

HUSBANDS AND WIVES

Two become One

Preface

This is one of several 21st Century Bible papers prepared for St Johns, Hensingham. They investigate various topical issues from the starting point that the Bible is the inspired word of God. Other papers can be found on the St Johns website (www.stjohnshensingham.org.uk) and are available on request in paper form. In my papers I take into account some of the facts and opinions provided by scholarship. However, as far as possible my aim is to let the Bible interpret itself. Unless stated otherwise all Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Introduction

What is marriage; what is it for; how does it work; how should it work; who is in charge? These and similar questions have been thrown into the melting pot in the last half century and old certainties have disappeared. The secular world tells us that marriage is a socially convenient legal contract, which can be useful for a good family and sexual life, but it has no absolute value. It can be discarded if it becomes difficult and other arrangements are equally moral and may be more appropriate. Evangelical Christians will place a higher value on marriage, but we are not immune to the effects of our society. Feminism in particular has made a huge impact. There are now differing views even among those who consider the Bible to be their guide. This paper is an attempt to consider what God has revealed about marriage throughout the Bible. Consideration is given both to the foundations and to practical everyday applications. However, this is not a psychological study, useful as that might be.

THREE EVENTS

There are three big events that together provide the foundation for marriage as Christians experience it: Creation, The Fall, and the New Creation. We shall consider these first and then look for practical illustrations and applications.

The Creation

There are three accounts of Creation and its aftermath in Genesis, all of which have marriage as a major issue. They are Gen 1 – 2 v 3; Gen 2 v 4 – 4 v 26, and Gen 5 – 6 v 8. The two latter accounts go on to consider the Fall and its effects. Both the latter include judgement, but end on a hopeful note. The Bible often provides different accounts of the same important event, each of which gives a different angle. (Liberal theologians often take such repetitions as signs of different and contradictory stories about the event concerned. However, there is no need to take this approach.) I have shown the account from Gen 2 below as the most useful for this paper.

Gen 2 vv 7,15-22

7 then the LORD God formed man [Adam] from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man [Adam] became a living being.

15 The LORD God took the man [Adam] and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man [Adam], "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man [Adam] should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." 19 So out of the ground the LORD God [had] formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man [Adam] to see what he would call them; and whatever the man [Adam] called every living creature, that was its name. 20 The man [Adam] gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man [Adam] there was not found a helper [Adam] as his partner. 21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man [Adam], and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man [Adam] he made into a woman and brought her to the man [Adam]. 23 Then the man [Adam] said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman [Heb ishshah], for out of Man [Heb ish] this one was taken." 24 Therefore a man [ish] leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife [ishshah], and they become one flesh.

Comments:

1. Adam is both the personal name of the first man and a name for mankind in general. Presumably this is because Eve and all their descendants derive from Adam and are in an important sense included in him. (See 1 Cor 15 v 22.) Hebrew has other terms for individuals who are "men", e.g. "ish". I suggest that there was a good reason why the author of Genesis chose "Adam" in most of the verses above. In particular Eve was included "in" Adam and therefore shares his name, not the other way around.
2. Feminists often find the fact that according to the Bible Eve was made from Adam's rib humiliating. However, Adam was made from dust, which I suggest might be seen as even more humiliating!
3. When Adam was created he contained within himself the potential for a woman, but the creation was incomplete until the woman had also been fully created. He/they are in the image of God who is also both one and plural at the same time.
4. From the beginning Adam and Eve were not created as colleagues or a courting couple, but as a male/female married one flesh couple in the image of the godhead as Gen 2 v 23-24 (and Gen 1 v 27 show. In Mark 10 vv 6-8 Jesus confirms this.
5. Because God has made married couples one they should remain united, just as God remains united. See Mark 10 v 9: "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." In my view this neither implies that divorce is impossible, nor that it should never happen. However, it is always a sign that something has gone seriously wrong. For further discussion of this topic the reader may like to consider my paper entitled, "Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage".
6. Because Adam was incomplete in himself he needed a "helper". The Hebrew for helper is "ezer". This is a general term and often implies superiority. In the Bible "ezer" usually refers to God. (E.g. Psa 33 v 20.) It therefore does not mean that Woman was created to be the husband's personal assistant or domestic help, though she might be. Her particular talent would be in producing children (much undervalued in our age) and in particular producing the Saviour of the world without direct male human intervention. (Gen 3 v 15,20) There may be other things she can do that he cannot do on his own.
7. It is easily overlooked that there were three actors in these passages, i.e. God, Adam and Eve. I suggest that all three imaged the three persons aspect of the trinity together rather than by Adam and Eve as a couple. Adam and Eve needed God to complete their marriage.

