

Christian Marriage

So much has been said and written on Christian Marriage, attempting to bring about Biblical standards in Christian marriages. All sorts of courses have been designed, projects produced, manuals written and so on, to try and produce better "Christian Marriages". The basis of so much has been "Wives be subject to your husbands, husbands love your wives." These are so often quoted, but, sadly, Christian marriages rarely seem to approach the wonderful standard of love and purity set out by Paul to the Ephesian Church. Perhaps the reason for the failure is that, as usual, with most things we do, we approach the matter from the human point of view. We look with our own understanding at the words the Lord Jesus has given, then try and outwork them ourselves; this rather than seeing the truth from God's point of view and letting His revelation enter our hearts. A marriage encounter should not be just between a husband and his wife but between both partners, together, and the Lord Jesus.

The apostle Paul writing to the Galatian church said that "The gospel he had received he had not received from man, neither was taught it by man: but by the revelation of Jesus Christ". Happily for us, the revelation which Paul received he wrote in letters, but there is a need to avoid the danger of applying the principles of those letters without having the same revelation. We would all agree that to become a Christian we all need our own personal experience, revelation if you like, of the Lord Jesus. Christianity cannot be learned, Jesus has to be received. "It is to those who receive Him He gives the power (authority, or right, Gk. exousia) to become sons of God". In the same way, to have a proper Christian marriage we, both partners in particular, need a revelation of marriage from the Lord Jesus, so as to receive a spiritual understanding of Christian marriage: we will then see marriage the way God sees it.

In the Christian life, we are to "live by faith", "The just shall live by faith", where the basis of our life is trust in all that Jesus has done for us. We are to "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in us to will and to do of His good pleasure." We can therefore only work out that which God has worked in. That surely was the secret of Jesus' own life, when He says "It is not I but my Father" and the result "I do always the things which please Him". Paul says "without controversy this is a great mystery, God was manifest in the flesh"; an amazing comment when there are so many debates about Christian doctrine, about this there is no argument; it really is a great mystery. (That is perhaps why Christianity and the Lord Jesus are so heavily criticised, at least in the UK, as the whole concept of God manifest in man is beyond the comprehension of a human mind, built up through much teaching and education.)

In the New Testament, mysteries are things which were once hidden but are now revealed; they are all out in the open. So for the Christian, Jesus becomes the revelation of God manifest in the flesh. It is not a mystery any more. It is clear that it can happen and has in fact taken place. The apostle John says "We beheld His glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth". Paul to the Colossians says "For in Him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily", but Paul also says "God would make known to you what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles (the rest of the world really), which is Christ in you , the hope of glory". So the mystery of God manifest in the flesh grows for the Christian, as not only was God manifest in the flesh in Jesus Christ, but

having received Jesus into his or her life, the Christian discovers God manifest in his or her own flesh. The possibilities, rather the wonderful certainties, then arise of the Lord Jesus working in each Christian life, in ways which please God. It is not controversial that it is a great mystery, and yet a true reality for Christians; for those who have really repented of their sin and received the Holy Spirit, to bring about the power of God working in them, and who then continue in faith serving the Lord. Paul says "We have this treasure in an earthen vessel, so that the excellency of the power is of God and not of us". Wonderful, quite wonderful: do you believe it? Does faith rise in your heart to say Yes Lord, Thank you Lord Jesus, I believe?

Paul mentions another great mystery. "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and His Church". So we have 2 great mysteries, and there are only two mentioned in the whole of the New Testament. One relates, as we have seen, to God manifest in the flesh, and the other to the Lord Jesus and His Church. It is this second mystery which is to form the basis of our understanding of the relationship between a man and his wife. The Bible tells us, "For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones", and in the beginning of the book of Genesis, "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and they two shall be one flesh". So we find, right in the beginning, when God created male and female to be in marriage as one flesh, their union was to demonstrate the relationship between Jesus and His Church. If you think that is the wrong way round, please understand that the church, (and therefore all Christians), was ordained to belong to the Lord Jesus, before the foundation of the world.

