

LEADER'S MARRIAGES – A PRIORITY IN NEED OF RESTORATION

Written originally in July 1980
by ROD DENTON
EQUIPPING THE NEXT GENERATION

Since coming to California 10 months ago, I have preached no sermons, and led no Bible studies. In short, I have not sought, nor have I been offered any opportunity to be involved in public ministry.

Apart from my life at Fuller Seminary, I have had opportunity to give the balance of my time to the most important congregation I will ever have the privilege to minister to – my family. Further, can I say that these last ten months of intimate focused attention on my family have been ten of the richest months in my life. During this time, the Lord has impressed upon me the preciousness of His gifts of Sue, Sarah and Kathryn to me and also the great responsibility that is mine to love and care for them. A responsibility that is of highest priority in my life – second only to my relationship with Jesus Christ.

In recent months, this truth has been reinforced by some powerful experiences that have come my way. Let me share three significant ones with you.

The first one occurred at the memorial service of Mary McGavran conducted on the Fuller Campus two months ago. Mary, the wife of Donald McGavran, the father of the church Growth Movement, died at the age of 92, following 67 years of married life. She was affectionately called his 'right hand.' Could any minister of the gospel ask for anything more from his wife in this age of independent careers. The greatest lesson for me however came when I learnt of the way Donald McGowan gave himself totally and ceaselessly to his wife in the final months of her ill health.

So much so that he was prepared to lay down his life for her as he kept a bedside vigil. He didn't attend to the painful cancer developing in his own body. He suffered silently at her side. As I write to you, he is very near death and stubbornly refused to take pain killers so that his mind might remain clear as he now pushes on with his latest writing and research.

The second one came from an article by a World Vision leader, as he shared how a colleague became aware of the grave injustices he had committed against his wife in the name of God's work.

He writes:-

“the real issue was whether I loved my work more than I loved my wife. Though I denied it, Peggy suspected that she came in second. The ministry had clearly come between us. I had never imagined that a call could become a seduction that would destroy a marriage. Nor had I been aware of how subtly a ministry could give one an inflated view of his own importance. How sinister that I could be deluded into believing that it was somehow

alright to neglect my wife at a time when her needs for companionship and support were great. What is worse, that I would set her up for spiritual alienation at the same time.

...it is becoming clear to me that a call of God, rightly followed, does not cause or allow me to do hurtful things to my mate. Ministry must be subordinated to the greater call of loving my wife as Christ loved the church. I am learning that my work (ministry) can be a powerful seductive love. What is even more dangerous is the case of confusing love of work with my love for God. These are clearly not the same.

... my deepest regret, however, is that my growth has come at such a high cost to the loving person God gave me for a life companion. Perhaps during the next 19 years I will learn how a man called to serve God in the city can be faithful to a higher call to love first and best in the home.”

The third one comes from a letter written by Dr. Robertson McQuilkin, the President for 22 years of the highly respected Columbia Bible College and Seminary in South Carolina. Dr McQuilkin has recently resigned to care for his wife who has Alzheimer’s disease.

He writes:-

“My dear wife, Muriel, has been in failing mental health for about 8 years. So far I have been able to carry both her ever growing needs and my leadership responsibility at C.B.C.S. ... but now it is clear to me that she needs me now, full time.

Perhaps it would help you understand if I shared with you what I shared at the time of the announcement of my resignation in chapel. The decision was made, in a way, 42 years ago when I promised to care for Muriel “in sickness and in health...till death do us part.” So, as a man of my word, integrity has something to do with it. But so does fairness. She has cared for me fully and sacrificially all these years; if I cared for her for the next 40 years I would not be out of debt. Duty, however, can be grim and stoic. But there is more. I love Muriel. She is a delight to me – her childlike dependence and confidence in me, her warm love, occasional flashes of that wit I used to relish so, her happy spirit and tough resilience in the face of her continual distressing frustration. I don’t have to care for her, I get to. It is a high honour to care for so wonderful a person.

There are other people in the world who can successfully lead C.B.C.S. There is only one who can successfully care for Muriel at this point. So love for both dictates the same answer!”

Can I say to my brothers wherever you might be, particularly in the ministry, that for many of us our marriages and families are priorities in need of restoration. It has been said that the best thing we can ever do to our children is to love their mother with all of our heart. Perhaps we could amend that today to say that the best object lesson we will ever provide our congregation is the one that sees us loving our wives and children as the highest earthly priority in our lives. If our congregations do not get that modeling from us, where on earth will they get it?

It is my conviction that one of the greatest demonic deceptions we have faced is that which Graeme Irvine describes – “that a call could become a seduction that would destroy a marriage.” My growing conclusion is that the marriages and family life of many of us ministers are in need of great repair, instead of being Christ-like examples for our congregations.

I have not written these words lightly and I write them with a degree of emotion. I wonder if you would agree that our family life is a “Priority in need of Restoration”

It is not too late to confess our misguided priorities to God and to our families and seek their forgiveness and ask that God be a God who might make all things new.

I do not write to bring guilt, but rather freedom. Freedom from bondage and freedom to enjoy the priorities that God meant for us to live out.