

Dear All

According to my records the next edition of Table Talk is due to be held at Villa Bethel at 12.30 pm on Friday 17th June 2005. As no one else volunteered to set topics for this session I am taking the liberty of proposing the following:

Topic 1

This is really a follow on to one of Leif's main topics for last time, proposed by Sidney.

(A) How much has the overtly military structure adopted by the church from time to time (e.g. The Teutonic Order, The Knights Templar, the Order of St John and the Knights of Malta) made it a cause of conflict and war?

(B) Jesus appears to have advocated the use of arms in certain of his sayings in the gospels (e.g. Matt 10:34 and Like 22:36). Was Jesus advocating the use of violence and armed force? Was he a political as well as a religious activist?

See also Sidney's e-mail.

Topic 2

What is the scripturally approved role for women within the church? Is this capable of being altered or amended to reflect what would be more culturally acceptable views to different ages and societies?

Topic 3

What should our attitude (a) as Christians and (b) as the church be towards divorce and the remarriage of divorced persons by and within the church?

Table Talk – 17.06.05

Topic 1

- (A) All these military orders originated in the middle ages and seemed to have their origins and basis in the religious fervour of the middle ages combined with its love of military prowess. There is no doubt that they caused and participated in even more conflict and bloodshed, but they are now either inconsequential or peaceful.

The Teutonic order are fairly symbolic carrying out ambulance services.

The Knights Templar were tried for heresy (largely because of their secret rites). The pope eventually decreed the dissolution of the order. Their property was inherited by the Order of Hospitallers.

The Knights of Malta still exist primarily in Bohemia and Italy.

- (B) I believe Jesus' instruction to the disciples to buy a sword in Luke 22:36 was to indicate to them that they would now be facing opposition of a totally different order from their first missionary journey on which he had sent them. I do not think it was intended to be a general call to arms.

I believe Jesus' comments about bringing the sword in Matthew 10:34 are intended to highlight the conflict that belief in him and Christianity would generate. He was also intending to highlight the importance of putting belief in him before everything else.

He often spoke against violence e.g. Matthew 26:52 where he said that all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Or where he advocated turning the other cheek in the Sermon on the Mount.

He was also an advocate of obedience to civil law – render unto Caesar what is Caesars.

Sidney's comments about the militancy of certain New Testament passages such as Luke 19:12-27 and Luke 21:9-10 are accurate on the face of the text, but when interpreted in the light of other passages I do not believe they imply militancy for Christians.

I believe the Luke 19 passages are about the coming of Jesus and his kingdom and urge us to use our talents for building that kingdom. The comments in verse 27 about killing Jesus' enemies do seem harsh. When faced with a difficult text it is usually a good idea to look at the description of the same events in other gospels as many events are recorded in several or even all the gospels. Here the passage is paralleled in Matthew 25, where it talks of the wicked servant being thrown out to where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. I think this means that those who do not become disciples will not enter into the kingdom, but will be excluded from it.

I think the Luke 21 passages are simply a factual description of the future from Jesus' time. I do not think they in any way imply that followers of Jesus should cause wars or revolutions.

I do think that western civilisation needs to stand firm in preserving Christian values and freedom of religion. We should not suffer ourselves to be taken over by extreme forces – such as militant Islam – which will eliminate such freedoms and impose a harsh middle ages lifestyle which oppresses and dishonours women and all who disagree.

Topic 2

There is no doubt that women have been oppressed and suppressed historically. Aristotle said, "Females are imperfect males, accidentally produced by the Father's inadequacy or the malign influence of a moist south wind." Even Jewish writers such as Josephus said, "the woman is inferior to the man in every way." Jewish men gave thanks every morning in prayer that they had not been born a woman.

It is a tragedy that the early church fathers influenced no doubt by these Greek and Jewish perspectives often wrote disparagingly of women.

At least during the 20th century the status and service of women has been changing rapidly in the West.

In the context of our topic, I think we need to focus on equality, complementarity, responsibility and ministry.

Equality

If we look at the first chapter of Genesis I think it is clear that God made (and makes) man in his own image, that he made (and makes) them male and female and that he gave (and gives) them dominion over the earth and its creatures. Thus from the beginning man was male and female and men and women were equal beneficiaries both of the divine image and of earthly rule.

