

# Reflections on Marital Breakdown in the West

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## Samevatting

*In hierdie artikel word daar besin oor die huwelikskrisis in Westerse, histories-Christelike samelewings. Hierdie artikel is gegrond in die oortuiging dat die huidige huwelikskrisis voortgegroei het uit drie kragte wat die denkklimaat in kontemporêre Westerse samelewings oorheers, naamlik die soeke na aardse geluk en selfvervulling; morele relativisme en die gepaardgaande seksuele vryheid; en die feminisme. Die outeur bedink die historiese wortels van hierdie drie kragte. Dié wortels reik terug tot die Verligting. Daarna bedink sy die wesenlike sondige geaardhede van die vrou en die man wat onderskeidelik deur die sondeval meegebring is. Dié geaardhede gedy in die huidige denkklimaat en verwoes huweliksverhoudinge. In die lig van die insig wat op die wyse verkry is, besin die outeur, 'n evangeliese Christenvrou, oor praktiese riglyne vir Christenvroue om aan God se bedoeling met die vrou in die huwelik te beantwoord.*

## 1. Introduction

We live in a time in which marital and familial relationships in historically Christian societies are falling into ruin. It has, in fact, been predicted that in these societies the marriage and family crisis will be the central issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Browning & Clairmont, 2004:viii). Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century an increasing number of married couples are struggling to make and sustain a relationship of depth and permanence. Many people are rejecting the idea of marriage, either as an institution or as a permanent relationship. More and more children are being denied the security of growing up in a stable home, and many are consequently staggering along in the darkness of alcohol and drug abuse, sexual promiscuity and even criminality.

In this article the author, an evangelical Christian woman, reflects on this crisis; its underlying historical dynamics and, with such knowledge in hand, an attempt is made to help Christian wives of today to strengthen

their own marriages. This article proceeds on the contention that the current marriage crisis is an outgrowth of three forces that are dominant in contemporary Western societies: first, the primacy of earthly happiness and self-fulfillment; second, moral relativism and the sexual freedom it implies; and, third, the feminist movement. In this article an outline shall be drawn of the historical dynamics that served to establish these three social forces. This will place the marriage crisis in its proper context. The rationale is that the historical perspective provides insight into underlying cultural beliefs, values and attitudes that have with the course of time been absorbed into accepted thought – they may even have become dogma – but which have now generated a level of crisis in Western marriages. Making such beliefs, values and attitudes explicit enables one to get outside of them and challenge them in order to return to and hold fast to that which is good (I Thess. 5:21).

## **2. The marriage crisis**

### ***2.1 Corruption of God's pattern for marriage***

God instituted marriage with Adam and Eve, and His normative pattern was one man and one woman, faithfully united for life. Throughout history and in every culture, God's pattern for marriage has been followed, and although polygamy was engaged in by some, even by the Old Testament patriarchs, "most men and women have been married – monogamous, faithful, permanent marriage" (Storkey, 1996:1). The Old Testament patriarchs engaged in polygamy, but it is not condoned in the Old Testament. In fact, the Old Testament relates the personal histories of the ancient Israelite patriarchs, and these clearly show polygamy's destructive dynamics – jealousy between wives, ranking of wives and concubines, cruelty to other wives and concubines by the senior wife, rivalry between the children, and tension for the husband as he tries to cope with multiple relationships (Storkey, 1996:49-50).

Polygamy was a corruption of God's perfect pattern. Today polygamy is illegal in all Western, historically Christian societies. Contemporary Western societies corrupt God's marital pattern by denying marital permanence and/or faithfulness. Unfaithfulness in marriage and remarriage after divorce generate the same destructive dynamics as does polygamy – jealousy and ranking between spouse, ex-spouses and/or mistresses/lovers, rivalry between children of different partners, and tension for all involved.

From Genesis 2:24, it is clear that, in marriage, couples should dedicate themselves (cleave) to each other for life. God instituted marriage as the

working out of a vow, that is, an alliance in which the couple are irrevocably bound to each other. In other words, marriage as instituted by God was “not merely a one-dimensional contract, a purely human association which may be broken at will” (Von Allman, 1963:31).