8. God gave Adam-and-Eve various commands, e.g.

- To have children and fill the earth
- To rule over the living creatures
- To take control of the land as gardeners

However, it seems there was no explicit instruction as to how the details of these tasks were to be divided between them. The implication is that they were partners with considerable freedom to work the details out for themselves. Biology tells us that Eve bore and suckled their children, and it suggests that Adam probably had more physical strength. There may have been other differences that made one or other of them better at various tasks.

9. In the Bible giving a name to an individual is a sign of authority. Parents name their children. God names Adam and others, e.g. John the Baptist (Luk 1). Pharaoh renames Joseph (Gen 41 v45). Jesus gives new names to some of his disciples, e.g. Peter (Joh 1 v 42). Adam names the animals in Gen 2 vv 19,20. Adam initially names his wife Ishshah, (Gen 2 v 23) and after the Fall he renames her Eve (Gen 3 v 20). The fact that Adam named Eve implies his authority over her. The fact that he named her the first time before the Fall implies that such authority was a Creation ordinance, not a result of the Fall.

10. God giving Adam authority over Eve implies:

- In any decision making process where there was no direct command from God Adam had the final human say.
- In any such decision making process Adam had the ultimate human responsibility. The buck stopped with him.
- Following any such decision making process Eve's authority was limited to what Adam allowed her.
- Since Adam's authority was delegated from God, it did not give him the right to ask Eve to do something God had forbidden or not do something God had commanded.

There is no suggestion that Adam's authority implies that Eve was inferior in any other way. I believe that logically these passages do not imply:

- Adam/men are of greater value than Eve/women.
- Adam/men owned Eve/their wives.
- Adam in general had superior knowledge, intelligence or abilities.
- It was right for Adam to use his authority to get Eve to be his personal servant.
- Eve should always change nappies, do boring household chores etc. and Adam should do interesting manly tasks.
- Adam/men should make decisions without consulting Eve/their wives.
- Eve should relate to God through her husband.
- Eve's advice was worthless.
- Eve/women are incapable of exercising authority.
- Eve lacked authority over her male descendants.
- Men in general have authority over women in general.
- Adam/men have free reign to do what they will within marriage. They are under authority just as much as Eve/women – God's.
- Adam had the right/duty to enforce Eve's obedience to him.

If Christians believe any of these to be true they would need to find other scriptures to justify their position.

The Fall and its Fallout

Gen 3

1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" 4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. 8 They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." 11 He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 12 The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." 13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." 14 The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. 15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." 16 To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." 17 And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground [Adamah] because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18 thorns and

Gen 6 v 1- 8

1 When people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them, 2 the sons of God saw that they were fair; and they took wives for themselves of all that they chose. 3 Then the LORD said, "My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years." 4 The Nephilim were on the earth in those days — and also afterward — when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them. These were the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown. 5 The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. 6 And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 7 So the LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created — people together

thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." 20 The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living. 21 And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them. 22 Then the LORD God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" — 23 therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. 24 He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." 8 But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD.

Comments

1. The first passage describes the start of human sin and its initial judgement, while the second describes the depths to which the human race descended and the almost final judgement that resulted. Both passages have some difficulty in interpretation. For the purposes of this paper the second is the more difficult passage. Some interpret "the sons of God" to mean believers, i.e. some of the descendants of Seth and see the sin as mixed believer/ non-believer marriage. However, elsewhere in the Old Testament the term "sons of god" always refers to angels. In this case the passage refers to fallen angels who married human women and had children by them. From a Biblical point of view this interpretation is the more straightforward and it is not as outlandish as it seems. One usual objection is that angels are incapable of fathering children. However, the truth is our knowledge of angels is very limited. The fact that angels in heaven do not marry (Mat 22 v 30) may not mean that fallen angels could not.
2. In both passages the corruption of God-given family relationships is central. "Sin begins at home." Those of us who are spouses and/or parents should take warning. The home is a primary spiritual battleground and we can take nothing for granted.
3. In the first passage God pronounced two curses. The first was on the snake, i.e. Satan, and the rest of the Bible shows that it extends to his followers. The second was on the ground and seems to extend to the rest of the physical universe as we know it. Both will ultimately be burned up. Adam and Eve were not cursed, though there were consequences. They were affected by the curses with Eve facing particular satanic attack, which may help explain women's oppression and generally low status in the world since that time.
4. Some of the consequences for marriage are found in Gen 3 v 16. Eve would "desire" her husband and he would "rule" over her. This expression can be taken three ways:
 - a. As part of her punishment she is condemned to desire her husband while he should now lord it over her and keep her in submission. However, this is not a good interpretation because there is no "should" about it. If it were correct then by the same logic women should not take painkillers while giving birth.

