any wise husband will recognize that his wife does need to have some areas where she is solely responsible and can exercise her own choice. She, too, may be a child of God whom he is bringing into maturity, which involves making decisions. She too has a need to express individuality as she unfolds her part of the multicoloured nature of Christ.(23) A failure to recognize this could leave her feeling crushed and dominated. It is, moreover, a good idea to talk out areas of responsibility (individual and joint) early in (or before) marriage. For one thing, the husband and wife may come from families with different traditions; and different expectancies could lead to conflict. For another, it enables a more conscious and intelligent pattern to be thought through than if it is simply left vague. Needless to say, this cannot be a once for all thing. Areas may change, and differing needs may arise. But within a loving relationship of mutual concern and respect, the partners can continue to develop as “allies” in all senses of the word.

We may now turn to consider a matter already touched on. What differences should there be between male and female attitudes toward sexual rights and enjoyment? What we find is that scriptural teaching on this is very explicit in terms of equality. It must, of course, be recognized that before the completeness of the revelation of God in Jesus, some elements of attitudes in the Old Testament society were less than ideal. Underlying this was their toleration of polygamy. This was common in surrounding cultures, and God did not expressly forbid it. But it was not in line with God's basic design in

Genesis, and whenever mentioned in Scripture it seems to lead to family problems of one kind or another.(24) Yet it was tolerated, and with it a lingering double standard. This meant that sex between a married woman and unmarried man was adultery, while sex between a married man and unmarried woman was perhaps not (for he could marry the second woman). Possibly this should be seen as a protection of the rights of women in a cultural context where these were often ignored. But Jesus made it very clear that he regarded sex between a woman and married man as adultery also. This was revolutionary. Paul is but drawing out the implications of this when he makes it clear that casual sex for the man is equally wrong.(26)

Paul, moreover, makes it clear that the husband's and wife's sexual rights are identical. In 1 Corinthians 7 he gives a mixture of authoritative teaching and personal suggestions for application in their circumstances, which is quite revolutionary. Almost every point is repeated from both persons' point of view. Thus, the husband "has his own wife," but equally the wife "has her own husband". The concept of possession goes both ways.(27) "The wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does." Is this sexism? No, for the next words are, "likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does." They both have joint ownership! In verse 5 Paul says, "Do not refuse one another." In other words, have regular sex to satisfy *both* parties. Beginning in verse 12, he says that if one partner is unbelieving, then the other should not leave him/her whichever it is. The whole passage puts the sexes on exactly equal footing. Even verse 18 should not read, as in the KJV, "Is any man called but "Is any one called . . ."

One of Paul's main points later in the passage is that we must not copy others, but find God's will individually for our lives. He gives as his personal opinion that in times of particular difficulty, it may be better to remain single or betrothed.(28) For this reason, in spite of his advocacy of marriage elsewhere(29) he has sometimes been labelled as antifeminist or even antisex. But his only reason-again we note, given in terms of both the man and the woman-is that in such circumstances it may be an unnecessary tie. This is precisely because in his high view of marriage, the married man is properly "anxious ... to please his wife" and the married woman "anxious ... to please her husband."(30)

How could this be antifeminist? The only hint of any inequality is that the final decision on whether a widow should marry is assumed to rest with herself, but with a virgin the decision rests with her father.(31) Paul simply assumes this (which was practice for both Jews and Greeks), without any comment either way on the desirability of the custom itself. Since, however, he elsewhere instructs fathers not to provoke their children, it can be imagined what advice he would give a father who was intending his daughter's marrying or not marrying against her will.(32) But this concerns selection of partners.



Within marriage, any idea of one-way sexual rights is demonstrably against Paul's explicit teaching. It is also hard to see how some Christian writers apparently get the idea that man's headship means he is to be the initiator in sexual lovemaking. Why should he be? The wife has as many sexual rights over her husband as husband over wife, and should seek them if she feels like exercising them. If ever they do have a short period without lovemaking, it will be during a time of special prayer (when they may also, perhaps, abstain from another good thing, food, in fasting). But this must be by mutual agreement.(33) The husband's headship is *not* sufficient authority to deny his wife her sexual rights *unless* she specifically agrees. Is this women's liberation or what? Whatever happened to this revolutionary biblical teaching on sex in the centuries of male chauvinism which followed?

We turn now to a very basic question. It is somewhat abstract and has been left until some of the more concrete issues have been considered. It concerns the distinction between masculinity and femininity as such. In Chapter 2, we looked at the account of God using Adam's "side" to make Eve. Having taken a part of man's side, God "closed up the flesh," leaving man incomplete. This surely was not meant to teach that man is physically lopsided, but that his physical/mental makeup has predominately one side of human nature. We might call this "masculinity." The side of human nature which predominates in woman we might call "femininity." Both are in God, for we were made "in God's own image ... male and female.(34)

How, then, can we know which characteristics are properly to be regarded as masculine and which feminine? God, unfortunately, nowhere gives us in the Bible any direct description of how *he* sees these. We have to work from clues only.

Perhaps we might begin by asking whether there is a hint to be found in the reference to God himself as "he." This is possible, though it is hard to say exactly what that hint is. Mankind *male and female* were made in God's image; so to call God "he" rather than "she" must be something of a language convention. No one would want to call a personal God "it"; so it had to be either "he" or "she." Likewise, Jesus could not be incarnated as neuter, so had either to be a man or a woman. We believe that Jesus was a man, and that he taught us to pray to God as 'dad' (*abba*) or 'father'. But, of course, the picture of God as our Father (does *not* exclude the use of a motherhood picture of God as well.(35) If, then, we glean anything from this, it is a notion of strength and authority as masculine, and tenderness as feminine. God has both equally. But the link is slight.

Can we, then, discover clues in innate or inborn characteristics of men and women? Has God, in other words, laid them down in the way he *made* men and women? There may, indeed, be such inborn characteristics, but it is difficult to

discover them. There have been suggestions, for example, that very slight brain differences mean that spatial awareness is generally more highly developed in men, and the ability to detect subtle body language in women. Some have related this to some kind of natural selection of qualities used in hunting/gathering vs homemaking roles. But it has to be said that the distribution of levels of such abilities in men so overlaps with that in women, that socialisation may be the much bigger factor. Modern study comparing different societies and cultures has shown that much of what we see as masculine or feminine is affected by social conditioning.(36) Thus, a girl acquires or exaggerates those characteristics in herself which she is told are feminine, and a boy those which he is told are masculine. The power of this conditioning appears to be very strong compared with any inborn influences. Since it is, of course, impossible to find anyone in whom the inborn characteristics have not been affected by some form of conditioning, this makes the inborn very difficult to detect. All that one could make is a kind of statistical argument: whenever social conditioning starts to develop a particular characteristic as masculine, it is *more likely* to take and exaggerate or modify an inborn characteristic of men than one of women. Thus, looking at the world as a whole we should expect a majority of societies to have their social conditioning in line with the faint inborn characteristics. This is a dangerous line of argument in a fallen world; but if we follow it, then undoubtedly the majority of world cultures have seen masculinity as implying strength or even aggressiveness, and femininity as tenderness or even softness.

This may also relate to another possible clue, the purely physical differences. We noted that, as Peter said, the man has on average greater muscle power than the woman, while softness is the special quality of the woman in her bodily design for suckling tiny babies. Here again, strength and tenderness are twin ideas.

The roots of the Hebrew words for male and female, man and woman, if anything confirm this. The roots of the words in Genesis 1:27 are obscure, but seem to relate purely to the physical appearance of the distinctive male and female organs. The words used in Genesis 2:18-23 seem, however, to be from roots denoting “the strong one” and “the delicate one.”(37) This confirms our previous ideas.

Now this suggestion of strength for masculinity and tenderness for femininity should be treated with care. Our own Western cultures seem in the past to have carried this much too far, and we do not want men and women to become caricatures. In the Song of Songs, for example, there do seem to be slightly more hints of strength for the man and softness for the girl; yet the girl also uses words like “sweetness” to describe her man. Jesus, moreover, did not try to keep a stiff upper lip in public, but wept openly.(38) We should beware lest our social conditioning make us caricature the masculinity or femininity proper to men or women. It is a sobering thought that Satan’s parodies of

Christ and the bride in Revelation are the beast and the harlot, hideous caricatures of masculinity and femininity.

Two last points should be made. One is that it is entirely possible that (within very general frameworks) God intends humankind to create something of their own masculinity and femininity. This could, indeed, be a part of the creativity within the Christian's dynamic relationship to God, to show God's "manifold wisdom" in the new humanity of Christ.(40) It is true that "in Christ there is no male nor female,"(41) but in the context Paul is surely speaking of a lack of any spiritual class distinction. He does not mean that the enriching individual differences are to be wiped out in grey monotony. Neither, in our view, should Jesus' teaching that marriage is transcended in Heaven (42) imply that masculinity and femininity as such will be abolished.

The other point is that one should beware of the practical implications for someone in a particular society. Although much of what is seen as masculine or feminine in a society may be convention, this does not mean that a Christian can behave in any way he feels like. Take the question of clothing. Very obviously what is seen as men's (or women's) clothing depends on social convention. But people in Jewish society were forbidden to dress in clothing which our society views as properly belonging to the opposite sex. This has to do with motives. Likewise with masculinity and femininity. If we deliberately adopt characteristics which we see because of our upbringing as more proper to the opposite sex, then for us this may be wrong. Our motive would be a desire to change roles, to act out a role we see as that of the opposite sex. In this context, "whatever does not come from faith is sin".(43) But the individual for whom this is a problem must sort it out for himself through prayer and Christian counselling. It cannot be legislated.

All this may strike the reader as rather vague in comparison with the rest of this book. It is. The Bible is itself vague on the subject. So we aim to do only two things. First, we reaffirm (against some modern liberationists) that it is right and enriching to distinguish between masculine and feminine. Second, we urge care upon our fellow-Christians in making assumptions about what specific characteristics to link with the masculine or feminine ideal.

In summary, there are different roles for husband and wife in marriage, along lines of headship-subjection. Yet we must be careful not to read into these roles more than the Bible indicates. All that we can say is that one should never seek (as, for example, some "liberation" movements have done) to try to define true manhood or womanhood in isolation. The whole true nature of humankind can be seen only in the balance of the married unit in which God designed it.

NOTES

1. 1 Tim. 5:14.
2. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (Maidenhead, England: McGraw, 1971; New York: Bantam, 1972). The version of love, marriage, family, etc. which Greer rejects in favour of her rather vaguely defined alternative is an entirely warped version of these things-hardly even resembling the Christian concepts. Her later views seem to have modified somewhat.
3. Num. 11:12; Isa. 49:23 (The NKJV has 'guardians' and 'foster fathers' but the implication is of a pre-weaned baby).
4. 1 Sam. 1:24; 2:11.
5. Num. 11:12.
6. 1 Thess. 2:11; Eph. 6:4.
7. Prov. 1:8 (here the NKJV is similar).
8. 1 Tim. 3:4.
9. 1 Tim. 5:14; Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11.
10. Used, e.g., in Plato, *Laws*, 808a. See also Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 2:509; Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:49; Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 2:1203 (none of whom say much!).
11. There are a number of primary and secondary source references on this, and elsewhere we show Paul's rejection of such low ideas of marriage and of prostitution.
12. Tit. 2:5; see Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 2:1205.
13. 1 Cor. 9: 19-23.
14. Acts 16:15.
15. Acts 18:3.
16. Acts 18:3, 26.
17. Neh. 3:12.
18. Luke 8:2, 3.
19. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Drayton, England: Penguin, 1972; New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 449.
20. 1 Tim. 5:14.
21. Gen. 3:19.
22. Ruth 2:2, 3, 8; Prov. 31:16.
23. Eph. 3: 10.
24. Gen. 21; 30:15; 1 Sam. 1:6.
25. Matt. 19:9.
26. 1 Cor. 6:15, 16.
27. 1 Cor. 7:4.
28. 1 Cor. 7:7, 8, 26.
29. 1 Tim. 5:14.
30. 1 Cor. 7:33, 34.
31. 1 Cor. 7:36-38 - alternate translation.
32. Eph. 6:4.
33. 1 Cor. 7:5.
34. Gen. 1:27.

35. Matt. 23:37
36. For a popular account see, e.g., Anpe Oakley, *Sex, Gender, and Society* (London: M. T. Smith, 1972; New York: Harper and Row, 1973).
37. See, e.g., D. S. Bailey, *Sexual Relation in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1959), pp. 280, 281.
38. John 11:35; Luke 19:41.
39. Rev. 17:3, 16ff.
40. Eph. 3:10.
41. Gal. 3:28.
42. Matt. 22:30.
43. Rom. 14:23.

**Discussion Eight****Male and Female in Marriage**

Readings: Proverbs 31:10-31

**Thought:** It is very hard sometimes to discern what the Bible actually teaches on God's intentions for social and cultural norms. It is easier either to react to hostile critics who misread it, or else to read into it confirmation of our own particular cultural conditioning.

**Discussion Questions**

1. **How far did previous generations lose the biblical understanding that both male and female are fully in the image of the personal God, and how far has this generation recovered it?**
2. **How far did previous generations lose the biblical understandings of mutual sexual enjoyments and rights in marriage and how far has this generation recovered it?**
3. **Are there meanings to 'masculinity' and 'femininity' and if so what balance of each should we expect in men and in women?**
4. **How can Christians get right the balance of accepting their own culture's views of what is masculine and feminine, whilst accepting that others may also be within the bounds of the guidelines set by God?**

## CHAPTER NINE

# Family Relationships

**Readings: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7**  
**Ephesians 5:14**

“Our Father, who art in heaven.” So millions of Christians address God. But what does it mean to have a loving parents and child relationship? Such a relationship must begin with the unconditional love of the parent for the child, as God loved us.(1) The parents’ love should not depend on the childrens’ behaviour, nor on the (perhaps weak) evidence of their love in return.(2) Parental love, furthermore, should be continually *expressed*, for we know of love only through its action.(3) This not only applies to physical provision,(4) but emotional; this means a giving of oneself to the child.(5)

In human terms, children (whether boys or girls) all need eye contact, physical contact, and focused attention from birth and throughout childhood.(6) Jesus himself recognized this, and made time to give attention to the children and to make physical contact with them in his blessing.(7) Good parents have time for their child, and is interested in every little thing about that child.(8) They enjoy talking with the child and respect the child as an individual.

Thus, although parents know their child’s needs, they like the child to express them.(9) Parents like to listen to and respond to any reasonable request the child makes.(10) Gifts are not, of course, a substitute for sharing together, and in this way are secondary to it. Yet, the good parent does not seek to foster dependence, but to have the child grow up to be a true “son” (or “daughter”) and take up their inheritance.(11) In a good relationship, there will be a genuine pleasure in doing things together, a sharing of enjoyment like the returned prodigal son and his father, rather than a grudging obedience like the elder son in the parable.(12) But again, the parents will respect the creativity and originality in their child and seek to encourage it, just as our creative God encourages creativity in his children, who are made in his image. Each child will be valued individually, as an individual with their own contribution to make. The parent will take the child seriously.

Jesus certainly did this with children. For example, he used the offering of a lad with a few loaves and fish.(13) He made time for children, and this in spite of his disciples’ evident wish to get on with the “really serious” discussion about divorce, etc.(14) His kingdom, he said, was made up of children and those with childlike qualities, and the welcome we give to children reflects our attitude to Jesus and what he values.(15) Thus, the Pharisees’ evident outrage at the children creating a disturbance in God’s Holy Temple really reflected their attitude to the message of Jesus and its simplicity.(16)

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees. Yet how often today do we refuse to welcome children (with all their exuberance) into our services, but make them sit in unnatural silence or banish them to the church nursery? How often do we fail to recognize them as members of the kingdom, or treat them less seriously than Jesus himself evidently expected to be treated at the age of twelve? (17)

The good parent will also be proud of their children(18) and will praise their achievements. Yet, they will not make their love or acceptance dependent on this achievement, nor try to live vicariously through them. True parental love is unconditional and unselfish.

True parental love also involves discipline. One of the proverbs quoted in Hebrews is: “For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”(19) Paul says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.... Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”(20) Discipline and love go together, but we must be careful about this word “discipline.” The Greek word can mean “chastise,” but really it has the wider meaning of training and instruction.(21) It is not merely, or even mainly, a question of appropriate punishment schemes. It is not merely a question of “behaviour reinforcement” (i.e., rewarding desirable and punishing undesirable behaviour). Such emphases might be suitable in animal training, but here we are dealing with a love relationship between personal beings, between parents and child.

The instruction will begin in the attitude of the parent to the, child, for from this the child will learn his or her first lesson. Children learn to respect others’ feelings through a genuine respect for personhood, as their own parents respect their individuality – not through behavioural reinforcement. More basically, a child learns the way of love by being loved unconditionally - not through any system of punishment and reward. How strange that some Christian parents who proclaim a gospel of grace try to teach their children love through a system of works. Our discipline should be modelled on that of our Heavenly Father.

We must, of course, recognize that chastisement and reinforcement can both play some part. But we should note that in Greek (and Hebrew), there is no connection between the word “discipline” and the word “punishment.(22) A judicial punishment means that a person receives his just deserts for a misdeed simply because the deed was wrong. It need not imply any motive of correction. It is the rightful function of *government* to administer punishment (23) (although some modern governments reject this idea of justice), but the Bible never uses it in a context of parents and children. It speaks of “discipline”, the motive of which is clearly corrective rather than punitive.

This is important because “punishment” relates simply to the deed, whereas



“discipline” should be more flexible, varying treatment according to the likely effects. A child who disobeys deserves punishment, but if (s)he already shows *real* repentance, then true discipline might involve immediate acceptance and reassurance rather than chastisement. This would teach the child more truths about forgiveness, whereas otherwise (s)he might be entirely puzzled by the words, “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities.... As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear ‘ him.”(24) This, of course, opens the parent to the possibility of a child saying “sorry” insincerely. It leaves parents with the difficult task of discerning true repentance from mere fear of the consequences.

But unfortunately no system of discipline can escape the need for discernment. Law (and punishment) knows only of rules with no exceptions; but discipline deals with the person, not the sin. Thus, while consistency is a good thing, to be totally inflexible in reaction would be to treat a person like a machine and this can have disastrous consequences. What is important, however, is that any variation in reaction is genuinely based on discernment of the needs of the child, not on the parents’ mood.

Yet, biblical love and discipline include physical chastisement where necessary, and Proverbs goes as far as to say: “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.”(25) Here again “the rod” fits into an overall picture of “discipline,” within which we see more clearly in New Testament light a role of unconditional love. But the word “rod” in any case implies more than physical force, for it can also mean “sceptre” (26) and is thus a symbol of authority. When it is used to chastise,(27) it therefore symbolises the wielding of authority, not an arbitrary use of personal violence in frustration. But the rod should also be used to guide and protect like a shepherd’s rod.(28) In this connection David said, “Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.(29) It is a comfort to a child to know that an authority exists, both for correction and protection. All children find a need at times to test authority, to find out if deliberate disobedience brings any reaction. To find that it does brings’: security and comfort. The use of physical chastisement in such a context can be right and can lead to healthy harmony in a home. A smack is a short, sharp, assertion of authority. After a short period of crying, it can be followed by immediate expression of, acceptance and reassurance. If a child deliberately disobeys, then the other alternatives are:

1. to ignore it and have the child lose any secure respect for authority
2. to use a form of punishment which could drag on without any real emotional release
3. to have a situation where the parent is continually whining and nagging at the child.

