

Don't Marriage Vows Matter Anymore?

The recent rash of marital failures among high-profile Christian leaders is forcing a showdown in the church. It isn't a showdown between those who have failed and those who might criticize them—it's a confrontation needed to face down a mind-set that, if left unchanged, will bring an onslaught of hellish delusion.

It's time we take a hard look at why so many marriages—especially of those in leadership—are being torn apart. We need to know how to respond and what the consequences could be if decisive action is not taken now.

There simply is no way to describe the present situation in lesser terms: We are at a point of crisis.

Failure has been evident across the entire spectrum, from renowned evangelical Bible preachers to charismatic evangelists, and from noted national youth leaders to ascending Christian TV superstars. Though the unprecedented increase in the number of broken marriages and moral failures occurring in general among church leaders is tragic enough, the crisis is amplified when high-visibility leaders go in and out of marriages.

Sheep follow shepherds, and multitudes mimic the more visible. Struggling couples reduce their own resolve to resist society's indifference toward divorce or immorality when the collapse of their spiritual heroes' marriages seems to justify, if not normalize, those same practices. Comfort, convenience and human counsel replace commitment, constancy and the place of the cross in the marriage.

Confused and biblically unfocused thinking is at the center of this crisis and has amplified its impact. It begins with

understandable sympathy appropriately shown for fallen or broken leaders. Certainly, a loving concern for such leaders is fitting.

But unbalanced views of Bible-based disciplines have become prevalent in the church today. And so have intentionally neglectful attitudes that waive the application of biblical wisdom and truth, which is needed to rightly serve the moment and is essential to sustain the pure passion and dynamic vitality of the church. Several concerns rise out of this crisis.

First is the widespread unawareness of the priority of clearly stated biblical qualifications for ministry leadership. Companion to this is the lost emphasis on the intrinsic relationship between a spiritual leader's marital commitment and moral fidelity as fundamentally required for their continued ministry.

Second, many deny or refuse to apply biblical leadership standards when they have been violated. Whether the failure was due to marital stress or outright sin, feelings are allowed to rule rather than biblical principles, and true life-restoring ministry is pre-empted. Wise and righteous dealings in graciously removing a leader from ministry for healing, counsel or other supportive care are disdained as either impractical or "too hard to apply," and humanistic means are substituted for divine directives.

Third, if sound, scriptural administration of the issues surrounding the church, its leaders and their marriages is not soon arrived at with solidarity, there is reason to prophesy widespread deception on other issues as well.

The "itching ears" characteristic forecast for the last days represents the mind-set of some of those in church leadership today. It's a setup for delusion with disastrous consequences.

Faith and Commitment

A few years ago Charisma reported the response of one highly visible church leader who divorced his wife only to remarry within a week: "God didn't call me to marriage," he stated. "He called me to ministry." His remarks were convincing enough to justify his actions in the eyes of the majority of his followers.

There are multiple ironies in such an unbiblical utterance given in such a compromised circumstance, but the bottom line rings out in tragic clarity—several thousand people bought it. Apparently they either thought the idea was a spiritual one, or they didn't care if it wasn't.

In contrast with the glibness suggesting a nobility in "dedication to ministry over marriage" is the truth of God's Word, which casts the issue in a vastly different light. According to the Scriptures, if a leader is married, two things are foundational: (1) the commitment he shows toward his marriage determines his right to lead as a servant of Christ in the church; and (2) the quality he reveals of his will to grow in his marriage determines the manner in which he will model as a representative of Christ to the church.

There is no escaping the two-edged truth unveiled in the New Testament. Because heaven's Bridegroom has come to earth to win a bride for Himself, the principles of both commitment (faith) and constancy (growth) are "locked" in the imagery of the marriage covenant between a man and a woman. Further, no one is more accountable to learn and grow in the lifestyle of modeling this commitment than a leader given by Christ to serve His bride.

No gifts of a brilliant leader, however remarkable, ought to be allowed to substitute for the will to increase in the graces required for two different humans to grow together. No fruit of statistical achievement is a worthy replacement for the required development of the fruit of the Spirit needed for

a husband and wife to learn to live together for a lifetime.