- b. As a consequence of the Fall her now sinful husband would rule over her for his own pleasure and purposes rather than God's. Despite this unattractive prospect she and women of subsequent generations would still desire a husband.
- c. A third interpretation links this verse with Gen 4 v 7. Cain is angry that God has accepted his brother, Abel's, sacrifice, but rejected Cain's. God warns Cain, "...sin is lurking at the door; its [his] desire is for you, but you must [will] master [rule] it [him]." If the usual translation is accepted this speaks about sin desiring Cain and Cain having to rule sin. The terms are the same as in Gen 3 v 16. This would suggest that the meaning of the Gen 3 v 16 verse is that Eve would want to take Adam over while Adam should rule Eve. This would predict marital struggle and give men the duty to rule over women or else be "henpecked" husbands if they do not. (The alternative translation of Gen 4 v 7 in square brackets would mean that Abel retains positive feelings for Cain and Cain is still the ruler of the two brothers being the elder. This would be God's reassurance for Cain as an incentive to resist sin.)

Either b or c is possible. Of the two b is probably more true to life. All marriages now involve sinful husbands and in the majority of marriages around the world the wife serves while the husband rules. Also, many marriages have little conflict, including amongst unbelievers and oppressed women. I therefore prefer b. If c is true then it may have serious implications for how husbands and wives should relate.

Other effects of the Fall Through the Fall sin and death became an integral part of human life. Both affect marriage. Because of sin even the best marriages fail to live up to the ideal and the worst bear little relation to how marriage should be. Marriage can be a prison for many. In Biblical terms this is because human hearts are "hard" and so God permitted divorce in the Old Testament - even between members of his own people, the Israelites. (See Mar 10 v 5.) Divorce is sometimes the lesser of two evils for those who do not have the Holy Spirit. Because of this Christians should be careful not to judge unbelievers in this matter. The principle is contained in 1 Cor 5 vv 12,13.

Death and its cousin, disability, also affect us all. Until Jesus' return we all die, become senile etc. Death dissolves marriage while disability makes it unworkable in its original form.

The New Creation

Christians are physically still part of the original creation and get married. We remain affected by the Fall. However, we are also a "new creation" (2 Cor 5 v 7), which means that God has breathed the Holy Spirit into us to give us new life. Romans 8 explains the results of this in some detail. Because we now have the help of the Holy Spirit God expects much higher standards of us than of other people. If the Holy Spirit is filling us, our hearts will no longer be hard. (See Gal 5 v 6.) If they are then we can and should repent!

Christians are therefore in a much better position to live up to the Creation ideal of marriage. Christian marriages should on the whole be better. Where there are problems God is only a prayer away. He responds to the right kind of prayer. (E.g. see Jas 4 vv 1-10.) If a Christian's marriage partner is leading an ungodly life and not living up to their side of the bargain, this does not exempt the Christian from doing what is right.

The Old Testament approach to divorce is changed, so that for Christians seeking a divorce is rarely permissible. Divorce and remarriage is a big subject. If this concerns the reader there is a C21 paper devoted to it and available on the St Johns website.

The New Testament is peppered with references to the value and holiness of marriage, the importance of living up to the ideal and practical instruction. The most popular passage concerning marriage is in Ephesians 5 vv 21-33.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind — yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

The new aspect of marriage here is the fact that human marriage is in the image of the future "marriage" of Christ and the Church. The term "mystery" means something that was not revealed in the Old Testament, but is newly revealed in the New Testament. This passage tells us that the Church's relationship with Christ after the judgement will be a form of one-flesh "marriage" when we will experience an intimacy we can barely imagine now. Meanwhile our human marriages should reflect this ultimate reality.

(Note: This is not the same as the Old Testament "marriage" between God and the Israelites. Israel was married, e.g. Eze 16 v 8, became unfaithful, e.g. Jer 3 vv 1-5 and there is mention of divorce, e.g. Jer 3 v 8. By contrast the Church will be presented to Christ as a pure virgin. 2 Cor 11 v 2.)

Other passages on the subject of marriage include Colossians 3 vv 18,19; 1 Corinthians 7 & 11 vv 3-9; 1 Titus 2 vv 4,5; Hebrews 13 v 4; 1 Peter 3 vv 1-7. Taken together they seem to show that little has changed since the Creation:

- Love is key. Husbands in particular are exhorted to cherish their wives and not be harsh with them. These passages do not provide exceptions in the case of unbelieving wives!
- While there is an element of mutual submission (Eph 5 v 21), the emphasis is very much on wives submitting to their husbands. In 1 Pet 3 v 6 Abraham's wife Sarah is put forward as an example because she called her husband "lord", the same term as is used towards God. (As in other aspects of submission, e.g. to governing authorities, there are limits to submission e.g. in the case of immorality.) If the wife is not submissive there is no suggestion that the husband should force obedience.