None of these three are acceptable.

In suggesting that discipline is appropriate for wilful challenge to authority, we are in a sense again following God’s dealings with us. A person who

persists in known sin will be excluded from fellowship in Heaven and on earth until he repents?’

This is important as we answer those “progressives” who ask what right parents have to use force to impose their wills on children. Parents have a God-given authority and responsibility (which no state can take away) to use physical correction in a right discipline of their children. But it is a misrepresentation of this authority to suppose that it involves merely the clash of preferences, with the parent selfishly insisting on his or her preference when the child’s would be equally valid. Parents teach their children what is *right* – ie not their own ideas, but God-revealed standards of right and wrong. This forms a framework within which children should have ample room for self expression if their parents truly love them. Paul’s instructions are most careful of children’s rights. Parents are instructed to bring their children up “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” - not in the parents’ own ideas and preferences. Furthermore, he specifically tells parents not to use their authority wrongly and so provoke their children to anger and frustration.’ We must treat this instruction with care.

A toddler, for example, may exhibit anger when she is prevented from touching a fire. She may become angry when she is chastised for deliberate rebellion. But this, surely, is not what Paul means. Rather, he must refer to the deep-seated frustration which burns inside over a long period, the kind of anger he forbade earlier in the letter.(32) An overbearing or unreasonable parent may provoke this kind of anger. An overindulgent parent may also be laying up a later store of anger and frustration as the growing child finds that she cannot get her own way with others as she has learned to expect from her parents. But rightly used, chastisement does not provoke this kind of anger. After a healthy expression of anger or pain in crying, there is reconciliation and the feeling that love continues. Only ineffectual chastisement leave lasting anger; there is irritation, but no real emotional release and no reconciliation, Rightly used authority and chastisement lead to harmony, not anger and frustration.

We believe that, in some circumstances, physical discipline is probably the most effective means of discipline. But let us reiterate and note some basic points about this:

- It’s purpose should never be just to vent the parental irritation – its purpose is the discipline of the child not the relief of the parent.
- It should be a resort only when faced with wilful, knowing, disobedience.
- It is inappropriate for very young babies. The current Government intention to outlaw smacking babies under one year old makes perfect sense – a baby under one year old is incapable of ‘rebellion’.
- It is most appropriate for a child of around 18 months to (say) 5, for whom ‘loss of privileges’ means little, but who is clearly capable of knowing rebellion.
- It is less appropriate for an older child who is capable of rebelling against a

- just a reasonable demand, but who can also understand loss of privilege.
- The use of an implement (a stick or slipper) to chastise is highly dubious. If it is really necessary then the chastisement is probably being applied to an older child for whom loss of privilege would be more appropriate anyway. It seems to some of us ludicrous that British law actually upheld the right of a stepfather to beat a teenager with a stick, and that when the European Court rejected this it was hailed as an ‘anti-smacking’ ruling. We welcome the Government’s intention to outlaw beating teenagers with sticks or other implements.
  - It should also be noted that the right of a parent to smack has nothing whatever to do with wanting to retain caning in schools. Unruly and violent children are more likely to lack the love of a secure environment than a ‘good beating’ from their guardians, and beating them in schools for misdemeanours is highly unlikely to redress this lack. Suggestions that unruliness in schools results from banning corporal punishment are unconvincing. Whilst we may see some point in kindergarten teachers being able to smack *in loco parentis* (albeit there are dangers in this), we have no regret at the demise of corporal punishment in secondary schools.
  - Shaking a child of any age is inappropriate under any circumstances, it is medically dangerous and should be banned in any civilised society.

We have argued for the rights of parents, under certain conditions, to smack young children. Let us briefly consider some arguments put forward by those against this:

1. *“It is like an assault of an adult”*

In British law no child under 10 can face criminal prosecution. If smacking a child of (say) 6 for hitting another child with a toy train is ‘assault’, then by the same logic the child herself should be tried for assault and subjected to a term of imprisonment. Young children have rights, but it is absurd to pretend that these can be the same as those for adults. Those who use such arguments sometimes suggest locking an unruly small child in his/her room, or ‘grounding’ them. To do this to an adult would be termed ‘unlawful imprisonment’ which is a criminal offence.

2. *“There is no way to draw the line between a legitimate smack and abuse”*

Some fathers sexually abuse their daughters, but no one on that grounds would want to stop fathers from cuddling them. There is no ‘clear’ line between pleasure in cuddling or caressing a child and sexual abuse – but in practice we all make such distinctions in law.

3. *“Smacking makes children more violent and gives them hangups”*

One sometimes hears such arguments put forward by those who deal mainly with the maladjusted and whose picture is therefore distorted. No one should pretend that ‘a good smack’ is some kind of panacea, and maladjusted people may more often lack a secure loving environment than physical chastisement.

But there are innumerable well-adjusted, non-violent, people, who have no particular resentment at being smacked as young children and have experienced no hang ups through it.

We should further note that God-given authority teaches by example and not only by, instructions Thus, when God gave the fundamental command to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,” he went on: “These commandments... are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up...”**(33)** Your children will best learn the love of God if it is a remembered, experienced, and verbalized reality to you in every activity of your life. The next few verses in the passage symbolically indicate that they should be bound on your hands (what you do), and on your foreheads (what you think), and on your gates (the principles of your home). It will be no use telling your children about God’s love if it is not a reality in your own life. The authority of parents, like that of elders,**(34)** is to lead by example.

Jesus also used this principle in teaching his disciples about authority. To show what a leader should do, he washed their feet; he did more than talk about it.**(36)** Children are to be imitators. They are also to be questioners. The meaning of the Passover (the most important Jewish annual festival) was not to be taught simply by a lecture. It was to be taught *in response to a question* asked by a child who saw the practical effects of the festival in the way his parents were behaving.**(37)** Training is by example and involves honest answers to questions. It should also be consistent between father and mother. Both father and mother are to be honoured, and the “father’s instruction” and “law of the mother” (KJV) are expected to be consistent.**(38)** If parents give different answers, or one is known to be stricter than the other, then it is confusing and harmful for the child.

Unconditional love, as we have seen, does not imply indulgence, sentimentality, or softness. Sometimes chastisement may be needed. Sometimes also a child has to learn to bear the effects of a misdeed or carelessness. God, too, does not promise to undo all the effects of our sin. Sometimes, indeed, it may be difficult to know when to interfere and when not. This may be especially true in that often difficult phase of adolescence. Problems there encountered may often reflect mistakes made when the child was younger, but can come to any family. The parable of the prodigal son **(39)** is quite interesting in this respect, for the son was probably about seventeen or eighteen. We note first that the father takes his request seriously, and in fact complies. He has somehow failed to convey to the lad the joys of sharing together, and he does not intend to keep him frustrated and restless at home. He respects his lad’s choice. Moreover, he does not try to shield his son from the bad effects of his irresponsibility. Perhaps he failed earlier to train his son to be responsible, but now at least he does not keep on sending extra money to help.

It would not really help, but merely prolong the time before the boy “came to himself.” The father has every longing for his son to return home, but does not pester him to do so. Yet, when the son does come home, the father does not put his son on trial, or try to rub it in to swell his own ego. His only concern is to re-establish a real relationship, one of sharing which surpasses that which previously existed.

The New Testament reveals to us three distinct phases in a parent-child relationship. The first is when the child is young. At that time he is the heir, and yet in some senses is “no better than a slave.(40) He shares a full relationship with his parents, but is under their discipline without the adult maturity to always understand that discipline or its purposes. He is, of course, a person in every sense of the word, but cannot be treated as a responsible adult. The second phase is entered when a child reaches what the Jews call “bar mitzvah”. Broadly speaking, this refers to the teen years. In many ways, the son or daughter should now be treated as an adult. They should be able (as with the Jews) to assume more responsible roles in the church. as already mentioned, it may become appropriate for other means of discipline to be found than physical chastisement, such as a loss of privilege. In any case, one suspects that by this time their attitude to authority will already have been formed; and if it is not a healthy one, then beating is unlikely to reform it very easily. The wisdom and benefit of a healthy early training should now be seen.(41) But at this stage, the children are in their parents’ household. Thus, although in some ways adults, they still to obey their parents.(42)

Thus it was that Jesus at the age of twelve went to his *bar mitzvah* in Jerusalem, and was able at that time to take his place in the adult discussion of the scholars.(43) Yet afterwards he remained obedient to his parents as he remained in their household.(44)

The third stage in parent-child relationships comes in the words, “For this cause shall a man *leave* his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife.”(45) After this time he should continue to “honour” his father and mother, but is released from the command to “obey” them. Part of that “honour” consists of making provision for any parent in need, especially a widowed mother or grandmother.(46) This is, in a sense, only a return on the parental obligation to provide for children when the dependence was the other way around.(47)

In these days, of course, we are unlike the society in which Jesus lived, in that some people remain always unmarried. To reapply the principles in our context would probably mean, therefore, that children should obey his or her parents as long as they are under eighteen (our present age of adulthood in law, and a reasonable average age of marriage in ancient Israel), and should obey on questions relating to activity *within* their parents’ home for as long as they share their household. Outside that they are free, and even within those bounds

the parents should not “provoke their children to wrath” unnecessarily.

It is interesting to note that the Scriptures never idealize Old Testament characters. We will see in Chapter 11 something of David’s less than ideal marital relationships. He was also an ineffectual father. When his eldest son Amnon became depressed, it was not David but his nephew who noticed it. Had David kept a close relationship with his son he might have offered counsel, and if Amnon’s feelings proved genuine have arranged a suitable marriage.(48) Instead Amnon committed rape. David was angry, but did nothing. The Septuagint explains: “But David vexed not the spirit of Amnon his son, because he loved him.” David mistook overindulgence for love. He neither punished Amnon, nor comforted Tamar - and Absalom took both upon himself.

David had a doting affection for the good-looking and apparently somewhat vain Absalom, (49) but was apparently not close enough to him to understand the resentment he felt against Amnon.(50) Later David refused to accept the obvious signs in Absalom’s behavior that he sought unlawful power.(51) Sadly, after Absalom’s rebellion, defeat, and death, his equally good-looking brother Adonijah showed exactly the same signs.(52) In this case, the Scripture actually makes clear the heart of the problem: “His father had *never interfered* with him by asking, ‘Why do you behave as you do?’(53) David did not discipline his sons, and had not himself shown them a good model of family life.

This should serve us as a warning that even for a “man after God’s own heart”, family life does not just happen. We need to be conscious of it, to spend time on it, and to make an effort to understand its principles and apply them to our lives.

## NOTES

1. Rom. 5:8; 8:35-39; 1 John 4:10.
2. Rom. 3:3; 5:8.
3. John 3:16; 15:13; 1 John 3:17, 18.
4. 2 Cor. 12:14.
5. As in Gal. 2:20.
6. See, e.g., D. Ross Campbell, *How to Really Love Your Child* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1977).
7. Matt 19:14.
8. Matt 10:30
9. Matt 6:8, 7:7.
10. Matt 7:7-13, Luke 11:9-13.
11. Gal 4:1-7.
12. Luke 15:11-32.
13. John 6:9-13.

14. Matt. 19: 13-15; Mark 10: 13-15.
15. Matt. 18:2-6; Mark 9:36, 37; Luke 9:47, 48.
16. Matt. 21:15, 16.
17. Luke 2:42, 46.
18. Job 1:8; 2:3.
19. Heb. 12:6.
20. Eph. 6:1, 4.
21. Acts 7:22; 22:3; 2 Tim. 2:25; Tit. 2:12.
22. Discipline=*paideia* (see Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3:775; Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 5:596; Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 2:1286), from “teach” in classical usage. Punishment=*ekdikesis* (see Brown, 3:92; Kittel, 2:445; Liddell 1,504), which concerns justice and avenging wrong.
23. Rom. 13:4; 1 Pet. 2:14.
24. Ps. 103:8~13.
25. Prov. 13:24.
26. Gen. 49: 10; Ps. 45:6.
27. Prov. 10:13; 23:13.
28. Ps. 23:4; Mic. 7:14, KJV.
29. Ps. 23:4.
30. Matt. 18: 15-19.
31. Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:2 1.
32. Eph. 4:26.
33. Deut. 6:5-7.
34. 1 Pet. 5:1
35. John 13:3,-5.
36. Eph. 5: 1. t,
37. Ex. 12:26;' 27.
38. Prov. 1:8
39. Luke 15:11.-32.
40. Gal. 4: 1.
41. Prov. 22:6,
42. Eph. 6: 1; Col. 3:20.
43. Luke 2:46.
44. Luke 2:51.
45. Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:7; Eph. 5:31.
46. Matt. 15:4-6; Mark 7:10-12; 1 Tim. 5:4, 16.
47. 2 Cor. 12:14.
48. 2 Sam. 13.
49. 2 Sam. 13:39; 18:33.
50. 2 Sam. 13:22, 26.
51. 2 Sam. 15:1-6.
52. 1 Kings 1:5, 6.
53. 1 Kings 1:6, LXX.

**Discussion Nine**

# **Family Relationships**

**Readings: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7  
Ephesians 6:1-4  
Hebrews 12:5-11**

**Thought: Rights always come with responsibilities, if we don't accept the latter we should not expect the former..**

## **Discussion Questions**

- 1. Does reading the Bible and being a spiritual person automatically make one a good parent?**
- 2. Are parents always to blame if their children make major wrong choices in their lives?**
- 3. What is the difference between the relationship between dog and trainer and that between child and parent?**
- 4. How can parents balance the needs for consistency with flexibility?**



# Men and Women in the Church Family

**Readings: Joel 2:28,29**  
1 Timothy 2:11-3:13

It might at first sight seem surprising that a section touching on church order should appear in a book about family relationships. But there is a good reason for this. The word “church” (Greek: *ecclesia*) does not mean an institution, but a group or gathering. **(1)** The church is the people who make it up. The New Testament, moreover, sees the church as an extension of the family. This is true in two ways. First, fellow Christians are viewed as brothers and sisters, parents and children, and are to be treated as such. **(2)** Second, Christian meetings for fellowship and worship tended to be in people’s homes, often informally in what was really just an extension of family worship. **(3)** But if the church is seen in the New Testament as a kind of extension of household or family, then obviously some of the household/family relationships will extend into it in some way. To “preside over” the church family will be a role similar to presiding over one’s own family **(4)**, and it may be that male/female family roles will extend into the church. It has to be added that some of the same groups I recent times who have emphasized male church leadership, have often taken a patriarchal approach to family life.

It has also to be said, however, that we deplore the media tendency to lump together as ‘traditionalist’ various views about (say) the rightness of heterosexual lifelong marriage, with views on women’s ministry. This book does not accept the epithet of ‘traditionalist’ on any issue – if anything it seeks to be ‘biblicist’.

So let us first look at how the New Testament church was run, and what were the formats of its gatherings. Paul actually gives explicit commands as to how these things are to be done, even saying that if anyone is really spiritual he will obey this! **(5)** This means that we should take the New Testament teaching on this very seriously. If we believe in the authority of the Bible, we need to thoroughly understand the principles of church government, order, and gatherings. There may, of course, be *some* aspects which have meaning only in relation to the custom and culture of that day. But they need to be treated as such only after careful examination. Too often major denominations seem to almost totally ignore the New Testament pattern laid down by the apostles and rely instead, on tradition or intuition. God will, of course, bless within *any* structure or format whenever he can do so. But he had good reason., for laying down a general pattern in a particular way and however we may adapt it to circumstances, we should not simply ignore it.

Three words are used for appointed posts in the early church: *episkopos* (bishop); *presbuteros* (elder) and *diakanos* (deacon or minister). The first of these is from a word group meaning to scrutinise or over see, with overtones in the Septuagint of looking after something.(6) The word *presbuteros* comes from the word for age, but seems to sometimes refer to a recognised group of leaders.(7) The word *diakanos* will be considered later.

The New Testament seems clearly to identify *episkopoi* and *presbuteroi* as the same group of people in the church.(8) Each locality had its one Christian gathering (or “church”) in which elders were appointed (or “ordained”) under the authority of the apostles.(9) The nature of this recognised appointment may be contrasted with the situation regarding prophets. One became an elder by being appointed to the post (whether permanently or for a specific context and time). But one became a prophet by receiving and exercising the gift of prophecy from the Holy Spirit, and would be a prophet only as long as one continued to exercise the gift. Paul would not have told Titus to “appoint prophets in every church”, for being a prophet was a role rather than an institutional post. A prophet could, of course, exert a great influence, even to the point of having a leadership role, but it would be an inspirational rather than an institutional leadership. It would not be his recognised *responsibility* to lead.

Eldership, then, was a post rather than a function as such. But elders were expected to fulfil three basic leadership roles: to rule or preside, to shepherd, and to teach. It is worth examining these three aspects of their authority.

In chapters 7, 8 we saw that the word *prohistemi* did not mean rule in the sense of a dictatorship, but spoke of a man “presiding over” the creative unit of the family. Elders “preside over” a church in a similar way.(10) Energy, creativity, ideas, ministry, etc. might bubble up from anywhere in the church, as the Holy Spirit inspired it. But the elders, in presiding over the church, had the task of channeling ideas, sifting them, and making any necessary decisions or rulings, which would then be seen as the decision of the church. As the institutionally recognized officers of the church, their decisions were ‘official policy.’ But these decisions could well be made with the help of the inspirational influence of non-elders.

Their second function is stated thus: “To the elders among you, I appeal ... be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”(11) They are “shepherds” not in any sense of “lordship”, but to *lead* the flock by their example. We should remember that Eastern shepherds (then as now) *lead* their sheep; they do not drive them. For this reason, someone appointed to be an elder should be “above reproach”.(12) They lead by example. But an Eastern shepherd also carries a “rod”,(13) a symbol of authority. The rod is

used to protect the sheep from wolves, and also to redirect any of the flock who are going astray. The authority of the elders may also be a protection by, refusing entry to a false prophet (who is like a wolf)(14) and a means to bring back any of the church going astray.

The third eldership function is that they should be “able to teach”. (15) This is linked with their rulership: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching.(16) The Greek rendered “doctrine” or “teaching” in the New Testament is the same word. In the New Testament, the title “teacher” implies authority. It was a title often used to address Jesus.(17) And the one under a teacher is a “disciple” rather than merely a “pupil”.(18) In the early church, a body of teachings was being laid down by Jesus’ chosen apostles; and the church continued steadfastly in “the apostles’ teaching.” Elders were not originators of doctrine, but an elder should “hold firm to the sound word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it. Part of the shepherding involved laying down an official line on what should be received as “apostles’ doctrine” (KJV). This, clearly, was even more important in the days before the New Testament was compiled. At that time, the elders also had to decide the official line on any new issues. For example, it was a council of leading elders, including the apostles who were also elders,(21) who decided the role of Gentiles in the church.(22) Teaching and authority were very clearly linked.

