

Does Your Marriage Come Before God's Calling?

In the last two generations of church teaching regarding marriage roles we have been told that marriage and family come first. This mind-set has led us to assume a theology that puts marriage and family members before God.

Unfortunately, when marriage is the primary relational focus rather than relationship with and obedience to God, it becomes subject to the will and weakness of its partners. The consequences are often unfruitful for home and heaven.

Marriage has a heavenly ordination that goes beyond family bliss. It is a tool for spouses to more completely fulfill God's destiny in their lives. But it is second to service to God. There is nothing in Scripture to suggest that a person should deny his heavenly call because his earthly partner doesn't recognize it—or abandon it because there is discord between them.

Misunderstanding about the role of marriage in the church can shipwreck sincere Christians when trouble develops with their spouses. Our traditions have subtly built an altar that makes married domestic tranquility the spiritual qualifier of Christians. In some cases it is a prerequisite for individuals, particularly women, to be received in ministry settings.

These traditions help to misplace single and divorced persons, particularly women, in the church. They also disable believers who are experiencing dissension at home.

This is not the teaching of Jesus or the apostles. Marital tranquility is not a prerequisite for anointing!

Perhaps the greatest error of the religious philosophy of

marriage first is that it emphasizes marriage over the greatest commandment: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’” (Matt. 22:37, NIV). If this commandment is in place in the life of a believer all other issues find their proper importance.

The second commandment prescribes what to do with your marriage: “‘Love your neighbor [spouse] as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). If these two guidelines are in order in your life you will understand how to conduct yourself even when you are experiencing marital discord.

Ideally, marriage should facilitate obedience to the call of God in the lives of both spouses. Unfortunately, this is not always the way it works. There are many examples throughout Christian history of anointed servants of God whose matrimonial state was less than perfect. Yet they successfully gave themselves to God’s service in obedience. We can learn from their examples.

DISCORD IN MARRIAGE Marital discord arises in the life of every union. From Adam and Eve down through the patriarchs and into our time, it comes with the territory. Remember how Sarah pestered Abraham to give her a child, finally insisting that he lie with her maidservant? Then when Hagar conceived Ishmael, Sarah had the nerve to blame Abraham! (See Gen. 16:1-5.)

In the time of Deborah and Barak, a housewife named Jael acted in direct violation of her husband’s political obligations. She killed a king who had a covenant of peace with her household (see Judg. 4:17-22). Imagine the music she had to face when her spouse got home!

David’s wife Abigail resisted the spirit and instruction of her first husband, Nabal, when she went behind his back to bring supplies for David and his men from Nabal’s storehouse. Abigail’s act of wisdom and faith made intercession for her

household and saved them from oblivion by David's army. But that same intercession so offended Nabal that he had a heart attack when she confessed what she had done (see 1 Sam. 25:1-38).

Perhaps the clearest picture of continuing to serve God with a whole heart in the midst of trouble at home is the one Scripture gives us of David when he brought the ark back to Jerusalem (see 2 Sam. 6:12-15). He was directly in the center of obedience to God's will for his life. But his wife Michal berated him (v. 20).

Michal's resistance did not deter her husband. David replied, "I will become even more undignified than this" (). If his godly service on that occasion displeased her, she was in for a lifetime of offense. The king would please God first.

In truth, the Bible does not make a person's marriage the plumb line of his relationship or anointing with God. Our traditions have done that.

Consider the example of Maria Woodworth-Etter, an anointed woman of God who helped usher America into Pentecost. A powerful preacher, Maria was used mightily in miraculous signs and healing in the late 1800s and early 1900s. But she was opposed at home as well as by the norms of society in her day.

In *Maria Woodworth-Etter: Her Life and Ministry* (Christ for the Nations Inc., 1992) Maria wrote, "When the Spirit of God was striving with me to talk or pray in a meeting, I would resist as long as I could. Then this awful vision would rise before me, and I would see souls sinking into eternal woe. The voice of Jesus would whisper, 'I am with you; be not afraid.'

"Then I would be on my feet or knees in a moment. I would forget everything but the love of God and dying souls. God seemed to speak through me to the people.

“But I had so much opposition to contend with. My people were opposed; my husband and my daughter fought against it; and my whole being shrank from going to stand as a gazing stock for the people. But the Lord was showing in many ways that I must go and perform the work He had for me to do.”

MIXING MARRIAGE AND MINISTRY The devil’s strategy is to hit marriages in order to spiritually immobilize married persons. If he can accomplish this in enough cases, he can effectively slow the advance of the kingdom of God in a generation.

Likewise, if Satan can deceive enough households with the “marriage first” theology, he can keep Christians so focused on home that they are AWOL from participation on the front lines of evangelism and church service.

What should you do if your ministry is being blessed by heaven and your marriage is buffeted by hell?

1. First, recognize that your spiritual effectiveness may be one reason the devil is hitting you at home. Do not assume that you are to stop serving God in order to focus all your energies at home. That is, not unless God says so!

