

ETHICAL ISSUES IN FAMILY RELATIONS

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Creating and sustaining healthy, enduring marriages ranks high on the list of personal/social ethical issues. Even though the 1990 divorce rate declined to 4.7 from its 1981 peak of 5.3 divorces per 1,000 adult population, nearly 1.2 million couples divorced in 1990.¹ The 1990 census also recorded almost 3 million unmarried couple households, an 80 percent increase from 1980 to 1990.²

In this article, our purpose is to evaluate some of the issues raised by Christian couples during family life conferences over the past ten years. Space limitations allow only a few of these issues to be discussed.

Formative Factors Affecting Marriage

Personal and family experiences that each of the partners bring to the wedding create or influence some of the concerns.

Primary Family Experiences

Family systems theory emphasizes the significant influence of primary family relations. In *The Birth of the Family*, a longitudinal study of newly married couples, Jerry M. Lewis affirms his premise that "family or origin factors play a role in the early covert negotiation of closeness, commitment, intimacy, autonomy, and power that, in concert, result in the basic marital structure."³

Personality Development and Needs of Marriage Partners

Individual personality development reflects an interplay of genetic and social learning factors with researchers giving increasing attention to the effect of genetic inheritance on personality styles. However, the family of origin has significant shaping power on each person.

Marital Expectations of the Couple

Since the age of first marriage has increased rather sharply over the past twenty-five years, many couples enter marriage with a longer period of singleness behind them. This may permit them to enter marriage more maturely or it may increase the unrealistic expectations that one or both bring into the marriage.

Influence of Church Teaching

For the Christian couple, teachings about marriage by the churches in which they have grown up influence the marital style they desire. The *traditional* style is central in the teaching of many evangelical churches but the *companionship* model is also popular among Christian couples. The personal attitudes of the minister(s) will usually determine what a church teaches about marriage styles.

Use of the Bible for Guidance

The final formative factor which we will consider is the Bible as a resource for guidance in determining roles and relationships in Christian marriage. Since Southern Baptists believe that the Bible is the definitive source for understanding God's plan and purpose for marriage, it is essential that attention be given to interpreting and applying its teachings to one's personal life.

The Bible is authoritative, divinely inspired, and is a progressive revelation of God's will for human life. The development is progressive from one testament to the other (Mt. 5:17-47; Heb. 1:1-2) and it reflects adaptive changes to the cultural settings in which God's people lived such as the

teachings on slave/slaveowner relationships (Eph. 6:5-9). However, beneath all of the cultural factors that influence some biblical teachings, there are basic theological principles just as applicable to today's families as when they were first written.

With these formative factors in mind, let us examine two relationship issues.

Issues In Relationship Building

Relationship issues concern how we deal with people in the daily routine of life. Intimate companionship, shared religious faith, authentic love, and personal integrity surfaced in the conferences. However, I will deal with only two areas of ethical concern in this section.

Equal Personhood Based on Healthy Self-Identity

In the assumption that most couples desire to create an intimate marriage, I agree with James Olthuis that "the best preparation for intimacy, paradoxical as it may seem, is the establishment and growth of each of us as a separate self."⁴

The New Testament affirms clearly the transition from the old self separated from God into the new self who has accepted the redemptive love of the gospel and is now a person through whom Christ lives (Romans 5-6; Eph. 2:8-10; Gal. 2:20). This self has worth in God's love and is affirmed when Jesus told his disciples to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 19:19, NIV). Such love for self is not self-centeredness but the exact opposite of it.

When men and women in Christ each honor the selfhood of the other as equal persons in God's love, a foundation is laid for building intimate relationships. Women too often have not experienced this joyous sense of self-worth and have tried to find it *in* the marriage rather than bringing authentic selfhood into the marriage. The best marriages are composed of two healthy persons who contribute to each other's self-esteem but are not expected to create selfhood for the mate.

Marriage Style: Traditional or Partnership

Closely related to the doctrine of personhood is the issue of marital style which has been mentioned previously. The *tradittional* style is based upon the hierarchical biblical model of male authority, female submissiveness and children responsible primarily to the father but also to the mother as representing the father's authority although this parenting perspective may not be a central part of the position.

