"Acquire a Wife in Holiness and Honor" (1 Thess 4:4)
Christian Marriage in the New Testament

Prof. Pheme Perkins
Boston College

Synopsis of Paper:

First century Christians lived in a world where marriages were contractual arrangements between families, not personal choice. High mortality rates and easy divorce made it likely that individuals would marry more than once. For slaves, former slaves and others from the laboring class, marriage in the full legal sense was not possible. Many of the first Christians who heard Paul's teaching on marriage may have been living in family relationships that were technically not marriage but concubinage. Though governed by Mosaic law and tradition, Jewish marriages were also a matter of legal contract and social custom much like their non-Jewish contemporaries.

Examples for the Pauline letters provide glimpses of how Christians began to redefine marriage. Two considerations played a key role: (a) Jesus' criticism of divorce as a concession to human weakness, not God's intention in creating male and female; (b) recognition of the communal body of Christ and the physical bodies of its members as a zone of holiness in which God's Spirit is present. Paul's moral instruction asks his converts to conduct themselves with the holiness appropriate to persons worshipping in a temple. Marriages that included the sexual fidelity of partners to one another are part of that holiness (1 Thess 4:3-8; 1 Cor 7:1-5). The Pauline disciple who penned Ephesians transforms the routine "household code" ethic in which the wife as inferior submits to her husband and he in turn exhibits a benevolent love toward her found in Col 3:18-19. Ephesians crafts a vision of marriage made holy by the self-sacrificing love of Christ for the "pure bride", the Church (Eph 5:22-33). One also finds cases in which the

Pauline letters seek to regulate actual situations of celibacy, divorce, marriage and widowhood as they impacted local churches (1 Cor 5-7; 1 Tim 5). In seeking a renewed appreciation of the sacrament of marriage in the 21st century, we would do well to distinguish between such immediate pastoral regulations and the larger vision of Christian holiness as lived in the Spirit-filled Body of Christ.

Introduction

For most of human history – and even in many traditional cultures today – the 21st century pre-occupation with marriage as a source of personal fulfillment, as a private matter of commitment between the two individuals rather than a familial and social arrangement. To consider marriage as an arena in which the equal rights or responsibilities of the husband and wife are constantly negotiated would likewise seem quite alien. No one in the first century asking "who could marry" would imagine same-sex unions – though they knew that attachments between males, married or not, could involve long-term homo-erotic relationships. The questions about who could marry in the world of the New Testament involved issues of blood relationships, complicated in cases of blended families; citizenship; social class; kinship ties; enslavement or freed status of one or both parties. Given the participation of non-citizen crafts persons, of slaves and freed-persons and the like in early Christian house churches, many of those addressed as "married" might be living in a relationship technically known as concubinage (Osiek & MacDonald: 23). Despite social disapproval of such relationships, masters – and less frequently documented – mistresses married slaves whom they had manumitted (Osiek & MacDonald: 101-103). The early Christian preference for believers as marriage partners (already 1 Cor 7:39) led Pope Callistus, a freedman himself, to sanction marriage between high-status Christian women

and low born Christian men in the early 3rd century C.E. (Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 9.12, with disapproval).

Such considerations remind us of the need to differentiate between the "ideal marriage" as represented in legal codes and moral exhortation and marriages as they were being lived. Studies of family dynamics in the Roman period show that women enjoyed considerable independence and authority in ordering their households and the lives of their children. The all inclusive power of a familial patriarch may remain on the books but such dominance was not the experience of most women and men. Such studies also show that the highly praised "husband of one wife" or "wife of one husband" (see the requirements for *episkopos* in 1 Tim 3:2) must have been a rare phenomenon. Ease and frequency of divorce, early mortality (for women in childbirth) leading the widowed to remarry and the more diffuse social expectation that adults establish households all contributed to complex "serial marriages". Since children belong to their father's household, what modern sociologists refer to as blended families of step-siblings would also be commonplace. Some evidence even exists in Jewish sources for males taking another wife, while the first remains in the household, though divorcing to marry another as presumed in Jesus' sayings against divorce (Mark 10:11) was the ordinary pattern (Ilan:88).

