

Out with Patriarchy!

1 Corinthians 7.1-16

The marriage bed must be a place of mutuality – the husband seeking to satisfy his wife, the wife seeking to satisfy her husband. Marriage is not a place to ‘stand up for your rights’. Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out. (The Message translation of I Cor 7.3-4)

I often have cause to be thankful for the way in which my parents brought me up, to be a practical person in all sorts of ways. I have many memories of doing woodwork and household repairs alongside my Dad and Grandad – indeed, I’ve got quite a lot of the tools that both my Dad and Grandad used in my garage and I’m really pleased to have them and to use them from time to time.

I also remember being in the kitchen alongside my Mum and learning how to cook and bake and do the washing and ironing. Often Mum would say things like ‘you won’t necessarily have a wife to do these things for you, so you need to be able to do them yourself!’.

Many societies in the world today are based on Patriarchy and the world of the Bible, both Old and new Testament was certainly Patriarchal.

What do I mean by Patriarchy? Here is one definition:

“Patriarchy is a socially-constructed system where males have primary power. It affects many aspects of life, from political leadership, business management, religious institutions, economic systems and property ownership, right down to the family home where men are considered to be the head of the household.”

I recognise that world view as one in which I grew up in the 1960s and 70s but, although there is still a long way to go, there have been significant changes in British society. I remember being described as one of the ‘new men’ because both my wife and I wanted to be actively involved in the birth of our children – men in the delivery room was still quite rare in the 1980s.

It seems to me that, as we read the letters of Paul that he was most definitely not a ‘new man’, which makes this passage all the more remarkable. Just look at the reciprocity in the passage:

V2b *each man* should have sexual relations with his own wife, and *each woman* with her own husband

V3 *The husband* should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and **likewise the**

wife to her husband

V4 *The wife* does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. *In the same way, the husband* does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.

V10 *A wife must not separate from her husband.* ¹¹ But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. *And a husband must not divorce his wife.*

In a patriarchal society and coming from someone who is often regarded as deeply patriarchal in his thinking, this is quite remarkable stuff!

Paul is being immensely counter-cultural here, even though other parts of the passage are very much in line with what we know of the culture of the day. That poses some interesting questions for me about just how ‘counter-cultural’ we are called to be as disciples of Jesus.

I’m not suggesting that Paul offers us easy answers to the questions that we face in today’s culture, but perhaps he offers us some principles. There seem to be some respects in which Paul wants the disciples of Jesus to be very much in line with their culture, but there are other respects in which he wants them to be counter culture and, it seems, their attitude towards relationships is one of the counter-cultural areas. Here, Paul seems to be painting marriage very much as a partnership of equals “each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.” V7b.

In our marriage Carole and I we see each other as equal partners, but with different gifts. It happens to be that I’m better at DIY kind of stuff around the house and garden and she is very much better than me at sewing – we can, of course each do both, but we tend to try to use our gifts and strengths to complement each other and that seems to be very much the model that Paul is offering here, except “I wish that all of you were as I am.” V7a.

Oh, it’s all deeply puzzling, isn’t it? I do so wish that the Bible would give clear and straightforward answers to today’s problems, but it doesn’t. The best we get is some principles on which we can build as we ask the question ‘If that’s what discipleship looked like to them in their day, what does discipleship of Jesus look like in our day as we strive to be ‘in Christ’?

Patriarchy is out and equality in!

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