In contrast to the biblical view, marriage is no longer seen as necessarily permanent and/or requiring faithfulness. Today, the dominant view of marriage is as a purely secular contract in which the partners each define and negotiate their own terms, and such terms are not subject to God’s standard or even to common social norms (Storkey, 1996:17, 28). On this basis marital life is a constant juggling of individual rights, and when the marriage enters difficulties, the individuals have the freedom to end the marriage if they believe that it is right for them.

Today, divorce is viewed benignly as part of individual freedom, despite overwhelming evidence of the social problems, especially juvenile problems, created by divorce (Storkey, 1996:19-20). And the fashionable notion of *irretrievable breakdown*, or *no-fault divorce*, means that neither spouse need call into question his/her attitude or behaviour. Even churches tend to espouse this essentially humanistic, liberal view of divorce.

The extent of divorce and the widespread acceptance thereof points to wider cultural changes in beliefs, attitudes and values. Such changes were brought about, first, by the shift from Christianity to secularism, which brought about a change from belief in and obedience to a settled and objectively true moral code (the biblical moral code) that determined the structure and ethics of marriage to the denial of the existence of an objectively true moral code. This change established the idea that individuals are the creators of personal moral and marital codes. Another factor that brought about a change in values and attitudes towards marriage was feminism. It brought about a denigration of housewives as well as a denigration of men and masculinity. The events in Western history that served to effect these changes are discussed in the following section.

## **2.2 The undermining of marriage in the West**

### **2.2.1 The change from Christianity to secularism**

The move away from Christianity to secularism was initiated by Western philosophers’ supposed enlightenment. The idea of “enlightened” thinking originated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when René Descartes’ famous *Cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) announced a new order which would “free man from his obligation to the Divinity, and thus emancipating him for a

new form of obligation – to himself as a rational being” (Judovitz, 1988:118). Thus, Descartes established “the existence of the self as a first principle” (Curley, 1978:193-194, see also 77-78). Thereby he ushered in the period of Western history known as the Enlightenment.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment philosophers preached a doctrine of political egalitarianism and individual freedom and autonomy. The enlightened person, they said, was autonomous, ‘a law (*nomos*) to himself (*autos*)’ (Raschke, Kirk & Taylor, 1977:187), and such a person did not need the Bible. Their religious position was that of deism, namely, that “reason alone, without revelation, is sufficient to bring us to a right understanding of religion and morality” (Stromberg, 1966:117). God, they said, would not reveal anything that was not clear-cut and logical, and the only matters in the Bible that they considered as such, and therefore accepted, were divine creation and the Bible’s moral and ethical principles. The latter, the deists believed, were rooted in nature, and therefore rationally discernible by all people and binding on all people (Stromberg, 1966:117). In terms of deist logic, after creation humans were left on their own in the world, but it was a world with an objective moral order and humans were equipped with the reasoning power to discover and follow that order.

The anti-authoritarianism and individual autonomy that the Enlightenment philosophers preached have in themselves profound implications for the marital relationship, namely, the assertion of individual rights; individual happiness and self-fulfillment become the primary goals in life and in marriage. However, such implications did not manifest with the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment philosophers preached political egalitarianism. They attacked the political system of pretended rights of wealth, tradition and social status that protected an often corrupt social hierarchy (Bloom, 1987:110). They did not attack the biblical sexual and marital ethic; they considered pre-marital sex, adultery and divorce as wrong, and they upheld essential, and God-created, differences between men and women. However, they undermined reverence for God and living in an open and central relationship with God – especially among the gentry (Storkey, 1996:11) – which meant that marital love and faithfulness among the converts to Enlightenment thought were no longer understood in terms of God but in purely secular, moralistic terms. This, by its very nature, encouraged “a formal, rule-orientated response to life and to marriage” (Storkey, 1996:14), which emphasised faithfulness and permanence in marriage, but these, ungrounded in a relationship with God, were reduced to nothing more than rule-adherence. Nevertheless,

prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rules were accepted as fixed and as demanding obedience.

The moralistic, rigid rule-adherence stance to marriage became widespread during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and because this time coincided with the reign of Queen Victoria in Britain it is usually referred to as Victorian morality. During this same time Darwin's theory of evolution was widely disseminated. It transformed the agnosticism of deism into atheism, and liberal Christian theologians now preached theistic evolutionism. However, it had no immediate effect on Victorian morals. This does not mean that evolutionism has no implications for morality and marriage, but merely that such implications, like those of the Enlightenment (see above), did not immediately manifest themselves. In fact, evolutionism has disastrous implications for life and marriage – people are not created in the image of God but elevated animals governed by drives and instincts; the central meaning of marriage is not rooted in the biblical meaning of love but in sexual passion; and the prime mover behind all relationships is not God's love but pure selfishness bred by the fight for survival.