Ephesians 5:22-33 not only points to the demanding nature of commitment needed by a husband and wife to make a marriage work, but it concludes with these sweeping words: "I speak concerning Christ and [His] church" (v. 32, NKJV). Forty years of experience and observation of leaders has taught me one profound fact in this regard: A married leader will eventually, and inevitably, treat Jesus' bride the way he treats his own. Likewise, a parent will teach and lead the family of God the same way they lead their own children.

The Ephesians 5 idea of true faith in Christ and His faithful commitment to His own is inextricably linked throughout God's Word to the figure of a faithful, growing marriage. Jesus communicated this idea in His parable of the returning bridegroom (see Matt. 25:1-13).

His use of the figure fills the bridegroom-bride relationship with more than passion: The central issue is fidelity to a promise on the groom's part and constancy of devotion on the bride's. Time can dampen fervor, but true love transcends emotion and remains committed.

The depiction of living faith as a marriage is found throughout the Bible, beginning with the type symbolized in Eve's creation from Adam's side, which foreshadowed Christ's begetting His bride through His wounded side. And it sustains until the finale, for we all anticipate our first stop beyond this world's history at a grand dinner called the marriage supper of the Lamb (see Rev. 19:9). The message: Tribulations rise and fall, but joy will come in the morning—hang tough!

In Jeremiah 3:14, God's commitment to the backslider is, "'I am married to you—a statement that calls a leader to seek to sustain his or her marriage even though society argues, "If it's not fun anymore, trash it."

It's a tender issue, and we certainly are never to condemn a

divorced or fallen leader. But neither can we permit a casual treatment of their tragedy, for God's Word is never to be lightly regarded on these points. How a believer lives unto Christ is measured in terms of marital fidelity, and how a leader leads in His name is to be judged by the same.

Leadership Standards

Though often cavalierly dismissed by the careless or uninformed, the Word gives requirements that serve as a grid for measuring a spiritual leader's readiness to lead. First Timothy 3:1-15 and Titus 1:5-16 list standards incumbent upon every leader who would serve in the church. This is true regardless of what office they fill, as listed in Ephesians 4:11.

The positional terms in Timothy and Titus—"bishop" (episkopos, overseer); "deacon" (diakonos, minister); and "elder" (presbuteros, mature leader)—form a cluster of at least a dozen behavioral requirements that, at the very least, establish a minimal standard for spiritual leaders. They span everything from being nonargumentative, noncombative and humbly teachable to being a faithful spouse and a good parent.

Equally important is the context—which calls for time to verify these qualities (see 1 Tim. 3:10) and slowness to confirm a person to leadership (see 1 Tim. 5:22). Further, if through a problem, a stress, a tragedy or a personal failure a leader pointedly violates or is unable to fulfill the biblical standard, he or she is to be relieved of ministry—at least for an extended season.

If for no other reason than to grant a needed period for spiritual and emotional healing, this policy ought to be regarded today. Reinstatement may eventually come, since the hope of recovery is characteristic of God's redemptive ways, but not without an extended season of recovery.

An even more thoughtful look at these leadership qualifications reveals that they have more to say about marriage responsibilities than is immediately obvious. Certain direct statements do declare absolute requirements, such as faithfulness in marital commitment (see 1 Tim. 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6) and orderly leadership in raising children (see 1 Tim. 3:4-5, 12; Titus 1:6).

But indirectly, most of the list also applies to marriage. For example, being “hospitable” (see 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8) represents an attitude of prioritizing time with one’s spouse and family as much as it does welcoming people into your home. Being “gentle” (see 1 Tim. 3:3) and “not quick-tempered” (see Titus 1:7) calls for a private loving, as Christ loved the church, toward one’s husband or wife (see Eph. 5:25-29) just as much as for a public graciousness or self-control with members of the congregation.

The fact is, spiritual leaders are expected to meet a higher standard than the world sets for its leading figures. If these requirements are not being met in at least an initial and growing way, the married leader’s potential for placement is to be disallowed.