Yet we must note that the authority of the elders was in no sense a priestly authority. A priest is a human mediator between God and men, and as a special position this ceased with the Old Covenant. The word is never used of a class of people in the church, and its use today is based on misunderstanding. An elder was not a priestly mediator. Neither was he any kind of successor to the twelve apostles and Paul. Their function was one of personal witness to Jesus’ resurrection,(23) and their authority was not passed on. (Likewise the “messengers” sent out by the churches (24) were what we would call “missionaries”. They were not successors of the twelve either.) Later church leaders recognised this great distinction between their own authority and that of the twelve apostles and Paul.(25) Elders, then, were neither priests nor successors to the apostles, and there is no biblical evidence that they played any special part in what various different churches call “breaking of bread” or “communion” or “the Eucharist”.

But we need to go further than this. The elders were not even the unique source of spiritual ministry in the church. Spiritual ministry was the function of the Holy Spirit through the whole body of the church. Thus, in a church meeting “each one” present might lead with a psalm, a teaching, a prophecy, etc.(26) In such a gathering, several prophets might speak. Yet what they said must be “weighed” by those present, for though the Spirit might minister through a prophet, the prophet did not have the institutional authority of the

elders to lay down church policy.(27) The function of elders was not to monopolise spiritual ministry, but to make sure that the church in general stayed along the right lines, and to decide church policy and doctrine. But the modern system in many denominations, where spiritual ministry is virtually concentrated in one full-time minister, is quite foreign to the New Testament.

In most denominations, this lack of New Testament pattern complicates the discussion of the place of women in the ministry. Those of us who wish the debate to be based on the revelation of God, rather than on, say, the value of tradition or the supposed psychological fitness or unfitness of women, have special problems in this respect. It is, of course, meaningless in biblical terms to ask if a woman can be ordained a priest, when there is no human class of priests in the church as God sees it. Thus, in the major debate on women's ministry in the Anglican church at the end of the last century, one of the arguments put was that since *any* priesthood was a human arrangement in the church, it could also be changed by human arrangement. But even in many nonconformist groups, the pattern of ministry differs from that laid down in apostolic times.(28) Since no counterpart existed in the New Testament church to the minister as conceived by many modern groups, it again becomes impossible to say whether (according to God's revelation in Scripture) a woman can be a "minister". If we really wanted to take the Bible as our authority, we would need to strive (whatever our particular denomination or tradition) to get closer to the divinely revealed pattern for church order and ministry, in which the relative roles of men and women is just one aspect.

We may bear this background in mind as we consider Paul's words in 1 Tim 2:11-12 "Let a woman learn in silence, with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent." What does this mean? The phrase, "teach and have authority" is, as we have seen, a specific function of an elder. Not, of course, that Paul forbids all teaching to women(29), and he seems to have had no qualms at Priscilla being named in the teaching of Apollus.(30) It is specifically the eldership. role of laying down authoritative doctrines of the church that he forbids to women. It is also noteworthy that Paul gives this as his own ruling for the churches, and this leaves it open as to whether there might be exceptional or different circumstances in which some other course could be the best.

To expand on this, Paul goes back to the Genesis account of the beginnings human life and society in Eden: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children."(31) Eve was a "helper" for Adam, meaning an ally and an equal. But Paul notes how Adam is portrayed as being formed first, and Eve as formed out of and through Adam.(32) In fact, in the Genesis account God is shown giving the moral command to Adam before Eve was created, and first requiring Adam to answer for it.(33). With his rabbinical background, Paul uses this to illustrate the temporal priority

of man in the birth of the church which was to reset humankind on course. In Genesis,, both Adam and Eve ignored the moral imperative.. Eve chose to follow the serpent’s advice rather than follow what Adam had told her was God’s instruction, and she evidently did it without even discussing it with him. Then Adam chose to follow his wife’s lead in eating the fruit, and tried to escape his own God-given responsibility by blaming her afterwards?(34) However much of the account we take to be allegorical, it is clear that something is involved of both man and woman trying to reject the pattern of institutional responsibility implicitly laid down by God. In the church order, Paul wants no such thing. The male elders must face up to their own institutional responsibility (whoever’s lead they may choose to follow), for laying down doctrine. The women know clearly that God has chosen to let authoritative teaching be established in this way, and are neither to listen to other voices nor seek to usurp authority, themselves.

We should note several things here. First, Paul nowhere says that women are unfit to be elders. He does not say that women are more likely to be deceived than men. His reference to Genesis is a purely historical one, showing that attempts to reject a God-given pattern led to disaster. This does not depend on any supposed universal characteristics of men and women.

Second, Paul himself was evidently concerned that no one should misunderstand him to be saying that women are inferior. In one passage, he goes on to emphasise that the human race is a unity, for though Eve was formed “out of and through Adam, men come out of and through their mothers”.(35) In the Timothy passage he is more explicit: “But she shall be saved through the childbearing, if they continue in faith, love and sanctification with sobriety.(36) This again refers to the unity of the human race, but seems to refer back to the next part of the Genesis story. The serpent (which Paul takes as an allegorical reference to Satan (37) will be crushed by the seed of the woman. God in Genesis chose to emphasise the special part that woman (through Mary) would play in bringing Christ into the world. Paul’s reference to “*the* childbearing” must surely refer to this, for to take it literally would imply that a childless woman could not be saved, which would be an absurd doctrine to ascribe to Paul. We should also notice that in Genesis 3:16 God now directly addresses the woman. There is no indication that in future he would communicate with her only through her husband. This is actually an interesting point relating to Paul’s use of the account. In Genesis 2-3 God seems to address commands to the woman through the man only in the very first instance. Did Paul intend his male eldership principle, God laying down patterns for Christian teaching, to be for all periods of the church or only in the first instance? Could it be that the principle of “to the Jew first and also to the Gentile...”(38) had a counterpart in the male-female church relationship – bearing in mind that in Christ there is ultimately no Jew or Gentile, male or female?(39)

Third, we should note what Paul immediately passes on to say. He lists the characteristics (married men of long Christian experience and high moral standing) necessary for those ruling and teaching as elders.(40) This reaffirms the point that in forbidding women to “teach... to usurp authority”(KJV), he has in mind the institutional authority of eldership. It may be that he also has in mind something of the idea of headship. He adds “If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?(41) Christian leadership is consensual, not autocratic. As the marriage unit is a body so is the church a body, and in a healthy body the direction is that of the whole organism – not one part at odds with others.

We should also note exactly what is forbidden to women. It is the institutional authority of eldership. But women, both in church and in family, could exercise inspirational leadership. In other words, her husband (or a church) might recognize that she possessed particular wisdom on some matter and could follow her advice. This did not cancel the male responsibility for the decision, but it is a valid function of being a “helper” or a fellow-worker.(42) We find that the Bible often alludes to such inspirational leadership. Perhaps the function of the saviour-judge Deborah could be seen in this light.(43) Such women judges were not recognized in an institutional way as kings, but held power in the manner of a prophet,(44) by their inspirational leadership. Likewise, the wise woman who saved her city Abel by her influence with Joab and her people had no institutional authority, but was listened to because of her inspirational leadership.

Paul, who based his views of women consciously on the Old Testament,(45) would not have wished to overthrow this kind of role for women. He appreciated the work of Priscilla in sharing with her husband equally in the exposition of Christian truth to the church leader Apollos early in his work.(46) He also refers to a woman, Phoebe, as a minister or deacon (*diakonon*) of the Cenchranean church. He tells the Roman church to assist her, and says that she had been a “helper” (*prostatis*) of many, including himself.(47) The word *Prostatis* is not used anywhere else in the New Testament, but is used five times in the Greek Old Testament to mean “ruler” or “officer.”(48) In general Greek literature, it meant “leader”, “patron”, “protector” (the defender of an inferior!).(49) This is the word Paul, an apostle, uses to describe Phoebe’s relationship with himself! Certainly this was a position of importance and influence, though again, of course, it was not one of institutional ruling authority.

We might pause to note at this point that there was another institutional post in the New Testament church which did not carry the ruling authority of eldership. just as the word “messenger” (*apostolos*) assumed a technical sense in some contexts, so the word “minister” (*diahonos*) seems in places to refer to a specific post.(50) The kind of people required were broadly the same, but the phrase “an apt teacher”(51) is omitted, for teaching carries overtones of

eldership authority. The exact functions of deacons are uncertain, but many people associate them with those appointed in Acts 6, where the verbal form of *diakoneo* is used.(52) If so, it would imply that the social work and famine relief undertaken by the seven later became the work of recognized deacons. Phoebe may have been one of these, and the context of 1 Timothy 3:11 seems to make best sense if we take Paul to be referring there to lady deacons. Unlike elders who were chosen for spiritual authority by those with spiritual insight the seven deacons were elected by the people - perhaps for the practical purpose that to counter complaints about unfairness they themselves should choose the men.(53)

On the practical level, one should also point out the apparent importance of the houses owned by women for early church meetings. After Pentecost, Peter evidently knew that the most important prayer meeting would be taking place at a woman's house. (54) Paul used Lydia's house as a base for mission.(55) Nymphas evidently had a church meeting in her house.(56) The reference to "Chloe's people" as a trusted source of information may indicate a sound group in Chloe's house.(57) Considering the few references to such things, the predominance of women is noticeable.

As far as women's participation in the life of the church was concerned, Paul forbade them to teach authoritatively, but allowed them to give exegesis.(58) and to prophesy.(59) The word "prophesy" is an often misunderstood Greek word, really meaning not just predicting the future, but "forth telling" God's message.(60) Unlike authoritative teaching, not all prophecy must be accepted; but it must be weighed spiritually against known truth.(61) The Jews expected both men and women to prophesy,(62) and God's promise of the New Covenant made it clear that the increase in prophecy due to the Spirit was to be shared equally between men and women.(63) It was part of God's foretold New Covenant design. So, for example, the four unmarried daughters of one of the seven respected and Spirit-filled deacons were recognized as prophetesses in the early church.(64)

Thus, it was quite normal for Paul to refer in 1 Corinthians 11 to women leading public worship in prayer or prophecy. Paul makes it clear that this is the context he has in mind by his words, "if anyone we recognize no other practice, nor do the *churches of God*." Paul does not say, "*church of God*", but "*churches of God*" The word *churches really* means gatherings; so Paul is saying that it is normal custom in church gatherings for women to pray and prophesy with covered heads.

Now this must form the background as we try to understand the admittedly difficult comment on women which appears later in Paul's letter.(65) Some have taken it to mean that women cannot pray or prophesy in church gatherings, nor lead public worship. We find this interpretation impossible for several reasons. First, it would be very odd for Paul to refer in Chapter 11 to a

normal church practice of women praying and prophesying with covered heads, but then forbid them, to pray or prophesy at all in Chapter 14. It has been argued that Paul wanted to deal with one topic at a time. But then, surely, in Chapter 11 he would simply have said, “It is a shame for a woman to appear in church with unveiled head”, whereas he deliberately says that the practice in churches is for them to lead worship.

Second, Paul seems to connect his forbidding them to speak with their being “in subjection.” A woman who is leading public worship can remain subject; ministry and authority are two entirely different things. Old Testament prophetesses who made public prophecy were not thereby refusing to be subject to their husbands.

Third, some people have connected Paul’s words, “as the Law says”, with women literally being in silence. But neither biblical law, nor even rabbinical oral law forbade the woman to speak in a synagogue. According to rabbinical law women were forbidden to teach (66) but could be called to the reading of the Torah in the synagogue (though in practice they were not).(67)

Fourth, Paul’s illustration of what he means - “If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home”(68) - simply does not relate to a woman leading worship in prayer and prophecy or preaching.

Last, it is hard to imagine Paul giving an instruction which he insists is a commandment of Jesus rooted in the essential origins of the gospel,(69) but which would fundamentally contradict the New Covenant prophecy that both the sons and daughters of Israel would prophesy.

Now this means that, however we look at the verses, we surely cannot interpret them to be a literal ban on all speaking. In actual fact, practically no one today would take literally Paul’s words, “they are not permitted to speak.” The word “speak is *lalē*, and in another passage describing a church gathering, this is shown to include “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”.(70) In other words, if we took all this literally, the women would not be allowed to sing either. But in this connection, nearly everyone agrees that the *context* of the word “speak” must explain its meaning, restricting its areas of application. All that we are saying is that a more detailed look at the context (particularly bearing in mind also what has gone before) indicates a greater restriction in the area of application than some others would believe.

The context of the passage is a general rebuke to the Corinthians for the disorderliness of their meetings. Their basic trouble was a “do your own thing” mentality. Their Communion service was evidently a shambles, with people eating at different times, over eating, and even getting drunk.(71) In their worship meetings, there was a hubbub of confused noises as people all spoke in, tongues and prophesied at the same time. as they felt inclined.(72) Evidently



some people felt that the “spiritual man” (verse 37) should not curtail any form of free expression or individual action. Paul opposed this, because God is a God of order, not of tumult.(73) There is also a God-given order of things represented in the word *hupotasso* (subjection), which really means “to set in order under.” The spirits of the prophets are “set in order under” the prophets; thus, it is wrong for a man (claiming to be spiritual) to say, “If the spirit moves me, I must speak immediately.” The women are “set in order under” the elders and, again, should only speak in a proper context. This emphasis on proper order implies that in certain contexts, people should hold their peace. This is the meaning of the word *sigao*,(74) which is a different word from that Paul used in 1 Timothy 2. It means to keep something to oneself. Someone with a “tongue” should keep it to himself unless there is an interpreter (verse 28). Someone prophesying should keep it to himself if another has a more urgent desire to speak (verse 30). And the women, if they have questions, should keep them to themselves until a more suitable time (verse 34).

Unfortunately we have to remind ourselves that we are looking here at only half of a correspondence. The Corinthians had written to ask Paul a number of specific questions,(75) to which he replied in this letter. They had evidently asked him about spiritual gifts and worship meetings.(76) What exactly had been raised with respect to women in meetings, we simply do not know. It is possible that in Corinth they sat segregated from the men at this time, for some early churches may have followed the synagogue pattern in this. But what kind of talking had been reported to Paul, we can never be sure. Paul’s words cannot be taken at literal face value for three reasons.

First, as we have seen, the word “speak” (14:34) would then include singing as *well*, which no one believes. Second, in verse 31 Paul had said that all should *learn* from the prophecy in meetings. Thus, his words, “If there is *anything* they desire to *know*, let them ask their husbands at home” (verse 35), would contradict this if taken literally. Third, this would not legislate for widows in the church. Widows made their own decisions, without being subject to anyone in the family,(77) and had no husband “at home” to ask. So Paul must have intended the Corinthians to intelligently interpret his words in the light of their practices, which unfortunately we cannot now know.

But none of it seems to concern leading worship in prayer or prophecy. A woman who did this recognized her position as a married woman (in that society) by covering her hair, and this sign itself became her “authority” to lead public worship.(78) She did not wish to “learn” anything; she was not asking questions, but letting the Spirit minister through her. Paul’s comment seems to concern questions, but we cannot now be sure what exactly these were. It is possible that Paul’s teaching to “let the others weigh what is said” by the prophets(79) implied a verbal discussion. This might have led to some of the independent minded Greek women reaching their own consensus, rather than relying on those with biblical background (probably usually men at that time)

for doctrinal direction. Again, it may be that the women of Corinth were discussing and questioning the decisions of the elders. It is not today unknown for folk to mutter afterwards about leadership decisions - in Corinth, the meetings were evidently so chaotic that this could have happened during the meetings themselves. This would make sense of Paul's words: be subject; hold your peace; discuss church decisions with your husbands (or at least with those more familiar with the considerations - not with other ladies in a group).

However these two controversial verses are taken, there are difficulties of interpretation. No one can really take them literally, and their meanings must relate to the (to us) unknown context. We should therefore be very wary of any attempt to use these two verses to effectively bar half the church of Christ from any central ministry of the Spirit. If they were to forbid anything it was women in eldership. One might, of course, have argued that a widow or spinster might hold such authority. Adult spinsters were, of course, virtually unknown in Paul's day, but there does seem to be evidence that there was some kind of appointed position of "widow".<sup>(80)</sup> What it was, we do not know. But the problem with conferring eldership authority on a spinster or widow is that they could later marry.

But how can we, then, apply these various principles and ideas in the churches today? We have already noted that the function of Christ's apostles was to witness to his life and resurrection from firsthand experience, and this could not be passed on.<sup>(81)</sup> The supreme authority of the apostles, therefore, as distinct from the authority of ordinary "apostles of the churches" or "missionaries", died with them. Thus, the "apostles' doctrine"<sup>(82)</sup>, which the early church had firsthand, is available to us only through the New Testament Scriptures written under the apostles' authority. But this obviously means that unlike the early church, we cannot settle any disputes by direct appeal to the apostles for judgment. In this respect, our church structure can never follow completely the New Testament practice. Those of us who regard as mistaken the attempts of various groups today to set up their leaders as successors to Christ's apostles, we must simply accept this fact.

At a local level, however, it may be possible to follow the New Testament pattern more closely. The structures set up at that time related to the nature of the New Covenant, not to any cultural factors peculiar to that day. As a matter of fact, the cultures of areas into which the gospel first came were at least as varied as ours today. So if we follow their lead on women's ministry, where would we get to?

On the positive side, this would make many ministry functions definitely open to both men and women. A woman could certainly be a minister in a full-time capacity. Properly speaking, the ministry is the work Of the Holy Spirit through the whole body of the Church. But it is not wrong to speak of male and female ministers' (like Phoebe). This is true whether they are

full-time or (like Paul) have a secular occupation as well. Spiritual ministry does not imply authority or government.

If we follow New Testament practice, we should also allow such ministry to include prophecy (which may include much of which we would now call preaching). Women could expound Scripture (as did Priscilla). Women could lead public worship in prayer. Women could also teach in various situations (83) ‘as directed under the elders’ authority. This would not be to “usurp authority”(84) but to recognize it.

But what about women in ‘eldership’ roles today? Remember, of course, that elders were neither priests, nor those who necessarily led the worship. Their role was to “rule”. They were institutionally recognized leaders, making day to day decisions on policy and church discipline as well as laying down a teaching program. In many modern denominations, it is difficult to see who exactly is fulfilling the eldership role. In some, ironically, women do sit on ruling bodies, but may not be “ordained”. Paul gives the ruling as for his churches(85) and we have already raised the problem that it is not clear whether this was an ‘in the first placer’ issue, or for all time. Would it cause problems for a woman to “be subject” to her husband in the home, whilst he was ‘subject’ to her as a church elder? When this book was first written, this seemed to us a problem. On further reflection, however, one would have to ask whether a Christian slave could “obey” his earthly master (as Paul admonished), but be an elder in the master’s household church. Surely the answer has to be “yes”? Even though a slave-master relationship is subservient in a way absent from the ‘allies’ in marriage, if in Christ there is no slave nor free then the answer must be “yes”. The point is that as Ephesians 5:21 says we should “be subject (*hupotasso*) to one another” in the church - rightful authority can operate in different directions in different contexts. But if this applies to this, then how much more to a married women (noting that wifely *hupotasso* follows in Ephesians 5:22) than a slave? In Christ there is no slave nor free, *and* no male nor female as Galatians 3:28 proclaims.