It is reasonable to infer that the gap between lived experiences of marriage and socio-cultural ideals embodied in legal codes and moral treatises was as wide for first century Christians as it is for the 21st century congregation – even though the understanding of personal relationships and social obligation is quite different. Social scientists can be enlisted to tell us how modern Christians respond to ideals depicted in symbolic language and sacrament. Canon lawyers and marriage tribunals to devise ways in which the ideals enshrined in Church law should be effective in our communal life. We have no such resources for the first century.

Recognizing the difference between discourse, whether in legal or philosophical forms, that represents a cultural ideal and that which refers to actual life, whether in evidence gleaned from private letters, legal documents or epigraphic data from funerary monuments, prevents misuse of the New Testament passages. Some texts provide instances of what appears to be a new ideological perspective in which Christian marriage will be distinguished from the common socio-cultural understanding (e.g. 1 Thess 4:3-8; Eph 5:22-33). Others a glimpse of attempts to provide what Jewish tradition refers to as *halachah*, application of Torah, or in the Christian case application of the community's ideals, to the practical life of believers (e.g. 1 Cor 7:1-16, 36-39; 1 Tim 5:3-16). The need for such rulings is associated with a deep-seated Jewish perception that the life of God's people should represent a holiness appropriate to the divine. Hence Paul will make quite an unusual move when he characterizes the unbeliever married to a Christian and the children of such a relationship "made holy" (1 Cor 7:12-14; Gillihan). Jewish halachic rulings treated marriage with a non-Jew as a source of impurity. When Josephus was given a captive woman as wife by Vespasian, any sons born of that union were disqualified from the priesthood (*Vita* 414; Ilan: 73).

Though concern for the holiness of the people of God motivates Jewish views about licit and illicit marriages, their marriage contracts, expectations about behavior of the partners and divorce are similar to the larger culture (Satlow:12-20). Marriage is not a peculiarly religious activity or ceremony in the Jewish community until a much later period – perhaps in response to Christian developments. Satlow argues that even rabbinic legal discussions should not be treated as reflections of actual practice. He suggests that the rabbis invented legal forms and ritual for Jewish marriage and then the larger community had to be persuaded to adopt them (Satlow: xx; 162-81). This development might be analogous to the tensions which 21st century Christians

experience. On the one hand, powerful socio-cultural developments, especially in the legal sphere, have broken free of traditional views of marriage and the religious convictions associated with them. On the other, Christians hold that marriage as sacrament was in some sense given by God for the growth in holiness of God's people. If Jesus could argue that Mosaic provisions for a divorce decree were accommodation to human weakness not God's intent (Mark 10:2-9), then a similar distinction might apply to contemporary legal developments.

Another meta-story about Christian origins that has taken hold in the media presents the emergence of what would become orthodox Christianity as teaching and practice imposed from above by monarchic bishops. Combined with the view that religious convictions are the individual's own responsibility, this perspective undermines public confidence in any traditional teaching. To consider the examples from the Pauline letters is to go back to the first attempts at shifting the understanding of marriage away from the cultural and legal sphere into the religious dimension of life lived in holiness. The Pauline examples are particularly instructive because they include both symbolic or ideological commitments to a distinctive view of marriage and some efforts at specific application of those ideals. Paul, himself, acknowledges the need for Christian halachah. Paul acknowledges that the Lord rejected divorce – or, at least, divorce followed by remarriage (1 Cor 7:10; Loader: 165-66) – but not all cases can be decided on the basis of that saying of Jesus (1 Cor 7:12, 25).