- Sexual relations are part and parcel of married life and should not be refused (except presumably in the case of illness etc.) In this matter the wife has as much right and authority as the husband. 1 Cor 7 vv 3-5.
- If one partner is disobedient/unbelieving this does not allow the other to follow suit. In particular 1 Peter 3 makes clear that wives are still to submit to disobedient husbands, hoping that their behaviour will lead to a change of heart. There is no equivalent passage relating to the husbands of unbelieving wives. Perhaps then as now it was usually harder for the wife.
- Wives are exhorted to be diligent mothers and good homemakers. Naturally there must be exceptions in the case of those unable to bear children etc. so presumably this is instruction for the majority rather than a rigid definition of gender roles.

HUSBANDS AND WIVES IN THE BIBLE

The Bible's stories provide us with real life examples of people living out their faith or otherwise for our instruction.

Adam & Eve Gen 2 & 3. Their tragic story illustrates the following:

- Adam allowed Eve to lead despite knowing that she had been deceived and what he should not do. (See 1 Pet 3 v 14.) Nevertheless he had the primary responsibility.
- Adam seems to have put his relationship with Eve before his relationship with God.
- Satan attacked Adam through his wife, the person who was supposed to help him.
- Through Adam we experience death (1 Cor 15 v 22). Through Eve we can experience life (Gen 3 v 15,20)

Abraham & Sarah References to their marriage are scattered through Genesis 12 – 23. Both were godly people. However, the Bible tends to highlight their failures. They illustrate:

- Abraham like Adam allowed Sarah to lead when it seems clear that she was in the wrong. This led to the birth of Ishmael, which according to the Bible caused various problems. (E.g. Gen 16 v 12) It is interesting that Mohammed traced his descent from Ishmael.
- Sarah loved and submitted to Abraham.
- Abraham habitually failed to acknowledge Sarah as his wife, presumably through a lack of nerve. Nevertheless God got them out of the hole Abraham had dug. (Gen 12 vv 19-20 & 20 vv 1-17 esp. v 13)

Isaac & Rebekah Gen 24 - 27

- Isaac's response to Rebekah's barrenness was to pray. It had better results than Sarah and Abraham's response to her barrenness! (Gen v 21)
- Isaac followed his father's bad example of calling his wife his sister with less excuse and almost identical results. (Gen 26)
- When Isaac was old and infirm Rebekah manipulated the situation to achieve her own way. The ends may have been right, but not the means. If she had trusted God more she might have saved the family from a great deal of heartache and discord. (Gen 27 on)

Jacob & his wives (Gen 29 – 35) Jacob may have only wanted one wife, but through the trickery and influence of others he ended up with four! His was not a happy family. However, he had a strong faith and God blessed him.

- Despite his less than perfect marital situation God used him and his twelve sons to found the nation of Israel. An encouragement to those who have a less than perfect marriage!
- Jacob seems to have recognised Leah's right to sexual relations even though he preferred her sister. (Gen 30 vv 14-16)

Samson & the Timnite Jud 14 – 15 This was a legal, but apparently most foolish marriage, which Samson's parents understandably opposed.. However, Jud 14 v 4 tells us that God had his own reasons for this marriage. 1 Cor 1 v 25 reads, "...God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom..." and this is a good example. We should be slow to criticize someone's choice of marriage partner!

Nabal & Abigail 1 Sam 25 This chapter provides an example of a good wife married to a bad husband in a situation of potential disaster. In this case she very sensibly goes behind her husband's back and against his will in order to save the family. She tells him of her actions later. This is one of a number of passages in the Bible that show that it is sometimes right to overrule a general principle. In this case the principle is that the wife should submit to her husband. (Another example is in Ex 1 where the midwives quite rightly do not submit to governmental authority and are economical with the truth.)

Solomon & his wives 1 Kin 11 This chapter relates how Solomon disobeyed two of the Law's commands. Deu 7 vv 1,3 commanded the Israelites not to intermarry with the seven nations already in Canaan, which included Hittites. Solomon married Hittites. Deu 17 v 17 commanded that the king must not marry many wives. Solomon's 1,000 wives breached this by a long way! The consequences of this disobedience were terrible as the rest of the chapter shows. Because marriage is such a close relationship it has the potential to draw us away from God as happened with Solomon. We should be extremely careful whom we marry! If it could happen to Solomon it can happen to us.

Ahab & Jezebel 1 Kin 16 v 29 – 1 Kin 21 This is another example of the danger of an unwise marriage.

King Xerxes & Queen Esther Esther From our point of view this is an extraordinary marriage that falls far short of the ideal. E.g. at one point Esther is frightened of approaching her husband in case he executes her! (Est 4 vv 10,11) However, the context makes it clear that God is behind the marriage and much good comes out of it. (E.g. Est 4 vv 12,13) In this case Esther's marital satisfaction is clearly not God's priority. It shows that God still cares for us and can still use us even if we are stuck in an unsatisfying, difficult or even frightening marriage. At the end of the book Esther, together with her cousin Mordecai, becomes a spiritual leader of the Jews. Together they decreed the Festival of Purim, called "the Command of Queen Esther" (Est 9 v 32). This is an example of a married woman having spiritual authority over men in the Old Testament.