In our view, then, there is no problem with women, married or single, being on ruling bodies of churches, and participating at every level. There might be some unease if they actually predominated – but alas in most churches (even those like the Free Methodists where all ministry positions are open to women) the opposite problem is usually the case.

Let us hope that our churches of all traditions come to recognize again the great potential for spiritual ministry in “ordinary” members. Men and women, without holding institutional posts of authority, may be used by the Spirit to minister. We might look more for the kind of husband-wife teamwork of Aquila and Priscilla which evidently impressed Paul. We should look more for women like Lydia, like Phoebe, who worked as Paul’s honoured fellow-labourers. Then., perhaps, the prophecy will be realized: *The Lord gives*

*the word. The women that publish the tidings are a great host.”(86)*

## NOTES

1. As used in Acts 19:4 1.
2. 1 Tim. 5:1, 2.
3. Acts 2:46; 20:7-12.
4. 1 Tim. 3A, 5; 5:17.
5. 1 Cor. 14:37.
6. See Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1: 188; Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:599; Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1:657; also 1 Pet. 2:25 where *episkopos* is rendered “Guardian” (RSV) or “Overseer” (NIV and NKJV).,
7. See Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1:192; Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6:651.
8. 1 Tim. 3: 1; 5:17 ascribe the same functions. Acts 20.17. 28 directly equate the terms.
9. Acts 14:23.. Tit. 1:5
10. 1 Thess. 5: 12; 1 Tim. 3.4, 5; 5:17.
11. 1 Pet. 5:14.
12. 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:7.
13. Psa. 23:4; also Rev. 2:27.
14. Acts 20:28, 29.
15. 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:9.
16. 1 Tim. 5:17.
17. Matt. 8: 19; Mark 4:38; Luke 7:40; John 1:38.
18. Matt. 10:24.
19. Acts 2:42.
20. Tit. 1:9.
21. 1 Pet. 5: 1; 2 John 1.
22. Acts 15:6, 22.
23. John 15:27; Acts 1:21, 22; 2:32; 1 Cor. 15:8.
24. 2 Cor. 8:23.
25. E.g., 1 Clement 3:12-16; 19:1-3; 20:22; Ignatius to Rome 2:6; Polycarp to Philippi 2:2.
26. 1 Cor. 14:26.
27. 1 Cor. 14:29.
28. 1 Cor. 14:37.
29. Tit. 2:4.
30. Acts 18:26, note she is named first in Rom. 16:3
31. 1 Tim. 2:13-15; see also 1 Cor. 11:8-12.
32. 1 Tim. 2:13; 1 Cor. 11:8, 9.
33. Gen. 2:15-17; 3:9-12.
34. Gen. 3:12.
35. 1 Cor. 11: 12.
36. 1 Tim. 2:15, RV.

37. See Rom. 16:20.
38. Rom. 1:16.
39. Gal. 3:28
40. 1 Tim. 3:1-7.
41. 1 Tim. 3:5.
42. Gen. 2:18; Rom. 16:3; Phil. 4:1
43. Judg. 4:5.
44. Judg. 2: 18.
45. 1 Cor. 14:34. "The Law" probably refers loosely to the Old Testament.
46. Acts 18:26; Rom.16:3.
47. Rom. 16:1, 2. In one of the earliest extant pagan references to Christianity, Pliny (*Epistles* x.33, c. A.D. 12) speaks of two female slaves who were "deacons".
48. 1 Chr. 27:31; 29:6; 2 Chr. 8:10; 24:11 (twice).
49. See, e.g., Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 2:1526 or any lexicon
50. In particular, Phil.1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8.
51. 1 Tim. 3:2-7 (note v. 2); 3:8-13.
52. Acts 6:1, 2.
53. Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5.; Acts 6:3, 5; Acts 6:1.
54. Acts 12:12.
55. Acts 16:15.
56. Col. 4:15. (*Her house is the preferred reading.*)
57. 1 Cor. 1: 11.
58. Acts 18:26.
59. 1 Cor. 11:5.
60. For prophecy see Brown, *The New International Dictionary of 'New Testament. Theology*, 3:74-89. Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 2:1539 gives classical meaning: "the gift of interpreting the will of the, gods."
61. 1 Cor. 14:29.
62. Ex. 15:20; Judg. 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chr. 34:22; Neh. 6:14; Isa. 8:3; Luke 2:36.
63. Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17.
64. Acts 21:9.
65. 1 Cor. 14:34.
66. *Mishnah Kiddushin* 4:13.
67. See, e.g., Popular Judaica Library volume by Havvim Schneid, *Family* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publications. 1974), p. 88; Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: 1922-1928), 111:467; Emil Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus* (New York: Schocken, 1961), 11:512; and Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1973; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), p. 374.
68. 1 Cor. 14:35.
69. 1 Cor. 14:37.
70. Eph. 5:19.
71. 1 Cor. 11:21.

- 72. 1 Cor. 14:27-31.
- 73. 1 Cor. 14:23, 29-33, 40.
- 74. 1 Cor. 14:28, 30, 34.
- 75. 1 Cor. 7:4.
- 76. 1 Cor. 12:1.
- 77. Num, 30:9
- 78. 1 Cor. 11: 10.
- 79. 1 Cor. 14:29.
- 80. Thus 1 Tim. 5.9, which surely cannot refer simply to joining the church.
- 81. See Notes 23, 25.
- 82. Acts 2.42, KJV.
- 83. Tit. 2:3, 4.
- 84. 1 Tim. 2:12, KJV.
- 85. 1 Tim. 2:12.
- 86. Ps. 68: 11 (see RV, ASV, or any stricter rendering).

Discussion Ten

# Men and Women in the Church Family

**Readings: Joel 2:28,29  
1 Timothy 2:11-3:13**

**Thought: There is a big difference between usurping an authority and receiving an authority as a gift.**

## Discussion Questions

- 1. What dangers are there in applying a legalistic understanding of some biblical instruction, without thinking through the context and overall picture?**
- 2. In what ways do modern cultures differ from those in Corinth or Jerusalem in the first century?**
- 3. How far should cultural expectancy and how far biblical teaching shape our views of church life?**
- 4. How do the roles and positions in our own church compare with those in the New Testament church, and should they all be open to either sex today?**

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**Marriage Problems and Divorce**

**Readings: Matthew 19:3-12; Mark 10:2-12  
Ephesians 5:21-33**

Our starting point here will be to look at the biblical approach to divorce. We need to distinguish between God's ideal at which we should aim, and God's realism in situations which are less than ideal.

God stated clearly his plans in Genesis 2. A man and a woman who have become "one flesh" through marriage would surely need a drastic "surgical" operation to separate them. This is how we should see divorce. Yet the first recorded divorce in the Bible was under God's direct guidance! Why? God had promised Abraham many descendants, but by the time he was eighty-five he was still childless. His wife Sarah therefore gave her maid Hagar "to Abram her husband as a wife".<sup>(1)</sup> Later, after first Hagar and then Sarah herself had borne Abraham sons, there was much bitterness and rivalry between the two women and their offspring.<sup>(2)</sup> So Sarah said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac."<sup>(3)</sup>

The word rendered "cast out" is the imperative form of a Hebrew word (*garash*), elsewhere used for divorce. Abraham was unwilling to divorce Hagar, but God said, "Do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your descendants be named." Abraham divorced Hagar on God's guidance.

Does God, then, approve divorce? No. But we must recognize that this was *already* a less than ideal situation. Abraham had become a polygamist without God's approval. His wife nagged him into it, and then blamed him afterwards when things began to go wrong!<sup>(5)</sup> Hagar despised Sarah, who beat her.<sup>(6)</sup> Sarah may have been obedient,<sup>(7)</sup> but was hardly the perfect wife. Then Ishmael mocked Isaac.<sup>(8)</sup> Moreover, Ishmael was the eldest and so should have been chief heir, which had not been God's intention. In short, Abraham's family affairs were in a total mess. It was in this situation, that God saw divorce as *the least of the evils*. We note that Abraham never *disobeyed* God's direct commands and never ceased to be in a relationship with God. Abraham was not written off as a wicked sinner beyond reprieve. He was a giant of faith in some senses.<sup>(9)</sup> Yet, God told him to get divorced. This too should guide our attitudes. God is a realist.

The Mosaic Law introduces the subject thus: "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some



indecenty in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce...”**(10)** This rendering is the most generally accepted, and it implies that it is not a law introducing divorce, nor even suggesting it. It is a law to restrict certain practices surrounding an already existing custom. It is presumed that, on the man’s action, if not initiative, the woman can be divorced. It also presumes that she can and may remarry; there is no concept of divorce in order to stay unmarried. In fact, it presumes that the man will have to give her a “bill of divorce”, the purpose of which seems simply to *enable* her to remarry. A woman cast out (like Hagar) without any proof that she had been legally divorced would be unable to remarry. So the bill was for her benefit and protection, providing for possible remarriage. But all this is incidental to the passage. Its actual point is to forbid her original husband to take her back again if she has been married to another man in the meantime.

Other laws similarly regulate the practice. One law says that a man (like Abraham) divorcing an ex-slave could not resell her, but must let her go free.**(11)** Another law says that a man with two wives must (unlike Abraham) give the double portion of inheritance to the firstborn son, irrespective of which wife bore him.**(12)** There were laws forbidding a man to divorce if he had been made to marry after seducing the woman, or if he had wrongly accused her of not being a virgin or, their wedding night.**(13)** This, perhaps, was because these might indicate that he was an unwilling spouse!

We have considered one divorcee -Abraham. We might now look at an adulterer, polygamist, murderer, and divorcee - David. His first wife was Princess Michal, who fell madly in love with him.**(14)** When times became difficult for David, he deserted her**(15)** and took other wives.**(16)** Michal, evidently considered divorced from David, became the wife of a man called Palti.**(17)** The Scripture itself calls Palti her “husband,” and so the new marriage was presumably legally valid – it did not consider her ‘still married’ to David.**(18)** Under the Mosaic Law, therefore, Michal was divorced from David and remarried, and David was strictly forbidden to take her back as his wife again.**(19)** This, as we know, is precisely what David *did* do when he came to power, to her legal husband’s evident distress. David reclaimed her as his “wife” **(20)** but Scripture itself refers to her thereafter not as the “wife of David**(21)** but as the “daughter of Saul”.**(22)** David had perhaps committed the “abomination unto the Lord” of divorce and remarriage to the same woman, forbidden in Deuteronomy. All this, incidentally, means we cannot agree with one scholarly study which states: “Jesus made his hearers realise that divorce has no effect on the marriage bond; although separated, the spouses remain united by the marriage.” If Jesus really taught this he was contradicting the Deuteronomic law – and this seems highly unlikely.

Later, David committed adultery with the wife of a man away fighting for him, and in fear of discovery had the man murdered.**(22)** The punishment for this, of course, should have been death. But no one, not even God, suggested it.

God instead sent Nathan to touch David's shepherd-heart and conscience at its most tender point, and David repented of this at least. Yet, even after this David decided to continue his liaison with the woman. He made her his queen, although he was already married. He gave her son Solomon the inheritance rights of the firstborn, although forbidden in the Mosaic Law to do so.(25) Yet God (after punishing David.) accepted this arrangement and Solomon as king. We see, of course, that not all the effects of David's sins could be removed. In this area especially the "sins of the fathers are visited on the children", for they learn wrong approaches to relationships from their parents. Thus, David's son Amnon raped his half-sister and then spurned her; David could say nothing after his own scandalous conduct. And another son, Absalom, later took the law into his own hands.(26)

Absalom also broke the law by taking his father's wives.(27) Much later, the downfall of Solomon himself was through matrimonial problems.(28) God does not stop all the effects of our sins. But he does accept practicalities. In some circumstances he may accept divorce as the best alternative; and on the other hand, he may accept and bless a real *de facto* present marriage in spite of a very shady origin of the liaison. There is, moreover, no indication that a couple with a less than ideal past are therefore barred from any future work for God. Neither Abraham after his divorce, nor David after retaking his ex-wife Michal were barred from service to God. God is more merciful and less doctrinaire than some of his followers seem to be. This is not, of course, to say that 'anything goes'. We know of one Christian organisation in the Evangelical Alliance where a number of the leaders are divorced – one of who abandoned a committed Christian wife without any cause and was accepted back after a nominal time into leadership. Some incidences of divorce (or indeed adultery) are such gross acts of betrayal, perpetrated by someone in full and well informed Christian leadership positions, that it is hard to see how Christian leadership could foreseeably ever be an option again for them.

There is little else about divorce in the Old Testament. In one context, all the people are encouraged by Ezra to divorce their pagan wives.(29) In another context, God says that he hates divorce.(30) Divorce is never ideal, but in some situations it may be the least of the evils.

The grounds for divorce were never laid down in the Old Testament. The phrase used incidentally in Deuteronomy 24:1 ("indecent") is literally "nakedness of a thing". This occurs only twice in Scripture and is obscure in meaning. By Jesus' time, there were two schools of thought on its meaning. That of Hillel took it to mean anything which brought shame, including quarrelling or burning the lunch! The school of Shammai restricted it to adultery as the sole grounds. This is the background of the question to Jesus: "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for *any* cause?"(31) The accounts in the Gospels are not identical, and it seems clear that we do not have a verbatim report of the incident. But the teaching of Jesus which emerges is this. First,

Genesis says that husband and wife become one flesh; Jesus took this to mean that they are no longer two but one. The termination of a Marriage, therefore, does not merely imply a legal enactment of divorce. It involves a splitting of a *real* as well as a legal union. Man should not *separate* what God intended to remain as one unit.(32)

The Pharisees asked him why, therefore, Moses had *commanded* them to divorce. Jesus replied that Moses had *allowed* divorce because of their hardness of heart.(33)

In other words, there was divine recognition (as we have already seen) that in some circumstances, in a less than ideal world, divorce was the least of the evils. But it had always been God's intention for marriage to be a permanent commitment. It was this kind of thinking, more basic perhaps than the legalistic arguments of the school of Shammai, which led Jesus to a serious view of divorce. It was not something to be considered lightly-and certainly not for trivialities like burnt lunch. It was to be considered only for serious "immorality.(34) The word Jesus actually used *is not* the word for adultery (*moicheia*), but a more general word (*porneia*).(35) It seems unlikely, therefore, that he intended a strictly legalistic restriction to only one ground of divorce (namely, adultery). The word *porneia* is often used in a figurative sense,' but it certainly does mean some serious fault.

First, however, note how Jesus drew out a further implication of the Genesis teaching that marriage involved a one-flesh unity. There could be no vestige of a double standard. A husband divorcing his wife is to be seen in the same light as a wife divorcing her husband.(36) Jewish practice had never permitted women to initiate divorce, and neither did the Greeks. Under Roman law, however, the form of marriage-normal for over a century before Jesus' ministry-could be dissolved by either partner. No grounds were needed, and divorce and remarriage of Romans was very common indeed.(37) It is certain, therefore, that the idea of woman divorcing man would be familiar at that time, and Jesus deliberately states the issue generally. Jesus also said that "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery with her".(38) This went far beyond the Mosaic legal code, which regulated but did not forbid either polygamy or free remarriage of divorcees of either sex. It has been argued that the language Jesus used primarily meant 'whoever divorces his wife in order to marry another commits adultery with her.' This would make a lot of sense, and would harmonise it somewhat with the other reference in Matthew 19:6. For a man to divorce a wife not for *porneia* but because he fancied another woman would be adultery. Whether this is the sense or not, it astonished Jesus' disciples. In fact, it had on them the effect Jesus evidently intended; it made them realize how seriously the marriage commitment should be taken. So stunned were they that they wondered if it was therefore too much of a risk getting married at all.(39)

We should note, incidentally, that this was no armchair philosophy. Herodias and Herod Antipas had both divorced to marry each other, and John the Baptist had been murdered for his criticism of this.(40) Jesus' words about women divorcing could (in a society where this was rare). have been taken as an allusion to Herodias; so Jesus risked a death like John the Baptist's'.

How should Jesus' words be interpreted practically? Should the church regard all remarried divorcees as living in sin? Should a divorcee be discouraged from remarriage? Are there "justifiable grounds" for divorce? What many people seem to seek is a kind of rule book to meet all circumstances. But this is utterly mistaken. God did not operate divorce in such a way even in the Old Covenant, which had the Law; so why should he do so for those who are not under the Law, but: under grace?

Let us, however, try to see where a rule book approach to Jesus' words would lead us. A strictly legalistic approach would presumably imply that anyone who divorces, (except perhaps for adultery) is living in an adulterous union if he or she later remarries. Let us see the implications of this.

First, note that the, word "adultery" means unfaithfulness of a *married* person. If a divorcee's new marriage union is adulterous, then it must presumably be because (in the eyes of God) he or she is still married to the original partner. If so, then it must surely, be right for him (or her) to return to that original partner and live as married. This makes a nice tidy sense of Jesus' words, seen as a set of rules. Unfortunately, it directly contradicts God's words in Deuteronomy (24:1-4). He says that for a remarried divorcee to return to the original partner is an abomination. In fact, it is one of the few points God makes about divorce in the Old Testament, so he must have felt strongly about it. But Jesus was surely interpreting Deuteronomy, not contradicting it.

A second absurdity with the rule-book approach is this. Suppose that a couple divorce (not for *porneia*), and both remarry other partners. Under a rule book, when they both form their new liaisons, both are, adulterous. But (according to a rule book) adultery is a valid ground's for divorce. Therefore, their divorce becomes valid, and so their new unions are no longer adulterous. But this kind of pettifogging is more like the worst aspects of the Rabbis than the living and pragmatic approach of God in the Old Testament.

There is a third absurdity. If we take Jesus' words to be establishing a new rule book, then we must look carefully at the whole sermon where he first introduces this new ruling on divorce.' In another part of it he says, "Every one who looks at a woman lustfully *has* already *committed adultery* with her in his heart.(42) If this is also part of our new rule book, then presumably lust counts the same as adultery under the rules, and a single incidence of such lust is an adequate grounds for divorce. In this case, one suspects that many Christian wives would have grounds to divorce their husbands.

There is a fourth sense in which the legalistic approach is absurd. Let us consider the reaction of a legalistic church to two applications for membership. Miss Take married a man who was unkind to her. She divorced, remarried, and had two children by the second husband. She and her second husband then became Christians and now seek church membership. The legalistic church must refuse, for her divorce was not strictly for adultery; so they see her present union as adulterous. In order to become a church member, she would have to split her present family and leave her two children without one parent and with a broken home. Alternatively, she and her husband might be admitted as some species of spiritual leper - on a level of those living in sin, and so to be given no spiritual work.

