

2. The writer's first and overarching exhortation concerned the obligation of brotherly love, and he followed that with two examples in which love for the brethren commonly falters. Certainly that was the case with his readers, whose personal struggles were distracting them and dulling their concern for their fellow believers, many of whom were enduring the same sort of mistreatment. Having charged them to fulfill their obligation of love toward strangers (which included Gentile believers) and those suffering unjustly, the author turned his attention to the matter of *marriage* (13:4). At first glance, this exhortation might seem awkward and out of place; what led his mind from concern for strangers and prisoners to the topic of marriage? The obvious connection is *love*, which is the most basic characteristic of the Christian life – life “hidden with Christ in God.” Yet one might argue that the writer didn't mention love here, but only marriage and the marital “bed.” But the same is true of the previous two exhortations, though it's clear he had the obligation of love in mind. But if the three exhortations of verses 2-4 are related to one another as examples of love in action, does this suggest that the present marital one should also be understood in terms of *brotherly* love? If so, does it only apply to Christians who have *believing* spouses?

The writer made no such distinction, indicating that marriage *as such* is to be honored by all. (The prepositional phrase could also mean, *in every respect*.) This conclusion is reinforced by the fact his exhortation pertains to marital love, and love is an unqualified obligation. Indeed, love is the very essence of Christian ethics and morality: *God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him* (ref. 1 John 4:7-21). In Paul's words, love is the fulfillment of all of God's *Torah*. The obedient Christian life consists in “faith working through love,” and this alone shows that the writer wasn't limiting his instruction to particular marriages. Similarly, Paul opposed the Corinthian notion that believers should put away their unbelieving spouses, or at least withhold themselves conjugally from such spouses. To the contrary, Paul argued that a person's union with Christ initiates a new and *greater* obligation of love within marriage, irrespective of their spouse's faith. Believing spouse or not, the Christian is to faithfully minister Christ in his marriage, testifying truthfully to Him for the sake of love and its good fruit (1 Corinthians 7:1-16; cf. Ephesians 5:22-33; also 1 Peter 3:1-9).

The Christian ethic consists in the perpetual obligation of love, and no arena of human existence speaks to it more profoundly than the marital union. Indeed, among human relationships, none shares the depth of loving intimacy enjoyed by husband and wife; no other relationship entails a “one-flesh” union ordained and sanctioned by God Himself (cf. Genesis 2:20-24; Matthew 19:1-6). This divine ordination grants unique significance to marriage, but all the more because God devised it to speak of something beyond itself, namely the *one-spirit* union for which He created man in His image and likeness (cf. Ephesians 5:22-32 with 1 Corinthians 6:15-17, 12:12-13; also John 17:20-23).

The singular place marriage enjoys among human relationships makes it fitting that the Hebrews writer should speak to it in his closing exhortations. And especially so because of the transformation of human existence that God has brought about through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. If the human *person* is transformed in Jesus, so also is every dimension of human *life*, including marriage.

God intends marriage to testify to His relationship with human beings (which relationship is realized through Jesus, the Bridegroom), and that testimony is most true and complete in marital unions that are grounded in the spouses' personal union with Jesus, and therefore their spiritual union with one another. *Put differently, the one-flesh union of husband and wife fully accomplishes its intended witness when it exists within the one-spirit union of their mutual share in the Messiah.* The Hebrews writer didn't speak to this truth, but he addressed his readers as fellow members of Christ, and so intended that they would view his instruction in those terms. It was as *Christians* – men and women defined by new-creational life in Jesus and informed by His mind – that they were to honor marriage and keep the marriage bed undefiled.

This exhortation was especially significant to the original audience, for they lived in a world that had little regard for marriage and the marital union. Marriage was transactional and utilitarian, and the question of love rarely entered into it. Parents or other custodians arranged marriages based on social, economic or political concerns, and it mattered little (or not at all) how the prospective spouses felt about each other. In many instances, couples were married without knowing each other at all. Marriage wasn't about love, intimacy and devotion, and so married people often fulfilled that longing through extra-marital relationships. Such relationships were usually scorned and punished in the case of women, but not so with men. The ancient world was almost universally *patriarchal*, and women enjoyed few, if any, of the rights and privileges afforded to men. In some cultures, women were effectively the property of male custodians, who could do with them as they pleased. This same patriarchal structure applied to marriage, so that wives were expected to be devoted to their husband, while promiscuity (involving males as well as females) was largely acceptable and sometimes even encouraged for married men.

