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# WIVES AS NEIGHBOURS

*Vincent E. Eriksson*

We are familiar with the Biblical injunction to love our neighbour as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18) which Jesus elevated to the status of the second great commandment (Matthew 19:19, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27; see also Romans 13:8 ff). This was applied by the Apostles to make persons of those previously regarded as *non*-persons (see 1 Peter 2:10, Col. 1:21,22, Eph. 2:11 ff, Galatians 3:38). But our familiarity with Western social and legal tradition, in which wives have commonly figured as property, probably prevents us from grasping the application of this commandment -- and the status of persons it confers -- to wives.

That we should not apply it to wives is rather startling, in view of the fact that Jesus applied it to enemies (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27,35; compare Romans 12:17-21).

## OUR WIVES -- OUR NEIGHBOURS

That the first-century disciples did give the significance of "neighbour" to women is evident -- but somewhat concealed at the same time -- by, among other things, the use of the term "sister" (Romans 16:1, 1 Corinthians 7:15). In 1 Cor. 9:5 in the Greek "sister" in this sense is applied to one's wife (see also 1

Timothy 5:2). This latter passage is especially significant in comparison with those from 1 Corinthians.

We see, secondly, Paul's recognition of women as co-workers. We have already noted Romans 16:1, "our sister Phoebe." But he several other places lists female co-workers, along with male co-workers, without distinction as to rank or place (see Romans 16:3-15, Phillipians 4:2, Colossians 4:10-15, and II Timothy 4:19-21). We know also from the book of Acts that he had female helpers in local congregations; Lydia and Prisca are named and other places mention women without naming them. In Acts and in Paul's letters, where Prisca (or Priscilla) and Aquila are mentioned, Prisca is named first in four instances (Acts 18:18,26, Romans 16:3, II Tim. 4:19), Aquila first in two (Acts 18:2, where they are first introduced, and 1 Cor. 16:19).

The term "neighbour" implies both closeness and distance. In the New Testament the neighbour is an object of loving concern. At the same time the neighbour is another person; both another, and a person. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *Life Together*, chapter 1, "Community," points out the distance involved. There he contrasts *eros* and *agape*, as human love and Christian love, pointing out that human love seeks possession and domination. In contrast, Christian love is to be reflected or mediated through Christ, that is, to serve the other as if he or she were Christ.

Reflecting another through Christ has the effect of placing some distance between myself and the other. It prevents our "love" for the other from deteriorating into domination over the other; it prevents our "loving" only for the sake of our own "hangups." It also gives equality under Christ.

We see this element of distance perhaps reflected in 1 Thess. 4:4,5 -- the exhortation about how to choose one's wife. Further, if we reflect on *agape* -- love for one's neighbour which is not a love which dominates -- this says a great deal about the exhortation to love one's wife in Ephesians 5.

Ephesians 5:22-33 has been interpreted as if Paul were reinforcing human tendencies. In short, this passage was used as a club against wives. Interpreted thus, the meaning is distorted in two ways: 1) Its context is neglected. It is one of three examples of the general exhortation in the previous verse (Eph. 5:21), "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." The other two examples are of children and parents and of slaves and masters. 2) The social context is neglected. Christianity did "turn the world upside down" (Acts 17:6); we are not to expect Christianity to reinforce our human prejudices, but rather to counter them.

## BIBLICAL SOCIAL CONTEXT

When we are considering the social context, we need to consider both the Jewish and the Greco-Roman contexts.

In the Old Testament (note Jesus' contrasts in Matthew 5) many passages relate to protection of women which indicate something approaching a property status: for example, the book of Ruth, chapter 4. At the same time, we note throughout Leviticus that daughters and wives are to be treated more

honourably than in the heathen nations round about (see Lev. chapters 18-20 for general contrasts). We note, though, many occasions of being put to death, some by stoning (Lev. 20:10 ff; see Numbers 5:12 ff. In comparison and contrast see John 8:1-11). We should remember as well the traditional Jewish man's prayer which included thanksgiving that he was not born a woman. In contrast, we may cite baptism of both males and females under Christianity.

For the letter to the Ephesians, the Greco-Roman social context is probably more important than the Jewish social context. We know from secular sources that the father's right over his family among the Greeks involved putting unwanted children to death through exposure. Among the Romans it involved the possibility of putting to death children and wives, as well as slaves.

Can one imagine that Paul, writing to Christians in the Gentile community of the province of Asia around Ephesus, would reinforce the way of life common among the Greeks and Romans? He does not do this in regard to slaves. He does not do it in regard to children. Why then assume that he is doing so in regard to wives? The whole force of verse 21 of Ephesians 5 is against reinforcing such traditional relationships.

It is significant that in Ephesians 5:25, in saying, "Husbands, love your wives . . .," Paul used the verb related to *agape*. He did not use the verb related to *eros*, i.e. he did not say, "Husbands, desire your wives," -- it presumably was not necessary. It would seem that he was imposing something new -- *agape* -- on the relation of husbands and wives, not reinforcing the common attitudes. This is parallel to Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, when he brought *agape* to relationships to transform them in contrast to the attitudes common among the Jews.

One should also note Galatians 3:28, where two of the relationships dealt with in Eph. 5:21 ff. are covered with the declarations, "there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female . . ."

## OUR SOCIAL CONTEXT

In our day we are the inheritors of a different but in some respects similar social and legal tradition. Among the Germanic tribes also women were property. This status was codified under the regulations of feudalism. Though not so harsh as that of the Greeks and Romans, the property relationship was there. In the continental countries, moreover, there were strong injections of Roman law in the 12th century and again in the 15th and 16th centuries (and in France at the time of the Revolution and Napoleon).

As late as the 17th century in England (which did not accept the revival of Roman law), orphaned minor children who were wards of the king were in effect sold for the most advantageous marriage -- advantageous, that is, in terms of inheritance of property. It was still possible for young people to "marry themselves," that is, to engage to live together as husband and wife in a union that guardians could not dissolve (this was the now much-abused term

“common law marriage”), but for the most part they were married off by their guardians (in this case, government officials).<sup>1</sup>

The status of women as property remained a feature of the law in many western countries until early in this century, though some of the harsher features were not generally practised. Those harsh features, which it was possible for someone to apply, were pointed out by John Stuart Mill in his essay *On the Subjection of Women*, written in 1861 and published first in 1869.

Now, because we have come out of another socio-legal tradition which regarded women as property, our perception of the implication of the New Testament passages about the new status of brothers and sisters in Christ, or as neighbours to be loved as ourselves, has probably been blunted. One familiar set of ideas can prevent us from perceiving another competing one, just as familiar. It would be well for us to recognize again that New Testament Christianity brought contrasts over against the life-style of the heathen, not reinforcement.

It would seem too that in looking at the passages in the pastoral epistles which seem to downgrade the position of women, one should keep in mind two countervailing sets of facts: first, how Paul worked with women, and especially how he listed them without distinction as fellow-workers; second and more important the transforming application of the New Testament message. Thus, it would seem that the passages in the Pastorals should be interpreted subordinately to the general messages about persons in Christ, and not *vice versa*. To treat the passages in the Pastorals as primary principles is to fall into the trap of using the Christian message as a reinforcer of the surrounding *status quo*.

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1. See Joel Hurstfield, *The Queen's Wards* (London: Longman's, 1958).