The Noble Wife of Proverbs Pro 31 vv 10-31 Traditionally this passage has often been taken symbolically as a picture of the Church. However this is unnecessary and more recently its plain meaning has become more popular. This passage gives a picture of the ideal “capable” (NRSV) wife in ancient Israelite society. As such she is perhaps the embodiment of the woman who has absorbed the lessons of the Book of Proverbs. She:

- Is entirely trustworthy.
- Produces, buys, sells and owns property and merchandise. It seems she is mistress of her own finances.
- Provides for her family.
- Is generous to the needy.
- Speaks with wisdom and kindness.
- Frees her husband to have the time to devote to public affairs. As a result he is respected.
- Receives the praise of her family.
- Fears the Lord. This is the bedrock of wisdom.

This passage is sometimes used to justify the view that wives are equal to husbands. However, this is not stated directly and it can equally be used to show the benefit of delegated authority where this is appropriate.

Song of Songs Commentators have been split between those who take this book symbolically and those who see it as referring to human love. Despite some difficulties of interpretation, a plain reading seems to provide a picture of an ideal romantic and erotic relationship between an Israelite wife and her husband. As such it provides the counterbalance to the very practical picture of the ideal wife of Proverbs. The overwhelming impression is of mutual attraction and delight in the context of faithfulness.

Hosea & Gomer Hosea The book of Hosea is extraordinary and there are difficulties of interpretation. In chapter 1 either God calls the prophet to marry a woman who is either already a prostitute or he calls him to marry a woman who he knows in advance will be unfaithful. The purpose of this is to act as a parable of God’s relationship with Israel. In Chapter 3 God calls the prophet to show love to and rescue his wife, who is by now an adulteress. The main meaning of the book is to be found in the parable and it is no coincidence that Hosea and Jesus are essentially the same name. The relevance to this paper is that God may call us to love a spouse who is unfaithful and/or undeserving.

Ananias & Sapphira Acts 5 vv 1 – 10 Most miracles in the New Testament are miracles of mercy or preservation. This story describes a miracle of judgement in response to the first major sin within the Church after Pentecost. Once again it shows that the intimate relationship of marriage can lead to spouses corrupting each other.

Aquila & Priscilla This couple are found in Acts 8, Rom 16 v 3, 1 Co 16 v 19 & 2 Tim 4 v 19. They were both tentmakers by profession (Act 18 v 3) and they were both gospel workers (Rom 16 v 3). Initially Aquila is put first (i.e. “Aquila & Priscilla”). However, after a while Priscilla is put first (i.e. “Priscilla & Aquila”) perhaps implying that she has begun to take precedence over her husband in some respect – presumably as a gospel worker. It is in the capacity of teacher that she, together with her husband, puts Apollos on the right track (Act 18 v 26). This provides good evidence of a married woman having the spiritual authority to teach men in the New Testament.

Philemon & Apphia The Apostle Paul's Letter to Philemon was written on behalf of a runaway slave. Both Philemon and his slave had become Christians and in the letter Paul asks Philemon to be lenient with his slave, who was now a Christian "brother". At the beginning of the letter Paul also addresses Apphia who is usually thought of as Philemon's wife. However, Paul's request is addressed to Philemon only, implying that Philemon had sole authority over the slave.

ISSUES:

The One Flesh Relationship

Being "one flesh" means unity at a physical level. This is not so much sexual as familial. Eve was "flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2 v 23) because she was formed from Adam's flesh. It seems that she was a female clone of Adam and in our terms a twin sister as well as wife. Thus children and kinsmen are of the same flesh, e.g. see 2 Sam 19 vv 11-19. Gen 2 v 24 says that the husband must separate himself from his parents (with whom he is one flesh) and instead glue himself to his wife to form a new one flesh family unit. Sex is about being "one body" with your married partner, who is one flesh with you. Being "one body" with somebody else violates the family unit. (See 1 Cor 6 v 16 for the terms "one flesh" and "one body".) Death means the end of the body and therefore the end of membership of that family unit. In our resurrected bodies Christians will be one flesh with Jesus (e.g. 1 Cor 15 v 49). Together we will be the bride of Christ - the "last Eve" for the "last Adam". (See 1 Cor 15 v 45 for the expression "last Adam"). There a number of parallels between Adam and Eve and Christ and the church as Eph 5 v 32 confirms. The big difference is that the last Adam got it right!

Authority

In our society this is the Big Issue. Up to the 19th Century it was generally accepted that men were naturally in authority over women who were the "weaker sex" both in body and mind (apart from notable exceptions such as Queen Elizabeth I). Since then it has become progressively clearer that women in general may be physically weaker, but mentally they have much the same capability as men as long as they are educated the same. As a result there is no reason from a capability point of view why women in general should not exercise authority. Therefore in marriage from sometimes the man and sometimes the woman will be better suited to taking the lead from a purely human point of view.