So for there to be an understanding of marriage there must be a revelation of the second great mystery to Christian hearts, but most especially to husbands and wives. And yet each Christian, whether man or woman, who is a member of the Body of Christ, should, rather must, know in their heart the love which the Lord Jesus has for them. He or she is, after all, part of the Church which Jesus loved, and for which He gave Himself. Possibly the most famous Bible verse is John 3.16, "For God so loved the world....". It is the "so loved" which expresses the great love of God outworked in the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God manifest in the flesh, when Jesus loved the world and gave himself for His church. The whole purpose of God manifest in the flesh was to reconcile the world unto God. "God was in Christ Jesus reconciling the world unto Himself".

So husbands, how great is your revelation of the love of Jesus when He gave himself for His church, when He gave himself for you? That is just how you are to love your wives; first the giving, before any thought of authority. We call Jesus Lord, as He is the head of the church, and rightly so, that Lordship only belongs to the Lord Jesus because it was given to Him by His Father. In all His dealings with us, the Lord Jesus is very much aware of who has given Him His authority. The right order is God, the Lord Jesus, man, woman and so on. Any husband with authority over his wife must operate knowing where that authority comes from, and act accordingly. Regrettably too many men use the "Wives be in subjection to your husbands" as an excuse for dictatorship, to satisfy their need for power and control. In many cultures wives are treated little better than slaves, and yet in a Christian marriage, though the wife is to be subject to her husband in everything, it is to be understood that they are "Heirs together of the grace of life", and the wife is just as much a Christian and loved of God as is the husband. Most people follow the pattern or example of their forebears and the culture in which they are brought up. It is just seen as the normal. They behave the way they do, because that is how their father behaved and his father before him, and so it carries on. That is why there is such a great need for a revelation from the Lord Himself, in order to deliver us from our culture, and

bring us into the freedom which God has given to us in marriage. "As you do it to the least of these my brethren you do it unto me". Paul tells us that "The man is the head of the woman as Christ is the Head of the Church". But he then mentions, in the next phase, that Jesus is the "Saviour of the body". There is no Headship for the Lord Jesus without the salvation that He has provided, through giving Himself for the Church. There is never any thought, of course, that a husband can provide eternal salvation for his wife. Only the Lord Jesus can do that; however the salvation which He gives does provide safety for the church and each member in particular. Likewise as the husband gives himself for the wife before the Lord, it provides the safety and security she needs. The apostle Peter describes the woman as the weaker vessel, so the husband is to provide not only physical and emotional security but spiritual security too. A husband, who himself is subject to the Lord Jesus, provides a spiritual authority and protection under which his wife can be free to serve the Lord Jesus. "Let no man have dominion over your faith." The husband therefore is not to have dominion over the faith of his wife but allow the wife a true and living personal faith in the Lord Jesus who died for her. Paul tells us that the woman was tempted first, and when the husband became subject to the woman, as Adam listened to and obeyed Eve, sin entered in. With the husband as the head, that avenue of weakness is closed, providing of course, that the husband is properly and fully submitted to Jesus Christ in everything.

The word subjection is a military one, related to the order of command. It puts the husband and wife in the right position to cope with the battles and difficulties which they will encounter. The words 'wives be slaves, or servants, of your husbands' DO NOT appear in the Bible; the instruction is for subjection. The Bible tells us that a woman should not usurp authority over the man. A good translation is that the woman should not take up arms and fight her own battles. This is clearly the idea in "wives be subject to their husbands". There are some battles in life better suited for the husband to fight. The idea is "Wives, let your husband get on with his responsibility and don't interfere." We are told that Sara obeyed her husband Abraham, as a result of her subjection. In the New Testament we read of the obedience of faith and obeying from the heart. When obedience really works it is based on faith, not on law; we obey the Lord when we trust Him. So will a wife obey, from the heart, when she trusts her husband. Faith works by love, so the love in the heart of the woman for her husband will lead to trust, obedience and proper subjection. Wives how great is your understanding of the love Jesus has for His church?