The reason that these negative implications did not immediately manifest was that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the social force of Victorian morality was extremely strong. In other words, although Victorian morality functioned primarily as a rigid adherence to rules rather than as the Christian response to God's grace, society, that is, social pressure, still imbued premarital chastity and marital faithfulness with value and authoritative weight. The social value and authoritative weight of this moral stance was rejected in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *2.2.2 The change from rule-adherence to moral relativism*

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the coercive power of Victorian morality collapsed under the weight of two theories: Einstein's theory of relativity and Freud's psychoanalytical theory. Freud's theory "had little true scientific content" and the application thereof in therapy has proved Freud's ideas to be "costly failures" (Johnson, 1991:6). In contrast, Einstein's theory was true; its truth, that is, the relativity of time, motion and space, was confirmed on 29 May 1919 by photographs Edison took of a solar eclipse. The impact of Einstein's theory on Western morality came via an invalid philosophical deduction that was drawn therefrom, and which illustrates what Popper called "the law of unintended consequences" (Johnson, 1991:3).

From Einstein's theory of relativity, the deduction was made that since there were no absolutes of time, space and motion there were also no moral absolutes (Johnson, 1991:4). This mistaken deduction caused Einstein great distress (Johnson, 1991:4), but in view of the intellectual climate of evolutionism it was perhaps inevitable that it was made. The denial of moral absolutes is inherent in the idea of evolution. A moral order can only carry enduring weight and authority when it is accepted as objective, but evolution and a fixed, objective moral order are logical contradictions. Evolution, irrespective whether one believes it to be divinely guided or not, is a process of constant change, and as such it can provide no logically coherent answer to the question of how and when an objectively fixed moral order evolved. In an evolutionary framework there can be no fixed moral rules; only social mores and conventional taboos and prescriptions that are never final, but always subject to reinterpretation and change.

The impact of Einstein's theory of relativity, namely, to extrapolate it into the moral realm, was especially powerful because its proof in the physical realm virtually coincided with the discovery of Freud's psychoanalytical theory by *avante garde* intellectuals and artists in the early 1920s (Johnson, 1991:5-6).

The discovery of Freud's theory thrust sexuality into prominence. Freud was an atheist, and he held an evolutionary model of the human individual as a creature driven primarily by sexual instincts and desires (Stromberg, 1966:337). Freud (1979) taught that an extreme conflict exists between humans' basic nature (sexual and aggressive, and located in the *id*) and the social suppression thereof (internalised in the *superego* as the personal conscience), and this conflict between the *id* and the *superego* created personal guilt-feelings which were responsible for neuroses. Thus Freud dismissed personal guilt as a mere social safety device collectively created by society to control humans' base instincts, and he equally dismissed the objectively true (biblical) moral code, which had been the principal engine of Western civilization, as a list of mere social taboos and prescriptions (Johnson, 1991:11).

The combined effect of Freud's (questionable) theory and the (invalid) philosophical deduction drawn from Einstein's theory was an easing of the pressure for sexual inhibitions as well as a diminishment of the sense of personal guilt and therefore of the sense of duty and personal responsibility on which marital permanence depends (and on which Western civilisation was built) even if it tended to rule adherence rather than the Christian response to God's grace. Initially, that is, in the 1920s,

this effect – which constituted a rejection of God’s moral order (which, as discussed in section 2.2.1, had not previously been rejected) in favour of the self as the central point of reference for choosing how to live – was limited to *avante garde* intellectuals and artists. From the 1960s it spread throughout the general populace mainly via the ideas propagated by the humanistic psychologists, for example, Maslow (1968) and Rogers (1986), and via the student counterculture of the late 1960s. The latter represented a wholesale apostasy from the respectability of traditional, and sexually normative, lifestyles (Raschke, 1980:208).

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the self had become the central concept around which marriage (and other relationships) were built; individual rights, individual freedom, individual happiness, self-fulfillment, and sex as self-gratification became the basis for marriage and other sexual relationships (Storkey, 1996:15-16). A marriage in which the self is the central concept may start off in a glow of romantic thrills, physical attraction and sexual passion. These, however, soon fade. They are not real love. Real love is self-sacrificial, a willingness to put the self second and the other first.