Before considering the subject of authority within marriage it is worth looking at the subject of authority in general. In the Bible it is made clear that God is in overall authority, but he delegates aspects of this to human beings. This is for the good of humanity who benefit from the order and organisation that results. Even bad authority is usually better than anarchy and mob rule. There are different spheres of authority. E.g. parents have authority over their own children (Col 3 v 20). Governments have authority over the people who live within their land (Rom 13 v 1). Such authority is never absolute – it is always limited. For example nobody has God's authority to stop other people becoming Christians or order immoral acts, though they may have the power to do so.

One odd thing about authority is that in the present age it is often in the hands of unbelievers and sometimes in the hands of people who are totally opposed to God's purposes. It may be in the hands of people who are not very competent. It is therefore commonplace for the person in authority to be incompetent, immoral and unbelieving. This may be understood as part of God's punishment on a rebellious world. (E.g. see Dan 4 v 17). Christians are called to share the sufferings of the world, which includes being subject to those in authority who are less than they should be. However, they can challenge the people concerned to live up to their calling (e.g. Act 16 vv 37-39).

Within the church authority is partly communal, e.g. Mat 18 v 17. Eph 5 v 21 states:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

A practical illustration might be when the vicar submits to the worship leader in a church service. However, overall authority is given to those who are set aside for the purpose, e.g. elders and others, as is made clear in various passages, e.g. Heb 13 v 17 and Act 15.

Some Arguments for Husbands having authority over their Wives Various passages in Paul's letters together with one passage in 1 Peter clearly tell women to submit to their husbands. They include Eph 5 vv 21-24; Col 3 v 18; Tit 2 v 5 and 1 Pet 3 vv 1-6. The latter makes it plain that submission is also due to unbelieving husbands. There are no equivalent passages that directly command husbands to submit themselves to their wives. However the Ephesians 5 v 21 passage commands that mutual submission of believers to one another and this would include husbands submitting to their wives in certain situations. E.g. if the wife is a doctor the husband would be well advised to submit to her when one of their children is ill. Another notable exception is 1 Cor 7 vv 3-5, which makes it clear that in sexual matters the couple have mutual authority over each other. Apart from that, the general thrust of other Biblical passages examined earlier in this paper seems to support the idea of husbands having overall authority over their wives within the marriage.

Some Arguments for Mutual Submission with Husbands having no prior authority over their Wives The key verse is probably Eph 5 v 21 quoted above. In this verse mutual submission is commanded of all Christians. Husbands and wives would be one subgroup to whom this applies. In the Greek the following verse 22 commanding wives to submit is part of the same sentence as verse 21 and is clearly meant as just one practical example of submission. The fact that Paul did not expressly include husbands submitting to wives in the sentence (or any other examples for that matter) does not exempt them from the command. This argument is that the submission is both mutual (which the passage seems to say) and equal (which the passage does not say). The reason given for mutual submission is "reverence for Christ". This could mean merely that we accept Christ's authority, which is taken for granted and gives no specific reason for this particular command. I believe a more likely explanation is that since the Spirit of Christ is in all believers we should submit to others when the Holy Spirit is moving them, whether or not they are of lower status than us. (Compare Mat 21 vv 15,16.)

A second argument is that in first century society (whether Jewish, Greek or Roman) it was automatically accepted that a good wife would submit to her husband. In the New Testament commands for wives to submit always include something extra, e.g. "as you are to the Lord", so that the emphasis in this example is on *how* to submit, i.e. with sincerity etc. to guard against the commonplace temptation of women of that age to submit in the wrong way.

A third argument is that the Bible also commands slaves to obey their masters – something that has led to Christians in the past justifying slavery. Few would endorse slavery today on these grounds. Maybe wives submitting to husbands was merely a temporary command for that society to avoid disorder. If the unequal relationship of slaves and masters is a thing of the past is it not time for wives to be free as well? However, this argument is not particularly strong as marriage and slavery are (or should be) two very different institutions.

A fourth argument is that in the Old Covenant Law of Moses found in Exodus to Deuteronomy there is no direct command for wives to submit to their husbands or for husbands to rule over their wives.

A fifth argument is that a universal command for submission is plain silly in many instances. Many husbands are incapable of looking after themselves let alone others, especially in old age, and rely on their wives for decision making as well as everything else.

The Trinity

Like so much else the doctrine of the Trinity is never spelled out in the Bible. However, it is implied in both Testaments and probably finds its clearest expression in the teachings of John and Paul. I do not have space to explain or “prove” the doctrine of the Trinity.

God is both one and plural and God made Adam and Eve both one and plural. Understanding the Trinity should therefore help us understand marriage.