On the other hand, Miss Use lived as a bisexual with a man and another woman for five years without getting married. She then left both to marry a third. Afterwards the couple became Christians and now seek church membership. The legalistic church will receive them (provided that they repent of former sins) as full and honoured members of the church. Whatever her past conduct, her present marriage is valid as she is not divorced. Amazingly, this kind of legalism would often be applied by Christians to keep a consistent witness, but in our view it is the kind of consistency God would prefer not to have. We have seen this kind of thing in even some scholarly studies on Jesus and divorce – one of which referred with approval to the Dean of a bible institute who would not grant degrees to remarried divorcees. Presumably he would have had no problem granting them to someone who had before conversion connived at killing Christians (like Paul), or had (say) repented of the murder of his first wife before remarrying. What nonsense! Exegesis which leads to such folly, however, learned, must be wrong.

In our view, therefore, the rule-book approach is misguided. We should rather begin from a distinction between the pre- and post- situations. If Abraham had asked God whether to marry Hagar, God would surely have said no, for marrying Hagar (as Paul tells us(43)) was a fleshly idea to try to fulfil God's promises. Abraham should and could have avoided his marital mess; but after it had arisen, God saw divorce as the least of the evils. When we are *contemplating* a course of action, God will set before us his ideal. *After* we have taken a wrong course of action, God is more concerned about picking up the pieces in the best way possible.

Likewise with David. As David contemplated adultery, then murder, then marriage to the widow, God would have held up before David his ideal. But *after* David had committed all these things, God accepted the marriage as an active ongoing union and made the best of the situation. Neither Abraham nor David were thereafter regarded as spiritual lepers.

Jesus, in our view, holds up God's ideal to men tempted to seek divorce

lightly and for selfish reasons. Marriage is a one-flesh unit, meant to last until dissolved by one partner's death. The breakup of the marriage unit is, as we saw in Chapter 2, blasphemous because it breaks a unit reflecting the unity of the Godhead; it is antisocial because it breaks a social unit; it is anti family because it leaves a conflict of loyalties in the children. So God hates divorce. To split a one-flesh unit is, like any surgery, a drastic measure. If a couple have marital problems, then they should be encouraged to try to solve them with God's help. Divorce is not a thing to be lightly approached or considered. But, nevertheless, God recognizes the realities of situations. In some circumstances, the reality of marriage as God intended it has already gone. This is not a question of vague feelings, like the old cry, "I just don't love her/him any more." Marriage is not based on feelings, but on settled attitudes. Neither is it a question of trivial irritations like burnt lunch. The marriage dies when the relationship is fundamentally broken down. In such circumstances, a divorce may be little more than a legal enactment of what is already a reality. It comes at a point where it is obvious that the marriage is not going to be re-established. No one can provide a rule book to say exactly when that point is reached. Jesus' word *porneia* is a vague but serious word. It is a matter for spiritual discernment, pastoral counselling, and personal decision. God gave Abraham the pastoral counselling he wanted-without hiding behind a rule book of generalities. God's pastoral assistants now are the church leaders or elders.(44) They should not duck their responsibilities.

What about our attitudes to those in a post situation? How should we treat divorce's like Abraham or David, whether remarried or not? First, we should make sure that our attitude is one of love and concern. It is all too easy to cast the first stone at adulterers. Yet, by Jesus' definition, one suspects that most of the men (and probably today a number of the women) in our churches are adulterous at one time or another(45) and deserve death under the Law. This is not, of course, to excuse sin. But we should recognise that the fundamental sin is in the breakup of the first marriage relationship. We do not mean by this the legal divorce, but the breakup of the *relationship*. It is here that there may be some need for repentance, especially if the breakup was largely due to the divorce' now seeking acceptance into a church fellowship. This is something which would have to be discussed seriously with the elders in that church. But it is here that the question lies. We cannot believe that the God of Abraham and Isaac would want the church to try to break up a committed marriage relationship in the present because of what happened in the past. Neither can we believe that a person who has had a marriage break up in the past is automatically barred from seeking a life partner in the present. This is simply not how God operates.

Now some may say that this approach opens the door to license. This does not alarm us, for the same kind of thing was said of Paul. Legalists misunderstood Paul to be saying that it was all right to sin because God would forgive.(46) Perhaps they may misunderstand us to be saying that marriage

breakup is all right, because God will favour the best practical solution to heal the broken pieces afterwards. But the difference between liberty and license is this: Liberty is when our freedom from the letter of the Law is used to seek God's best solution in a situation; license is when our freedom from regulations is used to indulge selfish desires with no thought of seeking God's will. It is a question of heart and motive which distinguishes the gospel of grace and love from a false gospel of abuse and lust. There are certainly cases today where church discipline should be applied- But God's chosen authority in pastoral care (the elders) cannot avoid their responsibility, They must seek guidance through the Spirit in dealing with any difficult cases of marital confusion or divorce. They cannot hide behind a rule book.

We have been thinking about Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce. What of Paul? Various attempts to view Paul's words on the subject as a new legal code are doomed to failure. Paul was simply not thinking legalistically. Thus, for example, he says that a woman is "bound by law" to her husband until death.(47) What law? Both the Mosaic and the Jewish oral law (not to mention Greek, Roman, etc.) allowed divorce in some circumstances which made the woman "freed from the law of her husband.(48) As a strict legal pronouncement on existing law, Paul's statement would be wrong. If, on the other hand, he were making *new* legislation he would surely not ascribe it to "law." Rather, we must take him to be speaking generally and ideally, not strictly legalistically.

The same is true of the well-known 1 Corinthians 7 passage. This seems based on Jesus' words, "What God has joined together, let man not *separate*.(49) By "separate" Jesus meant the dissolution of marriage, emphasizing the surgical splitting of the marriage union rather than the purely legal aspect of divorce. Unlike some theologians, he did not, of course, say that man *cannot* separate such a union. Nor is it stated as an inflexible rule, for he has already given the exception for *porneia*.

Paul paraphrases Jesus: "I enjoin, not I but the Lord, let not a wife be *separated* from her husband.(50) Paul intends this (as did Jesus) as an ideal rather than as an inflexible rule, for his second instruction which follows is: "But if indeed she separates, let her remain unmarried or to her husband be reconciled."(51) If they were absolutely never to separate, then why would Paul go on to give instructions on how to do it? Taken strictly legalistically, this second instruction contradicts both Jesus' words and Paul's own first instruction. Ironically, some have not only failed to note this, but have gone on to elevate the *second* instruction into an inflexible legal code. Paul's concern here, however, is not legal enactment, but with aiming at the best in less than ideal situations.

We need also remember that Paul is here answering specific questions they had asked.(52) It is easy to guess some of these. Corinth was a society rife with

immorality, prostitution, and idolatry. How could a newly-converted woman live a pure life while living with a husband who regularly got drunk, visited brothels, and worshiped idols? Surely she should leave him? After all, God encouraged Old Testament believers to *divorce* their pagan spouses (53) and the Jewish oral law enjoined *divorce* if a spouse left Judaism.(54) What did Paul think? Surely they should at least set up a separate household, even if not actually divorced?

Paul begins by setting up the ideal of Jesus: “let man not separate.” This makes it clear that he regards the marriage as no less valid because the wedding was a pagan one. But the comment Paul adds about how to separate indicates that he does not take this legalistically. He then goes on to give his own advice on how to act in their particular circumstances. Christian renouncement of the “world” is inner and spiritual-not a physical separation as with Israel. Thus, the Christian is not defiled in “dwelling with”(KJV) or ‘living with’ (NKJV) a pagan spouse (verses 12, 13). Paul says that they should not “leave” their partner - the word used meaning to “abandon” rather than “separate” the marriage union.(55)

Paul then continues, “But if the unbelieving partner desires to *separate*, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound.(56) This refers not merely to abandoning, but to “separation” of the marriage union. What does “separation” mean here? It certainly did not mean a kind of legal category such as we know today. Paul cannot be inventing a new kind of legal category, for the context is one of what the pagan partner sought. No legal category of separation different from divorce existed in Jewish, Greek, or Roman law; and no pagan partner would or could seek such a state. Paul uses the word “separation” (as had Jesus) to emphasize the ending of the union, rather than the legal aspect of divorce. The particular legal code under which they were married (and so the legal aspects of divorce) do not concern him. He focuses on the reality, not the law.

His reference, then, is to a termination of married union presumably associated with some form of legal divorce. If the unbeliever seeks this, then the believer is “not bound.” What can this mean? It cannot mean “not bound to be together”, for in this the Christian would have no choice. It can only mean not morally bound by the ties of a legally and socially terminated marriage. In other words, he or she is free to remarry.

Some commentators refer to this as ‘Pauline privilege’, but this may be misleading. Paul is not giving new legal enactments, but trying to generalize Spiritguided advice for a particular set of situations. He upholds the ideal, but (like God with Abraham) seeks to find the best option in non-ideal circumstances.

Some, again, have argued that a divorced Christian should never remarry,



and that such remarriages always remain adulterous. This is absurd. The whole point of the Mosaic Law regulating divorce was to ensure that the woman had the means to remarry. We have already seen how Paul's words, "let her remain unmarried", contradict both himself and Jesus if taken legalistically. In any case, how could she seek "reconciliation to her husband" if he had remarried? Jesus' abolition of the double standard would make this parallel to the supreme "abomination" of Deuteronomy.(57) Paul was advising all women against marriage in the Corinthian context (58) though elsewhere he gives the opposite advice.(59) The whole attempt to take his words legalistically leads to confusion and contradiction. He simply did not mean them to be taken thus. In the end, the advisability of divorce in any circumstances must remain a matter of individual counselling. While there are general guidelines, a legalistic approach really misses the point.

One final point. Some writers have said that there is never really an 'innocent' party in a divorce. Of course no one is perfect, but we would have to take issue with this. Of course we need to be wary of making over facile judgements, but there are instances in which there really is an 'innocent' party, and to imply that they must somehow be to blame would be to add guilt to their hurt and betrayal. It also encourages the person who simply wants to selfishly 'divorce his wife in order to marry another' because he (or equivalently she) can always excuse himself on the grounds that 'there is never really an innocent party'. This is not to deny that it is important for the wronged one to be able to forgive – but it is to say that there may sometimes be a wronged party.

All this, of course, refers to the church's attitude. Obviously a society will have to lay down civil laws regulating divorce, and it is in society's interest not to make these too lax. In English law, for example, adultery, cruelty, and desertion are the traditional grounds; then "irretrievable breakdown of marriage" was added, to avoid the need to manufacture grounds where none of the three others really existed. As legal grounds, telling people what they *can* do, we have no objection to them. But the Christian concentrates not on what people *can* do, but what they ought to do. This cannot be legislated, for it will depend on circumstances, as we have seen. To accept the four above as adequate legal grounds for divorce is certainly not to say that divorce is always the best thing if one of them applies.

Divorce, therefore, is absolutely a last resort. God expects Christians to work together to preserve a marriage relationship. But he wants it to be a genuine marriage – not one which is so in outward form only. This, we remember, is irrespective of how the couple came to be married, or of whether or not they now feel that it was a mistake. Any two individuals, seeking close union in a fallen world, are going to have problems. If they do not, then they are either not real individuals or else have not understood what such a close union means. It is as well that a young couple recognize this at their wedding.

The prince who gallops off with the beautiful maiden to “live happily ever after” is a mannequin, not a real person. But problems are overcome through being faced, not through being ignored. This is the first lesson to learn.

It would not be possible to write a manual on how to solve all marriage problems. For one thing, the variations on the kinds of problems are very large indeed—as large as the number of individual personalities in the world. For another thing, it is often a matter of judgement and counselling to decide which of two situations applies. Thus, in a marriage the husband might feel that his wife was not subject, while the wife felt her husband too authoritarian. Nevertheless, it might be useful to outline a few basic kinds of problem. Each of them is really based on some misunderstanding of a biblical teaching on marriage already noted in this book.

First, there may be a failure to realize the basis of marriage. A marriage is based on mutual commitment. Its validity does not depend on feelings, nor on the method of selection of a partner (for example, whether it was a “mistake”). Some people have never really accepted the fact that they *are* married (for better or worse), and had better stop complaining and get on with trying to make it work.

Second, there may be a failure to “*leave*” father and mother. A girl who runs home to mum after any quarrel has not understood “leaving”. A man who is still dominated by mother or father has not understood it either. A son or daughter is always responsible to see that parents are cared for,<sup>(60)</sup> but is not required to “obey” after marriage. Moreover, the first commitment should thenceforth be to the marriage partner, and his or her welfare should come first.

Third, there may be a failure to “*cleave*” together. This means that they regard themselves as one unit socially and financially. They should be open with one another, having no secrets. They should be closer to each other than to anyone else. If formerly they have had a close friend of the same sex, this friendship must now consciously be relegated to second place in their commitments.

Fourth, they may not realize the “one-flesh” ideal. This involves several things. It means that the other person’s body is regarded as a part of one’s own. There is, therefore, no reason to have any shame in each other’s naked presence.<sup>(61)</sup> But it also means that they should cherish and care for the partner’s body as *though it were their own*.<sup>(62)</sup> This initially may be an attitude to take up, though it should become also a feeling which comes automatically.

Fifth, and connected with this, they may fail to have regular sexual intercourse. This is a clear biblical command, and unless there are very pressing reasons (or the marriage is already in shreds for other reasons), all Christian couples should follow it.

Sixth, they may fail to recognize God's order for the direction of the unit. How are decisions made? The fundamental truth about a marriage is that it is a one-body organic unit. Normally (and this is written in the thirtieth year of a happy marriage) decisions will be made by mutual and loving agreement. It is seldom clear exactly who is making the decision – it is the one-body unit. If, however, there really is a divergence of view, then the husband is to be the head *as Christ is head of the church*. This means that he leads by example, but also that he has the ultimate institutional authority and responsibility for any decisions. In most instances He will listen to his wife and in love may sacrifice himself for her or follow her advice against his own inclination. But the ultimate 'casting vote' is his. The wife is to be fully an individual with ideas of her own, but (except in extreme circumstances) is to be "subject" where these go against a decision of her husband's. Approached positively by both sides, this is a recipe for a good relationship. Not understood, it can lead to constant bickering.

Seventh, they may fail to recognize the importance of family life. They are a one-family unit within the wider family of the church. But this means spending time together *as a family*. Sometimes couples too busy in church work neglect each other and drift apart. Certainly disciples of Jesus are supposed to love him more than any earthly ties.(63) But Paul recognized that in a normal, healthy Christian marriage, one would have divided interests in a way a single person would not.(64) In many circumstances, the power of a husband-wife team (such as Aquila and Priscilla) can be greater even than the individuals singly, for they are an encouragement to each other. But for this to happen they need either to be in the same work, or at least to fully understand and sympathize with each other's work. In any case, they will still need to spend time together as a family; otherwise the relationship will suffer.

Eighth, they may fail to adjust to the coming of children. Both husband and wife should be equally involved and interested in the child's upbringing. The child is the fruits of *their* love, and there should be no lessening of their love for each other through transference of affection to the child. The child will be more emotionally secure and feel more loved if the parents make a conscious effort to work at pleasing and loving each other after the child is born. This they should do – however exhausting they find parenthood! They must also understand and agree on the biblical principles for bringing up children. Disagreement over punishment, etc. can cause severe problems. If they really cannot agree, then it would be best to seek spiritual counselling.

Last, they must be faithful in thought and deed. This is helped, of course, if they both are "Anxious to please" their partners in dress, appearance, and sexual enjoyment. Romance and attraction may be based on feelings, but they can also be worked at. But, in any case, both should be faithful. This may be especially hard to do in *thought*, but this is what Jesus required. Prayer is the

answer to temptation.

One final word of caution. We have outlined some of the misunderstandings of the Christian teaching on marriage. Remember, it may be unhelpful of a man or woman who thinks that his or her partner's understanding is deficient to aggressively brandish the teaching over that partner. A gentle re-education may help to heal, but an aggressive attempt to instantly enlighten is more likely to cause even more problems. If you are already in a hole, stop digging!

## NOTES

1. Gen. 16:2, 3.
2. Gen. 16:4-6; 21:9.
3. Gen. 21:10.
4. Gen. 21:11, 12.
5. Gen. 16:5.
6. Gen. 16:4, 6.
7. 1 Pet. 3:6.
8. Gen. 21:9.
9. Heb. 11:8-12.
10. Deut. 24: 1.
11. Deut. 21:14.
12. Deut. 21:15, 16.
13. Deut. 22:19, 29.
14. 1 Sam. 18:20.
15. 1 Sam. 19:11-18.
16. 1 Sam. 25:42, 43.
17. 1 Sam. 25:44.
18. 2 Sam. 3:15, 16.
19. Deut. 24:4.
20. 2 Sam. 3:13-16.
21. As in 1 Sam. 19:11.
22. 2 Sam. 6:16, 20 23.
23. 2 Sam. 11.
24. 2 Sam. 12:13.
25. 1 Kings 1:29-35; Deut. 21:15, 16.
26. 2 Sam. 13.
27. 2 Sam. 16:22.
28. 1 Kings 11: 1-3.
29. Ezra 10:3.
30. Mal. 2:16.
31. Matt. 19:3.
32. Matt. 19:6; Mark 10:9,
33. Matt. 19:7, 8.
34. Matt. 5:32; 19: 9– "fornication" (AV); "unchastity" (RSV); "unfaithfulness" (NIV).

35. For *porneia* (used in Matt. 5:32; 19:9) see Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 2:497; Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 6:579.
36. Mark 10:11, 12.
37. See, e.g., John Balsdon, *Roman Women* (London: Bodely Head, 1962; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1975), p. 216.
38. Mark 10:11, 12.
39. Matt. 19:10.
40. Matt. 14:3-11; Mark 6:17-28.
41. Matt. 5:32.
42. Matt. 5:28.
43. Gal. 4:23-26.
44. 1 Pet. 5:1-3.
45. Matt. 5:28.
46. Rom. 3:8.
47. Rom. 7:2; see also 1 Cor. 7:39.
48. Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*, p. 158, ascribes the phrase also to the Rabbis.
49. Matt. 19:6; Mark 10:9. "Separate" is from the Greek verb *korizo*.
50. 1 Cor. 7:10, strictly rendered.
51. 1 Cor. 7:11, strictly rendered.
52. 1 Cor. 7:1.
53. Ezra 10:3.
54. Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*, p. 158; K. E. Keith, *The Social Life of a Jew in the Time of Christ*, p. 84; *Mishnah Kethuboth* 7:9, 10.
55. See Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1:289, 2:2016, though either could be used of marriage breakup.
56. 1 Cor. 7:15.
57. Deut. 24A.
58. 1 Cor. 7:25-38.
59. 1 Tim. 5:14.
60. 1 Tim. 5A.
61. See Chapter 5.
62. Eph. 5:28, 29.
63. Matt. 10:37, 38.
64. 1 Cor. 7:32-34.