With self-centredness rather than self-sacrifice as marital foundation, the marital relationship disintegrates into a battle between particular and selfish wills and marital breakdown becomes inevitable. Thus, since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century there has been a clear upward trend in the divorce rate in historically Christian societies, in particular historically Protestant societies, and this trend continues unabated. Broken families, single mothers, absent fathers, remarriage and cohabitation, either prior to or as an alternative to marriage, have become part of standard Western (Protestant) culture. Another contributing factor to this state of affairs is feminism. Feminism is the topic of discussion in the next section.

### *2.2.3 Feminism and the denigration of marriage and masculinity*

Feminism, which campaigns for legal and social equality for women, originated during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the origin of feminism, which represents a radical transformation of the relations between men and women, is the Enlightenment idea that relationships in society – between ruling and being ruled, lord and vassal, patrician and pleb, aristocrat and peasant – were to be reconstructed in order to bring social justice (see section 2.2.1). The original idea of the first feminist activists, first wave feminism, was to focus “on the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women and the opposition to chattel marriage and ownership of married women (and their children) by their husbands” (Wikipedia, 2008:1). In practice, however, early feminist

activism was limited primarily to campaigns for the right of women's suffrage.

A second wave of feminism started in the 1960s together with the general spread of sexual permissiveness (see section 2.2.2). The advent in the 1960s of effective mass-produced contraceptives made women's sexual liberation possible.

Second wave feminism is radical, and its ultimate aim is to abolish gender differences, where gender refers not to physical characteristics, but to behavioural, emotional, psychological characteristics. Gender characteristics, feminists maintain, are socially and culturally constructed and conditioned, and therefore ultimately arbitrary (Ross, 2002:11). Therefore, from a feminist perspective, women should not be treated differently nor occupy social roles that differ from those of men, and if and when these occur it comes down to oppressive discrimination against women. The doctrine of second wave feminism is that women "are in thrall to 'a system of male dominance'" (Sommers, 1994:22). Since the 1960s, second wave, radical feminists, or gender feminists, have concerned themselves with ending *all* social and cultural treatment of women that differs from that of men, and they encourage women to understand their lives in terms of sexist power structures (Wikipedia, 2008:3).

The term *sexism* was coined by feminists to indicate what they maintained were "wrongs of belief or action with respect to women" (Ross, 2002:2). According to feminists, a primary wrong was the traditional marriage structure that binds a woman to being a housewife and requires her to find her identity and the meaning of her life in her husband and children (Friedan, 1963). Feminists denigrate the idea of women as stay-at-home housewives and mothers as well as the idea of wifely submission. In the name of equality, feminists have promoted a cultural climate which, first, looks askance at being a "mere" housewife and at wifely submission, and, second, encourages women to walk away from their marriage if it does not appear self-fulfilling.

Radical, gender feminists are in fact anti-marriage and anti-family. As Ph.D. scholar Kelley Ross (2002: 3) points out, they present "marriage and family as so burdensome as to approach slavery. Feminism presented the family as a kind of prison, with a working career on the outside as a kind of liberation." She continues that these feminists do not take into account that most men do not go to work for self-fulfilment, but to support their families, and that men often have to do jobs that they simply tolerate, or even positively hate, for the sake of the income.



Gender feminism succeeded in convincing lawmakers, and many ordinary citizens, both men and women, that women were an oppressed group in Western, historically Christian societies. In fact, “[m]any people believe that Christianity is the major cultural carrier of the subordination of women” (Browning & Clairmont, 2004:viii). As a result, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western societies underwent profound transformations of schools, laws, parenting and culture. The distinction between the marital and parental roles of men and women were blurred, and laws and policies were put in place to protect women from men and to advantage females in schools and in the workplace. But the resultant legal regime that gender feminism promoted is backlashing against women, in particular housewives and mothers. Ross (2002:4) points out that the laws have:

served to damage the position of housewives and mothers, with “no fault” divorce (now being rethought even by feminists), anti-discrimination law and “affirmative action” to promote women and disadvantage traditional [sic] breadwinner males in the workplace, and, just as importantly, the denigration of the very idea that a husband owes support to his wife.

