

The Dynamics of Christian Marriage

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[0 : 00] Well now, as Willie said at the beginning, we're continuing this series of sermons on the ministry of Christian women. The plan is to have four sermons, and this is the second in the series of four.

We started a fortnight ago in the opening chapters of Genesis, but I'm conscious that not everybody here tonight will have been here then. So just by way of a very brief reminder, we saw that Genesis chapters 1 and 2 teach three foundation principles about men and women, namely equality, diversity, and complementarity.

So men and women are equal in status, in dignity, and humanity. But being equal does not mean being identical, because right the way through Scripture, the Lord deals with men and women and speaks about them in different ways.

So there's the first thing, equality. Secondly, men and women have a diversity of roles within marriage. So the husband is the leader, and his wife is described as the helper.

And then thirdly, men and women are complementary. Neither can function properly without the other. But together in marriage, they're able to work together as a team. But of course the application of that goes beyond marriage, because men and women work together and complement each other in wider society, and of course in the fellowship and work of the church as well.

[1 : 19] Well now this week, our subject is the dynamics of Christian marriage, or how Christian marriage is meant to work. We're going to move from questions of maleness and femaleness, to questions about husbands and wives.

Now some of you might immediately want to say, but hang on Edward, this is a series about the ministry of women, isn't it? So if you start unpacking the Bible's teaching about marriage, aren't you going off in a rather odd direction?

After all, you might say, marriage is about an exclusive one-to-one relationship. But the ministry of women in the church is a much broader thing. A Christian woman who has a role of leadership or ministry is relating to lots of different people, including lots of men.

And of all those men, there is a maximum of one that she can be married to. So why take us into teaching about marriage when we want to know about the ministry of women, whether they're married or not?

Now those are fair questions and important questions. Of course it is true that there are exclusive aspects to the marriage relationship, which don't apply to other relationships between men and women in the churches.

[2 : 29] So marriage is exclusive in terms of sexual relationship, responsibility for children, domestic and family life, shared finances, and lots of other things.

But, and this is the nub of the matter, when we turn to the New Testament's specific teaching about women's ministry in the churches, and particularly passages like 1 Timothy chapter 2, which we'll be looking at in a couple of weeks' time, we find that Paul derives his teaching from Genesis 1, 2, and 3.

In other words, it's the teaching about Adam and Eve and the first marriage that determines what the Apostle Paul teaches about the appropriate roles for male and female ministry in the churches.

So we can't separate the Bible's teaching on marriage from the Bible's teaching on male and female ministry. The teaching on marriage shapes the teaching on ministry.

It's the foundational head, it's the fountainhead of the teaching on male and female ministry roles. So that is why it's not a digression for us to study marriage this evening.

[3 : 35] In fact, if we didn't study marriage in a series on women's ministry, we'd be leaving out a critically important piece of the jigsaw. So let's be like Popeye at this stage with a can of spinach as we galvanize our brains into action.

We have a simple plan of attack this evening. We're going to look first at Genesis chapter 3 under the heading How the Fall Breaks Marriage Down. And then we'll turn to Ephesians chapter 5 with the heading How Christ Puts Marriage Together Again.

So first, how the fall breaks marriage down and then secondly, how Christ puts marriage together again. So can we turn together please to Genesis chapter 3. I needn't give you a page number for that.

Now the most significant thing about Genesis chapter 3 is that it records the entry of sin into the world which in turn brings God's judgment on mankind and that judgment is death.

So sin, judgment, banishment from the Garden of Eden and then finally death. But in addition to that gruesome central theme there is a great deal of highly significant detail in Genesis 3.

[4 : 53] And when we inspect the chapter closely we see that it's not only about the ruin of mankind's relationship to God it's also about the ruin of Adam's relationship to Eve.

So let's look at the chapter now under this heading How the Fall Breaks Marriage Down. Well the bare bones of the story I didn't read it tonight but I assume that most of you know the bare bones of the story of Genesis 3 very well.

We have the serpent who is Satan in disguise approaching Eve and sowing in her mind the novel thought that God's word of command might be suspect and unreliable.

And then having persuaded Eve to doubt God's authority he then gets her to disobey God by eating the forbidden fruit. She then takes some of the fruit and gives it to Adam and he also eats it.

