

Liberation by Peter Cousins. *I married you* by Walter Trobisch, a very readable book on the nitty gritty of day by day living as a Christian couple. *I love God and you* by Marion Stroud, deals with the unusual yet not so uncommon situation where a wife becomes a Christian after her marriage. *Marriage Problems* by Paul Tourner examines more closely some of the unhappy situations which he as a Christian psychiatrist has come across.

Conferences? Yes, and although more time is available at a weekend to get to know one another, there is much which can be accomplished on a day basis. There must be an opportunity for small group discussions with good leading questions and above all an open question session with plenty of opportunity for written anonymous questions. These sort of sessions are most useful if a good panel of down to earth speakers can be found, representing a number of different home backgrounds.

Above all, the individual counsel of a loving, concerned and approachable mature Christian friend is invaluable.

Whatever the source, all advice in the end points to the couple together working out their sexual problems. Marriage as seen in the Bible is a rich, deep lifelong commitment, for all mankind and not for Christians only. Perfection will never be attained in a fallen world, and the joining together of two imperfect people, even within the fellowship of the body of Christ, will not be all it should be.

The prayer of Paul for the Roman Christians, Romans, 15: 5, could well be the prayer for every married couple.

“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Jesus Christ, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

GEORGE E. HARPUR

4: A comment on abstinence mentioned in 1 Corinthians

The prophets were explicit in their denunciation of extra-marital intercourse of a specific kind, but offered little or no instruction, or advice, on the regulation of marital relations. This was not due to any prudishness but to the fact that they regarded the control of marital affairs as lying entirely within the competence of the persons concerned, the husband and the wife, to the exclusion of all

outside. This accords with the wide variation possible, when desire and competency vary as much as they do, and temperament, physique, circumstances are taken into account. No norm is laid down.

It is interesting and important, therefore, to note that in one place where the matter is referred to in some detail (1 Cor. 7: 1-6) Paul makes it quite clear that what he writes in answer to their questions is written by permission and not given as inspired instruction. He explains himself in the following verse. He clearly states what he himself would prefer in the Corinthian context, but is ready to acknowledge that it is God, not Paul who chooses what is right for each man's portion in life.

A number of matters dealt with in the Bible are not as clear to us as they might be, for elsewhere as here, the word translated 'man' (verse 1) is the same as the word translated 'husband' (verse 2). So also 'woman' (verse 1) and 'wife' (verse 2) are varied translations of the same original word. It devolves on translators to decide what is appropriate in each case. Plainly the translation "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" is very different from "It is good for a husband not to touch a wife". Translators rightly prefer the former, which is in keeping with verses 3-5. But verse 8 also uses the phrase "It is good"; and Paul is indicating that in his opinion it is preferable not to marry. We conclude, therefore, that he is not advocating abstention from intercourse within marriage. On the contrary, he regards abstention in marriage as dangerous, and he treats marriage as the proper answer to the common need of men and women (verse 2).

It is curious that people as prone to lasciviousness as the Corinthians (whether pagan or Christian) should entertain ascetic notions about the legitimate realm of divinely instituted marriage. Asceticism is often a clear pointer to inner personal weakness.

Since one of the reasons for marriage is to avoid the temptations of immorality, Paul goes on to show that conjugal rights (or rites) are of the essence of marriage. Without these it lacks validity and must fail of its purpose, for it opens again the door to Satan's temptations.

Intercourse is not something for married people to refrain from, but rather a course of action to which they are committed. What the KJV renders vaguely as "due benevolence", the RSV clarifies as "conjugal rights", but the original is blunter still and commands each partner to "pay the debt". Each partner has vowed to give the right and control over their own body to the other. To withhold or refuse this control is to commit a species of fraud. Paul uses the same word 'defraud' as is used in 1 Cor. 6: 8.

It is against this background that any Christian's abstention from intercourse should be considered. Intercourse will be automatically regulated by the normal affairs of life i.e. age, health, temperament and circumstances. Illness, absence, pre-occupation and other factors all produce different experiences for married people, and even a variation over the years for the same couple. The basis of marriage in love will ensure that the debt is not paid or exacted with indifference or callously, but as a joyful expression of affection and love.

However, Paul had permission to suggest that intercourse might be interrupted for spiritual reasons if certain qualifications were observed. First that there should be a time limit agreed for the abstention, they must be 'together' again. Second that the purpose of abstention is a spiritual one, to give themselves to prayer (the old MSS omit fasting). It is not implied that a normal married relationship prevents prayer, but rather that there are special occasions when more time and leisure is needed for urgent prayer. Such an occasion is seen in Acts 12 when many (not all) were giving themselves to a night of prayer for the apostle in prison due to be executed the next day (Acts 12: 5, 6, 12, 18). The third essential is that the arrangement be a mutual one. Exodus 19: 14-16 is an Old Testament case of very special circumstances in the spiritual realm.

There are two other things to be taken into account. First, that there is no obligation to abstain. The couple is completely free to make a decision suited to their own circumstances, to which they will be well advised to give full consideration. For, secondly, abstention carries with it an element of moral risk. Either partner may lack sufficient self-control and the experiment may end in moral disaster. They are warned that they have an Adversary who is on the watch for just such an opportunity to damage the work of God and ruin the life of the married pair. Moral breakdown in a Christian man or woman may do more irretrievable harm to the witness of a Church than their participation in a night of prayer may do good.