

## Aim of lesson

To provide an understanding of divine principles in marriage and family life, in particular the relationship between Christ and his family (the ecclesia), as a guide to personal relationships and behaviour of family members to each other.

## Bible background

Ephesians 5:21-6:4; (and 4:1-3); Colossians 3:18-25; (and 3:10-14); 1 Peter 3:1-7

It is essential that family relationships are seen as part of the overall behaviour of those in Christ, and the passages in brackets are general examples of how we should treat one another. God invests marriage and family with special importance and significance as we shall see; it was not his intention that there should be less love between husband and wife and children than exists between them and others.

## Preparation required

Think about the divine family of God, his Son, and the children of God, and their duties, attitudes and responsibilities to each other. You should be convinced of two things: first, that men and women are joint heirs of salvation, and are equal before God, and secondly, that, according to Scripture, men and women are made differently, and are not the same or interchangeable. Both have strengths and weaknesses. How these principles are worked out in practice is a matter for individuals - not all households will follow the same pattern. This can be a subject that generates more heat than light. Avoid attitudes such as "we would never have been allowed to do (or watch, or attend) such and such when I was your age", or that lax morals are the preserve of the younger generation - they aren't. We are inevitably the product of our age in terms of our material possessions, jobs, clothes, leisure activities and so on, but inside, the hearts and minds of men and women and children have always been the same.

This lesson deals with the basic principles of family life. You should be aware of the following three lessons so that you do not duplicate too much.

## Suggested outline of lesson

### What is marriage?

Begin by thinking about the absolute fundamentals of what marriage is about. These days it is a battered institution, struggling to survive the harm done to it by those whose marriages have failed and by those who chose not to marry but to live together.

Ask the young people what marriage is, and try to bring out two themes, with a few points under each:

It is a statement of commitment made firstly to each other, secondly to the rest of the world. By making this public statement the couple are:

- Informing other potential partners that they are 'taken' - like a 'reserved' notice on a restaurant table or a 'sold' sign on something in a sale. This is basically what a ring is, and there are obvious benefits in both husband and wife wearing one (you may like to discuss this at some point).
- Making a legal commitment to provide for each other, depending on the laws of the land in which they live.
- Potentially creating an environment in which children can be brought up.

For believers it is also a commitment before God to follow the pattern of marriage that he has laid down. It is this divine element in marriage that makes it different from ordinary human arrangements:

- God created the institution of marriage in Genesis 2.
- God intends marriage to be for life.
- He uses marriage often in the Bible as an analogy of his dealings with his people, right up to the end of Revelation, where the new Jerusalem is 'prepared as a bride adorned for her husband'.

It is however possible to make marriage sound far more complicated than it is. At its heart it is simply a label given to a relationship between a man and woman who are completely committed to each other.

### **Whether to marry or not?**

Ask the young people why so many do not marry, but live together instead. The reasons will probably boil down to one or more of:

- . The man and woman are not really committed to each other.
- . They do not expect the relationship to last, even though they would like it to, and they would rather end it without the hassle and legal costs of a divorce.
- . They don't know whether the relationship will last, but want to see what happens - maybe if it's a success they will get married.
- . They are influenced by their friends to think that marriage is not 'cool'.
- . They are put off by all the trimmings, and expense, of a traditional wedding.

Discuss the merits of attitudes like these by getting the young people to think about the nature of commitment, and perhaps to see for themselves that the first four points really do not hold water.

An uncommitted relationship stands little chance of surviving, since even 'the course of true love never runs smooth'.

Commitment is a decision, not a condition. It's not like good health, which can come and go; and it can't be half-hearted - that's not commitment. It is an absolute determination to look after the well-being of one's husband or wife, and given that sort of commitment between two people who love each other, the marriage will work.

The last of the five points is one that needs to be taken seriously, since Christadelphian weddings can be as over-indulgent as any other, and it is important to stress that the wedding itself can be divided into two parts:

- The vows before God, which are the essential element of beginning the marriage.

All the other things that go to make up a traditional wedding. These add up, broadly speaking, to an excuse for dressing up and having a party. Nothing wrong in that, of course, and a valuable opportunity for members of different families to meet and mix. The only problem is that these can detract from the important elements, and it is possible for a bride and groom to emerge from their wedding having been almost totally focused on the trimmings and without having given due thought to their subsequent life together.

### **Building a house**

The rest of the lesson likens the building up of a family in Christ to that of the construction of a real building. First of all, before any structure becomes visible, strong foundations are required. Then, the builders provide a framework of walls and a roof, and furnish it to provide comfort and security for the inhabitants. People live in it, and give it life, and warmth, and as time goes on, some of those people move out, to become home-builders themselves, leaving the original builders alone again. The analogy is not perfect, but it gives a progression to the family rather than starting off wherever we happen to be!

### **The Foundations**

Before a marriage starts and a family begins, there must be firm foundations laid. There will be difficult times ahead, which can shake a marriage in the same way that an earthquake can shake a building. The stronger the foundations, the less likely the structure is to topple. These foundations should be put in place before a marriage takes place.