They realize at that moment that they are in every sense exposed. They hide from God who searches for them finds them and discovers what they have done. And God then proceeds in chapter 3 to sentence them.

[5 : 58] God begins his sentence you'll see in verse 14 with the serpent. He then sentences the woman in verse 16 and then finally Adam in verses 17, 18 and 19.

Now let's begin with verse 17. I'd like to read out its first few words but I'll slightly alter them. To Adam the Lord said because you stubbornly rebelled and ate from the tree of which I commanded you.

Now he doesn't say that. What does he say? Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten from the tree. Now isn't that striking? The dreadful sentence that God pronounces not just on Adam but on the whole earth in the second half of verse 17 and in verses 18 and 19.

This awful sentence which includes the transformation of the very soil into an environment full of thistles and thorns which includes toil and hard labor for Adam as he battles with a now degraded environment and that ends with his being turned back to dust.

That heartbreaking sentence which we see writ large all around us in the world today that was directly caused by Adam listening to his wife.

[7 : 19] Now of course God doesn't mean that husbands shouldn't listen to their wives in ordinary everyday conversation. In fact if we husbands are to love our wives at one level I guess we should be listening to them rather more carefully than we often do.

What God is condemning Adam for here in verse 17 is for allowing his wife to take the lead. In other words submitting to her and obeying what she suggests.

Now let's trace this through from verse 1 and we'll see why God has to pronounce judgment on all three players here on the serpent the wife and the husband because all three are in fact in rebellion against him.

In verse 1 notice who the serpent approaches he approaches the woman rather than the man. Now he has his reasons for doing so.

His motive here is to subvert God's ordering of relationships. He knows that the man should take responsibility but he deliberately crosses the grain of God's intentions because he wants to do the greatest amount of damage.

[8 : 27] The devil Satan not only wants to spoil mankind's relationship to God if he can also wreak havoc in human marriages he will do that at the same time.

Just to leave the story for a brief moment let's always bear in mind that Satan is fiercely anti-marriage as well as fiercely anti-God. So all the trends in society today which seek to undermine marriage and to offer alternatives to marriage whether heterosexual alternatives or homosexual alternatives ultimately must stem from the devil.

Anything that subverts the God given and excellent order of Genesis chapters 1 and 2 is something that the devil will harness and fuel. So back to the story again.

Satan approaches Eve and without great difficulty apparently he gets her to capitulate to his authority. His motive or at least one of his motives here is to reverse the God given order of authority and the God given order is man first then woman and then serpent as part of the created the lower orders of creation and the serpent thoroughly succeeds so the order now emerges as serpent first woman second and man third.

He Satan persuades the woman to do his bidding and who then persuades Adam to take the course of disobedience? Eve does the serpent doesn't have to topple Adam himself Eve does the job for him so the serpent now has authority over the woman and the woman now has authority over the man so that God given order of man woman and serpent is reversed later on in the day however when the Lord intervenes in the situation he assumes that the proper order is still intact which is why in verse 9 he calls to the man where are you so Satan subverts the proper order by approaching the woman the Lord assumes the proper order by approaching the man now let's consider the man's role in this unfolding story do you know how Eve is the one who is popularly represented in myth and imagination as the chief culprit that brazen naughty woman leading the poor naive hapless man astray not a bit of it

[10 : 52] Adam must take the prime responsibility here now why is that let's notice first back in chapter 2 verses 16 and 17 that it was to Adam that the Lord gave the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and at that stage chapter 2 verse 16 Eve had not even been created so she wasn't there at Adam's side listening with her command because it's clear from chapter 3 verse 3 that she knew all about the command we know that from what she says to the serpent there's only one way in which she could have known if God hadn't told her it must have been Adam who told her so at some point in time before we get to chapter 3 verse 1 Adam had taken responsibility as his wife's leader and teacher now Genesis 3 the question is where was

Adam during this conversation that Eve had with the serpent was he half a mile away across the garden pruning the fruit trees no he wasn't look at the end of verse 6 she took of its fruit and ate and she also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate it oh man oh man oh male man what were you doing that's easy for me to criticize but of course I would have done exactly the same thing because I'm made of exactly the same stuff that Adam was made of what should he have done he should have grabbed her by the arm at that point before she could get the fruit into her mouth and he should have cried out don't eat it sweetheart to eat is death but spineless wimp that he was he stood back he abdicated responsibility and he followed his wife's lead even though he knew that the