In some cultures equality for women, equal standing in everything, is now the requirement. The Christian wife, knowing the revelation of Jesus giving Himself for the church, will appreciate how the Church has to be "subject to Christ" and therefore the requirement to be subject to her husband. It is so straightforward, and yet wonderful when the husband loves his wife as Christ loves His church. "Be not conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind". In other words don't think the way the world thinks, let the Lord Jesus transform the way you think. "Let it be the hidden man of the heart, which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit which in the sight of the Lord is of great price". That is how Peter tells us that a woman should be with a non-Christian husband in order to be an example to him of the Lord Jesus.

The word for Saviour comes from the same root as save and salvation. In Christian terms it involves the whole work of the Lord Jesus, in being our Saviour. "His name shall be called Jesus, (Hebrew Joshua: Saviour) for He will save His people from their sins". The work of the Lord Jesus is to forgive our sins, and to deliver us, His church, from sin and the power of that sin in each life. And yet we

read that “He will come again a second time without sin unto salvation”. This means that the Lord Jesus not only provides a salvation from sin, but a salvation when He comes again, when the whole church is taken to be with Him forever. That is when “He will present the church to himself as the glorious church without spot and wrinkle”. Jesus also provides a constant daily support for Christians in their lives, and the grace so to live. We understand therefore that we are saved on a day-to-day, basis, keeping ourselves in the love of God. Jesus truly is our Saviour.

The word salvation, or saved, is sometimes translated as ‘to make whole’, e.g. when Jesus healed the sick. Salvation therefore has the concept of wholeness, of deliverance, of blessing and well being. Jesus is the Saviour of the body and His very life becomes the well being of His church and of His people. The Lord Jesus makes and keeps whole; we read, “He nourishes and cherishes His body”. So if the man is to be head of the wife in marriage, he must be in the relationship the means of wholeness and well being to his wife. Not that the husband has any power in himself, but rather when submitted to the Lord he becomes he becomes a channel of blessing to his wife. No place then for flesh, fornication, adultery, abuse or uncleanness in the life of the husband, but a heart of love, through which the grace of Christ can flow. There is no place for abuse or uncleanness from the wife also. No place for any sort of domestic violence. Marriage is about wholeness and well being in body, soul and spirit.

The relationship is “they two shall become one flesh”. It is a mystery, Paul says. It is more than just a physical relationship. Sadly, so many marriages and partnerships, as they have become with couples living together rather than getting married, are based purely on a physical relationship. Marriage is more than that, there is a special union between a man and his wife which goes beyond just the “physical thing”. We read “He that is joined to a harlot is one body with her, for two, says he, shall be one flesh”. The physical union joins a man and a woman as one body. We are the body of Christ, “He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit”; it is just the same, it is a great mystery. That means that relationships outside marriage, against one man one wife, damage the marriage relationship. Paul tells us “A man who commits fornication sins against his own body”. Sin can be forgiven, of course it can, but bodies are not redeemable, we are to get new ones, so there is permanent damage to a marriage from immoral relationships. A man is to love his wife as his own, for they are one flesh, so when a man (or a woman for that matter) sins against their bodies by committing fornication, they sin against their partner also. The damage is not just emotional damage, but also literally against the body of their partner which can lead to sickness and other physical problems. There is spiritual harm too, due to the hardness of heart which operates in immoral behaviour. The damage done to the souls and lives of those who participate in fornication or adultery is therefore quite clear. Those who behave in such a manner surely demonstrate that they have never really understood the mystery of the relationship of marriage or realised the wonder of the union between Christ and His Church. “Let him that thinks he stands take heed unless he falls”. We are all dependent on the grace of God to keep us in this, as in many other areas of our lives. So many people, especially young people, seem so quick to abandon their purity, for the pleasures of sin for a short time, little realising the great value of what they lose.

Jesus was asked about divorce, which was allowed under Judaic Law. His comment was, “Moses allowed you to divorce because of your hardness of heart”. So when a man takes another woman, and, as has become common in this generation, a woman takes another man, they harden their heart in doing so. They sin against their body, and against their husband or wife, and the whole thing

causes huge damage to each partner and society in general. This is not salvation but destruction, which is why Jesus said, in the beginning there was no putting away, no divorce, as the purpose of the union between a man and a woman is for wholeness and well being. It was to be a lasting relationship, to show the eternal love of Jesus for His church. Divorce came later because of the hardness of hearts in human beings. Sin hardens hearts and as sin abounds in this current age, so does hardness of heart and so divorce increases, as for that matter does all manner of sexual immorality. Children produced, and who then grow up in a loving wholesome environment, where there are loving relationships between husband and wife, will thrive in that love, The opposite is true for those children damaged by the hardness of their parents hearts, when one “puts away another”.

