

The Christian Ethics of Marriage

Behold, thus saith the Lord, This people begin to wax in iniquity; they understand not the scriptures: for they seek to excuse themselves in committing whoredoms, because of the things which were written concerning David, and Solomon his son. Behold, David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith the Lord, wherefore, thus saith the Lord, I have led this people forth out of the land of Jerusalem, by the power of mine arm, that I might raise up unto me a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph. Wherefore, I, the Lord God, will not suffer that this people shall do like unto them of old. Wherefore, my brethren, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none: For I, the Lord God, delighteth in the chastity of women. And whoredoms are an abomination before me: thus saith the Lord of hosts. Wherefore, this people shall keep my commandments, saith the Lord of hosts, or cursed be the land for their sakes.— Jacob 2:32-38.

IN THE beginning of creation, God said that "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18). According to the Bible story, he therefore made woman as a helpmate, an equal partner, the second half of one perfect unity, and gave her to Adam that both his life and hers might be full and complete. It was on that occasion that he made the pronouncement, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Genesis 2:24).

RELATIONSHIP OF MAN AND WOMAN

Man and woman are two parts of one unity. Each one complements and supplements the other, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Each one finds in the other his fullest opportunity for self-fulfillment. Ideally, as they grow together in the family, they become one in thought, in purpose, in ideals, in motives, in actions. They find fruition in their children, in whom they truly become one flesh. This unity of the marriage bond finds a significant expression even in law. One spouse is responsible for the debts and contracts and obligations made by the other for the necessities of the family. Real estate unless specifically exempted by state law is held by tenancy by the entirety. Each owns all. One spouse cannot be forced to give testimony in a criminal case against the other, for the same constitutional reason that a man cannot be forced to give testimony which will incriminate himself. In law, and ideally in fact, a man and his wife are one entity, one unity, and in some respects at least, one person.

Any marriage that falls short of this legal, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual unity has partly failed, has missed some of the joy and happiness that God intended the married state to supply. Any normal individual is so constituted that he needs to feel that he belongs somewhere, that somebody loves him and cares for him, that he is important to somebody, that somebody needs him and depends on him. No man or woman ever grows up so completely that he does not feel these needs. The family is the only institution which brings to men and women the complete and full and permanent satisfaction of these needs. In marriage, man and woman belong to each other, they love and care for each other, they are important to each other, they need and depend on each other until they are separated by death.

When Jesus laid down the two greatest commandments, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy

strength," and "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:30, 31) he was not mouthing pious platitudes; he was expressing an inexorable law of life. The soul that loves, lives; the soul that hates, dies. John wrote in his first epistle: "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love" (I John 4:7, 8). In the marriage bond, love finds its highest and fullest expression as man and woman devote themselves to each other in a love that grows through the years, a love which does not depend altogether on physical beauty or material possessions, but partakes of the qualities of the spirit. Love is a necessity. Without it we cannot truly know God, or each other, or even ourselves.

MARRIAGE AFFIRMATIONS IN NEW TESTAMENT

When Jesus came into the world, men had to a large degree lost sight of the deeper spiritual meanings of marriage. Man and woman were no more equal partners in marriage, but man by reason of his superior strength had assumed the right to divorce his wife at will and had sanctioned this right by recourse to the law of Moses. One day the Pharisees came to Jesus with a trick question, asking him whether it was lawful for a man to put away his wife. Jesus replied:

"Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Matthew 19:4-6).

The Pharisees then asked,

"Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but *from the beginning* it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Matthew 19:7-9).

In other words, Jesus was calling for a return to the ancient, God-given concept of marriage as a bond in which one man and one woman are joined together by the sacrament of God, in a state of complete unity of body, mind, spirit, and purpose, a concept laid down when God performed the first marriage by giving Eve to Adam in Eden.

A portion of the fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians is devoted to the subject of marriage. He counsels, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husband, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church" (Ephesians 5:22, 23). And then, lest husbands take this as a license to lord it over their wives, he adds: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it. . . . So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself" (Ephesians 5:25, 28). And then Paul repeats the injunction given in the beginning of creation, that "they two shall be one flesh" (Ephesians 5:31).

Another excellent expression of the mutuality of marriage is found in the seventh chapter of I Corinthians, where Paul says: "Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife" (I Corinthians 7:3, 4). He indicates his attitude toward the permanence of the marriage bond in the words, "Let not

the wife depart from her husband," and "Let not the husband put away his wife" (I Corinthians 7:10, 11).