Lord God had commanded them not to eat of that fruit and to confirm this point that it was Adam rather than Eve who was chiefly responsible we've only got to see the apostle Paul's inspired comments in Romans chapter 5 death through sin and then verse 14 of Romans 5 death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses even over those who did not sin by breaking a command as did Adam no mention of Eve in Romans chapter 5 so there is Paul the apostle speaking by the Holy Spirit and laying the prime responsibility firmly at the door of Adam now let me at this stage try to make a clear summary of what Genesis chapter 3 is teaching about the roles of husbands and wives how should we describe their sin it's not enough just to say that they both broke God's commandment although that's perfectly true Eve sinned here because she took the lead rather than allowing

Adam to take the lead and Adam's sin more culpable than Eve's as I've tried to point out lay in abdicating his responsibility as leader and weakly allowing his wife to set the direction and this summary of their respective sins is both confirmed and augmented if we look on to chapter 3 verse 16 to the woman he said I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing in pain you shall bring forth children your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you that's the second half of the verse there which is the second half of the verse your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you now this is not sexual desire in this context it's the desire to dominate or to control in fact if you glance across to chapter 4 verse 7 the

Lord says to Cain sin is crouching at your door it desires to have you but you must master it so sin is desiring at that point to dominate and control Cain and it's the same Hebrew phrase in chapter 4 verse 7 as is used back in chapter 3 verse 16 so God is saying to Eve your desire will be to control to subjugate your husband and he will rule over you the implication being with a rod of iron because he's physically stronger and so disorder in marriage is one of the first consequences of the fall of man the wife becomes filled with the desire to dominate and the husband having abdicated his proper responsibility as leader now becomes a harsh ruler and these sinful tendencies are written in the fundamental makeup of all of us isn't that right you discover it more after you've got married you may suspect it's there before you're married but you certainly find it's there afterwards so the characteristic temptation of the wife is that she will want to rule the domestic roost and she will get cross with her husband if her husband does not meekly submit to her and the characteristic temptation of the husband is twofold twofold first he will abdicate responsibility for being head of the house in fact he'll feel much more at home with a can of and then secondly the husband may fight back by being overbearing tyrannical abusive and even brutal if not physically then mentally and verbally towards his wife we really don't need the researchers of modern sociology and psychology to tell us why marriages are so often difficult and full of battle it's all here in

[17:00] Genesis 3 simple profound and crystal clear the battle of the sexes begins back there so this is how the fall breaks marriage down and that's the bad news if you like things get better from now on so secondly let's see now how Christ puts marriage together again can we turn straight over to Ephesians chapter 5 we're looking particularly at verses 22 to 33 but one or two other important bits as well now in this famous passage on Christian marriage the Lord teaches Christian husbands and wives how to leave behind the disorder of Genesis chapter 3 and effectively how to rediscover the good order of Genesis chapter 2 but before we dive in at verse 22 let's see how

Paul the apostle leads us into this section the flow of thought for our purposes begins really in verse 18 with the words be filled with the spirit if you have the new international version open in front of you you'll see a rather misleading full stop after the word spirit be filled with the spirit it says and then full stop speak to one another with psalms hymns and spiritual songs actually the ESV the English standard version is much more accurate at this point because with the new international version you get the feeling that be filled with the spirit is a separate command and then he's going on to talk about other things but actually the way it's put in the ESV is much clearer a colon or it's a comma here at the end of verse 18 expresses Paul's meaning better what he means is this be filled with the spirit which involves speaking to one another with psalms hymns and spiritual songs singing making melody to the Lord with all your heart giving thanks always and for everything to

God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ so all those participles flow on from being filled with the spirit 21 is part of the behavior produced in Christians by their being filled with the Holy Spirit now the question is what does Paul mean by submitting to one another in verse 21 what he means is that it's part of the behavior sorry I'll begin that sentence again what does he mean by submitting to one another that verse verse 21 governs the next three sections the wives and husband section which fills the rest of chapter five then the little section on children and parents the first four verses of chapter six and then the slaves and masters section in verses five to nine of chapter six so what Paul means is that when the Holy