Ask the class to look at the following passages, and ask them to note down in their own words these principles which reach down to the bedrock of God's word, that is, connect into some thing that is solid and immovable.

The principles which these passages illustrate are:

- Ephesians 3:14-15; Matthew 23:9; Hosea 11:1-4: It is God who is the real father. All human families exist as reflections of that between God and his people. This is not just an important piece of theory, but a practical principle which should guide everything else in family life. You may need to explain that Matthew 23:9 is not saying that we should deny our human fathers: simply that we have an even greater father in heaven.
- 2 Corinthians 6:14-16; Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5-6: sharing the same beliefs, and being prepared to be "one flesh", that is together in all things;
- 1 Corinthians 13:4-8; Ephesians 4:1-2, 15-16: having true love for each other, not selfish love, but love that is "patient, kind, not rude or self-seeking, that keeps no record of wrongs, but protects, trusts and perseveres";

- Galatians 6:2-5; 1 Peter 3:8-11; Ephesians 5:29-32: a spirit of consideration for each other, for building each other up, so that the two together are more than the sum of the parts.

These form the foundation of a marriage which cannot be shaken. If one is missing, then the marriage will tend to be unstable.

### **The Framework of the Family - Husband and Wife**

This is provided by the husband and wife together. The key passage here is Ephesians 5:21-33, supported by 1 Peter 3:1-7. Ask the class to look at these passages and draw their own conclusions, specifying the responsibilities of both partners. To whom, or what, does Paul liken husbands and wives in Ephesians 5?

The point Paul makes is that, within a marriage, there are responsibilities and duties both ways - it isn't a one-way traffic. Wives are asked to submit to their husbands, but husbands are to behave like Christ towards their wives, with the same love and care that Christ has shown for his people, to the extent of giving everything so that we might be saved. Consider this passage in Ephesians very carefully, for it has tremendous implications for marriage. Marriage "in Christ" is much more than living together. It brings a relationship between two people onto a much higher plane, because of this linkage with the attitude of Christ, his self-sacrifice, and the love between Christ and his family.

It is not fashionable to teach that the husband should be head of the family, and that his wife and children should be obedient to him, but it is the way God ordained that the family should work, and we should not avoid teaching it simply because it is not 'politically correct'. The rôle of the husband is modelled on that of God, the Father, and on Christ, the head of the church, and young men should be growing up to bear this authority, but doing so with the same gentleness, kindness and unselfishness that their Lord and Master showed.

Similarly, young women should be learning to anticipate a rôle as wife and mother, not as a chattel of her husband but as one who has freely chosen to give her love to him.

Note that just as the wife has a responsibility to provide food for the family, so (Ephesians 5:28-29) the husband has to provide spiritual nourishment. This brings a responsibility to young men before they are married, to care for the spiritual well-being of their girl-friends.

### **Children**

Children bring a house to life. They teach parents unselfishness, and should bring out all the best qualities in adults. Children need, and deserve, the love of their parents, and it is a sad indictment of our society today that so often the trust that children have in their parents is abused, and the love they yearn for is not given.

Here are some passages for the class to look up and summarise:

- 2 Corinthians 12:14; 1 Timothy. 3:4; 1 Samuel 3:13;
- Deuteronomy 4:9; Deuteronomy 6:7; Proverbs 19:18;
- Ephesians 6:1-4

The first of the above deal with the responsibility of parents to provide for their families and "manage" them properly. The second block explains that parents have a duty to teach their children God's ways, not as an imposition but for the children's good: this includes discipline. With respect to the latter, the methods of discipline may have changed, but the need has not. Lastly, we come onto what children owe their parents. The previous pattern of mutual responsibilities is as evident in parent/children relationships as it was in husband/wife relationships. Incidentally, the word translated "exasperate" in the NIV in Ephesians 6:4 is a very strong word: it means "to irritate beyond measure" and it is used on only one other occasion in the New Testament (to make angry, Romans 10:19).

### **Older People**

Older people are still members of families. One of the great losses among us is the loss of the accumulated knowledge of older people, and the continual pain and waste of younger people re-learning those same lessons. As anyone who has worked in a nursing home will testify, there are some unattractive aspects of old age, but on the other hand there is a wealth of experience and wisdom to draw from older people before minds and bodies fail. Lesson 15 in Part 1 of The Way of Life deals more fully with this subject.

### **Relevance to our lives**

This lesson has demonstrated what the principles of marriage and family life "in Christ" should be. Things

go wrong when one or more of the parties involved don't keep their side of the bargain. These issues will be discussed in a later class.

## **Prayer**

In most cases the young people you are teaching will not be married. They will have thought about the possibility and therefore should be encouraged to realise that it is never too early to pray for guidance in choosing a partner and planning a marriage. Get them to write a short prayer of their own.

## **Other suggestions for activities**

This might be an appropriate time to discuss homosexuality with the young people. Whilst we should always have sympathy with those with real problems in this respect, the students should have no doubts about God's attitude to it. (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10)