Discussion Eleven

# Marriage Problems and Divorce

**Readings: Matthew 19:3-12;  
Mark 10:2-12  
Ephesians 5:21-33**

**Thought: It has always been difficult to discern when a commitment to holiness has become a commitment to a contradictory and illogical legalism.**

## Discussion Questions

- 1. Do our interpretations of biblical doctrine have to ‘make sense’ in pastoral situations?**
- 2. How easy is it for a doctrine of grace to be seen as a doctrine of indulgence? How do we ensure that one does not become the other?**
- 3. Is divorce some kind of ‘unforgivable sin’ which inevitably debar a person from pastoral authority? If not, then in what kind of circumstances would it so debar someone?**
- 4. Should divorcees remain unmarried in all or some situations? Are there circumstances in which it would be right to refuse them a remarriage in church?**

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# The Single Person

**Readings: Genesis 2:18-24**  
**Matthew 19:10-12**

In speaking of the single person we should remember that there are several distinct groups which fall under that general title. It may be useful to categorize them here:

- (1) those who remain single because they view the celibate life as a higher calling;
- (2) those who are single because they have not yet reached the usual age for marriage in their communities, but who have every prospect of marriage;
- (3) those (for example, missionaries) who have never married because the conditions in which they work are too difficult to provide properly for a family;
- (4) those who have never found anyone with whom they could enter the commitment of marriage, and are now likely to remain single;
- (5) the widowed or divorced.

Throughout history many have praised the celibate life, but the idea is against scriptural teaching. God himself said, "It is not good for man to be alone". Also, marriage is a higher calling insofar as the "one flesh" relationship reflects better the image of the Triune God. Neither the Bible nor Jewish thinking prized celibacy in itself. No unmarried man, for example, could sit on a Jewish council. **(1)** Since Paul had apparently done so, he was probably a widower at the time of his ministry, and he insisted on the right of apostles to be married. **(2)** Peter was also married. **(3)** The only passage which could be cited to advocate perpetual virginity is based on a misunderstanding, as we shall see. **(4)** The idea is sectarian or pagan.,

The other four categories are all those in which a Christian may find himself or herself. They are, of course, blurred categories, for marriage can come to even the most apparently confirmed bachelor or spinster. But it is still useful to distinguish them. To the person waiting for the right partner, the Bible says little that is specific. Obviously it will be a time during which he or she is developing and maturing as a person, especially in the spiritual dimension. In actual fact, the kind of general characteristics which should be forming in a Christian are themselves very good preparation for marriage. The kind of close relationships which should be forming with other Christians are also good preparation for the closer ones of marriage. Thus, Paul entreats us "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and

meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.(5)

But there are a couple of more specific aspects. One is that the individual should be finding his or her identity as a person. The church is to show the “manifold wisdom of God”,(6) but it is not always easy to steer between a boring conformity to stereotype and a rejection of valid universals of Christian manhood or womanhood. To be masculine or feminine will mean something in any society. A person should strive to be that something without becoming a mannequin. To most of us, masculinity implies strength, but emotion and tenderness are clearly marks of biblical men after God's own heart. To most of us, femininity implies softness and dependence, but the “good wife” of Proverbs 31 is also independently resourceful. A girl should be feminine, a boy masculine, but without losing balance as a person.

Similarly, it is right and good for a boy or girl to dress and act in a way attractive to the opposite sex. But this should stop short of being provocative for the sake of it. Those who are deliberately provocative are encouraging others to see them as sex objects rather than as people. This is bad both because it could incite lust and because it would be no basis on which to begin a relationship. Thus far, preparation for marriage runs along the same lines as becoming a mature and balanced man or woman. But there is one other factor. Paul implies that the husband should rightly be concerned to please his wife and the wife her husband. This means that one will have to find out something about the ways in which (in that society) men and women tend to react and think differently.

As we turn to the third category of single person, we might look at Paul's words to the Corinthians. They were given not as Christian doctrine, but as a piece of personal advice “in view of the impending distress”.(7) Violent opposition to the gospel from some Jewish factions was springing up everywhere. Nero was emperor. The church was in the birth pangs of a new age.(8) Paul's view of marriage was a very high one. He could not imagine a proper marriage except where husband and wife had constant care for each other's well-being and happiness.(9) Therefore, he said, his personal advice would be that it was better to remain single than have the pains and cares of so close a love-bond in times of difficulties. But he was not lauding celibacy. He was giving practical advice in a particular situation, just as in practical advice for a different situation to Timothy some years later, Paul said that his personal preference was for younger widows to remarry and have families.(10) There is no contradiction here, but differing advice in differing circumstances.

Today there may be circumstances where Christians are being mercilessly persecuted, and many would be better off without the cares of family attachments to add to their troubles. There may be other circumstances where the difficulties of mission work would make a single person more suitable for



the task than a married person with a family. It is not good for man (or woman) to be alone, but we do not live in an ideal world. Many good things have to be sacrificed by those warriors of the faith willing to work in such circumstances; family may be one of them. Jesus himself, because of his task, had to sacrifice the completeness a man was intended to find in marriage, along with the closeness of other family ties.**(11)** On a spiritual level, Christ's masculinity is to be united with the femininity of his bride, the church. Yet, on a purely human level his sacrifice of normal, fulfilling family relationships was a permanent loss, a necessary price to pay. Paul, like Jesus, sacrificed the joy he would have found in a wife, rejoicing to be "filling up" the afflictions necessary to the welfare of the church.**(12)** Some Christians today, with special tasks, may be called upon to make this sacrifice. This comes from a calling of God.**(13)**

The fourth category contains those who, for all kinds of reasons, simply never found anyone with whom they could share their lives. Some, of course, may have some serious mental or physical handicap which has deterred marriage. But there is a large group of Christians who, realising the permanent nature of the marriage commitment and the seriousness with which the Christian enters it, have never found anyone with whom they felt they could enter so final a commitment. When Jesus made it clear to his disciples that marriage was permanent for a Christian, their reaction was, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry". Jesus replied that some remain unmarried because of some physical disability from birth or later human action, while others remain married because of the kingdom of Heaven.**(14)** In its context the primary meaning of this is not, as is often supposed, that they give up marriage to serve God. It means rather that because they are Christians, they have a high view of marriage as a permanent commitment; and so they feel it better to forego marriage than to marry and make a mess of it. An unmarried person may be more use to the kingdom than a married one who feels bound by a relationship which is unhappy. Viewed positively, this could mean that something of value (marriage) is sacrificed because for *that individual* this is best.

The last category is that of the divorced or widowed. The Bible makes it clear that the death of a spouse fully releases a partner from the marriage bond,**(15)** and he or she should be encouraged to remarry.**(16)** Marriage ties are to be transcended in Heaven; so no problems will arise.**(17)**

The last three categories mentioned can all mean that a person spends a single life. Some books speak of "God making it up" to such a person. But we should be careful. When God said, "It is not good for man to be alone", he was aware that Adam already had a full spiritual capacity. Apparently, though, God did not think that any companionship with him self could effectively fill the human lack. Nor did he feel that it could be filled by any animal. There is a definite need for a certain kind of human link, and this is filled neither by a spiritual life, nor by keeping a cat or a parrot. Yet, to some extent the need

meant to be filled in marriage can and should be filled by other human relationships. For a time Ruth cleaved to Naomi.(18) Her words, “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people . etc”. imply a kind of commitment met at a deeper level in marriage. A close companion with whom to share (whether a relative or a close friend) can help to fulfil the human need. The relationships within the church can also do this. A working relationship in some worthy cause can also do it. Paul, though apparently without a wife, seldom travelled alone.(19) Something of the kind of “helper” experience in marriage can be met at a different level in such close relationships with co-workers. There may, of course, be dangers, especially if the co-worker is a member of the opposite sex whom one finds attractive. But it can be a valid way of meeting the lack, and could meet it much better than an unhappy marriage would.

The sexual needs which are met in marriage, of course, cannot really be met in any other way. There is no real substitute for regular sexual expression within a loving relationship. That is why Paul says it is better to marry than to burn.(20) The Bible is silent on all the other alternatives which may be suggested (for example, special prayer, plenty of exercise and cold showers, masturbation, or reliance on natural release for a man during sleep). We can give, then, no rigid advice, and the individual will have to work it out in a personal way with God.

There are other possible losses through remaining in a single state-such as the loss of an extended family, or lack of contact with children. Again it can be a good thing to find some substitutes for these. The church should be a kind of extended family, and there may also be opportunities for work with children within it. We may know of instances where bachelors or spinsters have identified too strongly with, their Christian work. Yet, approached rightly, they can bring a dedication (without harmful possessiveness) beyond that of others. The key is that the fulfilment of their own emotional needs should be incidental, and their focus remain on the needs of those with whom they work.

It is, then, “not good for man to be alone”. Yet, in our world today there are many other things which are not good, and this is only one of them. For some people, the unmarried state could be the best thing. The secret above all is contentment. We should learn, like Paul, whatever state we are in, to be content.(21) This does not stop us from seeking ways to make good any emotional lack which we may have in our lives, but it means that our peace of mind and heart are fundamentally based on Jesus.(22)

## NOTES

1. Mishnah Horayoth 1A.
2. 1 Cor. 9:5.
3. Matt. 8:14; Mark 1:30; Luke 4:38.

4. 1 Cor. 7:8-40.
5. Eph. 4:1-3.
6. Eph. 3: 10.
7. 1 Cor. 7:26.
8. Matt. 24:8; Mark 13:8
9. 1 Cor. 7:28, 33, 34.
10. 1 Tim. 5:14; cf. 1 Cor. 7:8.
11. Matt. 12:47-50.
12. Col. 1:24.
13. 1 Cor. 7:17.
14. Matt. 19:12.
15. Rom. 7:2.
16. 1 Tim. 5:14.
17. Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:25.
18. Ruth 1: 14-17.
19. Acts 13:2; 15:40.
20. 1 Cor. 7:9.
21. Phil. 4: 11.
22. John 14:27; Rom. 8:6; Phil. 4:7.

Discussion Twelve

# The Single Person

**Readings: Genesis 2:18-24  
Matthew 19:10-12**

**Thought: Jesus was single.**

## Discussion Questions

1. Does the church do enough to act as a family to the single person?
2. What more *could* the church do?
- 3.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**Homosexual Partnerships****Readings: I Corinthians 5**

**In third millennium Britain we face a number of issues about gays, lesbians and bisexuals. In particular:**

1. Should homosexual acts be legal in our multicultural society?
2. Should sexual orientation affect employment in any circumstances?
3. Should gays be able to register as married?
4. Should we distinguish different gay lifestyles, ie between promiscuity and longstanding partnerships?
5. Should gay partners get similar benefits in society to straight partners?
6. Is it right to promote heterosexual marriage in society?
7. Should gay couples be able to adopt children?
8. Should committed gay partners be accepted as church members/workers?

To focus our thinking we will consider attitudes to a number of (fictitious) people:

- A. Mr Toshin: Keeps a god-shelf according to Shinto tradition
- B. Ms Wild: Is single and continues to have casual sex with numerous men
- C. Mr Rover: Is gay and continues to have numerous male partners.
- D. Ms Adult: Has left a loving husband and children to live with a toy boy who provides better sex..
- E. Mr Mate: Is gay and lives with a longstanding male partner.

We will later consider in more detail proper attitudes to these people in society, but let us begin with consideration of their applications to join our church. Being a Christian is, of course, through the grace of God not through ‘works’. John 1:10 clearly tells us that we all commit sin, but if we are repentant and confess it will receive forgiveness. A person who commits fornication (straight or gay), or adultery, can receive forgiveness, and enter church membership. But A-E are not about acts but lifestyles. The New Testament makes it clear that certain lifestyles are inconsistent with being part of a Christian community and fellowship. In 1 Corinthians 5:13 Paul wrote:

“I wrote to you in my letter not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous or extortioners or idolators, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolator, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who

are outside, God judges... Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor the effeminate (*malakoi*) nor sodomites (*arsenokoitai*), nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will enter the kingdom of God.”

This is a key passage.

As we can see, it is *not* about friendships with non-Christians of all lifestyles (otherwise you would have to come out of the world), but of whom to regard as a brother/sister in Christ. It ties in with Jesus’ words about how to deal with those unrepentant of sin (compare Mathew 18:15-19).

It is also *not* about receiving the repentant. An alcoholic, for example, striving with God’s help to control her condition and live a sober life, is not what Paul means by a ‘drunkard’ who deliberately chooses such a lifestyle.

It is surely also *not* about accepting anyone who ‘isn’t harming anyone else’. This tends to be the postmodern absolute principle – do what you like as long as you impinge on no one else’s freedom. Only Ms Adult is breaking this rule – though even she is likely to be regarded indulgently in today’s society. But Jesus’ words on marriage and divorce leave no room for such a postmodern principle. Cases A-C above may all be nice, trustworthy people, pleasant to have as friends, and pillars of society. But biblical teaching on idolatry and on the intention of sex to be used within a committed partnership can surely leave no reasonable person in doubt that these lifestyles are inconsistent with being a part of the church? This is not ‘prejudice’ but common sense. If, eventually, European Law insists on grounds of equal opportunity that promiscuous idolaters have to be accepted as church ministers, then this will be equivalent to banning New Testament Christianity, and the church will have to go underground as it once was in Eastern Europe. How this could be consistent with the U.N. charter on freedom of religion we would have to leave to European lawyers to argue.

But what about Mr Mate? Since the 1970’s there have been those who have argued that for some Christians a committed homosexual partnership is actually the best option. Whilst promiscuity is unacceptable, they agree, a committed homosexual partnership is OK. The arguments they use are generally similar, and in the present comments we will restrict references to two typical publications. One is a statement of the view of the Gay Christian Movement, and the other bears names well-known in Christian circles.(1)

We will not here be concerned with popular misconceptions about homosexuals, the controversy over what causes homosexual tendencies, or the effectiveness of psychological therapy to “cure” them. Rather, we shall seek to examine the basic moral issues from a Christian standpoint. Can homosexual relationships ever be an acceptable life-style for Christians?

To begin with, it would be useful to point out that the argument is often based on a confusion of terms. The dictionary definition of “homosexual” is: “having a sexual propensity for persons of one’s own sex” (i.e., whether male or female). But in practice the word is often used in three distinct senses:

1. someone who enjoys the society of his (or her) own sex;
2. someone who is physically attracted toward those of his (or her) own sex;
3. someone who “lusts” for or actually engages in sexual acts with those of his (or her) own sex.

Sexual attraction is not lust, for lust involves a *mental* consummation of the sex act.(2) To emphasize the distinction between the three above situations, we might make an analogy. Who would wish to confuse: (1) a man’s enjoyment of his sister-in-law’s company, (2) his finding her sexually attractive, and (3) his having sex with her? Attraction to someone with whom sexual acts would be wrong can at strongest be called “temptation”. This in itself is not sin, for Jesus was tempted *on all points* as we are, yet without sin.(3) Whatever our view, therefore, of homosexual *acts*, the temptation to commit them is not itself a sin.

But what should be our attitude toward sexual acts between those of the same sex? Are they always wrong, or are there circumstances in which they may be right? As Christians we must take our standards from Scripture.

Many people may expect us to begin from the story of Sodom’s destruction, but in fact this is not altogether relevant here. The Sodomites (like the later Gibeonites(4)) were bent on committing what would have amounted, to homosexual rape of visitors to their city.(5) Later, Jews saw their sins primarily as those of a lack of social care,(6) pride,(7) and a breach of hospitality to strangers.(8) The particular expression of this was indeed in fornication and lust.(9) But neither censure of homosexual rape, nor later condemnation of idolatrous male prostitution(10) need necessarily imply rejection of homosexual acts within caring relationships.

It would seem valid, however, to begin from an apparently plain Old Testament condemnation of all homosexual acts: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman”.(11) “Gay Christians” have approached this ban in two basic ways. One has been to suggest that it refers only to certain *kinds* of homosexual practice, perhaps anal intercourse or the forcible rape of the vanquished by their conqueror.(12) This is unconvincing, for the phrase used is a very general one meaning to “lie down with” and occurs over 100 times in the Old Testament. Its context is also perfectly general. To read into it something more specific and restricted amounts to forcing the text around to a personal view.

A second “gay” approach to this has been to suggest that it is to be regarded in the same light as, for example, some of the dietary laws of the Old Testament.(13) “In the New Covenant,” they say, “has come a dawning realisation that such laws and taboos are unnecessary.” But this argument has

major flaws. First, in both instances the ban on homosexual acts comes in a context of condemning the sins of previous inhabitants (for example, child sacrifice, incest, adultery, and sex relations with animals).(14) The ceremonial and dietary laws were never given in such a context, nor were the Canaanites censured for not keeping them. In other words, the ban on homosexual acts relates to issues of *universal morality*.

This may be confirmed by more fundamental considerations of biblical interpretation. In Genesis, God pronounced that all his created things were good;(15) and in the new beginning with Noah he said, “Everything that lives and moves will be food for you”.(16) The later Mosaic prohibitions were not part of some original natural order laid down by God, but were often primarily (like, for example, circumcision itself) object lessons on holiness. When Jesus taught that in *themselves* foods could not defile, he was simply going back beyond the Mosaic Law to the more fundamental revelation of God’s designs in Genesis.(17) Paul makes the connection even more explicit. He objects to those who order others “to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving For *everything God created is good* and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving”.(18) The Mosaic dietary laws, given for a particular purpose to Israel, were not based on anything fundamental in God’s stated design in Genesis. They are not, therefore, to be enforced in the New Covenant. But it must be emphasised that the removal of Jewish restrictions in the New Covenant is not simply based on a principle of “anything goes”. It is based on a return to what ‘ was fundamental in God’s design, as stated in Genesis. When Jesus applied the same principle to sexual morality, the implications were quite different. The Mosaic divorce laws were a concession in an imperfect world, for “at the beginning the Creator made them male and female. ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’”(19) Jesus certainly did not suggest *relaxing* the Mosaic laws on this point. He did not suggest that “the only rule should be love”, as have some modern theologians. He insisted that God’s original design was for monogamous, heterosexual marriage, and that this establishes the right pattern for marital/sexual behaviour. He was, of course, answering a question about divorce, not homosexuality; but it is interesting to note that his answer deliberately joined Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:24. God’s creation of humankind as “male and female” is linked by Jesus to God’s intention that the “one-flesh” union of man and wife should make up one complete human unit. It is difficult to see how a union of two males or two females could do this. A married couple are a complete human unit, a single person might be seen in a sense as incomplete, but a homosexual “marriage” can be only a monstrosity. Within the framework of monogamous, heterosexual marriage there is, of course, a tremendous scope for variety and human creativity. But it is hard to avoid the impression that Jesus took this framework as divinely laid down.