However, this primal sexual equality was distorted by the fall. "Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you". Even if from the beginning sexual complementarity included masculine headship it was never intended to be autocratic or oppressive. The beauty of sexual love is praised (Song of Songs) and a good wife is praised (Proverbs 31). Many women were held up as admirable figures – e.g. Hannah, Abigail, Naomi, Ruth, Esther etc.

Jesus often received women in public even though Jewish men were forbidden to talk to women in public. Mary was the first witness of the resurrection.

Paul said there was neither male nor female (Galatians 3:28).

Sexual equality established by creation and perverted in the fall was redeemed in Christ.

Complementarity

Men and women are equal but not the same. Equality is not identity. Equality is of worth, not necessarily of role. However, there is nothing in scripture to say that women may not pursue a career or that they must do all the cooking and cleaning.

What scripture does say is that woman is to be a helper and is different from man (Genesis 2). Genesis 1 relates man and woman as equal before God, Genesis 2 relates them as different from each other. "Equal but different" may be hard to realise, but it is scriptural. The difficulty is to realise which differences are inherent and which cultural.

Responsibility

Paul adds to the foregoing the concept of masculine headship (Ephesians 5:23) and (1 Corinthians 11:3). The problem is to define what this means and to reconcile it with equality and complementarity.

Headship must be reconciled with the full equality of the sexes, but not totally denied as simply culture bound. In my view, Paul's teaching cannot be rejected as either incompatible with equality or confusing or totally culture bound.

If we reject Paul's teaching on this issue we both undermine the authority of scripture generally and particularly on such issues as homosexuality, marriage and divorce and even Christ and salvation.

I think Paul's teaching has authority because (i) man was formed before woman, (ii) Woman was formed out of man and (iii) woman was made for man. These arguments are based on Genesis 2 and not Genesis 3 – that is to say they derive from creation before the fall. Thus, they cannot be said to be changed by Jesus' redemption or the changes of passing culture.

To reconcile the issues here we must define what Paul meant by headship. I believe he meant to use the Greek word "kephale" that he chose in the sense of responsibility. I base this choice on the way in which kephale is used in Ephesians 5. - the head's attitude to the body.

Firstly, the husband is head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the saviour (Ephesians 5:23). Changing the metaphor, he loved the church as his bride and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25). Thus, the very essence of this kind of headship is sacrificial love.

Secondly, "husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies." (Ephesians 5:28). The ancients did not think of the relationship of the head to the body in modern medical terms. They thought rather of the head's integration with and nurture of the body. So Paul wrote elsewhere of Christ as the head of the church, by whom the whole body is "joined and held together" and through whom it "grows" (Ephesians 4:16; Colossians 2:19).

The husband's headship of the wife, therefore, is a headship more of care than control, more of responsibility than authority. As her head he gives himself up for her and cares for her and looks after her.

Why should a woman be cared for? I think we need to embrace the apostle Peter's description of women as "the weaker sex" (1 Peter 3:7). Within the ambit of weakness here we probably mean physical strength and those characteristic feminine traits of gentleness, tenderness, sensitivity, patience and devotion.

It is surely a distorted headship of domination by men which has caused the feminist reaction in many women, destroying the good biblical caring headship along with the evil of excessive domination and exploitation.

Ministry

In my view, women are certainly called to ministry in the church, for ministry is service and every Christian is called to that. The only question is whether any limits should be placed on such ministry.

Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have no women priests at all. However, I think there is a sound scriptural case for active female ministry in the church. In the Old Testament there were prophetesses who were called and sent by God and in the New Testament there are many references to women speakers and workers.

Another argument is that on the day of Pentecost the spirit was poured out on both men and women, so that the gifts of the spirit were bestowed on women.

I think it is clear that Paul's comments about women keeping silent in church were of strictly limited application. I say this because he assumed that women would pray and prophesy publicly (1 Corinthians 11:5) and allows everyone to contribute "a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation" (1 Corinthians 14:26).

It is, however, more difficult to dismiss 1 Timothy 2:11-15. His instruction sounds quite general "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent." I think the point is the antithesis between "full submission" and "authority" – which I think confirms what I said above about female submission to male headship. I think this prohibition is partly cultural and partly an expression of a prohibition against a reversal of sexual roles giving women authority over men.