We have spent this considerable time on the ancient concept of marriage laid down by God in the beginning of creation, and reaffirmed by Christ and by Paul, because man seems constantly to depart from that lofty concept; and when he does he also departs from God. The downfall of Israel as a nation was in large part the result of their adoption of the degraded marital and sexual standards of the heathen nations by which they were surrounded. Their patriarchs and leaders and kings set the people an example oftentimes of polygamy and concubinage, which in the case of David brought such troubles as incest, treason from his own son Absalon, civil war and political chicanery, and bitter jealousy and rivalry between contending wives. In the case of Solomon, his numerous wives and concubines turned him completely from the worship of Jehovah, established idolatry again in the kingdom; this eventually resulted in the division of his once glorious realm under two contending sons, never to be restored or unified again to this day.

TEACHINGS CONCERNING MARRIAGE IN THE BOOK OF MORMON AND THE DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS

We have been considering for the past several chapters the contributions to religious thought made by Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, the whole Restoration movement of which these are a part. What concepts of marriage are contained in the revelation given through Joseph Smith, and in the Book of Mormon? Do they harmonize with, support, and strengthen the concept laid down by God in the beginning of creation, and reaffirmed by Christ and by Paul? Let us look first at the book of Doctrine and Covenants, which contains the revelations given through Joseph Smith and his successors in the prophetic office of the church.

In 1835, five years after the formal and legal organization

of the church, these revelations were gathered together and prepared for printing in book form. The proposed book was carefully examined by a General Conference of the church, which gave it approval and ordered publication. At that point W. W. Phelps proposed that an article setting forth the church's beliefs on the question of marriage should also be published with the book. This statement does not have the status of a revelation, but is an official statement of belief. This document recommends that marriage should ideally be contracted between two people of the same religious faith, and that it should preferably be solemnized by ecclesiastical, rather than by civil authority. The validity of civil marriages is however recognized. It prescribes the following marriage covenant, which is a part of every marriage service performed by one of our ministers: "You both mutually agree to be each other's companion, husband and wife, observing the legal rights belonging to this condition; that is, keeping yourselves wholly for each other, and from all others, during your lives?" The document continued: "We declare that we believe that one man should have one wife; and one woman but one husband, except in case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again" (Doctrine and Covenants 111:2 b, 4 b). This reaffirmed the one husband, one wife principle which had been established at creation, and together with the covenant stressed the mutuality, the sacredness, and the permanence of the marriage relationship.

Elsewhere in the Doctrine and Covenants there was sound teaching regarding marriage. One of the false notions about marriage that men had adopted from time to time is that marriage itself is wrong and dishonorable and displeasing to God. Paul had to write to the Corinthians to correct this notion, saying, "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband" (I Corinthians 7:1, 2). He also wrote to Timothy concerning men who would bring

seducing spirits and doctrines of devils, "forbidding to marry" (I Timothy 4:3). In 1831 this problem came up in our church which was then only a year old. Several converts had come into the church from a sect which taught and practiced strict celibacy, and these converts continued to be sympathetic with that doctrine. A revelation came to them through the prophet, Joseph Smith, commanding them to go and preach to their old associates, and prescribing what they should teach about marriage. From that revelation we quote: "And again, I say unto you, that whoso forbiddeth to marry, is not ordained of God, for marriage is ordained of God unto man; wherefore it is lawful that he should have one wife, and they twain shall be one flesh, and all this that the earth might answer the end of its creation" (Doctrine and Covenants 49:3 a, b).

Another revelation, given also in 1831, says: "Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shall cleave unto her and none else." It forbids adultery, and adds: "He that looketh upon a woman to lust after her, shall deny the faith, and shall not have the Spirit; and if he repents not, he shall be cast out" (Doctrine and Covenants 42:7 d).

The Book of Mormon reaffirms and upholds this same high standard of marriage. Some of its people practiced polygamy, too, but those who advocate polygamy today will find small comfort or support in the Book of Mormon for their belief. In various passages of the Book of Mormon polygamy and concubinage are called "wicked practices," "gross crimes," "abominable in the sight of the Lord," and "abominable before me." As the beginning Scripture points out, the second chapter of Jacob in the Book of Mormon commands, "there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife, and concubines he shall have none." The Book of Mormon strictly and unreservedly upholds the principle of monogamy in marriage, and of mutuality and equality in the marriage relationship.

The Prophet Joseph Smith during his lifetime also upheld, preached, and practiced this principle of monogamy in

wedlock, and of mutuality and equality in the marriage relationship. The fact that eight years after his death certain factions of the original church proclaimed polygamy in his name cannot alter the record he has left in the Book of Mormon and in the revelations given through him and contained in the Doctrine and Covenants. The sons and grandsons of Joseph Smith who have succeeded him in the presidency of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints have continued to uphold by precept and by example this ancient, sacred, and God-given ideal of monogamy, sanctity, mutuality, and permanence in the marriage relationship.