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The early Christian conceptions of family relations

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The Early Christian Conceptions
of Family Relations.

While the prevalent spirit of other-worldliness gives a clear tone to the early Christian teaching, concerning family and marriage relations, another element, namely; that of morality is responsible for very much, if not most that is introduced by the New Testament writers.

It is very evident that the leaders in the early Christian Church were engaged in a fierce warfare against this, very prevalent form of immorality. It is apparent that chastity was loosely regarded in the communities, both by the married and unmarried. Marriage vows were lightly held, and in many cases it would almost seem that new converts at times, endeavored to escape marriage obligations, on the pretense of religious scruples, where the husband or wife was not a believer.

Accordingly the leaders in the Church frequently insisted on the sanctity of marriage, evidently in order to prevent their followers from presenting a scandalous spectacle. Matthew in Chapter 19: 9 represents Christ as teaching that a man shall not put away his wife except for fornication. Neither should one marry a woman that had been put away. Mark 10:11. and Luke 16:8 likewise represent him. The author of Hebrews 13:4. says, "Let marriage be had in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled; for God shall judge fornicators and adulterers". Paul in Romans 7:2 puts the case very strongly. "For the woman that hath a husband is bound to him by law while he liveth

but if he die she is discharged". In 1 Cor. 7:27, he says to men : "Art thou bound to a wife, seek not to be loosed". In verse 10 he gives it as the Lord's command that the wife depart not from the husband, but if she do depart let her remain single or become reconciled. In the following verse he makes the same rule for men. But according to verse 5, they may separate for a time by mutual consent for prayer. In verse 12 he commands the believing husband to continue with his unconverted wife if she is content, and in the following verse the same rule is applied to wives. The language implies that they were exhorted to continue together so long as it was possible to maintain peaceful relations, but that they might separate in case religious views became the source of distracting contentions.

The question seems to have been raised by the Corinthians as to the effect upon the offspring, if one of the parents was an unbeliever. For Paul asserts in verse 14, that the unbelieving parent is sanctified (*hagasatai*), i.e. made holy, by the believing husband or wife, and thus the danger of unclean children is avoided. (The theological implications of this statement of Paul's are outside the scope of this paper).

It will be sufficient in this connection in addition to remind ourselves that one of the three injunctions placed upon the Gentile converts at the Apostolic Council was, that they abstain from fornications. Acts 15:20 .

It is thus clear that many of the early Christians lived

in the marriage state, and that the sacredness of marriage vows ^{was} were vigorously enforced. More than that husbands and wives were taught to dwell together each ministering to the needs of the other. The picture is by no means one of enforced continuance in family relations for decency's sake, or because they happened to be married and the law required them to continue. Jesus according to Matthew 19: 4-6. used these words indicating that they should be held together by the bonds of love and live in harmony as though one. "He which made them from the beginning made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife, and the twain shall become one flesh - what therefore God hath joined together let not man put asunder". Here is an under-current of teaching for loving family ties.

Peter thus exhorts the husband(1 Peter 3:7) "Dwell with your wife wisely giving her honor as the weaker vessel".

The author of Titus in 2:4, urges believers to train their young women to love their husbands. The wives were expected to live in subjection, in a sense, to their husbands. The author of 1 Peter, in 3:1,2-6, says, "Ye wives be in subjection to your husbands even if they are without the word", and then appeals to Sarah's obedience to Abraham. By following her, example they become children of "Abraham and Sarah.

In Eph. 5:22f. wives are exhorted to be in subjection to their own husbands for (verse 23) the husband is the head of his wife, as Christ is the head of the Church; verse 24, as the

Church is subject to Christ, so let the wife be subject to her husband in everything. In Titus 2:4f, the young women are to be trained to love their husbands, and their children, to be sober minded, chaste, workers at home, kind, being in subjection to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.

But on the other hand, husbands are not to lord it over their wives. We read in Col. 3:19 "Husbands love your wives", and in Eph. 5:25-33, ^{The} husbands ~~is~~ exhorted to be worthy of this leadership over the wife, to love her as his own flesh, as Christ loved his Church, and to sacrifice for her if necessary as did Christ for the world.

As to the conduct of children, they were taught to live in loving obedience to their parents, and were evidently expected to contribute to their support when circumstances made it possible. Christ, according to Matt. 15: 5-7, reënforced the commandment, honor thy father and thy mother, and called some of his hearer's hypocrites for withholding the rightful belongings of parents from them, on the pretense that it was to be given for a sacrificial offering.