The primary verse demonstrating God’s oneness is called the Shema and is Deu 6 v 4:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

The word translated “alone” is echad, which means a compound unity - it is the same word as in “one” flesh to describe a married couple. (Hebrew has another word for a simple unity, yachid.) In practical terms it means two things for the godhead. First there is an intermingling - they are “in” one another. Second they are totally united in purpose and action. As a result, to experience one person is to experience all three. Jesus explains his unity with God the Father in the following terms, Joh 14 vv 7-11:

If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me..."

However, this unity is unforced, voluntary and allows for different functions, including leadership. It is similar to the unity of a pair of figure skaters who coordinate their actions perfectly to achieve what neither could do by themselves. This is illustrated by Joh 10 vv 14-18:

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep... For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

This passage also illustrates one further essential ingredient – love. The Greek word is *agape*, which emphasises will and action in seeking the best for the person loved. Such love is central to God – He is described as being “love” in 1 John 4 v 16.

A final and perhaps most controversial ingredient is equality. E.g. Joh 5 v 18:

...the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was ... calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

The question is how Jesus can be both equal to God the Father and also under His authority. The answer would seem to be that this authority is a purely voluntary affair, done for convenience rather than because of anything unequal about them. Being under authority does not make Jesus a lesser being. (Note: By becoming human Jesus did in one sense make himself less than God the Father, but this lies outside this discussion.)

Taking all this together suggests that at Creation human marriage was meant to have the following characteristics:

- Love, especially *agape* love, both within and outside the relationship.
- Unity. Both physical, and a unity of purpose and action involving a high degree of cooperation.
- Differing functions.
- Equality
- Unforced leadership on the part of the husband and submission by the wife.

Meaning of “Head” in the New Testament

Paul tells us that the husband is “head” of the wife, e.g. Eph 5 vv 23-25; 28-30:

For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body.

These and similar passages including the word “head” are often used to show that husbands have authority over their wives. The second sentence seems to follow logically from the first and so “head” appears to mean authority in this context. However, some commentators dispute this, claiming that in the New Testament “head” means a source of support, not necessarily somebody who is in charge of another. In support of this are verses such as Col 2 v 18,19:

Do not let anyone disqualify you... not holding fast to the head [Christ], from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

In this latter verse authority does not seem to be in mind. However, to my mind this is a false distinction – it is not either/or, but both/and, as the Ephesians passage states. Elsewhere Jesus makes it clear that the one in authority is meant to care for those under his/her authority. (Mat 20 vv 25-28). So being a “head” seems to mean both being in authority and caring for the needs of the one under authority.

A Personal View about Authority in Marriage If the reader has followed the various arguments raised throughout this paper it should come as no surprise to learn that my view is as follows. In general wives should submit to their husbands. However, because of the Fall and for a variety of reasons, there are some situations where this is impractical or dangerous and in these circumstances husbands should submit to their wives.

Love

In English “love” has a wide range of meaning varying from sexual lust to detached do-gooding. What these meanings have in common is strong positive feeling or intention. In the New Testament spouses are told to love in two ways. The first is to “make love”, i.e. satisfy each other’s desire for sexual intercourse. 1 Cor 7 vv 3-5:

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. This I say by way of concession, not of command.

(The “concession” probably refers to the sentence before, meaning that agreeing to a set time of abstinence for the purpose of prayer is optional.)

The second kind of love is from the Greek word agape. This is the kind of love Jesus showed on the cross and it is often costly or inconvenient. This is the kind of love in the Ephesians 5 passage and it is primarily husbands who are told to love their wives. However, Christians in general should love other people in this way and this includes wives loving husbands. (E.g. Tit 2 v 4.) This kind of love emphasises a deliberate decision to be good to someone else, and includes loving one's enemies. Luk 6 v 27:

[Jesus said,] "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; ... If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ... But love your enemies, do good, ... Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

Sadly some spouses are indeed enemies of each other. However, for Christians there should be no such thing as a loveless marriage because a Christian spouse should always show agape love. This is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5 v 22). It is not easy – as humans we naturally love only those who please us. But it is possible for those who spend time with God.

Divorce because of Lovelessness It is commonplace for a spouse not to be loved, including in the Bible. For many people in our culture who believe you only live once not being loved is a good reason to leave a partner. They often hope to do better the next time round and sometimes they are successful. (Although they frequently leave emotionally and morally damaged children and spouses behind them.) However, lovelessness as such is never an excuse for breaking marriage vows in the Bible. The first example of a loveless marriage in the Bible is Leah's marriage to Jacob in Genesis 29. Gen 29 v 31 shows that God knew, cared and acted:

When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.

God did not force Jacob to love Leah, but he did give her children and in the grand scheme of things this would be more important. Jesus himself was descended from Leah, not her more favoured sister. A loveless marriage is difficult, but this does not make it invalid. As Christians we are called to live with difficulties and obey God through them. All of us face judgement as to how we have lived our lives and this will include how we have handled our marriages. (This is the judgement of believers, not unbelievers Rom 14 vv 10-12. The issue of judgement is covered in the paper, "Heaven, Hell and Life after Death" available on the St Johns' website.) One of the tragedies of our age is that many Christians do not live up to this and separate/divorce when their marriage partner stops loving them. (See Romans 8 for how to live in the middle of difficulty.)

