

Christian Perspective of the Family in the Contemporary Society: Lessons from Ephesians 5:21 – 6: 4 cf. Genesis 2

Esther J. Kibor*

Department of Education, Kabarak University, Nakuru, Kenya

***Corresponding author**
Esther J. Kibor

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Abstract: This paper looks at the family from a Christian perspective within the contemporary society. Beginning with the biblical design of marriage, the author uses descriptive research design to discuss what the family is, describe what Christian marriage is and its purpose. She also examines the teaching of the Bible concerning marriage, the roles and responsibilities of both the husband and wife, the relationship between children and parents, and parents as role models in the home.

Keywords: contemporary society, Christian perspective, Ephesians, Genesis.

INTRODUCTION

The family has always existed. It is as old as the book of Job, written 400 years before Abraham lived. The story of Job concerns a husband, wife, and ten children (seven sons and three daughters). They all had a home, friends, livestock, work, trials, sickness, joys and heartaches. Not much has changed since then. Even before that, Adam and Eve, the special creations of God, were brought together in marriage by God Himself, God whose desire is for the family to reproduce and multiply, not only commanded them to “. . . Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth . . .” (Gen. 1:27 – 28), but also he instructed them, even before in-laws existed, that each couple inhabit its own home. Genesis 2:24, states, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”

This is a monogamy principle of one man and one woman so long as they are both alive in this world. The family has experienced many changes due to race, culture, religion and other social factors; but there has never been a time when the family was not a functional unit within society.

What is family?

The family begins with a covenant relationship between a man and a woman who have decided to live together for the rest of their time on earth. It is a ritual, a ceremony that we call marriage and one which implies a long duration, if not permanent, for the relationship. In this relationship, the marriage partners have roles and responsibilities within the home, and they also have duties and rights of parenthood that are also socially defined and recognized. The components of marriage consist of husband and wife; and with blessings of children, the family live in a common place. The man and woman bond in marriage, living together with their children. The family as seen in a traditional way is one in which the husband is the breadwinner and the wife a homemaker with several children to be provided for.

Today, this traditional family by definition, like the family itself, is in serious jeopardy! In this present age, activists include homosexuals, lesbians and singles living together without benefit of marriage in their new definition of a family. Such “families,” demand full legal status and the same benefits as members of traditional families. The courts of western world are replete with gay and lesbians who fight for their rights to rear ‘children’! However, there is no substitute for the family. It will never be replaced.

What is Christian Marriage?

Marriage is a significant social event in both non Christian and Christian life. The words, “marriage”, “married”, “husband,” and “wife” according to Mary Fairchild [1] occur more than 500 times in the Old Testament and the New Testament. A Christian marriage is when a marriage union takes place between two Bible believing persons who truly want to serve the Lord together. A Christian marriage is one that is entered into for the glory of God. Marriage is a very sacred union that should never be entered into in an impulsive or haphazard manner. However, in recent times, marriage has received bad press. People are abandoning their marital vows for reasons which were

negligent in traditional way of life. Divorce has become the order of the day.

What does the Bible teach about marriage?

In Genesis 2:18, God instituted the family when he said, "It is not good for man to be alone." Genesis 2: 21 – 24, then, states that God "formed woman (Eve) out of the rib of Adam (the first operation on earth) in order to fill the man's loneliness, for he did not have a companion like the rest of the animal kingdom. When God brought the formed woman to Adam when he woke up from his deep sleep, he exclaimed, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, she shall be called woman." The Bible records, "the two were naked, and not ashamed." (Gen 2:25). This is the beginning of the established family [2].

Three elements stand out in this union: one, the idea of leaving, second, cleaving and third becoming one flesh. Becoming one flesh is a union that only comes through marriage. That is, without a man and a woman coming together in marriage, there is no family. Marriage therefore is an idea found in the mind of God. In leaving the man becomes responsible for his own family unit. However, this does not mean that the couple neglects their responsibilities to their parents, but that the idea of leaving could be geographical as a fully grown man. The cleaving means that the husband and wife are joined together physically, emotionally and spiritually to become God's pro-creators; resulting into a family with roles and responsibilities. It is God's desire that the two shall bring forth their offspring.

What is the purpose of Christian marriage?