As examples of ideal paraenesis, we will consider Paul's general instruction to new, non-Jewish converts in Thessalonica (1 Thess 4:3-8) and the Christianizing adaptation of the Household Code on marriage by the author of Ephesians (Eph 5:22-33). As examples of practical applications, Paul's halachah on marriage in 1 Cor 7 and the rules for widows in 1 Tim 5:3-16.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

The moral exhortation addressed to a fledgling non-Jewish church in 1 Thess 4:3-8 serves as a reminder of instruction previously received from the apostle (1 Thess 4:1-2). Holiness, God's will for believers, requires sexual restraint. The language employed refers to males. Each person is to acquire or get his own "vessel" (= wife). Though some exegetes have read the use of "vessel" instead of the simple term woman/wife here as a general reference to controlling sexual urges, the verb "get" and possessive "his own" along with Paul's comment about marriage in contrast to sexual immorality in 1 Cor 7:2, make it more likely that Paul is referring to marriage specifically (Malherbe: 226). Lack of a comparable exhortation to women may be due to the presumed audience or to the cultural fact that women were married at a young age whereas males were closer to thirty.

Similarly the further specification not to "defraud one's brother" is subject to diverse readings. Some exegetes assume a change of topic from marriage to business, since the term "thing" could be commercial. However Malherbe argues that the larger context demands a single focus on sexuality and holiness. Therefore the fraud in question would have been adultery (Malherbe: 231-33). Adultery was viewed as an offense against the woman's husband or his property. Hence the peculiarity of Jesus' statement that a man who divorces his wife commits adultery against her in Mark 10:11. Matthew 5:32 has a version more in line with cultural conventions. The husband forces her into adultery – based on the assumption that the divorced woman has no option but to marry someone else. However Jesus originally formulated the case, he likely sought to reorient the audience's general acceptance of divorce rather than to create new legal rulings in the style of the Pharisees for example (Davies & Allison: 532).

Jewish authors routinely assumed that sexual immorality went hand in hand with worship of gods and goddesses (e.g. *Jubilees* 25:1; Rom 1:24-26). Whether there was an actual difference in behavior between Jews living in Greco-Roman cities and their non-Jewish neighbors can be debated. Scholars have found inscriptions giving the rules for private cult associations honoring gods like Zeus, savior, that also demand sexual restraint. Members are to limit sexual activity to their own wives (or husbands). They are not to commit adultery with another man's wife or to tolerate contraception, abortion or exposure of infants (Ascough: 66-67). As a Jew, Paul would presume that non-Jewish converts had to learn a new regard for sexuality and marriage just as they had to turn from idols to the true God (1 Thess 1:9-10).

On the other side, Paul's audience may have been familiar with similar rules in regional cult associations. Therefore Paul's teaching would not be entirely foreign. Ascough suggests that the larger framework in which such rules are perceived distinguishes Paul's perspective from a devotee of "Zeus savior" or some other pagan deity. In the pagan cults, the reason for sexual restraint was ritual purity. An individual's immoral conduct defiled the community and elicited the deity's anger. Consequently the god would not be receptive to the sacrifices offered and might even retaliate against the group as a whole (Ascough: 67). In Paul's religious universe such ritual purity only concerns Jewish priests associated with the Temple in Jerusalem. He routinely uses the language of liturgical holiness to refer to the ethical orientation of one's character (e.g. Rom 12:1-2). The latter, an emphasis on change in character which is contrary to routinely tolerated behavior in one's social context, brings Paul's view closer to that of philosophical moralists than the rules of cult associations. Stoics would expect a person devoted to philosophy to have control of the passions and to confine sexuality to marriage.

Paul distinguishes himself from the moral philosophers by introducing the category of holiness rather than reason as the motive for transforming Christian behavior. Holiness suggests two sides to the relationship: God's presence to believers in the Spirit and their efforts to live on the basis of that holiness (Malherbe: 228-29). Because he understands marriage as God's intention for humans from their creation, Paul does not have to engage in the philosophical discussions over why (civic duty) the sage should marry at all (Malherbe: 237). Though Paul's non-Jewish converts remain part of the world of small time artisans in the city, holiness signifies the two respects in which they now dissent from its ethos. They have abandoned the cults of gods and goddesses and have undertaken a comparable moral reform in their lives. They have faced persecution for these convictions already (1 Thess 2:14-16).