Coping with Sinful Husbands

All those who are married are sinful and have to cope with their own and their partner's sin. The Bible provides general principles of how to relate to other people and these apply to marriage. It is clear that we must love other sinners, including our enemies and our partners! The Bible gives specific instructions to wives married to unbelieving husbands in 1 Pet 3vv 1-6:

Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight. It was in this way long ago that the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by accepting the authority of their husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you.

The context is 1 Pet 2 v 13

For the LORD's sake accept the authority of every human institution...

The human institutions concerned are often hostile to the gospel. Peter confirms that wives should follow Sarah's example by obeying their husbands even if the husbands concerned do not deserve to be obeyed. He assumes that the wife will want to win her husband to faith and points out that she will be more likely to do this if she concentrates on her behaviour rather than making her clothing attractive. Obeying a husband who is disobedient to God can be scary and Paul tells such wives to hope in God and not to be overcome by their fears.

Coping with Wives who won't submit - Enforcement If it is right that wives should in general submit to their husbands – and perhaps sometimes the other way around – what if the person concerned does not submit? The Bible makes it clear that in other relationships the one in authority has the God given duty to enforce good behaviour. Thus parents should discipline their children (e.g. Heb 12 vv 7-11); governments have the "sword" (Rom 13 vv 1-6); and the church has excommunication (e.g. 1 Cor 5). In some other cultures it is accepted that husbands may physically discipline wives and there are even Christians who believe this on the grounds that authority implies enforcement.

In the case of marriage however I believe that submission is voluntary. I base this on two arguments. First, nowhere in the Bible is there any hint that submission should be enforced. Although this is an "argument from silence", it is quite a strong one given the importance of the issue. Second, if marriage is modelled on the Trinity then it is noteworthy that Jesus' submission to God the Father was voluntary. E.g. Joh 10 vv 17,18:

[Jesus said,] "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power [authority] to lay it down, and I have power [authority] to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

Although the Father commanded Jesus to go to the cross, Jesus had the freedom to refuse. He obeyed because of love and because of the joy set before him (Heb 12 v 2), not because he was forced to. There is dispute among theologians about whether Jesus' subordination was only after the incarnation. However, at the very least it sets a precedent. Perhaps wives too should submit to their husbands out of love and because God will reward them for it and not because of fear of their husband!

If this view is accepted, it implies that husbands should not pressurise their wives to obey them, (though they may wish to encourage them). In our culture where equality is the norm it implies that many Christian husbands will be in marriages where there is equality because their wives are unwilling to submit to them. Husbands should not feel that they are necessarily failing if this is the case.

Roles and Responsibilities

According to Genesis 2 women were created because men could not cope on their own and needed help. However, what this means in practice is unclear. Biology tells us that wives can bear and suckle babies and husbands cannot. Husbands are usually physically stronger and so are better suited to heavy manual work, but in our technological culture this is less important than it used to be. Psychologically there are differences, though this varies with the individuals concerned. It may well be that on the whole some occupations and roles better suit one gender rather than the other, but it may be dangerous to be too definite about this. Historically wives have often been tied down by child bearing and raising. However there have always been barren women and in our culture small families are the norm, so there is more choice. Historically wives have often been less well educated and this has restricted their options. However, this is no longer the case. So are there differences in what husbands and wives should do within marriage, or are their jobs and roles a matter of culture, choice, aptitude and spiritual guidance?

The issue of authority has already been covered. Apart from that I do not see that the Bible lays down universal rules about who does what. The following passages are worth considering:

- 1 Tim 3 vv 4,5. Husbands as well as wives have responsibility for their children.
- 1 Tim 4 vv 14. It is Paul's intent that younger widows marry etc for the reasons given. It is not a command for all young women at all times. In any case not all young women will be able to find husbands or bear children.

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Suggested Reading

Heirs Together: Applying the Biblical Principle of Mutual Submission in Your Marriage by Patricia Gundry Suitcase Books ISBN 1-882169-02-6

Available for free download on <http://www.heirstogether.com/>

This book provides a good example of an egalitarian evangelical author arguing for mutual submission in marriage. Worth reading even if you disagree with her main idea.

Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth by Wayne Grudem IVP ISBN 1-84474-068-4

This book provides numerous arguments for the “complementarian” position on manhood and womanhood, which includes in marriage. It also answers many arguments made by evangelical feminists. Lengthy and detailed. A good reference book.

Split Image by Anne Atkins Hodder and Stoughton ISBN 0-340-70986-3 This book also reviews manhood and womanhood in the Bible and is somewhere in the middle of the other two!