God designed marriage to be an instrument to make us more like Christ. In his book, *Sacred Marriage*, Gary Thomas [3], asks this question, "What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?" Needless to say, "is it possible that there is something much more profound in the heart of God than simply to make us happy? Can we lay down our ambitions to love and serve our spouse?" While these questions are significant, Mary Fairchild observes by saying that through Christian marriage we can learn about unconditional love, respectful honour and how to forgive and be forgiven [1]. We can see our shortcomings and grow from that insight. We can develop a servant's heart, and draw closer to God. As a result, true soul happiness can be discovered, and this, it is believed, is one of God's ultimate desires and purposes for designing the covenant of marriage.

In the same line of thought, Baliswick [4] states, "Christian marriage is more like accommodation, where two separate people maintain their distinct personhood but agree to come together in a unity and oneness of commitment, meaning and service." Baliswick, adds further that, "In Christian marriage each partner is subject to the other: each is to love and

be loved, to forgive and be forgiven, to serve and be served, and to know and be known." (ibid) A marital oneness or union before God does not mean there will be no conflict or differences between spouses. Both come from different backgrounds, have been raised differently, have different personalities, and educationally are not the same. However, marriage without conflict often signifies that one partner has given up personhood . . . commitment involves a willingness to confront a partner in love as well as a willingness to listen when a spouse expresses a difference of opinion or is confrontational. Commitment assures a love that cares enough to listen, to understand and to find ways to work out the conflicts.

Despite all these conflicts and differences, Genesis chapter two indicates that marriage is an idea of God, designed and instituted by him alone as the creator of the world and of mankind. At the heart of this design of God, marriage is indeed for companionship and intimacy in addition to procreation as has been discussed above. Hence, the purpose of marriage is three-fold: procreation, companionship and intimacy.

What are the roles and responsibilities of husband and wife in marriage?

It should be understood that God in His infinite wisdom has planned varying but complementary roles and responsibilities for the two partners in the marriage unity. He has entrusted certain roles and responsibilities to the husband, and certain other roles and responsibilities to the wife. Each member of the couple has his or her own functions within the marriage. Unity in marriage is promoted when both partners understand, accept and fulfill these respective but complimentary roles and responsibilities according to the plan of God for the Christian home. These husband-wife roles have been formulated based on creation (Gen 2:18) and as a result of the fall in Genesis chapter three verse sixteen.

The two-fold responsibilities of a wife to her husband are, first, to be a completion in the God-given role of pro-creation (Gen. 2: 18 – 25); and secondly, to be in submission and obedience to her husband (Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3: 18; Titus 2: 4-5; 1 Pet. 3:1-6). God made the woman to be man's helper in terms of companionship, advising and being a resource person. Without the woman, man is incomplete. The idea of incompleteness in this sense is not that the man in his personality and make-up is missing something or that a celibate is not complete in himself. But unlike the animals that had their own pairs of species, man after thorough analysis and naming the animals (Gen. 2: 19 - 20), discovered that he did not have any companion, hence, he was incomplete because there was none to assist him in the mandate of procreation.

Submission as Ephesians chapter five verse twenty-one points out is required of every Christian one

to another. The great motive for this submission is as unto the Lord. It is for the sake of Christ who has saved both the man and woman from their sins. How the couple relates to Christ, should be a model for their relationship in the home and society. The contemporary woman should understand that submission is neither slavery nor silence. As 1 Timothy 5: 14 states, submission do not rob one of decision making responsibility. Neither does it indicate that the wife is inferior and the husband superior. But it is more of the God-given mandate in creation to man as the head of his family, and the woman as a helper to her husband.

Further, in obedience, the woman is to be a willing, loyal and suitable helper to her husband and his complement. Genesis 2: 18 explain that the woman was made to fulfill the deficiencies and the insufficiencies of her husband. She thus becomes man's unique helper and partner for life. No wonder Prov. 18: 22 says, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favour from the Lord." In Proverbs 31:10 – 31 the wife of noble character is far more than rubies because she is obedient, creative, initiative, hard-working, intelligent and wise. Her freedom and authority to do many things benefits her family. There are great lessons the contemporary family especially the woman can learn from this passage.

The two-fold role of the husband is to be, first, the leader in the home (Eph. 5:23); and secondly, the lover of his wife all the days of their marriage (Eph. 5: 25, 28, 33). The Lord's authority in the home has been delegated to the husband and he cannot pass it on or abdicate his duties. As the head of his home, the husband is responsible for everything that happens in his home. He has to keep his whole household under subjection (1 Tim. 2: 11-13). A biblical definition of a leader as given in Mark 10: 42 – 45 is that of being a servant. The concern of a servant-leader is to satisfy the needs of others. Therefore, the mark of leadership is humility as exemplified by Jesus Christ when he took a towel and washed the feet of his disciples as rightly narrated in John 13:15-17.