If He tells you to do this and you continue to give your full attention to ministry activity, then your ministry has become an idol—and an excuse for disobeying God. Remember that on Judgement Day Jesus will say to Christians who spent their lives in ministry as an excuse for serving their own agendas, “Although you prophesied and worked miracles in My Name, now depart from Me you lawless ones. I never knew you!” (See Matt. 7:21-23.)

2. Seek God’s solutions to the weaknesses in your marriage and begin to strengthen it without taking your focus away from full devotion to God. Don’t give territory to the devil by retreating to hearth and home simply because you have conflict there.

3. Throw yourself, your spouse and your marriage on the Lord. Seek and receive His specific personal instruction for your situation and season. Sometimes this comes as daily and hourly instruction until God brings you through into His peace and blessing. Once you have His direction, obey—whatever the cost.

The virtuous wife of Proverbs 31 fulfills the full purpose of God and provides for her family at the same time by active engagement of her spiritual and creative gifts in the marketplace. She delegates her responsibilities within the house while she is away and neglects neither her home nor her calling.

Man or woman, it takes a person wholly devoted to God to find the proper balance between marriage and ministry. For each one of us there will be a different equation. That is why it is so important to be led by the Holy Spirit in responding to God's call and following His lead in living it out.

The important thing to remember is that each one of us will answer to God—and no one else—for our lives and how we spent them. We will not answer to our spouses, our children, our pastor or our employer. In marriage as in single life we must individually work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.

God will accept no excuses. He will not release you from accountability because your spouse didn't want you to follow the call, your pastor didn't think a woman should preach or your children complained that you were never around. He will judge you based on whether or not you did what He asked you to do.

MINISTERING IN CONFLICT Ministry in the midst of marital discord is not ideal—but it is not necessarily devoid of anointing. And it is certainly not an excuse for disobedience to heaven's call. Your marriage was never ordained by God to be a hindrance to your service or obedience to Him.

As ministers, my husband, Mahesh, and I have daily opportunities to experience the strain that ministry can place on marriage. Particularly during times when we are bringing the gospel to strategic regions we face tremendous spiritual resistance that usually results in pressure on the home front. Our personal compatibility and communication can easily become stressed to the breaking point.

The devil uses our weaknesses to try and turn us against one another or drive one of us into isolation. He knows that division between us is strength for him.

In the early days it would never fail that our weaknesses came to a head just as we were leaving for church. Once we were at the front door on the way to an important church meeting and dinner fellowship. Mahesh was carrying a huge dessert we were taking. I was rushing around tying up all the loose ends I had to handle while he waited—impatiently.

The day had been littered with lots of little foxes. As pressures grew, tempers shortened. When Mahesh reached for the door handle I made a resentful remark. It was the last straw for both of us.

He dropped the dessert, on purpose, on the floor. He wasn't counting on its bouncing back! But bounce it did: everywhere. I watched, angry and horrified, as red Jell-O, whipped cream and other ingredients splattered the ceiling, walls, floor and front door.

What did we do? We left the mess and went to the meeting, sans dessert but with hearts sure for God. For months afterward I found little dried spots of red Jell-O in all the crooks and crevices of our home. Each one was a reminder of the devil's strategy to get us to back down from the war against his kingdom by starting a war at home. Satan's biggest tactic against married persons is to put pressure on them in an effort to make them retreat from active spiritual service.

Our experience has showed us that the two most effective tools for handling ministry in the midst of marital discord are: (1) commitment to God and His kingdom first; and (2) a sense of humor. Sincere commitment to God ultimately brings clarity in our personal circumstances, and a sense of humor helps us to hope, bear and believe all things (see 1 Cor. 13:7). Both these tools help us to fulfill the two greatest commandments in proper order: love God and love your neighbor.

Love says to take precautions in relating to one's spouse. As much as possible try to sidestep the areas you know will cause him to stumble or to become angry or anxious, even if you have an opportunity to make a point regarding an issue in his life. Maintain control over your own spirit, keep a guard on your tongue and refuse to indulge in self-pity or self-importance.

The key to spiritual success in marriage is realizing that each one is as unique in the plan of God as the partners themselves are unique among human beings. For this reason there must be not two, but three persons in agreement within each marriage: the husband, the wife and the Holy Spirit.

A marriage is not an organization; it is an organism, a living union no less than a person or a tree. When one or both partners demand that it become the tool to service their own comfort, convenience or demands, shipwreck is inevitable.

On the other hand, the husband or wife who uses religious or ministry business as an excuse to neglect loving service to his or her family is in danger of being in disobedience to the voice of the Holy Spirit as well. Balance and personal obedience to God are the plumb line.

Just as you must work out your own salvation in fear and trembling, you must work out your marriage before God and His Word. The bottom line is: Love the Lord first, love your neighbor (who is also your spouse) second. Love seeks not its own, including its own spiritual agendas or carnal comforts.

Love seeks to do the heart and will of God.

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