‘Two becoming one flesh’ is so that they may work to support and sustain each other. Part of any marriage is the physical relationship. Sexual relationships have been so debased, through rampant immorality, in so many cultures, and yet for the Christian we read marriage is honourable in all, and the bed is undefiled”. Here is the position of purity and wholeness in marriage, providing well being for both parties, in their physical relationship. Sexual relationships in such an honourable marriage, can be with a clear conscience before God. Children are then born without the problems caused by being brought into the world through an immoral relationship. Paul tells us that in physical relationships the man does not have power (authority) over his own body but the woman, likewise the woman does not have power (authority) over her own body but the man. Here is equality; the balance is just right. Such principles are not believed and practised in so many cultures, and yet in Christian marriage the power is for the woman to say no or yes to the man and likewise the man to say yes or no to the wife. The husband is to show due kindness to the wife and likewise the wife to the husband. The old English word is benevolence, just good will. There is therefore no place here for abuse, or violence or uncleanness, but love and grace, with one subject to the other in the love of God. Abstinence is to be with mutual consent and then only for an agreed period, to seek the Lord. We see then kindness, good will and mutuality, a genuine sharing together in the love of God.

The Lord gave the woman to the man to be a help meet, a help just right for the job. What a wonderful provision, but how often such a provision is abused. “A man ought to love his wife as his own body..... because he has never hated his own flesh”. A man who hates and abuses his wife hates and abuses himself. There has to be such a hardness of heart for such behaviour to take place. But great is the mystery, “A man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife”. The greater our understanding of the relationship between Christ and His church so will be our understanding of the wonderful provision of the woman for the man and thereby the wife for the husband. “It is not good for a man to dwell alone”.

There is no place for selfishness for either wife or husband. As Jesus gave Himself to be Head of the Church, he said “I am among you as one who serves” and “Let him that is chief among you be the servant”. So likewise should the man who is the head, serve as that head to the wife, all for the glory of God. In that context the wife, although obliged to obey her husband whatever, will find such obedience a delight as she is submitted to her husband as unto the Lord. Such relationships provide real wholeness and well being for husband and wife. No wonder the Bible tells us that “She shall be saved in childbearing”.

So we find the principles of love and service, and sacrifice and obedience working in Christian marriage to glorify God, and so be a testimony of the love between Christ and His church. The ways

of the world have no place in Christian marriage. There is no room for lust, uncleanness, selfishness, pride, hardness of heart, or abuse. "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it." Is the emphasis for the responsibility really on the husband? In one way yes, as the Lord Jesus took the initiative in our salvation. Jesus took the responsibility, Christ is the head of the man. So must the man take the responsibility first, and yet there is an equal requirement for the wife to be responsible and obey her husband, being subject to him. Love of one another is the key. The word for love in the Greek language is agape. It is all about sacrifice, about the laying down of life. If Jesus laid down His life for us, so ought we to lay down our lives for one another.

As the revelation of Christ in us, in our flesh, the hope of glory, is the basis for Christian living, so the revelation of Christ and the church is the basis for Christian marriage. The joy for a Christian man and his wife is that they can seek such a revelation together as "heirs together of the grace of life". Both have access to the Father by one Spirit through the Lord Jesus, so that they can receive all they need. As they do, the wonder of the mystery will grow in them, and in their relationship together. "Husbands give honour to the wife as to the weaker vessel." says the apostle Peter "that your prayers are not hindered." When we get these principles right in the Lord, our prayers, and the praying together of a husband and wife, are not hindered. Heaven is open to them and so will the wonderful revelation of Christ and His church be revealed, as they seek the Lord together.

"It is a great mystery but I speak concerning Christ and His church, therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife and they two shall be one flesh. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular love his wife as himself and see that the wife reverence her husband". How wonderful. Ever lead us on Lord Jesus. Amen.