With a servant's heart, the husband in his home will lead and act like a servant even when treated like one (1 Thess. 2: 5-11). His perfect model is the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil. 2: 6-8) and he is to live for the sake of his family, always keeping his family's interests at heart and recognizing that the Lord has given him this family. To effectively lead his family, the husband has to be in close contact with his wife and children (1 Peter 3:7). He cannot lead by remote control! Like the Lord Jesus, a Christian husband is to be an example, a model, a pattern of godliness, holiness, compassion and devotion to and dependence upon the Lord. Where there is failure, confession is in order. A husband leads his family by making the right decisions and by delegating responsibilities and authority to the wife who is the

husband's helper, advisor, and in the language of the corporate world, 'a resource person and consultant' in the family affairs. He is responsible and accountable for all decisions made in the home (Eph. 6:4) and for any loopholes in the marriage/family.

Husbands are to be leaders and lovers. Leadership without love is tyranny while love without leadership is mere sentimentality. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. Three reasons are given for this act of the Lord Jesus Christ. Similarly, the husband gives himself up for his wife for three reasons, namely, first to sanctify her. This means to enable her fulfill her womanhood by being wonderful helper and to contribute beauty both physically and spiritually at every stage of the marriage and in all aspects of her life.

Second, the husband is to honour and exalt her in his own thinking, in the family circle and outside of it by being courteous and to avoid all kinds of sarcasm, contemptuous language, and unwarranted bitter criticism labeled toward her.

Third, husbands need to fulfill the mystery of unity. Husband and wife are not just two persons living together. Their lives actually do blend into one another – they actually become one if the husband loves his wife as his own body. Whatever hurts one member of the couple must hurt the other. The extent of the husband's love for his wife is that of Christ's love for the church (Eph. 5:25). He is also to love his wife as his own body (Eph. 5: 28) and to love her as he loves himself (Eph. 5:33). However, "the husbands taking the authoritative lead in marriage and wives submitting" are not popular messages in today's society. Submitting, especially to husbands who do not follow Christ is difficult but 1 Peter 3: 1-5, 7 promises that the wife's godly character and inward beauty will win over her husband more effectively than her words. This calls on the wife to be prayerful and to uphold Godly values which should permeate whole aspects of her life. It should also be noted that these verses in first Peter highlight the equal partnership of husbands and wives in God's gift of a new life.

In summary, though the husband exercises the role of authority and leadership, and the wife fulfills a role of submission, both are equal heirs in God's kingdom. Their roles are different, but equally important. So the teaching here is three-fold; first, that wives must demonstrate godly character and quiet inner beauty. Second, husbands are to love and honour their wives and be kind and gentle with them. Finally, both husbands and wives are equal partners. Both partners cannot act on their own effort and power. It is only God's grace operative in the redeemed hearts of the couple that can make a wife to be subject to her husband, and only that same grace can fill the husband's heart to rule /guide his wife in love.

The couple must bring their love to Christ (Eph. 5: 25-26). This passage exhorts husbands to love their wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word. While submission is the controlling idea with regard to the wife, love is the controlling idea for the husband. Love is implicit in the headship of the husband especially if harmony is to be maintained in the home. No husband is the head of a wife unless he loves that wife.

The fullness of Christ's love for the church, which should be a model for the husbands love toward their wives, suggests five major characteristics for all Christian men to emulate by the power of the indwelling Spirit as follows: First, Christ loved the church realistically. It was not a romantic sentiment of love that moved the Son of God to love us. Christ knew us just as we were – sinful, unlovable, and unresponding. Our only capacity for love was to direct it to ourselves. But “while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” – in love. His love was not prompted by anything in us at all. Our need and inability only added a quality of depth and utter self-giving to that love. Husbands then must love their wives realistically. This love must embrace all of the faults and failures, the unlovely and disagreeable elements. Realism is love with eyes wide open.

Second, Christ loved the church sacrificially. This indeed is the cost of love. 1 John 3: 16 says, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus laid down His life for us . . .” Jesus counted the cost of love's new creation, and paid it joyfully by His death at Calvary. Husbands must love their wives sacrificially. They must be willing to give up all that is required to fulfill the life of the beloved. This may involve giving up some of their interests, their time, their pleasures, their ambitions and their friends.