Having said all that then I think women can (and should) be appointed to ministry, but under male authority. Thus for example a woman can be a member of a team ministry (which, incidentally, I think is a healthy and biblical model – Paul appointed *elders* (*plural*) in every church). I do not believe women should be in "headship". I believe the foregoing is scripturally ordained in a context which is non-cultural (since it derives from the original model of creation) and thus not subject to change.

Topic 3

I believe that marriage is a divinely ordained institution, intended for man from the beginning (Genesis 2:18). Marriage was divinely intended to be a reciprocal commitment of mutually self-

giving love which finds its expression in sexual union (Genesis 2:24). The needs for which this institution was created have, I believe been strengthened not weakened by the Fall.

Divorce is a breach of this divinely ordained union which has dire consequences for the man and woman concerned and even more so for any children involved. The biblical model for marriage is the replacement of the child parent relationship with the husband wife relationship. I believe Genesis 2:24 implies that marriage has four characteristics (i) it is an exclusive relationship, (ii) it is publicly acknowledged, (iii) it is permanent and (iv) it is consummated by sexual intercourse.

I believe that divorce is scripturally permitted in certain circumstances, but even where permissible, is always a departure from the divine intention.

The only Old Testament passage which refers to grounds or procedures for divorce is Deuteronomy 24: 1-4. However, it does not require or recommend divorce, or even sanction divorce. It merely prohibits remarriage of a former spouse. It is clear that, in so far as divorce is permitted, it carries with it the permission to remarry (as was normal in the ancient world, and indeed today).

However, Jesus gave us substantial teaching on the issue of divorce, perhaps best set out in Matthew 19:3-12. It is clear from this passage that Jesus' views on divorce were quite strong and fairly rigid. Firstly' he endorsed the permanence of marriage and (adding his own prohibition to the Genesis texts) said "What God has joined together let man not separate." That teaching is unambiguous. Marriage is a divine yoke. Secondly, Jesus declared the Mosaic provision of divorce to be a *temporary* concession to human sin and contrary to the divine intention, introduced because of human sinfulness. However, human conduct which falls short of God's will is always sin. Provisions designed to limit the consequences of sin must not be taken as constituting permission to sin. Thirdly, Jesus called marriage after non-biblically acceptable divorce *adultery*. If a divorce and remarriage which have no sanction from God take place then the result is adultery. Fourthly, Jesus permitted divorce and remarriage on the sole ground of immorality (*porneia* in the Greek).

I have spent considerable time thinking about this fourth issue and have reached three conclusions. Firstly, I believe that this "exceptive clause" should be accepted as an authentic utterance of Jesus, even though it occurs only in Matthew (and not in the gospels of Mark and Luke). Secondly, I believe that the Greek word means sexual immorality in the sense of marital unfaithfulness (including every kind of unlawful sexual relationship). This is consistent both with the normal meaning of the Greek word and the "one flesh" principle. Thirdly, divorce on this ground is permissible but not mandatory. This is consistent with the expressed words of Jesus and with the ordinance of the permanence of marriage.

Paul echoes Jesus' prohibitions in 1 Corinthians 7 and Romans 7 with full apostolic authority.

Having strictly limited the scriptural grounds for divorce and remarriage, I need to swiftly go on to say that separation (but not with remarriage) is acceptable in a much wider range of circumstances – for example when a woman is mistreated by her husband. This is envisaged by the New Testament (1 Corinthians 7:11 for example). Paul also permits divorce when a believer is deserted by an unbelieving spouse on the grounds *and only on the grounds* that the unbeliever is unwilling to remain for religious reasons.

This strict teaching gives rise to a number of pastoral needs. Firstly, there is a need for thorough biblical teaching about marriage and restoration. Secondly, there is a need for better preparation classes and teaching for marriage. It may be appropriate to train lay couples for much of this function. Thirdly, there is a need for a reconciliation service. Fourthly, there is a *great* need for pastoral work and ministry with the divorced.

You will not be surprised on the basis of the foregoing that I believe that remarriage in church should be restricted to those who fell within the biblical prescription for divorce and that the marriage service should be adopted in such cases to include an expression of penitence. I believe we have no mandate to go beyond quite clear biblical prescriptions.