

Rebuild



Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, They will raise up the former devastations, And they will repair the ruined cities, The desolations of many generations. (Isaiah 61:4)

Paradigm Makes a Difference (Part 2): Married or Living Together?

How we see something makes a difference. Take the issue of relationships, specifically the "living together" arrangement versus "marriage." What are the real differences between the two?

I asked a man who was living with his "significant other" why he did not commit to her in marriage. "Because I love her too much," he said. "How does that figure?" I asked. "Well, if I commit to her, and then later fall out of love, I would have to leave her. I would never want to hurt her like that."

For him, a loving relationship is primarily about feelings. If the feelings go away, he goes away.

Certainly this is a far cry and a cannon shot away from "to have and to hold, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live..."

I wonder how he would write the "vows" if he were to solemnize his living situation? "To have positive feelings for another, an active sex life, a friend when I need one ... for as long as we both feel for one another."

Most of us are probably reading this and shaking our heads. "Yes, it is sad. No one knows what it means to love any more - the commitment to one another through 'thick and thin.'"

But do we Christians really see relationships all that differently from those who say they love one another but refuse to commit themselves to the relationship? How many of us do not maintain an "options open" relationship with brothers and sisters in Christ? How many of us are willing to work through conflicts

instead of ending the relationship altogether? How many of us are willing to say to those within our congregations, "Because of our mutual commitment to Christ, I am committed to your best in God, and pledge my personal loyalty?"

In Covenant, We All Say, "I Do."

"Come on, now," one may insist. "You cannot compare the relationship of love and commitment between a husband and a wife with the relationships among believers. These are two entirely different things altogether."

Why is that? The Bible says that relationships within the Church are to take primacy, and actually set the pitch for the marital relationship. In fact, Paul states that the nature of Christ's union with us, and our union with one another (i.e., the Church), is actually a greater divine disclosure of God and His purposes than those within marriage (Ephesians 5:28-32). One can remain unmarried and still be "in Christ," but one cannot be in Christ and remain "unattached."

Christ came to "marry us," to "bind us together." This is the precise sense behind the Biblical word *covenant*. "This cup ... is the new *covenant* in My blood," Jesus said (Luke 22:20). All who drink of this Cup not only express their "bond" with God, but with all who *likewise* drink from it. God's Covenant has married us to Christ, making us *brothers* and *sisters*. In Covenant, all say "I do."

During New Testament times, the word *fellowship* carried with it a deep sense of relational commitment,

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thus becoming "a favorite expression for the marital relationship ... the most intimate among human beings" (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament...*). Far from being the mere sharing of a donut after "services," fellowship was understood as the sharing of God's life *in and through* His Covenant Community. John says that the point of his proclamation is that "you may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father... and Jesus Christ" (see 1 John 1:3). This kind of union with God only happens when God's People take their fellowship seriously.

Unlike the love glamorized in popular movies, Christians have a different measure as to what it means to love: "We know love by this, that Christ laid down His life for us, and [therefore] we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). Practically, this means that we are to love one another "in sickness and in health," when feelings are high or low, when easy or difficult.

Love cost Jesus His life. It will cost us ours. If our love does not require such a cost, we are not Covenanted, we are just living together.

Contemporary American Church	Biblical Model of Church	Biblical Truth(s)
<p>Relationships: Relationships are either virtually non-existent (fellow “attendees”), or are based on mutual attraction and shared life-style (people of a common economic standing), or are centered around a common task (i.e., some ministry, volunteer service). If the attraction wanes, the social standing changes, or the ministry/special volunteer service ends, relationships will usually end.</p>	<p>Relationships: The condition for relationships in the New Testament rest on Christ’s blood Covenant: not on the meshing of personality types, nor upon commitments to a common cause. The People of God related to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ because God’s Covenant made them a Family. Relationships conditioned on anything else were seen as “fleshly,” and required repentance (1 Corinthians 11).</p>	<p>“We love because He first loved us. If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also” (1 John 4:19-21).</p>
<p>Explanation and Significance: The People of God are called to demonstrate what the love of God looks like by their love for one another. It is to be a love that is committed and loyal, just like the love that God offer us. This love is the mark of a disciple (John 13:33,34). This love proves that we are believers (1 John 4:19-21, above). And it will be this quality of love that will prove God loves them, and from this motive, sent His Son (John 17:20-23). Today, when the world looks at the Church it does not see a Covenant Fellowship of People committed to love God and one another to the death; it sees an organization with an “angle” behind its preaching (to get more money, more members, more power and influence). Those outside the Church see relationships within as something that is not all that different from those they experience at work; people are together because they get something out of it (i.e., a pay check), because they have a common task (to build, or sell something), and people form subgroups only with those they most like. If someone gets promoted, the relationship often ends when he or she moves upward, or out of the company. More than this, it is sad to say, but if we are honest, we must admit that “work relationships” are often more meaningful, and have greater depth, than with whom many share the Covenant Meal of the Eucharist. How can this lack of Covenant love among God’s people ever woo the world to enter into God’s Covenant?</p>		
<p>The Difference Between Paradigms: Living together and being married can look so much alike. Does it really make any difference? Let me put it this way: If your spouse suddenly approached you and said, “Honey, I am going to divorce you, but I still want to live with you, sleep with you, do things with you, and even share my paycheck - <i>but</i>, only for as long as I get something out of this relationship.” What would you think about your spouse’s love then? How would you feel he or she valued you as a person? The reply to those questions is the same reply the world gives when asked to comment on God’s love. “He loves me <i>if</i> I do what pleases Him. But since I don’t do what He likes, He doesn’t love me.” The source for such a conclusion? The conditional, options-open relating of those who have “accepted Christ.” Unfortunately, when it comes to God’s love, the experience of many believers echoes the same wrong conclusions of the world. Yes, it makes a difference whether we relate in Covenant, or as those who only have feelings for one another.</p>		

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