

WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY PROJECT

THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

Doctrinal Statement

The marriage relationship is the basis of the family, which in turn is the core of a stable society. As the primary physical analogy of God's plan for mankind, marriage, child rearing and the family are given a preeminent place in the teachings of the Bible and the Church. Although roles are defined, men and women have equal spiritual potential before God.



DOCTRINAL OVERVIEW

The Church believes and strongly teaches that marriage is of divine origin and is a sacred institution in itself. Marriage and the family picture the family relationship of God. God reveals Himself as a Family composed of two persons--Father and Son--which is now reproducing itself through mankind by the addition of sons and daughters. In like manner, mankind physically demonstrates this God-plane relationship through marriage. Man can, like God, build a family and add to it while experiencing the joys and happiness that family life involves. Paul refers to this analogy between marriage and the family and God's purpose and plan of reproducing Himself through Christ and the Church as "a great mystery" (Eph. 5:32) because it reveals the very purpose for which God created mankind.

True happiness and personal fulfillment for both sexes can result from a proper understanding and application of God's instructions concerning the roles of men and women. All people--regardless of race, nationality, social status or sex--have the same ultimate goal and are spiritually equal before God. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). God's purpose of reproducing Himself in mankind clearly applies to both male and female, because all shall be "sons and daughters" of God (II Cor. 6:18).

When it comes to the marriage and family relationships, however, both male and female have certain roles or responsibilities which are not interchangeable. In procreation the male and female roles cannot be switched. In less mechanized and specialized societies the strength of the male makes him better suited for hunting and defending the community, while the activities for which the female is most suited tend to center around the home, children, and agriculture. The children take their place in the family and community as they mature. It is not a question of superiority or inferiority but of contributing to the common goal in the way each is most able.

The modern family also requires each of its members to fulfill a certain role, whether that of husband, wife or

child. Someone has to have the final say when a decision is required. On the other hand, the sharing of responsibility based on physical strength is no longer so essential in most modern societies. There are different kinds of intelligence demonstrated by males and females (leaving the traditional question of the relative importance of environment and heredity moot), though each area of intelligence is broadly overlapping between the sexes. Natural intelligence is thus equally distributed between husbands and wives. Therefore, the wife should contribute fully to any decision even though the husband is the one who bears final responsibility.

Furthermore, just as the husband has the final responsibility for family decisions, he must also shoulder the task of seeing to their needs. He is a leader, not a taskmaster; a father and husband, not a boss; one who looks out for the welfare of his entire family and puts them before himself. He should be respected because he has earned respect. The wife and children should be willing to submit to his decisions because he has demonstrated wisdom and sound judgment and has taken their desires and suggestions into account. The wife is content to have her own desires overruled on occasion because she knows that her husband will give preference to her judgment when it is clearly the sounder. The husband should be the leader of the family, showing the same love and respect for his wife as Christ shows for the Church. A husband is instructed to love his wife as Christ loves the Church -- that is, to be willing to sacrifice himself for her in every way, for her benefit (Eph. 5:25). This basic principle can be expanded by analogy and comparison with Jesus' life and death for humanity to every conceivable aspect and area of life. Women are instructed to "be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.... As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands (Eph. 5:22-24). Paul then follows this admonition to wives with an equally strong admonition to husbands that they must love their wives just as much as they love their own bodies (Eph. 5:28) to indeed nourish and cherish their wives (v. 29). Husbands and wives are therefore to be joined to each other as "one flesh" (Eph. 5:31 quoting Gen. 2:24). It is interesting to note how much the Bible is ahead of its time in championing and upholding the equal position of women in marriage and society.

The very analogy of God's Church as the "mother" of Christians shows that from God's point of view both father

and mother have specific roles. Both are absolutely essential. The spiritual responsibility of the Church to nurture, protect, care for, instruct and even discipline God's spiritual children is analogous to the wife's responsibilities to nurture, protect, care for, instruct and discipline the family's offspring. This, of course, no more negates or diminishes the husband's responsibilities in such matters than it does God's responsibility as a spiritual Father toward His children. In addition, the Bible describes that a fundamental responsibility of a wife is to sustain the home environment ("keepers at home," Titus 2:5 KJV; "domestic," RSV).

