

Daughters And Marriage

by James Sherman

Recently my oldest son and I spent a day with a family that has a daughter his age. As the parents of these adult children we had arranged the meeting to allow them to meet one another in a protected and family-oriented atmosphere. There was a sense of joy and fellowship and some excitement for us all as we wondered how this meeting might develop. This will be the first of a series of such meetings as my wife and I have eight children: four boys, then three girls, and finally another son.

As I have prepared for this time of my life I have been struck by the difference in my attitude with the process of helping my sons find a mate and with the same process for my daughters. I have the feeling that the time is ripe for my oldest son to start his own household. I have prepared him and taught him as well as I can; I protected him when he was tender and challenged him to maturity as he grew older. Now I regard him as an adult whom I admire, respect and love. I will offer him my counsel and help but will no longer be in authority over him as I was just a few years ago. As he goes from under my umbrella of protection and authority and establishes his position directly accountable to God, I know he will make mistakes but I have confidence in his preparedness and God's grace.

For my daughters, though, I sensed that my release of them would be qualitatively different. My expectations of the circumstances were different; my preparation would be different. I sensed the difference but wondered what God's Word had to say on the subject. Hence this study.

The Covering Of Authority

God places men and women differently in the structure of authority. "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ" (so as my son matures and can function as a "man," I release him from my authority to that of Christ) "and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." (1 Cor. 11:3) This passage says to me that as my daughter matures and becomes a woman that she remains needful of the protection and authority of a man. As her father, I am that authority until she moves from my authority to that of another man. There are possible exceptions, but most commonly that transition is to her husband.

My son is working in another city. I am comfortable allowing him to make unsupervised decisions regarding friends, place of worship, and leisure activities. I would not be as comfortable with a daughter of the same age. God's word indicates to me that regardless of her age, commitment to godliness, ability to discern good from evil, etc., that it is my responsibility to function as her authority until I turn that right, or burden, over to another.

A transfer of authority to someone other than a husband would be unusual.

Temporarily, the man in charge of an overseas missionary team might function as my delegated authority. Before I would allow that there would be a clear understanding between us of how seriously I regarded that honor! Scripture gives us a principle for this circumstance in Exodus 21:7-8: "If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as man servants do. If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners because he has broken faith with her." While the specific situation would be different, the principle is clearly that the daughter's authority must revert back to the father when it has been temporarily transferred to another man. This passage and principle would also apply following a divorce or death of a husband.

A second situation of transfer of authority outside marriage involves the death of a father. Numbers 36 describes a situation following the death of Zelophehad, a man who had no sons. His land was inherited by his daughters. In order that the land not pass out of the clan upon their marriage, Moses directed (as their spiritual authority) that they must marry within their clan. The elders of the clan had come to Moses with the problem. In this passage the principle appears to be that authority over an orphaned daughter lies not only with her mother, but also with the male relative (older men within the clan) and pastors/elders (spiritual authorities). The relationships of Esther and Mordecai and Ruth and Naomi give additional insights into this complex issue.

Finding God's Choice For A Mate

The far more expected transfer of authority is to a husband. How then should a father approach the marriage of his daughter? There is no need even to consider this issue if the daughter has rejected God's principles or has never been taught them. If she is out from under her fathers authority and protection to start with, there can be no transfer. That which I do not have, I cannot give. Just as I give Christ the authority over my life and willingly obey His command, so must my daughter willingly allow me the authority over her, and willingly submit to her husband. Let us assume that my daughter has been raised in a godly home and more than anything else desires God's best in her life, and trusts Him to work through her father, a man whose failings and weaknesses she knows well. What then, as fathers, shall we do?

Fortunately, God gives very clear directions. "Do not intermarry with them; do not give your daughters to their sons (Deut. 7:3). "But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations... and if you intermarry with them... they will become traps and snares for you, whips on your back and thorns in your eyes" (Josh. 23:12). Under the old covenant, marriage was restricted to another covenant child of God. Likewise in the new covenant, marriage is limited to a child of the new covenant, another Christian. "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?" (2 Cor 6:14) But as is frequently the case, the principle here is broader than it was under the old covenant. There marriage was limited. Under the principle of 2 Corinthians 6 fellowship and any other "yoking

together” is limited. I believe this would limit any boy-girl relationship for my children to a fellow believer. In directing this I need to be as sure as I can be that my child is a believer lest they be a snare or trap to someone who assumes their salvation because they are my child.

The foregoing mention of boy-girl relationships is not an acknowledgment of dating as it is practiced in our day. “Dating” is, in my view, a dangerous temptation to our youth and a wasteful abuse of God’s provision.

A marriage completely arranged by parents without the input of the couple is also unscriptural. “Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up; a servant who becomes king, a fool who is full of food, and unloved woman who is married, and a maidservant who displaces her mistress.” (Prov. 30:21-23) Love in a marriage after the initial rush of excitement is a result of commitment to one another and of understanding and meeting a mate’s needs. Love grows in a good marriage. An unloved woman then is one whose husband is not committed to her, will not meet her needs; does not have her best interests at heart, and who does not understand his relationship with Christ and his wife. It is my responsibility along with my daughter to try to assure that this will not happen to her. That will require father and daughter to spend time with the man.

