

each case should be decided individually in a spirit of love. The permissive society in Africa, and in the homeland, at present makes it possible for a man to have had intercourse with a number of women before his conversion. Each of them has in one sense been his wife, yet if such a man really repents he is ultimately received into fellowship.

Apart from the Scriptural issue the main difficulty is obviously the maintenance of the wives. There are several possibilities:-

1) He could retain the first wife, send off the others, making adequate provision for them until they were able to remarry, but in so doing he would cause them to commit adultery. In many African communities such a woman would be sorely tempted to become a prostitute. A young Christian would hesitate to marry her, regarding her as a little 'secondhand', and she would be embittered by the action of her husband who she would feel was not acting in a spirit of love.

2) The man could permit the younger wives to still live in his house, supporting them, refraining from intercourse, and maintaining intimacy with his first wife, and on these grounds be received into fellowship. In this case both the man and the women would be exposed to serious temptation, jealousy would be incurred, and the world would misjudge his action.

3) He could wait until the death of one of his wives resolved the situation, but it could well mean waiting a very long time. African elders would not be prepared to baptise a man with more than one wife. They know their own people and their decision is certainly Scriptural.

Obviously these do not exhaust the possibilities, and as a servant of God I would suggest that each case should be considered sympathetically in a spirit of love, bearing in mind the principles of the Bible.

HELEN COOKE

### **3: Barriers in communication**

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For too long, Christians have naively pretended that Christian marriage is *per se*, total bliss, and utterly devoid of the many problems of the marriage next door. In the seventies, we have suddenly become aware that marriage, and—dare we say it, Christian marriage, has fallen from its pedestal. Most of us have Christian friends whose

marriage relationships, if not completely broken, are sadly impaired. It would seem a tragedy that by the time the first sign of trouble in the relationship of a Christian couple is evident to friends, a great deal of bitter estrangement has taken place and the rift between husband and wife is considerable.

The Christian husband in the 1970s is under much more attack by direct sexual stimulus than his counterpart in 1940, '50 or even '60. Television, radio, newspapers, literature and magazines, and subtle advertising of all kinds make sure that he does not escape their titillating appeal. The Bible is right when it says "No man ever hates his own flesh", and modern living makes sure that fulfilling the needs of his own flesh is the all-important success image in the life of any man.

How then does this affect his marriage relationship? Perhaps well aware of the teaching of Ephesians 5, and 1 Cor. 7, he nevertheless sees himself as a sexual tycoon, ready to bring to the girl he marries a depth of passion quite unsurpassed by his non-Christian contemporaries.

But what of his wife? Her needs are *so* different, and perhaps no one has ever told him. For example, he may feel rebuffed to discover that whereas his response to some small physical caress from his loving wife is immediate and dependable her response to such a caress by him may be quite the opposite. This puzzling female reaction may catch the young husband unawares, and it may not be his fault that he is hurt by this lack of response. It is simply that he has not understood that female response, even in a woman capable of intense passion, is at times low, or non-existent, and that this is not in any way due to his failure as a lover.

Certainly we live in an age of increased awareness and knowledge of biological function than our forbears did. The average ten year old will unblushingly be aware of the nature and function of male and female sexual organs, but he is less than well prepared for the lifelong business of living together in love and harmony. In fact he is in some instances taught that sexual intercourse is for personal gratification only, and that this has no connection with love and even less with marriage.

This is a very different premise for sexual relationships from God's description in Genesis 2: 18., and is it therefore surprising that even among Christians, the relationship is seen through worldly-wise eyes? The rich relationship of Christ and his loving bride is worth studying.

Let us look at some of the problems as they arise. It is possible that Christians have problems at the outset of marriage because they believe that sexual intercourse for the Christian couple is out before

marriage and therefore sexual arousalment is to be discouraged, by fondling, petting, etc. For a couple much in love, this can create very real tension. In addition to the yearnings of their own love and desire, they live in a society screaming its deafening message of instant self-gratification and indulgence. But then when marriage does come, sometimes the problems start, especially for the girl. For months or years she has been restraining her passions, and then may find to her horror, and his, that her response to his love-making is cold and passionless. It may take days, weeks, months or even years of patient tender love on his part to bring her, and so himself to sexual fulfilment.

