

MUTUAL ENCOURAGEMENT AS HUSBAND AND WIFE IN PASTORAL MINISTRY

By Brian H. Moore*

This occasion is called Pastors' Conference but I think of it more as a retreat than a conference because our subjects in these days are not as academic as they are personal. We are coming together as husband and wife, to be apart from the routines and the pressures of ministry and family. It is a time to consider how God is at work in our lives and to open ourselves again to the possibilities of God, to ask, "What is going on in me?" and to look at our spouse and ask, "What is going on in you?"

But what irony! Here I am without my wife! Failing to exhibit the very concept I am in theory endorsing and trying to promote! And yet, isn't this the reality of life in pastoral ministry? We conceptualize our ideals yet struggle very deeply to bring them to reality! So, what my life is saying today provides a kind of foundation for the ideals I am trying to perpetuate: if we are not careful, we tend to become a houseful of strangers. We will be going places and doing things in ministry and leave our families to care for themselves. And it is a distinct possibility that we may do so because we find less resistance from our inner selves to go out on our 'white horse' to 'save' somebody than to deal with the hardships of relating to our family members. There seems to be more immediate fulfillment and more obvious reward in exercising our Messiah-image than in being a patient spouse and creative parent.

I'm glad you have blown the whistle on yourself, that you think enough of your mate and your mutual relationship to throw off the shackles of a supposed indispensability, and that you have allowed yourselves to come to a setting where some courage to be vulnerable is required. I hope we experience some tension, if not pain, in these few days together, for it is unlikely that much of value will come without some tense or painful moments. But more than tension or pain, I hope we also experience true pleasure in being together, relating to one another and growing closer to one another as husband and wife. And for those of us who, like myself, are only partially here, I hope we will reflect upon our relationship as husband/wife and go back to our homes with new resolve to intentionally encourage one another. And, strange as it may seem, may we, in that balanced rhythm of pain and pleasure, discover the presence of God all over again in fresh ways.

I have already implied that I did not ride in on a 'white horse'; I do not come as expert or family therapist. In fact, I have wondered on a number of occasions since I was first invited why I have been invited to share in this at all! (When I am finished, you may wonder the same!) If I have any credentials, it would simply be that I am one of you and one with you, which seems to make my task that of stating those things you would state if you were stan-

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ding here and I were sitting there. My wife and I have been married 24 years. We have been parenting nineteen years so far, and expect to continue in that role for at least eight or ten more, having twin ten-year-old boys at home. We struggle with the same struggles that you do; we are in the trenches with you; I've got mud on my boots and blisters on my heel! We get weary of it all at times and dream (i.e., fantasize) of that situation where there will be few problems, few demands, few expectations, few disappointments, few bills (and plenty of money to pay them!), few pressures, and lots of motivation! But we haven't found that place yet! (The Lord hasn't called us to your church yet!) If these are sufficient credentials, then I have brought mine along, have properly signed them, and trust that you will seat me as a delegate among you!

A number of years ago, I listened to Dr. J. Grant Howard, then pastor of Camelback Bible Church of Phoenix, Arizona, address the Kansas State Sunday School Association Convention in Wichita, Kansas. He was quite involved as a marriage and family counselor. He said that, generally speaking, he could trace every marriage problem back to a failure to do at least one of the three things mentioned in Genesis 2:24: 1) leaving father and mother; 2) cleaving to one's mate; 3) becoming one flesh. That may seem too simplistic at first sight, but let us consider that text and the surrounding context as the basis of our thoughts on mutual support as husband and wife.

Before we consider verse 24, let us note how this amazing statement came to be given. Verse 18 speaks of the aloneness of man and how, in the face, of the all the 'good' things about God's creation that was 'not good'. Man names the animals, a naming that implies a kind of assessment of their nature. None of them was a proper companion for man (not even a dog!). Man is made for companionship; even 'alone with God' is insufficient! We must be careful in our counsel not to imply that someone who has suffered the loss of a mate can make God his or her companion now — Adam had God as his companion, but he was still alone!² Note, then, in the second part of verse 18, that God devises to provide the helper, literally, "a help opposite to him," "corresponding to him." How do we understand the word 'help' in this context? Help him work in the garden? Like a carpenter's helper? Help him multiply the race (he would need help!)? The 'help' corresponds to man's aloneness; man is incomplete without this 'help'. Man could, therefore, now become his true self because of the woman. This is the very beginning of human community: one man and one woman. The cell of the human community is still this. "Be fruitful and multiply" would come, the community would enlarge, but the fundamental unity in community is husband/wife. "For this reason," on this basis, we have verse 24. What reason? That man and woman are made for each other, and that together they constitute the basis of human community and mutual support. And, unless the stipulations of verse 24 are followed, this mutual support and community will be threatened. The breakdown of the cell will lead to breakdown of the body. So, to fully realize this relationship, those three areas in verse 24 mentioned by Dr. Howard must be followed through. To expand on this, I want us to ask ourselves three questions:

I. Have we left father and mother?

“For this reason a man will leave father and mother . . .” These words indicate the seriousness of belonging to each other. The relationship between husband and wife is to be exclusive. Literal violations of this are rather easy to spot: the husband, even though now living in his own dwelling with his wife, remains at the service of his parents. He still allows his parent’s demands and expectations to take priority over his family responsibility. Or, the wife has never let go of the apron strings, still showing primary emotional attachments to her mother, preferring her parents over her husband when there is a choice to be made, and generally making him feel second to them. The husband stops at his parents on the way home from work and remains there through the dinner hour, sharing the meal, lingering into the evening, while the wife has been at home, supper having been prepared, wondering where he is. He makes a habit of this, so she knows where he is but doesn’t call because that would only make matters worse. The wife, on the other hand, instead of being home at the usual hour, spends all afternoon shopping with her mother and gets home late, while he has been waiting and wondering where she is. But he knows where she is, because this happens frequently. The marital relationship suffers when there are primary loyalties that have never been transferred. Few of us in pastoral ministry have this problem in a literal way because we are usually physically removed from our parents and sheer distance helps us keep this principle if we are unable to do so otherwise. But we may have another, more subtle, problem with leaving father and mother. While we probably respect our parents, cannot and would not usually openly forsake their ways or deny their influences upon us, a problem can arise if we are unable to dismiss subconscious parental influences over us which are detrimental to our lives, our relationships or our ministries.

For example, have you ever wondered, in your down times, who called you into the ministry? Have you wondered if it really was the Spirit through the Church, or if it was mostly your mother or your father? And how much of what we do and the way we do it is directly related to the sense of father and mother looking over our shoulders? The Fall 1981 issue of *Leadership* journal contains a story by Harold Fickett, Jr., entitled “The Perfect Prodigal.”³ It is an account of a pastor whose problems with his church board, his reactions to their decisions and the like, stemmed from unresolved conflicts with his mother. Through a long process of counseling at Marble Retreat in Colorado he was able to work through the conflicts and resentments, write to his mother, forgive her and begin to be healed. Only relatively late in his experience did he “leave father and mother,” i.e. their deep-rooted negative influence over him.

The film *Amadeus* is a Hollywood version of the life of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The theme is built around the power struggle of the established court composer, Antonio Salieri, and the young threatening upstart, Mozart. Mozart had experienced disagreements and conflicts with his father, Leopold. Leopold died with these conflicts unresolved. Salieri, trying to rid himself of Mozart,

came upon the idea of exploiting the sense of incompleteness in the relationship between Mozart and his father. He induced him to compose a *requiem*. When Wolfgang was very ill, Salieri urged him, pushed him relentlessly, to finish the *Requiem* and thus drove him to his early death. According to the story, Wolfgang had never left his father, and that plagued him in life and brought him to death.

Lloyd Olgvie has written,

“I have come to believe that people select a mate in affirmation or negation of the parent of the opposite sex. This is natural, but volatile. With the mixed feelings we all have about parental influence or lack of it, we run the danger of pressing the person into a straightjacket of reincarnated expectation, or we work out unresolved tensions and hostilities of childhood.”⁴

Let us ask ourselves if we have really left father and mother. Have we been able to distinguish the blessed from the detrimental in our parental legacy and have we been able to dismiss the one and retain the other? Mutual support is best expressed by keeping this matter in perspective. There is a big difference between having our parents as “balcony people” cheering us on and their subconsciously badgering us because we are still trying to do the impossible: please them.

II. Have we learned the meaning of joint union?

“And be united to his wife,” or, “each other.” Mutual support was in the mind of God from the beginning. The literal meaning of the words is, “be glued to his wife.” Bonded! Cemented! PermaBond! The relationship is not only to be exclusive (as indicated in the first point), but permanent. Was it Aldous Huxley who envisioned a day when marriage licenses could be bought like dog tags: for a specified period of time with no regulations against keeping more than one animal at a time? Our society has not yet reached that point, but there is a spirit about marriage and its permanence which is not far removed from that.

In our relationship as husband and wife, called of God, serving in pastoral ministry, this matter of joint union has some specific applications: 1) It should alert us to the danger of flirting with those desirable women in our congregations (assuming a male pastor). We have been duly warned about the problem of transference in a counseling situation, but I believe there is a broader area of concern. These people I have in mind are those who work closely with us; they are on committees; they take interest in the work of the church; they share our concerns; they support the vision we are trying to promote. This kind of partnership in the Gospel can easily lead to an unhealthy partnership. While a strong marital relationship is a great help in this area, that alone is not enough to stay the forces of temptation. Be glued to your wife! Fight off the mental fantasies that somehow worm their way into that union and threaten to dissolve the glue! 2) There is another Lady! I have trouble with this Lady! She is at

once my delight and my greatest headache. (I'm not talking about my wife!) This Lady is always around, it seems. She is always making Herself available to me. She wants more from me than I can possibly give Her. I have had trouble with this Lady for quite a few years now. And to complicate matters, She is already married! She sometimes interferes with my marriage, but only because I allow Her to. I'm talking, of course, about the Bride of Christ.