Paul, like Jesus, saw God’s stated intentions in Genesis, rather than the



Mosaic Law, as the most fundamental guidelines for marriage.(20) But while Jesus' recorded ministry was in a culture where open homosexual relationships were rare, Paul circulated widely in areas where they were common Thus Paul is more explicit on the issue. "GayChristians" have taken three basic attitudes to Paul's words. Some have simply dismissed them as cultural prejudice, an attitude clearly unacceptable to those of us who believe Scripture to be God's revelation. A second group has suggested that Paul intended his censures to apply only to *certain kinds* of homosexual acts and not to others. Paul's actual language, as we shall see, makes this implausible. But the third suggestion is more subtle. It is that Paul thought that all homosexual acts were bound to be prostituting and idolatrous. It is unlikely that he knew any people whose identity as human beings was bound up with their (homo)sexual orientation... (21)

We should question two things about this. First, there is the assumption that there are people whose "identity as human beings" is homosexual, or "persons whose 'nature' itself appears to be homosexual.(22) We need not doubt the testimony of psychologists that in some people heterosexual activity produces indifference or revulsion, while homosexual activity seems "natural". But Christians base neither morality nor human identity on human feelings. A person may feel it "natural" to have sex with his camel, lose his temper, or beat his wife, but that neither makes it *right* nor a part of his "human identity". To compare a homosexual tendency with, for example, left-handedness (23) begs the question; no one seriously takes left-handedness as a moral issue. Of course, we are all born with or grow up to have different tendencies, feelings, or inclinations; but we recognise that some of them would incline us to do things which are *wrong*. We then regard those who act on such feelings as unenlightened, sick, or committing sin. If, for example someone is "by nature" greedy or cruel, we Would not take this to imply? That it was right for him to follow these inclinations. Of course a "natural *inclination*" *may sometimes* lead a person to do the right thing.(24) But only God's *word* to us are a sure guide to right and wrong.(25)

The Genesis story itself indicates this in portraying Adam's sin as disobedience of divinely revealed moral laws.(26) It also indicates that human identity is essentially bound up with God's design for us: "in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them."(27) To be truly human is to be as God designed us to be; this is not always apparent from our built-in inclinations, as we all well know. The question, then, is not whether Paul was conversant with particular psychological conditions in our fallen world, but rather whether God has revealed any moral issues in homosexual relationships. We may, moreover, doubt the naive assumption that Paul knew only of "prostituting and idolatrous" homosexuality. Paul was from cosmopolitan Tarsus (the capital of the province), was widely travelled and could quote Greek classics.(28) Various famous Greek classics discuss the spiritual and physical aspects of faithful homosexual love between consenting freeborn men,

(29) and it would be incredible for Paul to never have come across unmarried homosexuals in a “caring relationship”.

So what does Paul actually say? In Romans 1 he speaks of those men who “suppress the truth in unrighteousness”, and goes on: “Therefore God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts to impurity... gave them up to dishonourable passions. Their females exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the males likewise gave up natural relations with females and were consumed with passion for one another, males committing shameless acts with males.(30) Paul’s censure here certainly falls on the homosexual acts, rather than the inclinations, but what has he in mind? Various implausible attempts have been made to restrict his censure to certain kind of homosexual acts. Some have argued that the word “exchanged” (verse 26) and leaving (verse 27, KJV) restrict Paul’s meaning to those who were once heterosexual. But this is a literalism which ignores all context. It would be like taking verse 23 to refer only to those who *personally* changed from God to idolatry. Paul is not speaking of individuals’ decline so much as of the effects on *society* of deifying Nature rather than worshipping God. Had, moreover, he really meant his censures to primarily refer to their marital infidelity, he would surely have used the terms *andres* (men or husbands) and *gunaikas* (women or wives) and not *arsenes* (males) and *theleiai* (females).

Other commentators have argued that his reference to “lusts” (verse 24) excludes loving homosexual relationships. This is equally misleading, for the word used (*epithumias*) is a general word for a deeply felt desire.(31) As such, the term would fit admirably the instance of a person “drawn to someone of the same sex for the sake of love”.(32) It carries no necessary suggestion of either a passing fancy or a mere desire to experiment. Moreover, Paul’s complaint is not that they were *unfaithful* to their homosexual lovers, but that they exchanged the “natural” relationship of female for male to one of female for female, etc. It is useful also to note in passing that his introduction of the idea *via female homosexuality* nullifies the suggestion that he thought only of prostitution or male rape as a sign of conquest, for neither applied to females. He had in mind homosexual acts of free consenting adults, pronouncing such acts wrong and unnatural.

It is sometimes suggested that Paul is here using the word “natural” in the sense developed by the Stoics. Stoicism maintained that it was right to live “according to nature” (33) and so declined the right as the natural. But though some Stoics had a strong idea of God,(34) in general the system was pantheistic. There was no concept of a verbal revelation from God. So to base morality solely on Nature (i.e., the observable world) could only lead to the conclusion of Aurelius: “*Whatever* happens, happens rightly.”(35) But Paul believed the created world to be in bondage to decay, groaning in travail, so he would hardly have based morality on observed Nature.(36) Our assurance as to what is right is founded rather on God’s verbal revelation.(37)

So Paul begins with assumptions very different from those of the Stoics. His suggestion in Romans 1 is certainly not that they have paid *insufficient* attention to deducing morality from Nature; rather, he argues that they have *substituted* Nature for God.(38) They have refused to acknowledge God and open a dialogue with him during which they might learn the ways to righteousness.(39) His reference to the unnaturalness of homosexual acts is not to say that this is the way in which we *know* them to be wrong; it is only to categorise the kind of sin they are. His use of the terms “male” and “female” may, indeed, refer to the fact that human sexuality is part of a wider pattern found in Nature. But our knowledge of God’s design in this is not based merely on direct observation; it refers also back to his statement of intent for human nature in Genesis 1:27. We have already seen how Jesus linked this verse on “male and female” with the later one on God’s design for marriage. To be unnatural implies to the Christian a departure from what *God intended* in Nature, not merely from Nature as now observed.

In spite of all attempts in place a restricted meaning on Paul’s censures, he could hardly have found words. to make them more general. Sadly, the modern gay movement itself reflects his words. They too begin from “nature” rather than from God and his revelation. Mankind was made “male and female” (Romans 1:27; Genesis 1:27); the image and glory of God (verse 23) was to be shown in a one-flesh, husband-wife union. But, though professing wisdom (verse 22), they have exchanged this for an enshrined image of corruptible man based on “nature” (verse 23), not revelation. This different image is based on observed deepset desires of the heart (verse 24); the fact that some are attracted only by their own sex is said to make their “true nature” homosexual. Thus, basing morality on the creature rather than the Creator (verse 25), God gives them up to put their desires into unclean acts. Knowing that the Levitical judgment of God prescribes the death penalty, they yet not only do the acts but consent to them as good (verse 32). God’s truth is not merely violated, but “suppressed” (verse 18).

The other main reference by Paul to homosexual acts is in the word *arsenokoltas*.(40) The word is made up of two Greek words: *arsen* (male) and *koltas* (going to bed with), and put together they mean “going to bed with a male”.(41) The Greek word *koitas* (like the English phrase) commonly implies a sex act.(42) This is, for example, implied when *arsen* and *koitas* are similarly joined in the Septuagint Old Testament.(43) How have “gay Christians” reacted to such an apparently clear condemnation of homosexual acts of all kinds? First the word is presented as being “uncertain” or “problematic,(44) and the various translations of it are presented as “proof” of this. This is unconvincing. Neither the fact that no exact English equivalent exists for it, nor the idiosyncrasies of different translators can alter the fact that the Greek word is simple, perfectly general, and unambiguous, But from this point the gay Christian argument goes on to suggest that “The original intent seems to have

been to single out specific *kinds* of same-sex practice that were considered deplorable.(45) No serious proof is advanced for this, and on the basis of pure conjecture it is said that it “may refer to sodomites,(46) or “could refer to male prostitution”.(47) But if the apostle of Christ deliberately chose a general word (“go to bed with a male”), then we are surely not at liberty to arbitrarily suggest some limited meaning for it.

Some, indeed,, have tried to give a linguistic backing by citing Romans 13:13 to argue that *koitas* can mean “sexual excess”.(48) But in Romans 13:13 the word is plural, and it is joined under the same verb with a word for “excesses”. In itself, it by no means implies any excesses and unless good reasons can be given, we should take it in *arsenokoitas* in its simple and usual sense. It would apply to any and all forms of homosexual activity, and in using it Paul surely meant a general censure. One writer puts it: Paul could have chosen more specific terms such as *paiderastes* (lover of boys’) or *paidothoros* (‘corrupter of boys’) or *arrenomanes* (‘mad after males’). But he went for the most general word available.(49)

Another point from Paul’s comments is worth noting. Christians have sometimes seemed to regard homosexual activity as some kind of supreme evil or ultimate decline, reacting in shock and revulsion bordering on hysteria. Paul has no such reaction. *Arsenokoitas* is placed alongside sins of fornication, lying, greed, covetousness, and extortion.(50) He regarded homosexual acts as wrong and unnatural, but not as some kind of supreme or special evil.

if God’s revelation implies that such acts are wrong, then for us to say so is not to be unloving, but simply to be true to- what God has said. So how should we regard the homosexual? Again, we need to be careful about the different uses of this term. We have noted that to be attracted toward an act which would be wrong is temptation, not sin. Someone facing and resisting such temptation should receive all the compassion and help which fellow Christians can give, and should never be afraid to seek confidential counselling in a spirit of love. If the problem persists, he may be advised to avoid situations of particular temptation.(51) But this is based on sense, not on some hysterical “branding” of him as a creature set apart. If he (or she) should fall into the temptation and then afterwards repent, what then? When the adulteress confessed Jesus as “Lord”, the sinless Christ replied, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again”.(52) Homosexual activity is not a special sin, and God’s forgiveness and cleansing are available.(53)

As we have earlier explained, a ‘homosexual’ is someone with an attraction to the same sex. There is no reason why a homosexual should not hold any position of trust and authority in the church. There is also no reason why a person who has repented of and renounced a past gay lifestyle should not similarly be positioned. The issue has concerned rather those like Mr Mate above, who maintain a gay partnership and claim to be “gay Christians”. We

are in no position to judge their individual consciences before God, but it seems clear that case E above is seen by the God of the New Testament as no different from cases A-D. However sincere a chap he is, Mr Mate cannot be accepted in fellowship with the church, but treated as though a non-Christian. (54) This does *not* mean that he is to be hated or reviled, for Christians are to love all neighbours. (55) The protection of God's flock may at times call for firmness, but a gentle and loving spirit is essential. Homosexual activity is not a special sin, and those who unrepentantly continue in it seem no more deserving of *social* ostracism than the fornicator, adulterer, proud, or avaricious. Do those who express fear that the young may "catch" it also fear the contagious nature of heterosexual debauchery, pride, or avarice? Let us be unafraid to speak for the right, but let us also be consistent with God's standards. A gay lifestyle is morally wrong, but not some kind of special case.

One last point about Christian homosexuals. This book has emphasized that neither right and wrong nor the validity of a marriage are based on feelings. A Christian whose feeling remains homosexually oriented may nonetheless validly get married. And if once Christians recognize that this is not a temptation set apart from others, we may see the time when, like other temptations, it may be shared with a prospective spouse in a spirit of mutual respect and affection.

We may turn now briefly to some of the other questions asked at the very beginning of this chapter. In a multicultural society we may tolerate lifestyles which we believe to be morally wrong. We may disapprove eg of idolatry, promiscuity, adultery, and gay partnerships, but this does not imply that any of these should be *illegal*. Nor does it imply that any of the people in A-E above should face any kind of prejudice in employment. Idolatry, promiscuity, or having a gay partner are nothing to do with capacity to function in most jobs, and the only one over whom one might rightly have doubts would be Ms Adult. For some strange reason, however, in Britain today a solemn undertaking made totally voluntarily, in the presence of many witnesses, and before God, to stay with a spouse for life, seems to be regarded as one which can be broken without any implication of untrustworthiness. A British politician who lies to a court about a hotel bill can be imprisoned, one who lies to his wife about an affair which breaks the most solemn of promises can stay in the Cabinet. No one has been able to explain to us the logic, but in any event it doesn't affect the gay rights issues. Personally, though, we feel happier with an unmarried gay MP who has broken no promises, than with one with a history of deceit. The fact that our current MP is in fact a declared gay would not in itself affect our intention to vote for him. There may be some posts for which religious/sexual orientation is relevant – eg as a minister or in a school where teachers are required to be active Christians or active muslims. But this does not seem to apply eg to the army, or to school teaching in general.

Early in the new millennium there was a debate in Britain about 'Clause

28' in the Local Authority bill. This forbade the 'promotion of homosexuality' in schools. Claims were made that this clause made teachers afraid to address the existence of homosexuality, or to protect children with gay tendencies from bullying. However, no teacher was ever actually prosecuted under this clause, and legal experts have insisted that no such implication exists. Of course children need to understand that there are gay, idolatrous, and promiscuous people – who have a perfect right to their lifestyles. But it is a total fallacy to suggest that in order to tolerate other lifestyles one has to agree that they are right and moral. The whole essence of toleration in a multi-cultural society is that one tolerates lifestyles which one believes are neither. Nor should this prevent dealing with bullying of any and every kind. Ironically, even gay rights fanatic Peter Tatchell stated that he did not wish to see homosexuality promoted in schools – and so one cannot see why the clause should be objectionable. We would object just as strongly to promotion of promiscuity or idolatry – but would wish to see strong steps to deal with any bullying of those involved in it. The inability of the Labour leaders and the confused liberals who write columns in the *Guardian* to distinguish toleration from agreement is not shared by the general public. A poll in February 2000 found a majority want to see heterosexual marriage promoted as an ideal in education, but at the same time strongly believed that any anti-gay bullying should be dealt with severely.(56) We believe that this is right.

A slightly different issue concerns 'rights' of gay partners. This arose because some employers (and judges) extended benefits rights originally given to married partners to partners not married. So, the clamour went, if someone works for the railways, if free travel is extended to an unmarried heterosexual partner why not a homosexual one? In our view the mistake was to extend the benefits beyond legally married in the first place. Consider the following four rail workers:

1. Mr Smith lives with his wife.
2. Ms Jones lives with a longterm male partner but is unwed.
3. Mr Brown lives with his gay partner.
4. Ms White lives with a flatmate but is celibate
5. Ms Green is bisexual and lives with a male and female lover.
6. Mr Blue lives alone but has regular sex with his girlfriend.

So who should get the benefits? Mr Smith has a clear legal relationship with his wife, but the other relationships all depend on a simple declaration. Why cannot Ms White get the benefits for her flatmate? Should she have to prove that regular sexual intercourse is taking place in order for the flatmate to get the benefits? How often? What about Ms Green – why should there be prejudice against triads? Or polygamists? The whole thing becomes absurd. Either such benefits should be restricted to those married, or else everyone should have the right to nominate any other one person they wish to receive them – spouse, lover, flatmate or maiden aunt. Labour ministers were reputed in February 2000 to be working on legislation to allow gay partners to avoid inheritance tax as a spouse can under the law. Does this mean that (say) a long

term friend and housemate would have to prove that sexual intercourse had taken place regularly in order to inherit her friend's wealth? Will clinical or video evidence be necessary?

In conclusion then, those who believe in the teachings of Christ cannot accept that it is right to use sex in any context other than heterosexual committed marriage partnership. They cannot accept that any who choose lifestyles which diverge from this should be accepted into the life and work of the church. They are, at the same time, totally committed to the rights of individuals to live their chosen lifestyles in a multi-cultural society, without fear or harassment, and they are committed to loving all their neighbours as themselves – irrespective of their neighbours' lifestyles.

## NOTES

1. *The Bible and Homosexuality* (London: Gay Christian Movement, 1977); Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour?* (London SCM Press, NY Harper and Row, 1978). More recent work has added nothing.
2. Matt. 5:28.
3. Heb. 4:15.
4. Judg. 19 (note "know" in vv. 22, 25).
5. Gen. 19:1-11 (note "know" in vv. 5, 8).
6. Ezek. 16:49, 50.
7. Ecclus. 16X
8. Wisdom 19:13, 14.
9. Jude 7.
10. 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46.
11. Lev. 18:22; 20:13.
12. Hinted at in *The Bible and Homosexuality*, p. 4.
13. *The Bible and Homosexuality*, p. 8; Scanzoni, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour?*, pp. 60, 61.
14. Lev. 18:24, 25; 20:23.
15. Gen. 1:31.
16. Gen. 9:1
17. Mark 7:1-23.
18. 1 Tim. 4:3, 4.
19. Matt. 19:4, 5; Mark 10:6-8.
20. E.g., Eph. 5:31.
21. *The Bible and Homosexuality*, p. 10.
22. *Ibid.*; Scanzoni, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour?*, p. 77.
23. Scanzoni, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour?* p. 77.
24. Rom. 2:14.
25. See above and Romans 3:2.
26. Gen. 2:16.
27. Gen. 1:27.

28. Acts 17:28; Tit. 1:12.
29. E.g., Xenophon's *The Banquet*, and Plato's work of same name.
30. Rom. 1:24-27, RSV, but using the more literal renderings "male" and "female."
31. E.g., Luke 22:15; 1 Tim. 3: 1; 1 Pet. 1: 12; etc.
32. Scanzoni, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour?*, p. 62.
33. A famous dictum of Chrysippus, the early Stoic.
34. E.g., Cleanthes and Seneca.
35. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4: 10.
36. Rom. 8:21, 22.
37. See Note 25.
38. Rom. 1:25; etc.
39. Rom. 1:21.
40. 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10.
41. See Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 2:570.
42. E.g., Rom. 9:10; 13:13; Heb. 13:4; and see Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 2:586.
43. Num. 31:17; Judg. 21:12 (LXX).
44. *The Bible and Homosexuality*, p. 3; Scanzoni, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour?*, p. 66.
45. Scanzoni, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour?*, p. 67.
46. *The Bible and Homosexuality*, p. 3.
47. Scanzoni, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbour?*, p. 67.
48. *The Bible and Homosexuality*, p. 3.
49. David Field, *The Homosexual Way - A Christian Option?* (Bramcote, England, InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 22.
50. See Rom. 1:29-31; 1 Cor. 6:9, 10; 1 Tim. 1:9, 10.
51. 2 Tim. 2:22.
52. John 8:11.
53. 1 John 1:9; Heb. 10:22; Matt. 18:22.
54. 1 Cor. 5:1-5; Matt. 18:15-17.
55. Matt. 19:19.
56. In a *Guardian/ICM* poll, reported in the *Guardian* 15<sup>th</sup> February 2000.