This example demonstrates that Christians had to learn that marriage was a matter of "holiness and honor" intimately connected with one's relationship to God. That pattern of convictions points forward to what the Church will define as sacramental. Adultery aside, there was little social disapproval for males whose sexual activity was not confined to their wives. Prostitutes and one's own slaves provided ready outlets for both heterosexual and homosexual proclivities. Our modern climate has as much sexual promiscuity as the first century, though the ancients would be shocked to find "respectable women" acting out their sexuality on the same basis as their brothers. Not that they thought women incapable of such activities – the ancients generally thought women as a group incapable of rational control of their desires. The failure lies with the family. However from the Christian perspective suggested by 1 Thess 4:3-8 that shift makes little difference. Instead of addressing a purely male audience as Paul does, the exhortation to holiness and honor in marriage today must speak to both men and women. Some of Paul's symbolic categories do not translate to the 21st century as easily. We have no cultural or

emotive ties to holiness as ritual purity. No one is brought up as ancient children were exercising caution in religious settings lest an offended god or goddess visit disaster on the community. Our understanding of reason and emotion is shaped by psychology, not Stoic philosophy. So making a persuasive case for Christian marriage as sacrament requires putting this foundational understanding in terms that address the 21st century.

1 Corinthians 7

The socio-economic demographic of the church at Corinth contributes to a number of difficulties which Paul confronts in dealing with that community. Before turning to questions they had posed in a letter to the apostle (1 Cor 7:1), he confronts two forms of sexual immorality, an incestuous marriage with a step-mother (1 Cor 5:1-5) and the use of prostitutes (6:12-20). Paul hints that the community even takes some pride in the member living with his step-mother (5:2) – presumably a wealthy patron. Those associating with prostitutes consider such relationships under the Stoic philosophical category of indifferent matters. Paul offers another holiness image, that of the body as the temple of the Spirit, to counter the claim that what is done with the body is of no consequence to the individual's real self (6:19). Paul insists that incest and sexual immorality (= use of prostitutes) defiles the communal body of Christ (Gillihan: 729). The incestuous man is to be formally separated from the community (5:3-5). No specific penalties are proposed for those who use prostitutes. Nor does Paul address the very real likelihood that both male and female slaves who are Christians (7:21-22) will be forced to engage in sex with their owners or employed as prostitutes. Told to be obedient and unconcerned about one's slave status, Paul's sexual ethic places the Christian slave in a double-bind (Glancy). Failure to comment on such abuse may have been the consequence of a general recognition that slaves had no choice in the matter. Even though slaves did form relationships equivalent to marriage, they

could not be considered married. Some slaves may have hoped that a sexual relationship with a free-born person could lead to manumission (Osiek and MacDonald: 113).

The questions which the Corinthians posed in their letter to the apostle come from an unexpected direction. Apparently some people have concluded that Christians should refrain from any sexual contact with women – even that with their own wives. They may have proposed divorce as a means to achieving this goal. Though Paul's defense of marriage as God's intended mode of sexual expression for men and women (1 Cor 7:2-4), is identical with his ordinary teaching as we have seen, his personal option for celibacy appears to have contributed to the arguments against marriage being advanced by some at Corinth (vv. 8, 38; Collins: 253). In addition Paul introduces women into this discussion at certain points. Although some of Paul's conclusions retain the androcentric focus of his earlier comments (e.g. vv.36-38), others indicate that women, themselves, may have taken the initiative in disposing of their own lives. Cultural studies have shown that women had some freedom in determining marriage partners for themselves -- at least in the case of a second marriage -- and in arranging marriages for their children (Ilan: 80-83). A women whose social status is superior to her husband's would often be responsible for major decisions affecting the household as may have been true of Prisca and Aquila (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3-5; Acts 18:1-3; 18:18-19:1; Osiek and MacDonald: 29-35).