John MacArthur, a popular advocate of this style, argues convincingly for the equality of men and women in Christ in his discussion of God's pattern for marriage. He does not see this as a problem in traditional marriage since female submission is a matter of *function* rather than *personhood*. He writes:

The partners' spiritual natures are the same, their positions before God are equal, but in order for the family to function in harmony, the woman, with no loss of dignity, takes the place of submission to the headship of her husband.⁵

The mutual submission taught in Eph. 5:21 is fulfilled since "as she submits to follow, he submits to lead her. Both authority and submission are still preserved, which is essential for proper function in marriage."⁶

Using the analogy of government in which authority and submission are essential to prevent anarchy, MacArthur declares that the same principle holds true in the family. "There cannot be anarchy in a family, with no one responsible for discipline, earning wages, controlling behavior, or giving direction, without creating chaos."⁷ In the traditional pattern, the husband is that responsible person.

The *partnership* or *companionship* style is based upon the biblical concept of the personal equality of husband and wife as Christian persons also. However, it recognizes their freedom in Christ to be equal in decision-making, earning wages, and role definition as well. Such equality does not mean sameness nor does it eliminate the necessity of deciding what roles each will fulfill to keep the marriage functional. However, it does not define roles strictly on maleness or

femaleness but on mutual choice and recognition of competence for tasks. This results in mutual accommodation and shared leadership with much discussion but not anarchy for couples who follow this model. Primary biblical support is found in such passages as Gal. 3:26-28, Eph. 5:21-33, 1 Cor. 7:3-5 and Proverbs 31.

This relationship issue leads directly to the area of role definition so we now turn to role responsibilities.

Issues in Role Definition

A role is the behavioral expectation that each partner has for self and mate in the marriage partnership. Role expectations are influenced greatly by primary family modeling as well as by religious teaching about biblical perspectives on male/female roles. Role definition is required in establishing marital identity, sexual relationships, income production and money management, reproduction and parenting, and conflict resolution. In this section only two of these will be considered.

Establishing Marital Identity: Leaving and Cleaving

Establishing marital identity is foretold in the familiar words of Gen. 2:24: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." Leaving and cleaving is central to marital identity.

Aron and Pauker, from their research with newlywed couples, concluded that "family is (after money) the second major cause of arguments among newlyweds."⁸ It is rewarding for a couple to establish close ties with primary families but these ties must respect the marital identity of the couple.

With the average age of first marriages increasing in the United States, it would seem that fewer couples would have trouble leaving the parental nest since many have been out on their own for several years. Interestingly, however, this is not always true. Getting married is a symbolic break with the family of origin and can trigger deeply buried feelings of separation and loss that were hardly conscious during the singleness period when the person could go "home" and be

welcomed as a "child" again. Going home as a married person is distinctly different and requires a new orientation to family and marriage for the couple as well as the parents.

Income Production and Money Management

Immediately upon leaving and cleaving, the couple faces the challenge of producing and handling money. For many years, after the industrial revolution took the man from the home to the factory, this challenge seemed pretty clear: the husband was the income producer who brought home the paycheck and the wife was the homemaker whose job revolved around the household and the children. Even though the man might have been viewed as the decisive figure concerning money usage, the wife often took care of the mundane responsibility for dispensing the income in bill paying and providing for home needs.

The past decade reflects clearly how this pattern has changed. The dual income family with husband and wife being employed gainfully has become the fastest growing type of marriage. In 1980 there were 12,990,000 families with both husband and wife in gainful employment outside of the home, but in 1987 that figure jumped to 14,955,000. From 1980 to 1987 the number of families with the husband as the sole income earner dropped from 12,127,000 to 9,640,000. Median weekly income for a single earner home in 1987 was \$477.00 but was \$741.00 for a dual income. The number of wives employed fulltime rose from 14,884,000 in 1983 to 17,496,000 in 1987.⁹

Sociologists and theologians alike have debated the influence on the family of women working outside the home with varying degrees of criticism and support. The most outspoken theological opponent of women working is probably John MacArthur. His argument is based on several concepts which he describes as essentially biblical.¹⁰ Women are to *be workers at home* (Tit. 2:5) and not in a job or career outside the home. Since the Bible makes no provision for a career for a married women, she should remain at home. Even the productive woman of Proverbs 31 conducts her business from her home under her husband's watchcare and therefore does not violate God's plan. Since childcare and

homemaking are a woman's God-given responsibilities, she should not violate that assignment by being away from home at a job. Also since homemaking is more than childcare, remaining at home continues even after the children are grown and have left the family nest.

The principle of submission to *her own husband* is violated when a woman works outside the home and is in submission to other men in her job relationships. Also the Bible makes no provision for a woman to be "the breadwinner" or the main provider in the family.

MacArthur's most startling position is that if a woman is left as a widow or divorced person without family to care for her, the church family should assume the responsibility of caring for her and her children. By applying to contemporary life the shared community concept of Acts where Christians sold possessions and gave the money to the church to care for the body of believers, he assumes that present day churches fail their responsibility if they do not care for these women.