I suppose one of the toughest challenges we face as pastors and wives is how to keep this Lady from causing our relationships to become an empty shell, a hollow formality. For one of the big problems is that we are committed to this Lady! We give our lives for Her, i.e., our time, energy, emotion, thought. She is our life! And especially when we live next door to her dwelling we've got a strenuous assignment *not* to prefer Her to one another. She keeps calling, it seems! And She is seldom boring. Someone said that boredom is the great enemy of marriage. If, then, we are bored at home, we can always go see the other Lady. And She is so tempting! She can seduce us before we know it! We get so involved with Her that we can scarcely tear ourselves away from Her. And worst of all, I think, is the truth that Gordon MacDonald stated, when he said, "It is glamorous, even heroic, to burn out, break down, and even relationally blow up if you can prove that your friend, your spouse or your congregation left you because you were faithfully discharging your call."⁵ To "cleave to one another" sometimes means saying "no" to otherwise good things, even ministry things. If we experienced half as much guilt for denying our mate as we do for saying "no" to some off-the-wall church request, maybe we would make some changes in our priorities and put wife or husband much higher on the list.

III. Are we experiencing oneness?

"They shall become one flesh." "One flesh" may refer primarily to physical union, but the Hebrew mind and thought didn't seem to divide people into categories like we do. (By the way, if our society had maintained the Hebrew view of personhood, we would probably not have the sex-related problems we now have, stemming so often from sex divorced from personhood.) The idea of "one flesh" is basically "oneness."

I am sure that we all realize that we can experience a growing apart without any serious conflict; a drift, as indiscernible as the movement of a glacier. And that will happen if we do not take deliberate measures to keep it from happening. I try to remember to put notations in my calendar every week just for my wife, reservations for just the two of us. Just a little matter to help keep us together.

Consider these suggestions and questions to help us keep and develop our oneness: 1) Obtain and read together *To Understand Each Other* by Paul Tournier, John Knox Press; 2) Ask ourselves, "Are we talking to each other?" Deep encounters rarely take place in a few moments, especially with all the distractions that assault us continually. We need hours of careful drawing

together. 3) Are we listening? 4) Is one of us paying the greater price for the success of our marriage than the other? Becoming one means that this should not be so. It is mutual encouragement that we need. 5) Are we encouraging one another? Men, we can encourage our wives by creating time and space for her to have a regular quiet time, by, reading and discussing subjects together, by referring persons to her when appropriate, talk her up whenever we can, keep her picture in plain view in our study. I heard someone say that a wife wants to hear how attractive she is while a husband likes to hear how competent he is. We can encourage one another in those areas.

Not long ago our church choir performed the musical, *Bind Us Together*. I will close with an excerpt from that, entitled, "Who Are You?"

Their hearts were broken as they told her goodbye
And they stood in the yard 'til she drove out of sight,
Then they turned to face their first day and first night
Of their last child leavin' home.

She made some coffee and he went outside
And all afternoon they never met eyes
And it was late in the evenin' when she realized
They hadn't spoken all day.

Then she looked at the photograph up over the bed
Of the children she could say she knew.
Then she looked at the stranger asleep in the bed,
and whispered, "Who are you?"

Years ago all they had was each other
They were best of friends and best of lovers,
Then their good times made them father and mother —
And they did their job so well,

Lost in the details of raisin' the kids,
Was the thing of most value that lovers can give;
Keeping each other's needs at the top of the list
Of the things they gotta do.

And he was the first to wake up next morning
In a house as quiet as a tomb.
Then he looked at the stranger asleep in his bed
And whispered, "Who are you?"

But it's not to late for fathers and mothers
To go back to bein' best friends and lovers.
It's sad when they whisper, "Who are you?"

Put each other's needs at the top of the list!
Do those loving things so easy to miss!
And don't forget to whisper, "I love you!"⁶

NOTES

- ¹This article is from an address to the Brethren Pastor's Conference held at Mason, Ohio, in April of 1988. Little effort has been made to disguise its nature as primarily a spoken message to a live audience on that occasion.
- ²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1959), 59 ff.
- ³Harold Fickett, Jr., "The Perfect Prodigal," *Leadership*, Vol. II, No. 4 (Fall, 1981), 78 ff.
- ⁴Lloyd Ogilvie, "Marriage As It Was Meant to Be" in *Make More of Your Marriage*, Gary Collins, ed. (Waco: Word Books, 1976), 22.
- ⁵Gordon MacDonald, "The Private Times of the Public Minister," *Leadership*, op. cit. 102.
- ⁶Steve Chapman, "Who Are You?" in *Bind Us Together*, Steve and Annie Chapman with Dennis and Karla Worley, arr. by Fletch Wiley (Houston: Star Song Music Publications, 1986).