Though the Corinthians' question is reflected in a slogan about men (v. 1), Paul immediately directs the "on account of sexual immorality" argument for marriage to both genders (v. 2). The symmetry continues in the halachah which formulates conditions under which husband and wife may refrain from sex (vv. 4-5). Paul then introduces a distinction between what is "command" and "opinion" (v. 6). The context is problematic. We know from 1 Thess 4:4, that Paul would consider his advice that each person ought to have his or her own

spouse to be "command", that is, God's ordering of human life. He has appealed to Gen 2:24 in the earlier argument against using prostitutes so Genesis remains in the background of the discussion (Collins: 254). Is the "opinion" Paul's halachic proviso that a couple may abstain for a limited time in order that one or both may be devoted to prayer (so Collins: 260)? If so, then Paul's next remark appears to undermine his earlier defense of marriage. It would be preferable for all to be celibate as he is, but God has given the charism of celibacy to some and of marriage to others (v. 7). Paul expands on that remark with the judgment that the unmarried (males?) and widows would do well to remain so, a suggestion that is contrary to cultural expectations.

Those who lack the requisite charism for celibacy should marry (vv. 8-9). Paul repeats essentially the same point again. At verse 25 he introduces the command/opinion distinction in that context. The missing command in that setting is not Torah (= Genesis) but a word of the Lord (= Jesus). Even for those who have not yet been married, "concerning the virgins", celibacy is preferred but marriage is not a sin (vv. 25-29). Finally the halachah on marriage concludes with advice for the Christian widow. She is free to marry if she wishes – but "in the Lord", that is, to another Christian. However, she would do better to remain as she is (vv. 39-40a). Although Paul returns to what he calls an opinion in concluding (v. 40b), his affirmation that this statement comes from one who has "God's Spirit" makes it more than a "take it if you like" proposition. He is not claiming a monopoly on spiritual discernment, since Paul has insisted throughout that either marriage or celibacy is a valid choice (Thiselton: 606).

At this point Paul might appear to have given considerable ammunition to an ascetic devaluing of marriage such as that apparently proposed by the Corinthians' letter to Paul. Another line of argument begins in verse 10. It depends not upon Paul's judgment but upon the Lord's command, though Paul must use that command as the basis for his own halachah in verse

12. Unfortunately Paul does not cite the Jesus tradition as he knew it. The versions as we have them stem from the evangelists writing a generation later. Paul's summary of the Jesus tradition involves two judgments. A woman should not be divorced. If she is, she should not remarry. Doing so would render her an illicit marriage partner for her original husband according to Torah (Deut 24:1-4). Paul first speaks in a convoluted fashion about a woman separating from her husband before concluding with the direct statement that a man should not divorce his wife. This tactic suggests that the concrete situation he is addressing might involve women who have divorced their husbands or are considering such a move (Collins: 263-64). They could even be acting in response to the same ascetic ideology represented in the opening slogan.

The significance of Jesus tradition for Paul's own halachah becomes evident in the convoluted logic by which he deals with questions raised by Christians married to non-believers in vv. 12-16 (see Gillihan). The tight connection between idolatry and sexual immorality in Jewish sources as well as Paul's earlier emphasis on the holiness of a believer's body might lead to the conclusion that Christians ought to divorce non-Christian partners. However Paul insists that the Lord's command overrides such considerations. Given the ease with which either spouse could initiate a divorce, Paul differentiates between the Christian and non-Christian parties. A Christian divorced by a spouse unwilling to live in harmony with a believer should be free to remarry (v. 15). However the real case at issue appears to be Christians concerned about remaining married to unbelievers. That issue is resolved in the summary point that concludes the section (v. 16).