Spirit fills Christians there comes into play the principle of the right ordering of social relationships it's part of the reversal of the effects of the fall so wives as they're filled with the Spirit reject their natural desire to boss their husbands and learn to submit to them instead children reject their natural desire to thumb their noses at their parents and they learn to submit to them and slaves reject their natural desire to misbehave and run amok in the workplace and they learn to submit to their masters who employ them so the Spirit's ministry amongst Christians is to reorder and bless and make happy these fundamentally important social relationships which in a fallen and disordered world create so much unhappiness and conflict of course the Spirit does other things that doesn't exhaust the sum total of his ministry but this is part of his ministry and it's most important now in verse 21 of chapter 5 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ

Paul is not for a moment teaching a mutual reciprocal submission in these relationships he's not telling Christian masters to submit to their slaves nor Christian parents to submit to their children can you imagine the chaos that that would produce nor is he instructing Christian husbands to submit to their wives to read it that way would be to make nonsense of the whole section and nonsense of the flow of Paul's language Paul is teaching that in the Christian church the three great relationships of husbands and wives children and parents and slaves and masters should be governed by the principle of authority exercised with love on the one hand and submission offered with willingness on the other hand we're now a few comments on the section on marriage beginning at verse 22 the heart of Paul's instruction the heart of God's instruction is that Christian wives are to submit to their husbands that's verse 22 and Christian husbands verse 25 are to love their wives this reverses the damage done by

[22 : 19] Genesis 3 where Eve failed to submit to Adam because she took the lead in following the serpent's suggestion and Adam failed to love Eve because he abdicated his responsibility to reject the devil's invitation now what we need to notice most particularly is the reason that Paul gives for each of these commands so let's take them in order wives submit to your own husbands as to the Lord but why why should you Christian wife submit to your husband your instinctive reaction might be to say but look at my husband he's no Solomon for wisdom he's no Winston Churchill for courage he's no David Beckham for beauty he's no Gordon Brown when it comes to handling money he's such an ordinary man and I'm probably a bit cleverer than he is all of which sisters may well be true yes many women are cleverer than their husbands and often a lot nicer as well but Paul doesn't tell the Christian wife to submit to her husband because he is superior to her in intellect or wisdom he gives a quite different reason in verse 23 let's see what it is for the husband is the head of the wife even as

Christ is the head of the church his body and is himself its savior so the reason for the wife submitting to her husband is because in the Lord's ordering of mankind the husband is the head of the wife that is to say the authority that he has over her as her leader is an authority given to him by God let me give a simple illustration of this principle just imagine one day a university professor is in his car and he's driving down the road and up ahead he sees a lollipop man with his lollipop step out into the road and make the traffic stop to allow some children to cross now the professor although he's slightly late for a very important engagement still stops his car in obedience to the lollipop man at which point he is submitting to the lollipop man's authority now no one is suggesting that the lollipop man is brainier or more competent than the professor almost certainly the reverse is true but we have here a point of order the lollipop man is authorized by the government to stop the motor traffic even professors at certain times of the day so that the children can safely cross the road and if society is to work properly and happily the motorist knows that even if he is the brainiest professor in the world he must submit at that point to the lollipop man now in the same way the

Christian wife submits to her husband she may well surpass her husband in intelligence in common sense and in practical wisdom that's certainly true in my marriage and brothers it may well be true in yours as well but God's ordering of the relationship is that the husband takes responsibility ultimately for the marriage and the wife gladly to his authority now what is this going to mean for us in practical terms does it mean that the husband is the one who has to decide on the color of the children's socks or the menu for the week well of course not in fact Paul writes about married women managing their households in 1 Timothy chapter 5 and that surely involves plenty of decision making no the point at which this principle of submission really comes into play is the point when husband and wife disagree about some major decision that needs to be made decisions for example about do we move house does one of us change job decisions about the children's schooling or the care of aged parents or big financial decisions things in very of us a church husband and wife will be in tune with each other when it comes to that kind of decision and they will agree anyway but sometimes they won't sometimes they will form opposite views on a particular matter and it's at those points that the

Christian wife will submit to her husband's decision even if objectively speaking her position is the wiser of the two this is the Lord's recipe for having harmony and not battlefield in the marriage.