Gender feminism has also created a society increasingly hostile to men and masculinity (Buchan, 2008; Kupelian, 2008; Sommers, 1994:157ff). The evidence is everywhere, especially in schools and in the workplace. Even a number of feminists – labeled “anti-feminists” by radical feminists (Wikipedia, 2008:19) – are expressing their concern about Western societies’ assault on boys, men and masculinity. The Ph.D. scholar Christina Hoff Sommers is one such feminist. In her groundbreaking book *The war against boys*, Sommers shows that:

the chic, politically correct ’90s “discovery” that *girls* are being short-changed ... is largely unsupported by either research or common sense. She goes on to show that it is actually *boys* who are not only being shortchanged, but are being targeted for radical reprogramming by a society increasingly offended by masculinity itself (Kupelian, 2008:5).

Gender feminism has bred contempt for masculinity, and patriarchy – male authority, be it as husband or as father – is derided as male abuse of power (Kupelain, 2008:1-2). But what we face in today’s families is not so much male domination as male “neglect, absence and failure of responsibility” (Browning quoted by Miller, 2004:66). Men, too, have been liberated from their old constraints of duty towards their families. The historical dynamics discussed in sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 created a cultural climate in which the self (man or woman) is the central concept around which marriage (and other relationships) are built. This cultural climate beckons both men and women to give in to the lower, ignoble and selfish impulses that always appeal to us in our earthly existence.

In today's world liberated men and women believe rights precede duties and self-fulfillment has primacy over marriage and family. For liberated women, this has meant a refusal of male headship, a career (not merely work) outside the home, and men sharing equally housekeeping and child-rearing responsibilities. For men, this has meant that marriage is viewed with suspicion, and, as Maggie Gallagher (2004:118) points out, today's men tend to think of married life as "submission to the female domain: of attachment, order, love, babies – a life lived in the service of others, a daily round of duty, no glorious last stands". Deriding marriage, many men give preference to (natural, unregenerate) masculine values such as "wilding, male bonding, retaliation, outlawing and even the more mundane 'coming and going as I please'" (Gallagher, 2004:118).

Even in today's world, a world in which feminists have made every effort to crumble gender differentiation, the fact remains that men and women have gender differences, that is, behavioural, emotional, psychological differences. Men tend by nature to be ambivalent not only to marriage but also to fatherhood (Browning, 2004a; 2004b:135-136). In contrast, women, no matter how liberated they are, tend by nature to desire children, even if they do not desire marriage. Male ambivalence is, of course, a result of the Fall (to be discussed in section 3.1), and feminism has reinforced it by denying men their traditional, and biblical, role of headship. Liberated women who denounce male headship "have no basis for claiming that men should share their desire for children or assume a responsibility for them" (Bloom, 1987:114).

Thus, the way to establish a peaceful, happy and stable home is for wives to offer their husbands marital headship (Gallagher, 2004:118), and not by way of men developing and expressing a softer, more sensitive, nurturing and feminine side, a vision propagated by feminists and the popular media. Wives must offer their husbands marital headship in such a way that it brings out their husbands' true manliness, which is a reflection of the nature of Christ who was the perfect, the real, man.

### **3 Addressing the marital crisis**

#### **3.1 *The Fall's effect on God's plan for marriage***

God instituted marriage before the Fall, and He instituted it for a specific reason. It is, of course, presumption to say *why* God did something, but from a purely human viewpoint there are obvious reasons why God instituted marriage as a life-long relationship of love between a man and a woman. Humans *need* relationships; the one feature of creation that God saw was not good was man's aloneness (Gen. 2:18). God's way of alle-

viating man's aloneness was to give him a woman – a fellow human created in God's image (Gen. 1:26), but different in a complementary way.

God ordained a need for “otherness” in the marital partner (Lee, 1977:11), and He also ordained a specific order. The man is the leader – Adam was formed first, then Eve (1Tim. 2:13) – and the woman is his “helpmeet”, that is, his helper and companion (Gen. 2:18). The respective positions that God ordained for men and women do not imply male superiority and female inferiority. God ordained complementarity and mutuality, and these are grounded in the gender differences that God created. The man was created to be the head, the protector and provider, but the woman was created to be the heart of the family. In fact, says Ginger Plowman (2006:19-20), in creating the woman's specific position in the family, God “created a role that can only be filled by the emotions, discernment, and compassion of the woman”.