Paul's supporting rationale has generated much confusion among both ancient and modern commentators unfamiliar with the first century Jewish legal reasoning behind it. Even if some persons from Corinth's Jewish community were part of the Corinthian church (so Gillihan:

712), the argument may have been fairly opaque even for its initial audience (Gillihan: 741). The "sanctify" or "make holy" language found in this text also belongs to Jewish legal texts about betrothal and licit or illicit marriage partners. Offspring of an illicit union were considered unclean and barred from assembly of Israel (Deut 23:3; 4 Q Flor l i, 2-4. Their impurity might even be a threat to the holiness of the land (Lev 18:6-18). In his concern for halachah which respects the Lord's teaching, Paul exploits this terminology to reverse its usual assumptions. Marriage to a non-believer does not render children impure persons who are to be excluded from the holy assembly. Nor is such a marriage unholy or illicit per se. Instead the believer's marriage to a non-Christian spouse is to be treated as licit as a consequence of the Lord's instruction. This acceptance of the non-believing spouse fits in with Paul's insistence upon crossing other boundary lines elsewhere, Jew and non-Jew, male and female, slave and free person (Gillihan: 731).

The thicket of practical problems which Paul faces in 1 Cor 7 are clear evidence of fluidity in early Christian views about marriage. Greco-roman cultural conventions, Jewish convictions and halachah, Jesus traditions and the experience of Christian assembly as the body of God's Holy Spirit all play into the equation. Tossed into the mix one finds the new possibility that it is good for those to whom God gives a different charism to remain celibate – not simply "unmarried" as that might be the occasion for the internal corruption of lustful passions or sexual immorality with prostitutes. Paul's distinction between command, God's intention and Jesus' word, and opinion shaped by spiritual discernment reflects the on-going task of pastoral theology. Both married and celibate Christians have a gift of God's Spirit that contributes to the holiness of the communal body of Christ.

Tradition in the Pauline Churches (Eph 5:22-33 and 1 Tim 5:3-16)

Ephesians and 1 Timothy provide glimpses of the views about Christian marriage in the generation after the apostle's death. The complications introduced by celibacy as a good because of the freedom it offers one devoted to the Lord appears to have moved to the margins. The conventional household code ethic (Eph 5:22-6:9; adapted from Col 3:18-4:1) reinforces the validity of socially acceptable households headed by males (husband, father, master) and incorporated willing subordinates (wives, children, slaves). A primary qualification for the *episcopos* of a local community is his ability to order his own household (1 Tim 3:4-5). Perhaps because of this emphasis upon well-ordered Christian households, celibacy – which disrupts the household structures as does radical discipleship in Jesus tradition (e.g. Matt 8:19-22; Luke 9:57-62) and reiterated in tales of abandoned marriages from apocryphal acts (e.g. *Acts of Paul and Thecla*) – is not directly encouraged. Instead it appears only at the margins. Given the demographics of marriage and death in childbirth, both women and men can be widowed early on (cp. Anna in Luke 2:36-37). So the requirement that an *episcopos* be "husband of one wife" (1 Tim 3:2) not only prohibits divorced (and remarried) candidates, it also
turns a Pauline recommendation for those who are widowed to remain single into a requirement. 1 Timothy 4:3 accuses false teachers of forbidding marriage. Perhaps they did so along the lines of the slogan that Paul rejected in 1 Cor 7:1 (Marshall: 541).

The phrase "husband (or wife) of one wife (or husband)" is a cultural commonplace for the marital ideal of having had only one spouse. It reappears among the list of qualifications for elderly women to be enrolled widows in the Christian community (1 Tim 5:9). Like the *episcopos*, such women must have demonstrated an ability to manage their households in bringing up children, making the household a place of hospitality and relief for the poor (v. 10). By setting an age qualification of "not less than sixty years old", 1 Tim 5:9 practically guarantees