This was the pagan world these Hebrews inhabited, and their own Jewish culture wasn't entirely different. Yes, Yahweh's *Torah* set out a vision of female dignity unknown in the ancient world, but this vision often failed in practice. In Israel, as in the Gentile world, women had limited rights, were regarded as inferior, and were subject to mistreatment (ref. Matthew 19:1-10). But now, with Jesus' death and resurrection, God had judged the natural expressions of human life and human relationships and inaugurated a new order of things. He had transformed human existence in Jesus, the Last Adam, and this transformation was to be reflected in every dimension of human life, including male/female relationships and the institution of marriage. The world under the curse is ordered by distinctions and divisions that reflect human alienation and self-centeredness (so Genesis 3:16), but God crucified that "world" in His Son. Now, in the Messiah, there is no longer "*Jew nor Greek, slave nor free man, male nor female,*" for all are made one through living union with Him (Galatians 3:26-28; cf. Ephesians 2:11-22).

The former world order was defined by *me contra you*, but the world Jesus inaugurated is defined by *me in you* and *you in me* – a new human family characterized by the kind of unity and intimacy that characterizes the Godhead (John 14:1-26, 17:1-23; 1 Corinthians 12:12-14). It is by living out this unity and intimacy that Christians proclaim the gospel of God's kingdom and His Messiah, and their marriages should bear this same testimony to the Church and the watching world, *whether or not they have believing spouses.*

And yet the reality was that many in Christ's body were failing in this regard. Within two decades of Jesus' ascension, Christians were already toying with the idea that there is greater sanctity in a life of singleness and celibacy (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:1-40; 1 Timothy 4:1-3), and increasing Gnostic influence in the churches added to the confusion by minimizing and even disparaging everything pertaining to physical life in this world. Indeed, hadn't Jesus and His apostles spoken against the flesh as the enemy of the spirit (ref. Mark 14:38; John 6:63; Romans 8:1-13; 1 Corinthians 5:4-5; Galatians 5:16-17, 6:7-8; 1 Peter 4:6; etc.)? These factors and others worked toward a confused and erroneous perception of marriage and its place in the Christian life.

These Hebrews doubtless had their own struggles regarding marriage, but it would be a mistake to conclude that the writer's only concern was that they hold marriage in high regard and honor their marital vows. For there is nothing peculiarly "Christian" in such instruction; indeed, people can be faithful in their marriage and still fall short of the writer's exhortation. He was calling for more than a committed marriage free from infidelity; he wanted his readers to view their marriages – and marriage itself – through the lens of what God had accomplished in Jesus and their own relationship with Him.

This perspective makes good sense in the case of two believing spouses. For marriage speaks to the one-Spirit union between Jesus, the Bridegroom, and His Church, and this same one-Spirit union exists in the relationship of the believing husband and wife. They are members of one another in the shared Spirit entirely apart from their marriage, and this *essential* union simply finds further expression in their *marital* union. They who are one-Spirit in the Lord now become one-flesh as husband and wife. In their case, then, it is easy to see why it's so important that marriage be honored in principle and in practice, not least by upholding the sanctity of the marriage bed: *The marital union of two Christians expresses their essential, everlasting union in Christ by His Spirit. Therefore, to denigrate or falsify the former is to denigrate and lie against the latter.*

The Hebrews writer was jealous for his readers' abiding love and faithfulness to their Lord, and there could be no such faithfulness apart from holding marriage in proper regard. And this includes faithfulness respecting the marriage bed. This means honoring the truth of the one-flesh union of husband and wife through marital *intimacy* on the one hand, and through marital *fidelity* on the other (1 Corinthians 6:13-7:5). Both aspects are critical to truthful and faithful testimony within marriage, and God will judge those Christians whose marital behavior lies against the truth that marriage signifies.

All of this seems clear enough in the case of two believing spouses, but what about Christians who find themselves "unequally yoked"? These readers were Jews who had embraced Jesus as Messiah, and surely some of them (women as well as men) had Jewish spouses who didn't share their conviction. *How could such marriages testify to Messiah's "marriage" to His people and the new-creational paradigm of "I in you and you in me"?* The answer is that all Christians have the same obligation to testify to Jesus' union with His Church by their marital love and fidelity, regardless of their spouse's faith. Where both spouses are believers, they build each other up in Him; where a believer is married to a non-believer, this faithfulness bears Christ's fragrance in the hope of salvation.