During the time the daughter is alone with a prospective mate, she is at some increased danger. Initially, neither father nor daughter may know the man well. In 2 Samuel 13 David sends Tamar, his daughter, to visit her half brother Amnon who rapes her. David was insensitive in sending her and absolutely derelict in his response to her rape. He thus set in motion a series of events culminating in a civil war. Jacob was careless with his daughter Dinah and she also was raped (Gen. 34). Interestingly, in both these cases the father was less concerned about his daughter than the political consequences of the conflict, and it fell to the girl’s brothers to respond. As my daughter spends time with a potential mate, the circumstances need to be appropriate and safe.

Additional insights are given in Genesis 24 as Abraham sends his servant back to his country of origin to find a wife for Isaac. We normally look at this story from the perspective of Abraham or the servant but there is profit in viewing it from the perspective of Bethuel, the father of Rebekah. Abraham directed his servant, “go to my father’s family and to my own clan, and get a wife for my son” (v 38). Bethuel knew the family of Isaac. He knew Abraham’s faith and his strength. He knew the kind of home in which Isaac was raised; he knew something of their values.

My daughters are not 1st generation Christians. They have been sheltered from much of the sinfulness of the world. They will come into a marriage relationship with a long list of expectations about their relationship with their husband, about his role in protecting them, about how their children will be raised, about their role in family, community, and church, and about appropriateness of dress, leisure activities, and social interactions. As we know so well, all these issues may be approached differently even within the

Christian community. 1st generation Christians frequently are unaware of all the worldly views and attitudes they carry into their Christian walk and into their families. An “equal yoking” would require some agreement on many of the above areas and as a minimum an understanding of each other’s perspectives prior to marriage. If my son married a new Christian the difference in background would cause difficulty which could be overcome with patience and loving leadership. For me to allow my daughter to marry a man brought up in a pagan family would be more difficult and would require the potential husband to submit to a period of discipleship.

Bethuel saw evidence of faith. “The LORD, before whom I have walked, will send his angel with you and make your journey a success so that you can get a wife for my son”(v 40). In this instance the statement and evidence of faith was Abraham’s. Isaac’s faith was assumed from the father’s profession. For a man to marry my daughter I will need to hear a statement of faith from him and see evidence of that faith in his life.

Is Complete Economic Independence Needed?

Bethuel saw evidence of the ability to provide for his daughter. “When the camels had finished drinking, the man took out a gold nose ring weighing a beka, and two gold bracelets weighing ten shekels” (v22). In the custom of that day, Rebekah and Isaac would live with Abraham. Isaac would work for his father, under his protection, and eventually become master of his own holdings. Jacob worked for his father-in-law during the first part of his marriage and only after many years gained his independence. We today have an expectation that our children should be completely independent when they marry. For many, that may be unrealistic. A prospective husband should have a plan and see a path. Some provision for a wife must be made but that provision might include a period of support from either or both sets of parents. There are dangers in being financially dependent on parents in a marriage. Great sensitivity is necessary to avoid using finances to put pressure on a young couple in decisions they make. But the financial pressure of unpaid bills can be a great marital stress also. A potential husband needs to have an understanding of budgeting, financial accountability, and a scriptural understanding of debt.

Bethuel saw evidence of the Lord’s direction. “This is from the LORD; we can say nothing to you one way or the other” (v 50). While miraculous prophetic signs are not likely to be given, I will certainly be alert to God’s direction and pray for His wisdom as I counsel my daughter.

The final decision to go ahead with a marriage is not mine. “Then they said, let us call the girl and ask her about it. So they called Rebekah and asked her, ‘Will you go with this man?’ ‘I will go,’ she said” (vv 57,58). I have the right to veto an inappropriate union but have no right to force my daughter into a marriage. Ideally it will be a unanimous decision involving two sets of parents and two single adults.

I find in God's Word that I have a responsibility to my daughter to discuss with a potential husband his faith, his family, and his finances. I need to make him aware of my daughter's background, the family values under which she has been raised, and areas in which she has special talent or special needs. My purpose is not to force them into recreating my family; by God's grace they can do much better! My purpose is to prepare him thoroughly to be what God wants him to be, the best possible husband for my daughter.

In contrast to the above process, consider Genesis 19, the story of Lot and his family. Lot's daughters were pledged to marry two men of Sodom. These men may have been handsome and rich but they were not godly, not teachable, and not serious-minded. They were destroyed in Sodom and in the series of tragedies which followed, Lot's daughters gave birth to Moab and Ben-Ammi, the fathers of two nations despised by God.

A Father's Continuing Interest In His Daughter

Having fulfilled all the foregoing and seeing his daughter married, a father's responsibility to her is not ended. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). It doesn't say the wife will leave her family, perhaps because the transfer of authority from father to husband makes that clear. Perhaps though the father still has some responsibility for his daughter. Deuteronomy 22:13-19 shows a father intervening to protect his daughter when she is slandered by her husband. Combined with Matthew 18:15-17 God shows clearly how parents might become involved in a daughter's defense. Clearly, great sensitivity and caution would be necessary in these situations. Laban said to Jacob as they parted, "May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other. If you mistreat my daughter or if you take any wives beside my daughter, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me" (Gen. 31:49-50).

A father and a son-in-law have much in common. They are both heads of households with responsibilities of self-sacrifice to those in their care. They both operate as intermediaries in God's chain of authority and protection. The daughter has passed from the loving authority of one to that of another. They are united in their love, affection, and willingness to sacrifice for her. The bond that develops as a result of their shared interest and position will mature through the time of discipleship and become strong in shared friendship, love, and purpose. The marriage of a daughter is indeed not the loss of a daughter but a gain—the gain not of a son but of a brother in Christ.
