

THE PRECIOUS BOND

Ephesians 5:22-33

Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord; for the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church, though there is this great difference, that Christ is the Saviour of the whole body. But, even allowing for this difference, even as the Church is subject to Christ, so wives must be subject to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church and gave himself for the Church, that by the washing of water he might purify her and consecrate her as she made confession of her faith, that he might make the Church to stand in his presence in all her glory, without any spot which soils, or any wrinkle which disfigures, or any such imperfection, but that she might be consecrated and blameless. So ought husbands to love their wives, to love them as they love their own bodies. He who loves his wife really loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh; rather he nourishes it and cherishes it. So Christ loves the Church because we are parts of his body. For this cause a man will leave his father and his mother and will cleave to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a symbol which is very great – I mean when it is seen as a symbol of the relationship between Christ and the Church. However that may be, let each and every one of you love his wife as he loves himself, and let the wife reverence her husband.

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No one reading this passage in the twenty-first century can fully realize how great it is. Throughout the years, the Christian view of marriage has come to be widely accepted. It is still recognized by the majority as the ideal, even in these permissive days. Even where practice has fallen short of that ideal, it has always been in the minds and hearts of those who live in a Christian situation. Marriage is regarded as the perfect union of body, mind and spirit between a man and a woman. But things were very different when Paul wrote. In this passage, Paul is setting down an ideal which shone with a radiant purity in an immoral world.

Let us look briefly at the situation against which Paul wrote this passage.

The Jews had a low view of women. In his morning prayer, there was a sentence in which a Jewish man gave thanks that God had not made him 'a Gentile, a slave or a woman'. In Jewish law, a woman was not a person but a thing. She had no legal rights whatsoever; she was absolutely her husband's possession to do with as he willed.

In theory, the Jews had the highest ideal of marriage. The Rabbis had their sayings. 'Every Jew must surrender his life rather than commit idolatry, murder or adultery.' 'The very altar sheds tears when a man divorces the wife of his youth.' But the fact was that, by Paul's day, divorce had become tragically easy.

The law of divorce is summarized in Deuteronomy 24:1. 'Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house.' Obviously, everything turns on the interpretation of *something objectionable*. The stricter Rabbis, headed by the famous Shammai, held that the phrase meant adultery and only adultery, and

declared that even if a wife was as mischievous as Queen Jezebel, a husband might not divorce her except for adultery. The more liberal Rabbis, headed by the equally famous Hillel, interpreted the phrase in the widest possible way. They said that it meant that a man might divorce his wife if she spoiled his dinner by putting too much salt in his food, if she walked in public with her head uncovered, if she talked with men in the streets, if she spoke disrespectfully of her husband's parents in her husband's hearing, if she was an argumentative woman, if she was troublesome or quarrelsome. A certain Rabbi Akiba interpreted the phrase *but she does not please him* to mean that a husband might divorce his wife if he found a woman whom he considered more attractive. It is easy to see which school of thought would predominate.

Two facts in Jewish law made the matter worse. First, the wife had no rights of divorce at all, unless her husband became a leper or rejected the faith or engaged in a disgusting trade such as that of a tanner. Broadly speaking, a husband, under Jewish law, could divorce his wife on any grounds, whereas there were no grounds on which a wife could divorce her husband. Second, the process of divorce was disastrously easy. The Mosaic law said that a man who wanted a divorce had to hand his wife a bill of divorce which said: 'Let this be from me your writ of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation, that you may marry whatsoever man you will.' All a man had to do was to hand that bill of divorce, correctly written out by a Rabbi, to his wife in the presence of two witnesses and the divorce was complete. The only other condition was that the woman's dowry must be returned.

At the time of Christ's coming, the marriage bond was in grave danger even among the Jews, since Jewish girls were refusing to marry because their position as a wife was so uncertain.