Discussion Thirteen

# Homosexual Partnerships

**Readings: 1 Corinthians 5**

**Thought: Should we as Christians take our standards in society from what is fashionable, or work for those taught by Jesus?**

## Discussion Questions

6. **Has the church in the past been guilty of prejudice against gays?**
7. **Are Christians today clear on the distinction between toleration in a multi-cultural society, and acceptance that a lifestyle is morally acceptable?**
8. **Is homosexual sex seen as especially abhorrent for reasons of cultural upbringing or for biblical teaching? Should we feel as abhorrent when we see greed, fornication, or avarice if we look with the eyes of God?**
9. **How practically should we treat homosexuals in churches?**
10. **Should homosexuality be discussed with young people in churches?**

## Women as Coheirs

How did the attitudes of Jesus and Paul toward women relate to the prevailing attitudes of their day. To consider this, we must first note the three elements of their background and culture. First, there was the influence of the intellectual heritage of Greece, the Hellenistic influence. Second, there was the all-pervading political influence of Rome and its laws concerning women and family. Last, and obviously most important, there was the intensely religious, cultural, and legal traditions of the Hebrew nation into which both were born.

The Hellenistic cultural influence was dominated by the thinkers of Athens, among whom the general view was that woman was inferior. On this, for once, even those twin stars of philosophy, Plato and Aristotle, agreed.<sup>(1)</sup> The position of women in social life reflected this. One Greek well put it: “We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure, but concubines for the sake of daily habitation and wives for the purpose of having children legitimately, and of having a faithful guardian of all our household affairs”<sup>(2)</sup> Woman was a means to an end—a chattel, drudge, or sex object.

Wives were seldom educated, and would be seen neither as equals nor as companions in any real sense. For pleasure and companionship, a husband (if he could afford it) would turn to some kind of prostitute. At banquets, for example, men would not have their wives, but *hetaerae* (“friends”) or *auletrides* (“flute-girls” and “guitar-girls”). There was no idea of companionship between man and wife in a deep and committed relationship. Moreover, any women of political influence in historic Greece were prostitutes or ex-prostitutes whose power originated in sex appeal.<sup>(3)</sup>

The soldier-farmers of early Rome had no slave economy, and they lacked the leisured classes of Athens. Their genius was in action rather than in thinking; and their emphasis on order and legal in situations helped them conquer and rule many nations. Originally the man had absolute power, (*patria potestas*) over his wife and children, but by Jesus’ day this was inoperative. Women could hold property (their dowry was repaid if their husband divorced them), and they could divorce their husbands if they so chose. Even so, no woman could hold political power in her own right (though she might scheme like Nero’s mother), and the virtue traditionally admired was loyalty to one’s husband. However, marriage in practice was not very highly regarded, and divorce and ‘remarriage were common, often for financial or political reasons. There were, of course, many currents and counter-currents of thought around that time—from Augustus Caesar’s strong laws against adultery to Ovid’s exaltation of adulterous “love”. Overall, however, the woman occupied a higher place in Roman than in Greek life. Yet still there was little real tradition of marriage as a committed relationship of companions.

The Hebrew tradition differs greatly from both Greek and Roman cultures. Nominally it began (as we trace in Scripture) with a patriarchal system. Yet, in actual fact at no stage of Hebrew history do women give the impression of being downtrodden serfs. At the start of the patriarchal period, Sarah generally seemed able to persuade Abram to do what she set her mind on.(4) When the nation was born, Miriam seems to have been a leading figure in her own right.(5) In the period of the judges, Deborah ruled with what seems to have been a forceful power of personality nothing to do with sex appeal! (6) In the times of the prophets, Hannah seems to be treated with great respect and tenderness by her husband, and her vow led to the birth of the great prophet Samuel.(7) The story of Ruth formed a background to the birth of the greatest line of Hebrew kings through her great grandson David.(8) Later, the courage of the Jewish queen Esther saved her people, an event celebrated annually by the Hebrews *in the feast of Purim*.(9) None of this is patriarchalism. Moreover, the words of Genesis always stood before them. Woman was made to be a “help of man’s like’ She was an ally, a companion.

But what of the ideas which dominated rabbinical thinking in the days of Jesus and Paul? We must here be cautious about concluding too much. For one thing, the traditions were not actually written down until later. For another, in the to and fro of rabbinical discussion one can easily find selected quotations which give a slanted impression of the whole. Yet, taken as a whole, there does seem to be a marked movement from the Old Testament regard for women. Even Jewish apologist Claude Montefiore admitted: “No amount of apologetics can get over the implication of the daily blessing which Orthodox Judaism has still lacked the courage to remove from its official prayer book: ‘Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, who hast not made me a woman.’”(10) Women had to keep the prohibitions, but not the positive commandments of the Law.(11) They were seldom taught the Law, and one first century Rabbi even said, “If a man gives his daughter knowledge of the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery’(12) In theory a woman could be called to read the Torah scroll in a synagogue, but in practice they were not because “of the honour of the congregation”.(13) It was normal for Rabbis, like all Jewish men, to be married. Yet the Hillelite school, including Rabbi Gamaliel, the teacher of Paul,(14) regarded marriage lightly. Divorce could be for the most trivial of reasons-at, of course, at the husband’s wish, not at the wife’s.(15)

Moreover, keeping much female company. even of One’s own wife, was deplored. “Talk not much with womankind”, said one second-century Rabbi.(16) Later, propriety forbade a man to be alone with a woman (other than his wife),(17) to look at or greet one,(18) or even to speak with one on the street.(19) This was, of course, in contrast to the Greeks who preferred company of harlots to their own wives; this was an avoidance of female company altogether. The Jewish wife was certainly held in higher honour than the Greek wife, but neither Jews nor Greeks saw the wife as a suitable

companion for study and scholarship. Standing outside the rabbinical tradition, the first-century Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo was equally depreciating of women: “It is suitable for women to stay indoors and to live in retirement.”(20)

Now it is likely that the ordinary workingman (Jew or Greek) might differ in his practical treatment of his wife from the theoretical viewpoint of the scholars. But both Jesus and Paul were Rabbis.(21) Their craftsmen origins (22) would be quite normal in Rabbis, and this should not mislead us. Yet, if they were Rabbis, then how did they fit into the rabbinical tradition?

As we turn to look at the attitude of Jesus to women, we find an amazing thing. He stands as a unique figure. Not only does he smash through all the conventions for a Jewish Rabbi of his day, but he towers above most Christian men who have supposedly followed his example. In contrast with his perfect life, several attitudes often permeate our thinking. One is an attitude of condescension, patronizingly assigning to woman her “proper place” The implication behind this is usually that woman is in some way inferior-though it is usually cloaked in phrases like “man has been better fitted by God for certain tasks and woman for others’ In practice this means that man can think, lead, and understand spiritual things. *while*. woman makes the tea and arranges flowers. Needless to say, there ‘is no biblical basis for this. God *commands* man to lead; he does not say that man is better fitted for it.

The second attitude often found is one which regards “female” things as somehow funny, irrational, and slightly amusing. Sadly, one often detects under this an inability to relate to a woman simply as a person. Some men find it hard to relate to women other than as sex objects (i.e., by flirting with them), or as a different species of child to be coddled and protected.(23) They can never take a woman seriously as, say, an intellectual or spiritual leader unless she is somewhat masculine.

A third approach, allied to this, is by those who are fearful of women and see their sexuality as a threat. Because fundamentally they see women as sex objects and not as people, they fear their own natural lusts and so thunder forth like Tertullian on the evils and dangers of the female sex. Some, admittedly, recognize that the problem is rather in themselves, but would still bar women from places of ministry.

Jesus had none of these approaches. He was one who, in the words of Dorothy Sayers: “never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made sick jokes about them ... who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found

them and was completely unselfconscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows Its pungency from female Perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything ‘funny’ about woman’s nature.’(24)

Fundamentally Jesus saw people as persons, each a disciple in his/her own right. Two incidents illustrate this. Some people would elevate motherhood as the supreme fulfilment of womanhood. One woman clearly had this idea and shouted, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked.” But Jesus said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the’ word of God and keep it! (25) Womanhood is no more exalted than manhood in procreation; but both are exalted in discipleship and as persons, without reference to sex. Jesus did not typecast woman as mother, or as domestic servant, as a second incident shows. When Martha asked Jesus to redirect Mary to a proper “womanly” role of serving the food, Jesus’ replied, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her’ (26) Jesus, in total opposition to the other Rabbis, encouraged Mary to receive spiritual teaching. Perhaps her later act (27) showed that she understood better than his male disciples. But fundamentally he related to her as a person; her sex was irrelevant.

This, in fact, marks off Jesus both from male chauvinists and from feminists. He saw no need to be either patronisingly patriarchal or touchily aggressive about femininity. He felt no need to make sweeping generalisations bolstered up by proof texts and “psychological insights’ Women and men are simply individuals, and he enters their worlds and lives as such.

This is reflected first in his teaching. The illustration of his parables often contain a male and a female example.(28) Likewise, in his references to the Old Testament he often referred to a woman and to men.(29) He often balanced his phrases such as, ‘father and mother’,(30) “brother and sister”.(31) He referred to “publicans and harlots”,(32) the lowest profession for each.

A similar pattern emerges in his healings. He healed a son(33) and a daughter.(34) He healed a woman whose touch would have made him “unclean”.(35) He even healed a mother-in-law-without even a nudge or a wink. He singled out a crippled woman, calling her a “daughter of Abraham”, to heal on the Sabbath.(37) He healed people because they were sick; their sex was irrelevant. He dealt with people according to their needs, not their sex. Thus, he accepted the woman with the ointment, seeing a repentant sinner where others saw only a sex object.(38) He forgave the adulteress (where was the adulterer? ).(39) He praised the faith of the Syro-Phoenician woman,(40) and the giving of the poor widow.(41) He talked with the Samaritan woman at the well - to the amazement (42) both of herself and of his disciples. In fact, it was to her that he first stated his messiahship as he sought to convict her of sin and win her to faith.

Women usually seem to get the important news of Jesus first. His coming was first announced to Mary.(43) The first to broadcast his coming in Jerusalem was Anna.(44) The first to whom he proclaimed messiahship was the Samaritan woman.(45) The first to hear of his resurrection were women, and the first to see his resurrected body and touch him was Mary.(46)

Lastly, we note that he was willing to accept women as disciples in his band and to look to them as the providers for his needs.(47) He did not choose any to be apostles, but we would suggest that this was for reasons we have given in Chapter 10, and not because he thought them unfit. But in all he treated women simply and unembarrassedly as people.

Paul the apostle could not achieve the perfection of the sinless Jesus; yet his attitude too was remarkable. Brought up in the Hillelite tradition of Gamaliel,(48) Paul would normally have shared the rabbinical attitudes of his day. The Mishnah discouraged men from talking much with women, and its rules of propriety discouraged a man from being alone with a woman other than his wife.(49) The Talmud went further in discouraging even looking at or greeting married women, while it, was disgraceful for a scholar to speak with a woman in the street.(50) Yet the Rabbi Paul at Philippi “sat down and began to speak to the women who gathered there”.(51) One of these was a businesswoman, Lydia, not even a Jewess, but a Gentile “worshipper of God”.(52) When she became a Christian she appealed to Paul, “If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come, and stay at my house.”(53) Paul had to choose. His rabbinical background would have led him to regard her firstly, as a woman, and only secondarily as a disciple. He would have wanted to keep himself away from female company and would fear any gossip. On the other hand, her words had urged him to treat her as Jesus treated women - firstly as disciples and secondarily as women. The Rabbi Paul passed the test; he went to stay with her household.(54) In fact, her house, like quite a few other houses belonging to women, became a standard Christian meeting place.(56)

This is all in harmony with Paul’s general attitude to women. For example, his longest letter was apparently carried by a woman (57) and contains greetings to seven women by name.(58) He commends the work done by women, and regards them as “fellowworkers”.(59) One woman he even calls his “patroness”.(60) None of this conflicts with Paul’s view of the husband as the head of the wife. Those who suggest a conflict generally misunderstand in several ways the meaning of headship. First, they mistake subjection for servility. Jewett (61) for example, sees headship-subjection as comparable to a general private relationship in an army. But if we wish to use a military analogy, the woman is the ally of the man, not an inferior rank. Between allies there may be one commander-in-chief, otherwise there would be chaos; but there is always consultation. The husband’s headship implies an authority like that of commander-in-chief among consulting allies, and this is God’s recipe to

avoid chaos and disharmony. Jewett's alternative - "When mutual agreement cannot be achieved, the husband's preference should be honoured by the wife in some instances, and the-wife's by the husband in other instances" (62) - is vague and unrealistic. Who decides which instances are which? Should they, like Roman Consuls Varro and Paulus, take command on alternate days? That arrangement led to the biggest defeat in Roman history. To have a clear commander-in-chief is better. Moreover, a commander-in-chief of allies implies no superiority. For example, the Greek commander-in-chief Agamemnon was neither a better man nor a better soldier than Achilles, his ally. In some cases, the husband is intellectually and spiritually inferior to his wife. But God has chosen to give a simple, unambiguous recipe to ensure order and harmony rather than chaos; and where God commands, God enables.

But this kind of military analogy omits a third vital point about Paul on the headship- subjection bond. The husband is to *love his wife as Christ loved the church*. He is to treat his wife as part of a one-flesh, one-body unity with himself. He is *head of one body*, not ruler of a vassal. Love, as Paul said, "does not insist on its own way". (63)

Lastly, we might note how misleading is Jewett's comparison of Paul's instructions on marriage with those to slaves to obey their masters.(64) Paul nowhere shows a concern to preserve the institution of slavery (which, unlike marriage, was never ordained by God). His instruction to slaves is concerned rather for their own spiritual growth, that they should be upright and trustworthy rather than scheming hypocrites.(65) His instruction to obey masters in this context was entirely right. But he himself recognised that freedom was preferable if obtainable.(66) Moreover, his instruction to Philemon to regard a slave as a brother was far more revolutionary (in its implication of a regard for the best welfare of that slave as an individual) than mere abolitionism.(67) Paul's instructions to slaves Were entirely right for a situation where the institution was unalterably upheld by the might of pagan Rome.

But to compare this with marriage is absurd. Roman law set strict limitations on the actions of slaves, but gave little restriction to the private behaviour of wives and husbands within their marriage. The husband-wife relationship was formed within the framework of a divinely ordained institution; and Paul's vision of headship- subjection was for a marriage where the very highest standards of Christ-like love already operated.(68) Thus, while the instructions to slaves may be particular to a social context which no longer exists, those on marriage certainly are not.

No one should ascribe to Paul the perfection of Christ. His personal advice could be couched in terms coloured by "masculine" thinking.(69) Yet we believe that fundamentally he broke with the rabbinical tradition in following his Lord's attitude to women. They are seen first as disciples and individual

persons, and only secondarily as females.

The Christian leaders of the post-apostolic age often abysmally failed to follow the lead of Jesus. This is not the place to enter into it, though there does seem to be evidence that those of the Reformed tradition tended to be particularly misogynist, while those in the tradition of Wesley, Finney, William Booth, Hudson Taylor, etc. accepted women fully as co-workers.<sup>(70)</sup> This could perhaps make us wonder whether a Christ-like passion to reach and win individuals leads naturally to a view of women as individuals and potential co-workers. In any event, we would perhaps all do well to meditate long on the shining example of Jesus and the way in which his life and approach to men-women relationships shattered the traditions of his times.

## NOTES

1. E.g., Plato, *Laws*, 781; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1:5. Socrates (see Xenophon, *Symposium*, 1) seems uniquely more enlightened, which may have influenced Plato's hypothetical suggestion of women's education.
2. Attributed (probably spuriously) to Demosthenes in Ag. *Neaeram*, 122.
3. The *hetaera* Aspasia was Pericles' influential mistress; the flute-player Lamia dominated Demetrius. Another *hetaera*, Thais, induced Alexander to burn Xerxes' palace and was later mistress to King Ptolemy, forming the Lagid dynasty. The one-time kings of Cyprus and Pergamum had *hetaerae* for mothers. Women who did rule were *hetaerae* (like Semiramis or Sappho) or descended from them (like Cleopatra).
4. Gen. 16:2; 21:10.
5. Ex. 15:20; Num. 12:1-15; Mic. 6:4.
6. Judg. 4:4.
7. 1 Sam. 1:8, 11.
8. Ruth 4:2 1.
9. Esth. 5: 1; 9:20-32.
10. Talmud Berakoth vii: 18, 16.
11. Mishnah Kiddushin 1:7.
12. Mishnah Sotah iii.4.
13. Megillah 23a.
14. Acts 22:3.
15. Gittin 90a.
16. Mishnah Aboth i:5.
17. Mishnah Kiddushin iv:12.
18. Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 70a, b.
19. Babylonian Talmud Berakoth 43b.
20. Philo, *De Spec Leg*, iii: 169.
21. See, e.g., John 3:2 where Jesus is so recognised by a Jewish leader; Acts 22:3.
22. Mark 6:3; Acts 18:3.
23. The most damning exposure of this attitude is in Henry Ibsen, *A Doll's*



- House* (Dayton, England: Penguin, 1965; New York: Dutton, 1954).
24. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 47.
  25. Luke 11:27, 28.
  26. Luke 10:41, 42.
  27. John 12:3.
  28. Luke 13:19-21; 15:3-10; 18:1-14. 29.
  29. Luke 4:25-27; 11:29-32.
  30. Matt. 19:29; Mark 7:10, 11; Luke 12:53.
  31. Matt. 12:50.
  32. Matt. 21:31, KJV.
  33. Luke 7:12-16.
  34. Luke 8:4 1 ff.
  35. Matt. 9:20-22; Lev. 15:25, 27.
  36. Matt. 8:14, 15.
  37. Luke 13:10-17.
  38. Luke 7:37-50.
  39. John 8:2-11.
  40. Matt. 15:28.
  41. Mark 12:43,
  42. John 4:9, 27.
  43. Luke 1:26-33.
  44. Luke 2:36-38.
  45. John 4:25, 26.
  46. Mark 16:6; John 20:14-17.
  47. Luke 8: 1-3.
  48. Acts 22:3.
  49. Aboth i: 5; Kiddushin iv: 12.
  50. Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 70a, b; Berakoth 43b.
  51. Acts 16:13.
  52. Acts 16:14.
  53. Acts 16:15.
  54. Acts 16:15.
  55. Acts 12:12; Col. 4:15.
  56. Acts 16:40.
  57. Rom. 16: 1.
  58. Prisca, Mary, Junias (probably female); Tryphaena; Tryphosa; Julia,, Olympas.
  59. Phil. 4:2, 3.
  60. Rom. 16:2.
  61. Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 132; cf. Brown on women also.
  62. Ibid.
  63. 1 Cor. 13:5.
  64. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, p. 138, from which a "historical limitation" of Paul's insight is deduced.

65. 1 Cor. 7:21; Eph. 6:5-8.
66. 1 Cor. 7:2 1.
67. Philemon 16; see also Eph. 6:9.
68. Eph. 5:25.
69. As in 1 Tim. 5:11-14.
70. The literature shows Luther, Calvin, Knox, and more recent men like Hodge and Hendrikson to have made very depreciating comments on women. However, Wesley, Finney, Moody, William Booth, Hudson Taylor, Franson, etc. all accepted women as co-workers and co-preachers.