Prior to the Fall, the marital partnership was perfect. The Fall warped and corrupted it. After the Fall, the man and the woman were each cursed with particular burdens.

The woman's burden was to bring forth children in pain and to “desire” her husband who would rule over her (Gen. 3:16). Viljoen (1996:23-24) and Godfrey (2004:85-86) explain that in the second part of the curse, the curse is not the husband's rule. Male leadership existed before the fall and, furthermore, the biblical meaning of *rule* is not autocracy. Christ's rule is not one of force or coercion, but of self-sacrificial love, which husbands should emulate (Eph. 5:23, 25). Even in the Old Testament, God reveals His will for men to rule their wives, not harshly, but lovingly as God-fearing men. Such men are promised good wives (Ps. 128:1-3).

Viljoen (1996:23-24) and Godfrey (2004:85-86) explain that the curse on the woman in Genesis 3:16 lies in the words *your desire will be for your husband*. In this context the word *desire* cannot mean sexual desire, because sexuality and thus also sexual attraction existed before the Fall. The word that was translated as desire was *tesûcah*. It is a rare word that is found also in Genesis 4:7 where God says to Cain: “... sin is crouching at your door, it desires to have you, but you must master it.” Thus, the curse on the woman is the heavy burden of resisting the sinful desire to control and dominate her husband. The *New Living Translation* indicates this meaning of the word *desire*. In this translation Gen 3:16 reads: “And you will desire to control your husband ...”

With regard to the man, his burden was hard work accompanied with heavy care and many worries as he must now make a living in a cursed

earthly world (Gen. 3:17). After the Fall, as Christenson (1970:40) says, the man's role as provider was a matter of heavy responsibility. In this regard, Christenson (1970:40) points out that: "Gladly would the man allow the rule to pass out of his hands – if at the same time he were released from the care and responsibility ... The number of men who have abdicated their position as heads of their households bears testimony to this in our own day." Thus, the curse on the man is the heavy burden of resisting the sinful inclination to shirk the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood. In today's cultural climate of feminism many men are content to step down and surrender to the leadership of women because if they do not do so their marriage becomes "a 'king of the mountain' contest, with the woman seeking supremacy and the man trying to retain his leadership" (MacArthur, 1982:112).

Christenson (see above) wrote about men being willing to abdicate their leadership roles forty years ago. In these forty years, males' ambivalent, even negligent and irresponsible, attitude to wife and children has become a major social problem (see section 2.2.3). Browning (2004b:135-136) refers to the "tendency of males to procreate but often be reluctant to bond with and care for children and wife" as the *male problematic*.

The fact that many men are not resisting their natural, sinful inclination to ambivalence and even negligence and irresponsibility towards wife and children is the direct result of feminism, which in turn stemmed from the ideas of egalitarianism and individual autonomy that the Enlightenment philosophers preached (see section 2.2). In fact, in the Christian West, as Von Allmen (1963:45, note 25) points out: "It is probable that the will of feminist emancipation would never have seen the light if men, in the first place, had not in general made themselves autonomous by ceasing to believe in Jesus Christ ... It can be seen that the truly Christian way to putting an end to feminist emancipation is to evangelize men."

Von Allmen wrote these words in 1951. Now, almost 60 years later, the full effects of feminism (which sprung forth from the Enlightenment ideals of egalitarianism and individual autonomy) have manifested – the erosion of masculinity, marital breakdown, and father absence and neglect. As von Allmen quoted above pointed out, evangelisation is urgently required. God's order for marriage needs to be restored.

Male headship as God's order is, however, also contested by sincere Christians (Browning, 2004a, 2004b; Cahill, 2004; Miller-McLemore, 2004; Osiek, 2004; van Leeuwen, 2004; Witte, 2004) who espouse what they call equal regard. To this author, as to others (Carlson, 2004; Chris-

tenson, 1970; Gallagher, 2004; Godfrey, 2004; Kupelian, 2008; MacArthur, 1982; Miller, 2004; Omartian, 1997; Plowman, 2006; Viljoen, 1996; von Allmen, 1963) the biblical texts of Genesis 3:16, 1 Corinthians 11:3, 8, Ephesians 5:22-24, 1 Timothy 2:13, Titus 2:5 and 1 Peter 3:1-2, 5, 6 seem to speak directly and clearly of male headship. On the other hand, the anti-headship texts of Genesis 1:26-28, Job 42:15, Acts 2:17-18 and Galatians 3:28 used by the equal regard proponents “do not seem particularly related to the issue of household management at all, even as they support the equality of women in a general sense” (Gallagher, 2004:111-112). In fact, the Bible’s teaching on the equality of men and women is not in conflict with its teaching on male headship, but reflect a coherent vision of men and women each needing the other and each equal before God but with their own distinct responsibilities before God (Godfrey, 2004:85).