Now in the next verse, verse 24, Paul brings in a further reason for this arrangement. And that is that the wife's submission to her husband mirrors the church's submission to Christ.

[27 : 04] Let me read that verse. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. So it's following that great principle of all Christians as a body submitting to the Lord Jesus.

So there's the first ingredient of the marriage characterized by happiness and not conflict. The wife submits to her husband as the church submits to Christ.

Now the second ingredient is also modeled on the relationship between Christ and the church. So here's verse 25. Husbands, you'd almost expect him to say at this point, husbands rule your wives, wouldn't you?

But he doesn't. He says, husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church. Yes, Christ rules the church. But at this point, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

So although Christ has authority over the church as its head, he expresses his authority not by harsh coercion, but by loving service, love of a kind that gives itself up self-sacrificially and in the case of Christ, even to the point of death.

[28 : 16] Now friends, that is a standard which is going to search married men to their hearts. Do we, we Christian men who are married, do we treat our wives in a way that allows them to blossom and flourish and be radiant?

It's a lovely word used in the New International Version at verse 27. Or do we relate to our wives in a way which over the years, over time, makes them worn down, faded and unappreciated?

Have you met a Christian wife like that? Worn down, faded, unappreciated. Are we husbands, just to give one or two practical examples, are we husbands prepared to get up at three o'clock in the morning to change a child's wet bed?

Do we do the extra washing up in the evening so as to give our wives a little bit of peace and quiet and the chance to watch a favorite television program? Do we run little Eustacia, our daughter, to the children's birthday party on a Saturday afternoon when we'd much rather be watching Partick Thistle?

It's those very practical applications of the principle which teach us whether we're obeying it or not. Having authority over his wife doesn't give the Christian husband freedom to tyrannize her or to overwork her.

[29 : 37] Yes, he must take responsibility, particularly for life's big decisions. But Paul is teaching him here to love his wife in the same way as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

So if the command to submit is a searching one for the Christian wife, the command to love will search out the husband as well. So those of us who are married Christians, let's thank God that in a world where marriage all around us is in such rags and tatters, the Lord lovingly teaches us how to conduct ourselves in marriage, where the wife learns to submit rather than to boss about, and where the husband learns to love and care for his wife rather than to be harsh over her or to abdicate responsibility within the home.

Where both of these things happen together, there will be a great deal of happiness and joy and a modeling, albeit a very imperfect one, of the relationship between Christ and the church.

And where a marriage is lived out substantially on these Ephesians 5 lines, it will bring great blessing not just to the couple themselves, but to the church they belong to, because that kind of Christian marriage is a great blessing within the fellowship, and it will also bring great blessing to their non-Christian friends who may begin to perceive something of the relationship between Christ and the church as they see this marriage being lived out before their eyes.

Well, let me just add a final word of encouragement to those Christians who are not married. I'm sure we have many here tonight, and we know many. Single people, single Christians, and also those who have been married, but their marriage has ended because of widowhood or divorce.

[31 : 26] In heaven, the Bible teaches us that all Christians will be married. In fact, in heaven, there is only one marriage and only one bridegroom, and that is the Lord Jesus.

Marriage on earth is a temporary arrangement. It comes to an end as soon as the first partner dies. It's not reconstituted in heaven. Those who have been married on earth won't need their earthly marriage partners in heaven.

Does that seem a disappointment? The point is surely that the eyes of all of us will be upon Jesus, and we shall be thoroughly, blissfully satisfied by belonging to him forever.

Christian marriage on earth is no more than a picture, a reflection of the marriage between Jesus and his people. That's what Paul is saying here in verse 32. In heaven, we shall have the real thing, all of us who are Christians.

So if for whatever reason you're denied marriage on earth, or if your earthly marriage has ended for whatever reason, and you're sad because of that, don't forget the big picture and the long view.

[32 : 35] All Christians will be married to Jesus in heaven, and we can be sure that that will be simply terrific. Do we bow our heads and pray and thank him.

Dear Heavenly Father, we do thank you so much that in Christ, the damage done to marriage by the fall is reversed, and sinful though we are, we thank you that wives can learn submission and husbands can learn self-sacrificial love.

For those of us who are married, please help us to live out the teaching of Ephesians 5, and for all of us, please put in our minds a happy expectation of the great marriage of Christ and his people in heaven forever.

And in Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.