

An invitation to love: Ephesians 5.15-33

Many thanks to Rod for today's challenging reflection!



Oh, my word! Well, I suppose that if we are looking at Ephesians someone had to get the opportunity to comment on this section. But why me??? This really is walking in ‘where angels fear to tread’!

Father Matthews, an Indian priest with whom I worked in Zambia many years ago, used to claim, with a twinkle in his eye and a huge smile on his face, that in this passage God was encouraging good Christians to drink whisky. Why?

Vv 18 – 19 “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit!!!”

Well, that’s the easy bit done with! If you’re not up to a bit more of a difficult read today, then I suggest that you stop at this point.

Now to the ‘Instructions for Christian Households’ as the New International Version calls the final section of Chapter 5. Husbands and wives, headship and all that kind of stuff that some parts of the church get so hung up on. It’s tricky!!!

If you want a detailed study of these verses there are lots available online, most of which are ‘dodgy’ in my book, but there are some good commentaries that give a clear understanding of the original context in which this passage was written and some of the issues around translation of the original Greek words and phrases, but I’m not going to betray my prejudices by recommending one. I want to leave that to you. I’m just going to ponder on what seem to me to be two key sections of the chapter for a few moments.

Health Warning

What follows is my own viewpoint and not the official stance of the Methodist church, or anyone else so far as I am aware.

1. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. V21

That sense of equal responsibility would, in its original context, have been utterly revolutionary. In many situations today the reciprocity of relationships is still revolutionary. There is still in many places an inbuilt assumption that the man is the superior partner. However, this sense of equal partner is based in the dynamic relationship of the three persons of the Trinity (not that this concept is mentioned in this passage). God is relationship, mutual relationship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That's a theme that we will probably explore a little on Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost

2. "For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." V31.

One of the great dangers in reading the Bible is that we take our own understanding of how things are, based on our own experience, and put those understandings onto the Bible rather than allowing the Bible to speak to us out of its own context and its own words and cultures and this is a classic passage where we so easily fall into that trap isn't it?



I caricature, of course, but the argument runs something like this:

- We know what marriage is, particularly the traditional view of marriage, we just have to look around us at our own experiences to see it.

- It starts with a man a woman falling in love with each other, that leads to a ceremony in which the two people make a legal contract with each other, often in the context of a beautiful church service.
- It's very much the bride's day and a day to dress up and party. That's what a wedding is and that's the start of married life.

For that reason, a man will leave his father and mother ...

The big problem with this, I suggest, is that it simply isn't what the Bible is saying, either in Ephesians 5 or in the original context from which this verse is quoted, in Genesis 2.

My question is this, "what is the reason? This verse is a quotation from Genesis 2, in which the reason is that God created woman out of the rib of the man.

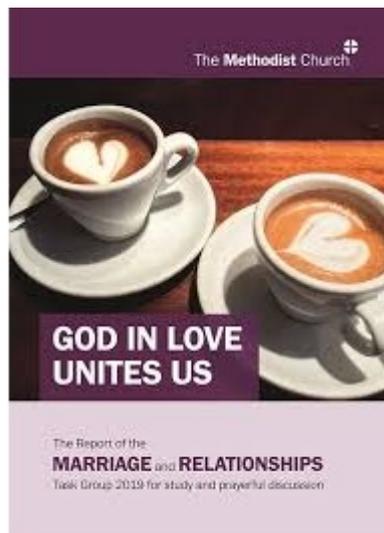
But if we look at the earlier creation narrative in Genesis Chapter 1 its clear that both man and woman are created in God's image.

So, it seems to me that the quotation, seen in the wider context, emphasises that men and women are created as equal partners, both equally in God's image. Thus, emphasising the point that the writer to the Ephesians makes in v21 about the reciprocity of human relationships.

Nowhere that I have been able to find, does the Bible talk about people 'falling in love with each other' and that leading to marriage – in fact, it talks often about what we would call 'arranged marriages'.

Nowhere can I find evidence of the Bible requiring marriage to include an act of Christian worship; that would clearly have been impossible for most of the Biblical period as the Christian Church didn't exist!

Nowhere in the Bible can I find written contracts and marriage registers. What I do find is two families coming together and having a party in celebration of two people moving in together!



For those who would want to hold onto the ‘traditional’ understanding of marriage this must be a real difficulty, but It seems to me that this reflects the profound challenge that this letter to the Ephesians would have had for its original hearers. God made people to be in relationship with each other, in a way that reflects the relationship within the Trinity, a relationship of mutuality.

All of this is of huge significance for the Methodist Church in Britain in this year and continues to be a matter of huge concern for the Anglican Church in the United States. *[And in the UK! Ed.]* Our Conference, here in Britain in the summer, will consider a report called ‘God in love unites us’ and that report moves us on from ‘traditional’ views of human relationships in some quite deep and profound ways. It seems to me that this report, if it is accepted, will move us much closer to the kind of reciprocity in human relationships that the writer to the Ephesians talks about.

When you read Biblical commentators who really seem to grapple with the original texts in their original context there is no doubt at all that this fifth chapter of the letter to the Ephesians would have been dramatic and profound in the challenges that were offered to the ‘traditional’ way of seeing things – woman as equal with me? Surely not. There is no doubt that God in love unites us will offer a profound challenge to many within the Methodist church but, if it is accepted, it will put us in a much better place to relate to people around us who, I dare to suggest, have a much more Biblical understanding of relationships in all their variety and complexity, than the Methodist Church has had for many decades!

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