Gallagher (2004) and Miller (2004) maintain that only male headship, and not equal regard, can address the male problematic effectively. As Gallagher (2004:118) says: “In its most basic form, male headship offers men an excuse to submit to the demands of family life – and to the reality that wives retain considerable power, control, and authority in the home over the daily life of the husband.” Men are aware that the home is essentially the wife’s domain, and therefore, as Gallagher (2004:118) continues, the way to get men to submit to this female domain is for women to recognise, and offer men, male headship in the home.

What does such an offer of male headship in the home entail for wives? First and foremost is the wife’s longing to *do* right rather than *be* right, and to thereby make the home a safe haven so that the “heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain” (Prov. 31:10). The second thing that is entailed is to let go of any expectations that she wants her husband to live up to. The third is to respect her husband (Eph. 5:33), and last, but definitely not least, she must pray for her husband, herself and their marriage. These are expanded on in the next section.

## **3.2 Reflections on the role of a Christian wife**

### **3.2.1 Creating a home**

Ginger Plowman (2006:19) correctly maintains that: “The woman sets the ambience of the home. If Mom delights in the role that God has ordained her to fill, she sets the stage for the other family members to do the same ... Mom has the power to make or break the family order.” The reason why it is the wife that sets the ambience of the home is that the care of the home and the children is ultimately her responsibility. This holds true for

all homes, be the woman a housewife or not, and no matter how liberated the woman may consider herself to be (Omartian, 1997:37). Martin Luther (2003:42) put it well: “In domestic affairs I am led by Katie. Otherwise I am led by the Holy Ghost.”

In today’s world, the wife’s role as homemaker does not mean she cannot work outside the home, nor does it mean that the husband cannot help with household chores and with tending the children. Since the 1970s there has been massive inflation, and fulfilling essential needs of food, housing, clothing and education is such that many mothers must work. What is, however, very difficult, if not impossible, is the idea (made popular by feminism) that women could “have it all” – a fulfilling career and fulfillment as a wife and mother (Ross, 2002:3). In fact, for most people, men and women, the whole idea of a fulfilling career is rather meaningless. For most people, men and women, a job is to make a living, and the worth of living is to have a home for one’s family and some leisure to be with and enjoy one’s family (Ross, 2002:3). Furthermore, the working environment is usually hierarchical and requires subordination to seniors and conformity to rules. Thus, as Maggie Gallagher (2004: 115) asks: “why is it that submission to husbands is now almost universally regarded as degrading to women while submission to corporate presidents is not?”

Being a homemaker, with or without an outside job, is a task entrusted to women by God, and a Christian wife finds her purpose in life – which is, as it is for all humans, to glorify God – in establishing a peaceful and stable home. She emulates the woman written about in Proverbs 31:10-31 – her supportiveness, her diligence (in and outside her home) and her sacrifice – because in doing so she serves and worships, and thus glorifies, God even in her mundane duties of life (Plowman, 2006:23). Such a wife, Martin Luther said (2003:42), is a gift from God: “God’s best gift is a pious, cheerful, God-fearing, home keeping wife to whom you can trust your goods and body and life.”

### 3.2.2 *Letting go of expectations*

A Christian married couple “consists of ordinary people with ordinary needs and failings ... and are *just as prone* to the effects of tension or difficult relationships as any other” (Lee, 1977:38). One certain source of tension is a woman who comes into marriage with expectations which the husband cannot or will not meet. Basics such as religion, fidelity and child-rearing should be agreed on prior to the wedding, and if the husband deviates from these the wife should speak about them to him, and if this has no effect she must pray about them. But for the small things in life,

things that do not really matter no matter how strongly the wife may feel about them, she should remember Proverbs 27:15: “A quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping on a rainy day.”