Many men are unprepared for the emotional and perhaps the physical changes which will take place in a wife during pregnancy. The delicate body balance suddenly functions in unexpected ways, and in the early days of pregnancy some wives have a distaste for physical contact with their husbands. She may be feeling sick and tired, and it is at this time that selfless giving in little practical ways on the husband's part can greatly endear him to her.

In various women's conference weekends which I have attended from time to time, the topics which unfailingly cause most problems to the young Christian wife relate to family planning, and unwanted pregnancy. The young, virile, aggressive husband is ready to jump into bed and his tired and jaded young wife is exhausted with the unceasing demands of an infant or two, the housework, garden and shopping. The very thought that if they have intercourse tonight she may become pregnant again has already caused such physical resistance within her that she is not capable of any kind of response to his demands. Yet she desperately needs his understanding and support, his warmth and comfort. He misunderstands, taking her lack of physical response to mean that he himself is no longer needed by her, or attractive to her, and he goes to sleep, as she does, restless and unhappy, full of unspoken misunderstanding and blame. A few nights like this and the situation becomes tense with each partner becoming more insular, and the relationship has suddenly gone all wrong. There is often an element of conflict with regard to the use of contraceptives by Christians who feel strongly that the gift of life is God's alone. "He surely has planned our number of children, and therefore I will only conceive if it is His will". Obviously every couple will have to work this one out sooner or later and given a dozen Christian couples there may be as many different ideas as to the best solution. It may be that some artificial means of contraception is decided upon. Another couple will decide that they are not happy about this and they decide that they will plan to have intercourse at safe periods only. The all important thing is that they come to a decision together and before God, and then by His help they work out the relationship. The couple who decide to

limit their family will be asking more of one another, if they decide to do this by natural restraint, and will therefore need to have an increased amount of tolerance and grace towards one another. There is no doubt that the larger the family the more money is needed to house and feed them. The Christian couple knows that He has promised to provide, but we live in a world drastically short of food in a situation of growing unemployment. We may not like to admit it, but the question of the family budget does cause disharmony in the bedroom.

Lest young husband feels he is being unfairly represented, let us look at young wife to see if she is in fact without fault. Is she as attractive as she was? Is she as keen to please him as she was? Does she cleave to him as much as she once did? Does she fully realise how much he needs her love and response at the end of his busy day, with pressures in the business world making increasing demands upon him? To know that she will welcome him, cook him an enjoyable meal, be ready to listen to him, and be his warm and comfortable help-meet means such a lot to him at the end of a hard day. To be able to talk to her about the ups and downs of work and home, and to know that she will endeavour to bring godly advice will be of great encouragement to him.

In conversation at women's conferences, I have been saddened to find that while many couples pray together, some feel unable to pray together about any physical aspect of their marriage. Could this point to the fact that they cannot talk together to one another concerning these delicate things? Modesty on the wife's part is a desired Biblical characteristic, but at the same time within this union of two of God's children, could there not be something of the situation of Genesis 2: 25, where they were both naked and were not ashamed? It was in the plan of God that they both become "one flesh" and this complete harmony of body mind and spirit is such a superb gift of God that it must be nurtured and guarded closely.

The loud voice of Women's Lib. and the teaching of Ephesians 5 pose problems for the woman whose forcefulness of character may be stronger than her husband's. Mutual respect is a healthy component of any friendship, supremely in the marriage bond. Some women say that it is difficult for them to be in any way subject to a man who will not make any decisions, or take the lead when it comes to lovemaking. Some women have overcome this problem by concentrating on giving respect to their husbands as godly men, if not as aggressive lovers.