From all this it is evident that there was no very wide spread expectation amongst the early Christians that the family as an institution was to be abolished, and as we shall see, there is no evidence that any of the New Testament writers considered family relations as necessarily antagonistic to the best interests of Christian development. ~~Indeed it ought to be the pre-~~

moter of Christian love and fellowship. The New Testament ideal for the Christian family where it exists is well summed up in Col. 3: 18-25, 4:1, as follows:- "Wives be in subjection to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands love your wives and be not bitter against them. Children obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing in the Lord. Fathers provoke not your children that they be not discouraged. Servants obey in all things them that are your masters according to the flesh; not with eye service as men pleasers, but in singleness of heart fearing the Lord; Whatsoever ye do, work heartily as unto the Lord and not unto men, knowing that from the Lord ye shall receive the recompense of the inheritance. Ye serve the Lord, Christ, for, he that doeth wrong shall receive again for the wrong he hath done, and there is no respect of persons; Masters render unto your servants that which is just and equal knowing that ye also have a master in heaven.

Since Paul is the only New Testament writer who treats this subject to any great extent, it is difficult to determine accurately what the Christian's ideal position was with reference to the advisability of the marriage state. In order to learn this it would be necessary to find statements which were not connected with the immoral conditions existing. And, it is not easy to know exactly what would have been said under such circumstances. Many passages indicate the belief that God had intended that man and woman should live together in the married state. Christ's words in Matt. 19:6, "what therefore

God hath joined together "also in verse 4, "He which made them from the beginning made them male and female", indicate such a belief.

The author of Hebrews in 13:4 holds that marriage may be honorable, and in 1 Tim. 5:14 the writer says, "I desire that young women(or widows) marry and bear children, which shall not give cause for reproach". Even Paul in 1 Thess. 4:4f. seems to imply that pure and proper marriage relations were divinely intended. He says, "Let each one of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in the passion of lust, as the Gentiles who know not God," clearly teaching that the marriage state might be made holy.

As before indicated these passages are brought forth to enforce morality, and evidently the allusions to the creator are made to enforce the teaching to that end.

It is evident that the emphasis upon the heavenly citizenship and the minor importance given to worldly relations, together with the notion of Christ's speedy return, led to many utterances rather disparaging to the marriage state as the ideal. Christ's most definite teaching in this regard is the passage in Matt. 19:12 concerning eunuchs, which is as follows, "For there are eunuchs which were so born from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs which were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs which made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it let him receive it".

This passage evidently teaches that if a man is thus willing to incapacitate himself or give up the marriage relations in order that he might devote himself wholly to the service of the kingdom of God, it was well for him to do so. But it could not justly be used as a foundation for dogmatic enforcement of celibacy and certainly was not so understood. On the other hand the presence of Jesus at the marriage at Cana cannot justly be used for asserting the Christian sanction of the marriage state. That could hardly be called a Christian marriage, and if it could Christ's mere presence might not express actual sanction on his part. Though had Christ felt opposed to it we should expect some expression to that effect.

Paul's teaching upon this subject is much more explicit. He takes a definite stand against marriage in his letter to Corinthians. In 1. Cor. 7:1, he says it is good for a man not to touch a woman", v. v. 8 & 8 "It is good for the unmarried and widows to remain single", and in verse 27 the same advice is given for widowers.

Societies of Virgins were springing up at Corinth, and the custom was evidently criticised. Paul, however, defends the young women for so doing, saying that it is well for them to remain single, but that the virgin might marry whenever the opportunity and the inclination presented themselves without sin.

It is true that in 1. Cor. 7:29, Paul calls their attention to the fact that the time is shortened and the future life is near at hand when the earthly relationships including those

of the family will be done away. It is also true that in verse 9 he seems to teach that the marriage relations should be avoided except when they are necessary to prevent immorality. Nevertheless it seems necessary to say, that had it not been for the gross lewdness of the times, Paul's teaching upon this subject might have been very different. His opposition was not based upon the ground that the marriage state in itself was sinful. Indeed he distinctly asserts otherwise in verse 28. "If thou marry, thou hast not sinned", but he adds, verses 28 to 33: "You that are married shall have tribulations, and I would spare you". In 32 ff, he says, "He that is unmarried is careful for the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord, but he that is married is careful for the things of the world how he may please his wife". And in 2. Cor. Paul finds it necessary to urge believers not to marry unbelievers. In 6:14 he says, "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers, for what fellowship have righteousness and iniquity, light and darkness, believers and unbelievers." As already shown this does not urge the dissolution of marriage contracts already made, except where the unbelieving member was discontented.

In view of what has been said the practice and teaching as indicated in the New Testament upon this subject may be briefly summarized as follows:-

First, some allowances must be made for rhetorical effect in Paul's vigorous sayings recorded in the seventh Chapter of First Corinthians. Second, he was aiming against immorality,

and not against marriage. Third, that the general view prevailed in the divinely ordering of the sexes, and the marriage state. Fourth, that the kingdom of heaven and citizenship therein were considered as most important, and that marriage relation, as well, as all other worldly relations were secondary, and if permitted, were to contribute to that end. Fifth, if any one were willing to sacrifice this relationship for service to the kingdom, either for devotional purposes as did some of the eunuchs and virgins, evidently, or for public service as did Christ and St. Paul, and if at the same time he was able to do this without being disturbed by unsatisfied appetites, it was considered as an eminently Christian act.

De Mont. Goodyear