Third, Christ loved the church purposefully. His purpose was “that he might present it to himself a glorious church . . . holy and without blemish” (5: 27). The Lord Jesus Christ leads the church in all of her growth, and directs her entire walk. He perfects the church's joy. He nurtures the church's life of holiness. The husband likewise, must love his wife purposefully. This will take time and thought, prayer and work, patience and persistence! Have the right attitude.

Fourth, Christ loved the church willfully. With no motivating cause outside of himself, God willed to love us. Agape love is not an affair of the emotion only, but is an unconditional activity of the whole personality, including the will. The mind, the heart and the will must cooperate in loving. This calls on husbands to love their wives willfully. The fact that they loved and married these wives requires them to go an extra mile in their relationship. Finally, Christ loved the church absolutely. His love for us was without limit,

without condition, and without reserve! Based on the fruit of the Spirit in Gal. 5: 22, the husbands' love must resemble the love of God. Only those husbands who are filled with the Spirit can demonstrate this kind of love to their wives.

Relationships of Children to Parents

In Eph. 6: 1 – 3, children are commanded to obey their parents in the Lord, for this is right. They should honour their father and mother – which is the first commandment with a promise, that it might go well with them and that they might enjoy long life on the earth. In verse four fathers are commanded not to exasperate their children, instead should bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. Although these verses are clear and direct in their teaching, many Christians live as if they were not in the Bible. In this “me” generation, each one fights for his or her own “rights” instead of their responsibilities. Fathers provoke their children in various ways: beating one against another, playing favoritism, labeling names on them, and nagging them – by being too strict and harsh or too lenient in such a way that children do whatever they want to do in life.

By contrast, children feel secure in a home where the father acts as the head of the family, lovingly cares for their mother, loves and respects God, and trains the children to obey God's principles. The assumption in Ephesians 4: 6 is that Christian parents, especially fathers must be true to their words, upholding Christian faith that is evidenced in their real life. Because they cannot pass on to their children what they themselves do not have or possess. Children raised in Spirit-controlled families will be “nurtured” (trained) and “admonished” (instructed) in the Lord.” They will learn the principles of God found in the bible, which everyone needs in order to live a happy / blessed and effective life (Psalm 1). Parents must live exemplary lives for their children to observe and model – being warm and loving. Solomon, the wisest man that ever lived declared in Proverbs 4:1, “Listen, my son, to your father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding.” Listening in this sense requires one to use both ears attentively, with an open mind with regard to the content of instruction.

Parents as Role Models

Children are the world's greatest imitators. Just as angry and selfish children are reared in angry, selfish homes, so living, joyful and thankful children come out of Spirit-filled homes, because they have seen these characteristics exemplified in the conduct of their parents. Integrity, honesty, industry and consideration for others are not only taught but caught by children as they grow up, if such traits appear on a day-to-day basis in the lives of their parents. The power of good example cannot be overestimated. The greatest blessing any parent can give his or her children is a consistent example in the home through actions and speech. Its

powerful impact can extend even to the third and fourth generations (Ex. 20: 5).

Parents should administer discipline too. The worst experience for any child is to regularly get his own way. But most every child tries: human nature insists on it. That is why he must learn, in the home, to control his desires by self or parental denial. If he does not receive that loving discipline from his parents, he or she will grow up to be a self-guided missile waiting for a disaster. LaHaye [5] argues that it is not possible for a child to disobey his parents at home and be obedient to God. Therefore, relationships in the family are far more important than clean homes. There is no substitute for personal, loving relationships in the family.

The stuff that we buy for our children will not take the place of relationship. We should not saturate children's lives with excessive materialism. Allow them the thrill of temporary deprivation. In this way, they will appreciate parents and life as it is. As parents relate with their children, they should enable them to cultivate their identities in Christ, develop wonderful character traits upon which they can live wisely and respectfully before God and all human beings in their communities and society. And above all, parents should guide them to foster godly relationships with others as well as their

peers. In doing so, they will learn to be responsible and honorable in life.

In conclusion, the family is the primary educational agency whereby children learn not only values and responsibilities, but also are given care and security (Deut. 6: 4 – 9). It is the context in which they develop positive attitudes through the guidance of their parents.

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