Perfection or full maturity is not mandated, but neither is it enough that the leader be exempted from the standards simply because he or she is “so anointed” (so was Balaam). Nor is it enough that a leadership position be given to a person simply because he or she “has so much insight into the Word” (so does the devil!).

Our society lauds and pays its athletes, entertainers and persuasive leaders just as long as they “keep the show on the road”—but that’s not the measure God calls the church to apply. Character, not merely charisma, is the mark of a spiritual leader.

And when he or she is married, the test of that character is

proved in the fabric of fidelity to vows and in the self-sacrificing will to serve marriage above ministry. To lower this expectation is extremely risky.

Reversing an Evil Trend

I am persuaded by a portent of danger in our midst of a frightening vulnerability to damning error if this bent toward neglecting the basic and practical standards God sets for leaders continues: If we continue to entertain confusion on these points, we will give place to a satanic darkness that will issue in a plague of spiritual death.

This is no idle warning. The wolf is already at the door, and he's wearing sheep's clothing. Already there have been leaders duped by a demonic doctrine secretly being taught by a former so-called charismatic leader. This false teacher spread a destructive heresy that suggests "immorality is impossible within the kingdom of God."

The concept is a bizarre twist on "kingdom teaching" that argues that after a person has entered God's kingdom they transcend earth's order and are thereby exempt from its laws—even God's. I will not dignify this corruption by explaining the convolutions and distortions of Scripture that underlie this error.

This stands as contemporary evidence that there are those who literally teach immorality and dilute marital commitment, exactly as the Word warns regarding the last days (see 1 Tim. 4:1-2). This is precisely what Jesus so forcibly opposed in the churches at Pergamos and Thyatira (see Rev. 2:14, 20-25).

We are wise to heed this warning. Unless the church shakes herself awake where seducing spirits are luring her away from a "first love" for the values of marital commitment and moral fidelity, a false definition of God's Person will supplant the pure glory of His real presence and give place to destructive delusion.

So what can be done to reverse this horrific trend and bring God's order back to the church?

First, heeding the Word—and with a renewed God-fearing alertness and Holy Spirit-enabled recommitment to marriage standards among church leaders—we must resist the devil. Where the infiltration of worldly marriage standards for spiritual leadership has given place to the penetration of evil that is destroying the foundations of so many Christian homes, a turnaround can be effected.

Psalm 11:3 says, “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” But Isaiah 58:12 says the Lord will enable us to “raise up the foundations” again. A return to the Word will give place to the Spirit's purifying and restoration.

Second, the issues of biblical requirements must be taught and administrated not only with evenhanded patience and grace but also with faithfulness to the truth. This is not a call to legalism but a call from a growing sloppiness called “grace in the name of love,” but without love's commitments or grace's power. Neither love nor grace should ever be a label used to bandage over our neglect or self-indulgence.

Third, let us pray for fallen leaders earnestly, while pursuing practical means to help strengthen and secure them in their marriages. I believe the following possibilities would make a tremendous difference in reversing the current trend and bringing healing and restoration:

For example, all training for ministry leadership should commit to shaping ministry candidates for their marriage as well as for their ministry. In God's eyes my fidelity to my wife is as important as my integrity in handling His Word or my purity in relating its truth. All Bible schools, training centers and seminaries must become responsive to this call.

Next, all Christian media should accept the responsibility to monitor, minister, admonish and administrate with reference to

God's standards for a leader's marriage and morality. Most networks, publishers and broadcast stations do this, but some do not. By God's grace a uniform standard must be raised, showing it is not enough that a leader merely be "successful" or that they "sell," but that they be "found faithful" (see 1 Cor. 4:2).

Finally, all congregations, denominations and other fellowships of churches should aggressively provide and fund nurturing resources for pastoral couples. It is not enough to provide "burn clinics" for those who have been wounded or fallen—there is a cry today to advance means of preventive care.

With such priorities pursued anew, a true visitation of miracle power can be expected. Jesus likes weddings. We know that because He chose one for His first miracle. It just may be that our giving His kind of attention to our marriages—especially to His expectations for those of us who lead—may give place to His last miracle visit!

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