Stormie Omartian (1997:41) has the following excellent advice for wives:

If we try to control our husbands by having a big list for them to live up to and then are angry and disappointed when they can't, we are the ones in error ... Let go of as many expectations as possible. The changes you try to make happen in your husband, or that your husband tries to make in himself to please you, are doomed to failure and will bring disappointment for you both.

### 3.2.3 *Respecting her husband*

God requires wives to submit to and respect their husbands (Eph. 5:22-24, 33), and He expects it unconditionally; it is not qualified with exceptions. Thus, respect is expected from the wife even if the husband is not particularly worthy of respect or he has lost his Christian faith or he proves to be only a nominal Christian who does not obey God. Stormie Omartian (1997:41) ascribes God's requirement of wifely respect to the fact that for women “[l]oss of respect seems to precede loss of love and is more hurtful to a man than we [women] realize”. Disrespect will not change a man; it only serves to erode his manliness by reinforcing our culture's animosity to masculinity. However, respect, that is, behaviour and attitudes that are “fitting in the Lord” (Col. 3:18), may win him over. As is written in 1 Peter 3:1: “... you wives must submit yourselves to your husbands, so that if any of them do not believe God's word, your conduct will win them over to believe.”

The stories of Michal, King David's wife, and Queen Vashti, wife of King Xerxes of Persia, illustrate the importance that God ascribes to wifely respect. Michal showed contempt for David's dancing for joy as the Ark was brought into Jerusalem, and God's judgement caused her to be barren (2 Sam. 6:16, 20, 23). Queen Vashti refused to come at Xerxes' (public) command, knowing full well it would be most humiliating for him; consequently she lost her position as queen (Esther 1:12-19).

Respect for one's husband does not entail being a doormat nor does it mean that a wife may not voice her opinion if it differs from her husband's (Mack, 1991:181-182). It also does not mean that the husband must always get his own way. Women do not wish to be, nor is it biblical for them to be subject to autocrats. Wifely respect, as the above events recorded in the Bible illustrate, means that the wife must never humiliate her husband, especially in public, and if she feels his treatment of her was

autocratic she must speak to him privately, and gently after praying. Wifely respect means that she must contribute to his good reputation – “she does him good and never harm” (Proverbs 31:12). It means that she must build him up and support him. It means that she must never make him feel inadequate, even in the privacy of their home and even if he makes some poor decisions (Plowman, 2006:66).

### 3.2.4 *Praying for her husband, herself and her marriage*

A wife who prays for her husband is wielding a gentle tool of restoration. A wife who prays is focussing on Christ Jesus and not on herself. She is resting in God’s power to transform her, her husband and her marriage in accordance with His will. And her time with God must not be only structured time. As Ginger Plowman (2006:31) says: “God wants to hear from you anytime and anywhere ... God will meet you where you are.”

Husbands can, and do, hurt their wives’ feelings; they can be inconsiderate, irritating, uncaring, negligent and even abusive. Praying for her husband, herself and her marriage enables the wife to get beyond the hurts, and forgive (Omartian, 1997:29). Praying is especially important if the marriage appears to be breaking down. Stormie Omartian (1997:18-19) points out that in every such marriage there is at least one person, perhaps both,

whose heart is hard against God. When a heart becomes hard, there is no vision from God’s perspective ... We only see the way it is, not the way God wants it to become. When we pray, however, our hearts become *soft* toward God ... We see there is hope ... We have faith that He will restore ... We can trust Him to take away the pain, hopelessness, hardness and unforgiveness.

## 4. Conclusion

In Ephesians 4:1-3 the qualities of a Christian life are given: “... live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle: be patient bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of love.” In a Christian marriage these qualities should abound in both partners. Such a marriage is a treasure from God. Martin Luther (2003:42) said: “Next to God’s Word the world has no more precious treasure than holy matrimony.”

Marriage is a treasure from God which allows the next generation to grow up in a home of security, a home of communication and discipline, a home which provides for their joy and their holiness. And for the married couple it provides a taste of life in Eden before the Fall: “a kind of faint image



and remnant of that blessed living-together” (Martin Luther quoted by Carlson, 2004:77). A Christian marriage is the reminder that God left with humans when He sent Adam and Eve out of Eden; a reminder of the blessed time that was in paradise and which is to come on the restored earth. Von Allmen (1963:47, note 33) states it as follows: “By their union the Christian partners thus rejoin the first creation which is restored in them, and prefigure the second creation, the whole New Adam, which is anticipated in them.”

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