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THE situation was worse in the Greek world. Prostitution was an essential part of Greek life. The Athenian orator and statesman Demosthenes had laid it down as the accepted rule of life: 'We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure; we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation; we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately and of having a faithful guardian for all our household affairs.' The women of the respectable classes in Greece led completely secluded lives. They took no part in public life; they never appeared on the streets alone; they never even appeared at meals or at social occasions; they had their own apartments where none but their husbands might enter. It was the aim that, as the historian Xenophon had it, they 'might see as little as possible, hear as little as possible and ask as little as possible'.

The respectable woman of Greek society was brought up in such a way that companionship and fellowship in marriage was impossible. Socrates said: 'Is there anyone to whom you entrust more serious matters than to your wife - and is there anyone to whom you talk less?' Verus was the imperial colleague of the great emperor Marcus Aurelius. He was blamed by his wife for associating with other women, and his answer was that she must remember that the name of wife was a title of dignity but not of pleasure. The Greeks expected their wives to run the home and to care for their legitimate children; but they found their pleasure and their companionship elsewhere.

To make matters worse, there was no legal procedure of divorce in Greece. As someone has put it, divorce was by nothing else than caprice, the result of a whim. The one

security that a wife had was that her dowry must be returned. Home and family life were near to being extinct, and faithfulness was completely non-existent.

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IN Rome, the matter was still worse; its degeneracy was tragic. For the first 500 years of the Roman Republic, there had not been one single case of divorce. The first recorded divorce was that of Spurius Carvilius Ruga in 234 BC. But, at the time of Paul, Roman family life was in ruins. The philosopher Seneca writes that women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married. In Rome, the Romans did not commonly date their years by numbers; they called them by the names of the consuls. Seneca says that women dated the years by the names of their husbands. The poet Martial tells of a woman who had had ten husbands; Juvenal, who was a lawyer, tells of one who had had eight husbands in five years. The biblical scholar Jerome declares it to be true that in Rome there was a woman who was married to her twenty-third husband and she herself was his twenty-first wife. We find a Roman emperor, Augustus, demanding that the husband of the Lady Livia should divorce her when she was pregnant so that he might marry her himself. We find even Cicero, in his old age, putting away his wife Terentia so that he might marry a young heiress, whose trustee he was, and thereby acquire her estate in order to pay his debts.

That is not to say that there was no such thing as faithfulness. The historian Suetonius tells of a Roman lady called Mallonia who committed suicide rather than submit to the

favours of the emperor Tiberius. But it is not too much to say that the whole atmosphere was adulterous. The marriage bond was on the way to complete breakdown.

It is against this background that Paul writes. When he wrote this lovely passage, he was not stating a view that everyone held. He was calling men and women to a new purity and a new fellowship in the married life. It is impossible to exaggerate the cleansing effect that Christianity had on home life in the ancient world and the benefits it brought to women.

THE GROWTH OF PAUL'S THOUGHT

Ephesians 5:22-33 (contd)

In this passage, we find Paul's real thinking on marriage. There are things which Paul wrote about marriage which puzzle us and may make us wish that he had never written them. The unfortunate thing is that it is these things that are so often quoted as Paul's view of marriage.

One of the strangest chapters is 1 Corinthians 7. He is talking about marriage and about the relationships between men and women. The blunt truth is that Paul's teaching is that marriage is permissible merely in order to avoid something worse. 'Because of cases of sexual immorality,' he writes, 'each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband' (1 Corinthians 7:2). He allows that a widow may marry again, but it would be better if she remained single (1 Corinthians 7:39-40). He would prefer the unmarried and the widows not to marry. 'But if they are not practising self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion' (1 Corinthians 7:9).

There was a reason why Paul wrote like that. It was because he expected the second coming of Jesus at any time. It was therefore his conviction that no one should undertake any earthly ties whatsoever, but that all should concentrate on using the short time which remained in preparing for the coming of their Lord. 'The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife' (1 Corinthians 7:32-3).