an empty category. Disparaging remarks about the liability to sexual promiscuity, gossip, influence by false teachers and the like among younger widows leads 1 Tim 5:11-14 leads the author to reinforce the normal cultural pattern by which widows are expected to remarry as soon as possible. Should such a woman lose her second husband, the "one husband" rule would exclude her from being enrolled as a widow. Some interpreters find that conclusion so distasteful, that they infer that 1 Timothy is using the cultural code only as a designation of sexual fidelity to her marriage partner(s) (so Marshall: 594). Not the slightest hint of Paul's own view that widows who wish to remain unmarried are to be encouraged has been retained in this discussion. Therefore 1 Tim 5:3-16 appears to be a retrenchment from Paul's own view. The author asserts that the behavior of younger widows has brought the community into public disrepute (1 Tim 5:15) as well as being a financial burden that families who could support these women are evading (1 Tim 5:4, 16). However it is probable that these women have taken Paul's advice to heart and engaged in a life-style of celibacy and evangelism outside the confines of the patriarchal household structures (Osiek and MacDonald: 230-33).

1 Timothy is responding to the pastoral situation in the last decades of the first century C.E. Its use of standard polemics makes it difficult to determine what its opponents actually taught. Written for Pauline churches in Asia Minor, Ephesians celebrates the Pauline vision of salvation and Paul as the heroic martyr. Many sections of this ornate rhetorical piece draw on the language of Colossians as well as other Pauline letters (especially Rom and 1 Cor). There is no indication of internal dissent or division in its sweeping vision of the Church as universal body of Christ who not only unites Jew and non-Jew but embraces the powers of the cosmos and God's preordained plan for all humanity to be drawn into Christ.

Its expansion on the traditional household code picture of marriage taken from Col 3:18-19 paints a poetic image of Christian marriage that coheres with the symbolism of the earlier theological section of the letter (v. 23b, "Christ as head of the church, himself savior of the body", 1:22-23; 4:15-16; MacDonald: 327). Though readers have no difficulty with subjection of cosmic powers (or the Church) to Christ as head of the body, many 21st century Christians have difficulty with the analogy between that subordination and a woman's relationship to her husband. Yet the image as Ephesians develops it undermines any form of abusive hierarchy. As Christ's body, the Church depends upon Him for its growth (4:15-16) and is to imitate the love Christ exhibited in dying for us (5:2). Ephesians spends most of the section on the self-sacrificial love of Christ for the Church and of the husband for "his own body", his wife. This development marks a striking advance over the injunction, "husbands love your wives and do not be embittered towards them," inherited from Col 3:19 (MacDonald: 328-30).

The holiness motif which we have encountered in the earlier Pauline halachah returns in this passage. Eph 5:26-27 depicts the Church as a pure bride (of the apostle's efforts for the local community, see 2 Cor 11:2) cleansed by the death of Christ. The imagery is somewhat contorted as the bridegroom, Christ, becomes the source of the pre-nuptial bath (see Osiek). This image of the Church as an undefiled bride evokes a metaphorical pattern that runs through much of Ephesians, the contrast between the believing community and the surrounding world of darkness within which it lives (Osiek and MacDonald: 124). In applying the imagery to a husband's relationship to his wife, Ephesians 5:28-31 reflects the Pauline tradition of a sexual partner as one's own body based on Gen 2:24 employed in the argument of 1 Cor 6:15-16. While a stunning development beyond the injunctions of Col 3:19, Ephesians is less imaginative in its words for women. Why are similar injunctions about love not addressed to them? Is "love" here

presumed to be the virtue of a superior party acting beneficently toward the weaker who have no claim on it? The summary (v. 33) enjoins "love" on the husband; "fear" or "respect" (tinged with fear of offending) on the part of the wife. Perhaps because this passage takes a traditional piece of moral exhortation as its foundation, it also lacks the discussion of the erotic side of marriage found in 1 Cor 7:3-5 (Best: 560-61).