In making judgment on women working, he attributes greed as the reason for most women working outside the home. The only way to redeem Christian family life is for the wife/mother to be the homemaker and the husband to be the provider.

MacArthur's commitment to the Bible is commendable but his attempt to make all of the economic factors of the biblical world applicable to contemporary society fails to address the comprehensive changes that affect the production and use of monetary resources. The industrial revolution changed the pattern of American economic life when families moved to factory areas for jobs and men began to leave home for work.

Certainly many researchers agree with MacArthur's conclusion that women working has contributed to the rising divorce rate in America. However, to attribute the major cause for women working to selfishness is extremely judgmental. It is based upon a model of family life that is primarily middle to upper class with men in jobs that can provide adequately for all family needs. In actuality, millions of families in America (and the rest of the world) are not like that. The income of the wife is just as essential to meeting necessities for life as it was essential for the pre-industrial woman to

work alongside her husband in the field and then come home to do the other chores required of her.

If MacArthur's conclusions are valid, then no church should employ married women in positions essential to the church's ministry such as staff members, secretaries, kitchen help, day-care workers and so forth. His interpretations fail to take cognizance of the progressive nature of God's revelation as biblical principles which must be reapplied continuously to the changing patterns of human life.

His position also fails to allow for the vital contributions made to families by working mothers who provide the necessary income for children to attend college and prepare themselves for more effective service in God's kingdom. It dismisses with male arrogance the opportunity for working women to fulfill their own intellectual and creative potentials even when their children no longer need their constant care. If adopted, the majority of male seminary students would not be able to pursue their studies since their wives now are primary "breadwinners" in their homes.

While financial pressures constitute one of the most common reasons given for both mates working outside the home, the desire of the wife to increase her sense of personal worth and self-esteem is significant for many couples. In William and Muriel Blackwell's discussions with 72 dual income couples concerning their reasons for the wife working, 39 attributed economic needs directly and 14 others had economic connotations. Eleven of the women found personal fulfillment and growth in self-esteem through their work which they did not find as homemakers.¹¹

This fact does not mean that women cannot find self-esteem and worth in homemaking. Many do and will continue to do so. However, for other women who have been on their own for several years before marrying, continuing a career does reinforce their sense of personal worth. When a husband also shares his joy in his wife's attainments, this gives significant support to her self-esteem.

It appears there is a difference in self-esteem factors between women who are pursuing a career and those who have jobs. The career oriented woman is more likely to relate her self-identity to her work than the employed woman who views her work primarily as providing an income for family

needs.

Home management includes defining how the roles that are essential to a well-functioning home will be assigned or assumed. A study by *Christianity Today* reported that more than nine out of ten evangelical Christians, both male and female, accepted in principle the idea that spouses should equally assume household tasks when both are employed outside the home. However, in practice, only moderate shifting of household duties actually occurs, so women tend to work the second shift at home as well as their regular shift on the job.¹² Such data points out the necessity for couples coming to a shared understanding of work and home responsibilities that recognizes the equal personhood of the wife and the mutual responsibility for home management duties.

In evaluating the ethical issues facing marriage, the traditional interpretation does emphasize the important male responsibility for spiritual and emotional leadership in the home, a role that too many men have abdicated. However, it does not allow for a home to be functionally successful through the cooperative leadership of both husband and wife which does not require an ultimate male authority to render final judgments. Many Christians believe such a marriage is not only possible, but it is both biblically sound and Christian.

NOTES

¹"90 Births Hit Boom Level," *USA Today* 9 April 1991, sec. 1A; "Marrying Age Higher Than Ever Before," *USA Today* 7 June 1991, sec. 1D.

²"Marrying Age Higher Than Ever Before."

³Jerry M. Lewis, *The Birth of the Family: An Empirical Inquiry* (New York: Brunner/Maze, 1989), 9.

⁴James H. Olthuis, *Keeping Our Troth: Staying in Love Through the Five Stages of Marriage* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 20.

⁵John MacArthur, Jr., *The Family* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 18-19.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*, 19.

⁸Miriam Arond and Samuel L. Pauker, *The First Year of Marriage: What to Expect, What to Accept, and What You Can Change* (New York: Warner Books, 1987), 39.

⁹U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1989* (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office), Charts 666, 667, pp. 406-7.

¹⁰MacArthur, 33-39.

¹¹William and Muriel Blackwell, *Working Partners, Working Parents* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), 48-59.

¹²*Missouri Word and Way*, August 30, 1990, 16.



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