But Proverbs 31 reveals that a woman's area of responsibility and opportunity is far broader than those who might interpret "domestic" responsibilities as only scrubbing floors and cleaning bathrooms. Instead, the ideal wife is pictured as one who has creatively developed her talents and interests. She is fully trustworthy, skilled with her hands, hard-working and industrious, intellectually stimulated, wise and kind. She has a keen sense of financial risk and responsibility (Prov. 31:16), has sharp business acumen (v. 18, 24), and is a competent administrator (v. 15). Such a woman is depicted as being "far more precious than jewels" (Prov. 31:10). (Once again, this passage evinces biblical superiority over other ancient literature in promulgating an expanded view of the role of women, thus foreshadowing and anticipating our modern era.)

Even in contemporary society, it is still normally mutually advantageous (in addition to being biblically proper) for the wife to maintain and build the domestic area while the husband maintains a job or business. But at times, especially in temporary circumstance, such as when the husband is unemployed or pursuing an education, it may be necessary to share or exchange certain duties which would usually be done by the other partner. The important thing is that the family activities be conducted in mutual love with respect and appreciation for the needs and wishes of the other (Eph. 3:21-33), and in accordance with the basic biblical principles. Many wives are completely fulfilled in caring for their homes and children. Those who have adequately fulfilled their domestic responsibilities (e.g., whose children are grown or in school) and who feel the need for further self-expression should be given the opportunity to the extent that their family situation allows. Improper suppression of any human's potential--male or

female--is both physically unwise and spiritually contrary to the plan of God.

The Bible also teaches that a healthy and joyous sexual relationship should be present within Christian marriages. God created the sexual differences and attractions between male and female for several reasons. Besides the obvious purpose of procreation, sexual relations within marriage are God-ordained as a means whereby a husband and a wife can express their love for one another (1 Cor. 7:3-5; Heb. 13:4). Any sexual relations other than with one's marriage partner (such as premarital intercourse, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, etc.) are condemned in God's Word.

Within marriage the bed should be "undefiled," meaning not corrupted by adultery or immorality (Heb. 13:4, RSV). Aside from the common-sense instruction that couples should abstain from sex during a woman's menstrual period (Lev. 18:19), the Bible--and hence the Church--has no proscriptions against specific acts of sexual relations except to teach that they must express mutual love, concern and be consistent with basic biblical principles. (Sodomasochism, for example, would be clearly contrary to such principles.)

The Church recognizes that even as God determines how large His Family will become, a couple has the right to mutually agree upon, and to determine, the size of their family. Wise methods of birth control which cannot adversely affect the body are encouraged, but such decisions are best left to the individuals and the proper medical authorities.

Because of the sanctity of marriage, the Worldwide Church of God strongly discourages divorce among its members. As a last resort, there are only three scriptural reasons why Church members may divorce each other--with subsequent rights of remarriage.

(1) Fraud: This amounts to an annulment, though divorce is usually required to terminate the marriage. The marriage covenant was made under a false pretense. One party later finds that he or she has been defrauded and decides to take action. (Deut. 22:12-21--The spirit of this scripture may be applied to other acts of fraud besides the pretext of virginity.)

(2) Illicit Sexual Activity: In Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, Jesus Christ states that "whoever divorces his wife, except

for unchastity /porneia and marries another, commits adultery." The Greek word porneia includes fornication, adultery, harlotry, homosexuality, etc.; it is best translated "unchastity" as in the RSV. When porneia has been committed, the offending party and the marital bond may be broken (Deut. 24:4; Mt. 5:31-32; 19:9), though Christians should surely be counseled to be forgiving towards their mates.