Between 1 Corinthians and Ephesians, there is a space of perhaps nine years. In these nine years, Paul had realized that the second coming was not to be as soon as he had thought – that in fact he and his people were living not in a temporary situation but in a more or less permanent situation. And it is in Ephesians that we find Paul's true teaching on marriage, that Christian marriage is the most precious relationship in life, whose only parallel is the relationship between Christ and the Church.

It is just possible that the Corinthians passage was coloured by Paul's personal experience. It would seem that, in his days as a zealous Jew, he was a member of the Sanhedrin. When he is telling of his conduct towards the Christians, he says: 'I also cast my vote against them' (Acts 26:10). It would also seem that one of the qualifications for membership of the Sanhedrin was marriage, and that therefore Paul must have been a married man. He never mentions his wife. Why? It may well be that it was because she turned against him when he became a Christian. It may be that, when he wrote 1 Corinthians, Paul was speaking out of a situation in which he not only expected the immediate coming of Christ but had also found his own marriage one of his greatest problems and deepest heartbreaks – so that he saw marriage as a handicap for Christians.

THE BASIS OF LOVE

Ephesians 5:22-33 (contd)

SOMETIMES, the emphasis of this passage is entirely misplaced, and it is read as if its essence was the subordination of wife to husband. The single phrase, 'The husband is the head of the wife', is quoted in isolation. But the basis of the passage is not control; it is love. Paul says certain things about the love that a husband must have for his wife.

(1) It must be a *sacrificial* love. He must love her as Christ loved the Church and gave himself for the Church. It must never be a selfish love. Christ loved the Church, not that the Church might do things for him, but that he might do things for the Church. The fourth-century Church father John Chrysostom has a wonderful expansion of this passage: 'Hast thou seen the measure of obedience? Hear also the measure of love. Wouldst thou that thy wife shouldst obey thee as the Church doth Christ? Have care thyself for her as Christ for the Church. And if it be needful that thou shouldst give thy life for her, or be cut to pieces a thousand times, or endure anything whatever, refuse it not . . . He brought the Church to his feet by his great care, not by threats nor fear nor any such thing; so do thou conduct thyself towards thy wife.'

The husband is head of the wife - true, Paul said that; but he also said that the husband must love the wife as Christ loved the Church, with a love which never exercises a tyranny of control but which is ready to make any sacrifice for her good.

(2) It must be a *purifying* love. Christ cleansed and consecrated the Church by the washing with water on the day when each member of the Church made a personal confession of faith. It may well be that Paul has in mind a

Greek custom. One of the Greek marriage customs was that, before the bride was taken to her marriage, she was bathed in the water of a stream sacred to some god or goddess. In Athens, for instance, the bride was bathed in the waters of the Callirhoe, which was sacred to the goddess Athene. It is of baptism that Paul is thinking. By the washing of baptism and by the confession of faith, Christ sought to make for himself a Church, cleansed and consecrated, until there was neither soiling spot nor disfiguring wrinkle upon it. Any love which drags a person down is false. Any love which coarsens instead of refining the character, which necessitates deceit, which weakens the moral strength, is not love. Real love is the great purifier of life.

(3) It must be a *caring* love. A man must love his wife as he loves his own body. Real love loves not to extract service, nor to ensure that its own physical comfort is attended to; it cherishes the one it loves. There is something very wrong when a man regards his wife, consciously or unconsciously, as simply the one who cooks his meals and washes his clothes and cleans his house and brings up his children.

(4) It is an *unbreakable* love. For the sake of this love, a man leaves father and mother and is joined to his wife. They become one flesh. He is as united to her as the members of the body are united to each other, and would no more think of separating from her than of tearing his own body apart. Here indeed was an ideal in an age when men and women changed partners with as little thought as they changed clothes.

(5) The whole relationship is *in the Lord*. In the Christian home, Jesus is an always-remembered, though an unseen, guest. In Christian marriage, there are not two partners, but three - and the third is Christ.