When Jesus said "those whom God has joined together let no man put asunder" did He mean "no man" as an outside force, or could He also have meant the partners of the bond? One is increasingly aware of the number of Christian marriages being broken by

husband and wife and not by a third party. I believe that we each must guard our marriage bond jealously from this kind of thing, so lightly viewed by the world. An attractive young wife came to me recently in tears because her married relationship was so boring and she was desperately attracted to another single man in her meeting. She knew this was wrong, but had let her feeling for him grow to such an extent that she had come near to the point of a nervous breakdown, and communication with her husband had almost ceased. He seemed unaware that their marriage was anything other than it should be, but her children were distressed and puzzled by Mummy's obvious unhappiness.

Let us not be so smug as to pretend that this could never happen to us. We are human and we are tempted, so what do we as Christians do if we find ourselves being attracted by other than our spouse? Could I suggest two practical things? a) prayer: prayer for forgiveness—we have broken God's law. Prayer for the Lord to take away this attraction from us, and a belief that He will do this. He is able. b) action: act on this belief and remove the possibility of this feeling developing. Do not go to where this person might be e.g. do not plan a holiday with this family and do not put yourself in his or her path willingly.

Then we must tackle the root cause. Why is this marriage not satisfying each partner? It is the unsatisfied partner who will consciously or unconsciously seek to be admired, needed and appreciated by another. A husband and wife need to reassure one another constantly of their love to each other and of their satisfaction in one another. Perhaps she forgets to tell him how glad she is to see him as she hears his key turn in the lock . . . does he remember courteously to thank her for taking trouble to get a tasty meal . . . does he notice when she has shampooed her hair . . . does she encourage him to relax and do what he would like to do instead of getting tight-lipped about the still half-painted bathroom wall . . . do both remember it is more blessed to give than to receive—or does each get hoarse shouting it at the other?

Are we the kind of people whom those in trouble with their sexual relationship could approach? Are we loving and concerned as a group of God's people, and as individuals, to help young Christian couples to become established as one flesh? Do we give the impression that we never have any problems, and are smugly satisfied with our lot? Or have we got so used to one another that we have quite forgotten the early days of getting used to living together.

It is not easy to be concise about an answer to the question of rectifying our guilty silence over sexual problems in marriage. Books? Yes, these certainly help, if they can be got into the hands of those who need them at the right time. *Christianity and Sexual*

*Liberation* by Peter Cousins. *I married you* by Walter Trobisch, a very readable book on the nitty gritty of day by day living as a Christian couple. *I love God and you* by Marion Stroud, deals with the unusual yet not so uncommon situation where a wife becomes a Christian after her marriage. *Marriage Problems* by Paul Tourner examines more closely some of the unhappy situations which he as a Christian psychiatrist has come across.

Conferences? Yes, and although more time is available at a weekend to get to know one another, there is much which can be accomplished on a day basis. There must be an opportunity for small group discussions with good leading questions and above all an open question session with plenty of opportunity for written anonymous questions. These sort of sessions are most useful if a good panel of down to earth speakers can be found, representing a number of different home backgrounds.

Above all, the individual counsel of a loving, concerned and approachable mature Christian friend is invaluable.

Whatever the source, all advice in the end points to the couple together working out their sexual problems. Marriage as seen in the Bible is a rich, deep lifelong commitment, for all mankind and not for Christians only. Perfection will never be attained in a fallen world, and the joining together of two imperfect people, even within the fellowship of the body of Christ, will not be all it should be.

The prayer of Paul for the Roman Christians, Romans, 15: 5, could well be the prayer for every married couple.

“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Jesus Christ, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

GEORGE E. HARPUR

## **4: A comment on abstinence mentioned in 1 Corinthians**

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The prophets were explicit in their denunciation of extra-marital intercourse of a specific kind, but offered little or no instruction, or advice, on the regulation of marital relations. This was not due to any prudishness but to the fact that they regarded the control of marital affairs as lying entirely within the competence of the persons concerned, the husband and the wife, to the exclusion of all