(3) Desertion: If one member of a marriage is or becomes an "unbeliever," and deserts his or her mate--not being "pleased to dwell" with her or him--the offended party is freed from obligation. He or she may formalize the separation and any subsequent divorce gives the right to remarry since "in such a case the brother or sister is not bound" (1 Cor. 7:15).

If no adequate scriptural grounds for divorce are present, the Church strongly recommends that the couple not divorce though they may choose to live separately. (If they do divorce, they should not remarry.) Reconciliation should be achieved at the soonest possible time. If this is not possible, they should remain single. If adequate biblical grounds for divorce are present, the couple may divorce if they have first exhausted all other attempts to resolve their differences.

While the Church allows its members to divorce and remarry under the above biblical conditions, it does not generally recommend it. God says he hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), and that should be the attitude of the church, its ministry, and each of its members. The church insists that every possible effort be made to reconcile offended parties. Forgiveness is an intrinsic part of the Christian character (Mt. 6:14-15) and must be given a prominent role in resolving marital problems. The Church lends its counseling services to aid in achieving such reconciliations.

Effective child rearing is also basic to the building of a strong and healthy family unit. It is as important as marriage in portraying the plan of God in that the relationship between parent and child is the physical type of the spiritual relationship between God and man.

As in other areas of the Christian life, God's Word allows great latitude of approach in the rearing of one's children within the general biblical guidelines. Of course, it is self-evident that a father and mother must clothe,

feed and shelter their youngsters as best they can within their means. For a parent to ignore these basic responsibilities is, in God's sight, to be "worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8). But the principles of proper child rearing must be far more inclusive than the basic necessities of life.

The Bible's primary admonition is that parents show deep love and manifest real affection toward their progeny, just as God does for us. This love will take many forms: protection from harm, instruction, encouragement, respect, participation in family activities, and balanced correction when necessary. The need for parents to express their love by spending much time with their children in both work and play is especially stressed by the Church. Likewise, great emphasis is placed upon the need for parents and children to communicate with one another, and to show genuine interest in each other by active listening. To this end the Church encourages its members to set aside at least one day a week for a "family night" of planned activities and recreation together.

Parents have a responsibility to provide moral and spiritual guidance for their children and to establish values consistent with the goals of Christianity, through their example as well as by formal religious instruction. The establishment and nurturing of true values and moral behavior will at times necessitate punishment for wrongdoing in the form of removal of privileges or spanking. All such punishment is done in love only (never in uncontrolled anger), is always reasonable, consistent and never injurious to the child emotionally or physically.

The proper balance in disciplining one's children is important to achieve. Two scriptures that can help define the boundaries of such balance are Proverbs 13:24 and Ephesians 6:4. In the former, parents are instructed that "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him"; in the latter, parents are cautioned never to "provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Thus parents are entrusted by God to generate and nurture physical, mental, moral, and spiritual growth in the children that He grants to their care.

Likewise, children have responsibilities toward their parents. While it is true that the obligation is first the parents to properly rear their child, it is also true that

a child is responsible for his own actions after a certain age. A child is required by God to positively respond to his parents. He must love, respect, honor and obey his genitors and guardians. In so doing, he will contribute to harmony within the home and receive for himself the blessings of obedience. Indeed, the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother" is called "the first commandment with a promise" since God states that as a result of obedience, "it may be well with you and...you may live long on the earth" (Eph. 6:2-3).

Although the building of a family is and can be a training ground for learning important spiritual lessons, God in no way commands everyone to marry. On the contrary, the apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 7:25-40 that at various times and for various reasons some may find it better not to marry. Indeed, these verses indicate that some unmarried persons may find a better opportunity to serve the Church physically and spiritually because of greater amounts of available time and fewer personal cares and concerns. Neither the married nor the unmarried state has any inherent spiritual superiority over the other, however. Everyone should evaluate his own circumstances and make his own decision in this very private and personal matter.

God is working out a great purpose here below. He has given men and women great latitude of roles and responsibilities within certain basic guidelines so they may reach their ultimate physical and spiritual potential.