Ephesians 5:22-33 should not be presumed to provide a complete teaching about Christian marriage (Best: 559). It lacks many of those nuts and bolts problems that one encounters in those Pauline texts which are directly concerned with communal halachah such as 1 Cor 7 and 1 Tim 5. Its patriarchal assumptions coded in the semantic distinction between a husband as one who "loves" and a wife as one who "submits/is subordinate" or "fears/respects" should not be treated as immutable will of God. They are a cultural code, which requires reformulation as appropriate to the 21st century social context. However, in its poetic descriptions of marriage Ephesians points toward another facet of marriage as Christian sacrament, its openness toward the mystery of Christ's relationship to the Church. As Osiek and MacDonald point out, one should not presume that the patriarchal elements inherent in its first century context do not eliminate the transformative possibilities of this depiction. Most Christian women did not enjoy the status or freedom of the idealized Roman matrona. It is possible that such Christian imagery conferred new dignity on women who previously enjoyed little respect in or control over their marital situation (Osiek and MacDonald: 141-42).

Conclusion

Historical, socio-cultural studies of marriage and family in the world of emerging Christianity shows the situation confronted by first century believers to be every bit as complex as that in the 21st century. The New Testament authors, exemplified by the Pauline traditions, exhibit a

complex interaction of factors in shaping a Christian discourse about marriage. Some first century C.E. cultural realities are taken for granted without comment or evaluation. Others, such as diverse patterns of sexual activity apart from marriage, are rejected as contrary to God's intention for humanity as known from Genesis. To some degree Christians can also adapt arguments against disordered passions developed by philosophical moralists though holiness inherent in being incorporated into the body of Christ is not to be confused with conversion to philosophy. Still other factors are perceived by Christians to be uniquely their own, a consequence of being in Christ.

Two lines of argument have played key roles in the material that we have surveyed: (a) Jesus' insistence that marriage is a permanent relationship between husband and wife. Divorce is a concession to human brokenness, not to be accepted as routine simply because the Law permits it; (b) Christian marriage and the holiness which Christians possess as members of the body of Christ are intimately connected. This association makes marriage a religious matter, an image of God's association with humanity, in a way that is quite unlike the ordinary view of Jews or non-Jews. To what extent this shift is linked with the break with families of origin and kinship ties demanded by conversion to Christianity in the first century is difficult to say (Loader: 54). As 1 Cor 7 indicated, Christian marriage had to negotiate is distinctive identity alongside an even more radical socio-cultural option, celibacy for some of those devoted to the gospel.

The New Testament does not provide a solution for how to put the pieces together that will provide a transformative vision of Christian marriage for the 21st century. What its authors knew about the requirements for human fulfillment came from Jewish scripture, elements of popular philosophical moralizing and widely shared cultural patterns. Social networks of family, place of origin, occupation, religion and the like were given at birth. Individuality, social

mobility, individual fulfillment and shaping one's personal identity are inconceivable in that world. Twenty-first century Christians also confront a flood of information from the social sciences that contribute to their view of what should or should not be expected of marriage.

Can the New Testament authors provide some hints for making our way forward in this situation? A few possibilities come to mind. First, to acknowledge that the sacrament of marriage is for Christians. It is integrated into our experience of salvation. Like the very fact of being "in Christ" it also means rejecting choices or freedoms that others in our cultural setting have no problem with. But because it is a Christian sacrament, we should not expect non-believers to buy the program. Second, to recognize that a communal halachah as Paul (and the Jesus tradition) practice it belongs to the arena of ethical exhortation, not legal regulation. The complexity of human communal life requires the kind of discernments which Paul exemplifies when he distinguishes his opinion – guided by the spirit of the Lord – from what is command. Third, as a charism or spiritual gift, Christian marriage expects on the gift of God's Spirit. It is not confined to what human beings make of it. Finally, there is another speech appropriate to describing the mystery of a sacrament, the language of holiness and poetic symbolism that assists believers in grasping the transcendent dimensions of that experience. For many people in our congregations (and pulpits), the poetic language of the scriptures is like a foreign tongue in which one recognizes a few words and can repeat a page or two of tourist book phrases. Retrieving the power of the sacrament to transform marriage from secular legal arrangement to an experience of Christian holiness requires a renewal in Christian speech.

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