

THE ROLE, USE AND PURPOSE OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE IN THE FIRST CENTURY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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This paper will explore the role use and purpose of marriage and family life in the time period of the first century Christian Church. Exploring the meaning of marriage will help define what the early Church would have used or perceived this union to be for male and female. The word marriage or matrimony is derived from the Latin word for Mother, Mater; this reveals one of the original and main purposes of marriage; to bear and rear children.¹ The Marital union is made up of a male and female while the family unit includes the fruits of this union (and may also include cross generational members). Throughout history and in nearly every culture we see that the family is the most basic unit in many societies. This was also true for the first century Christian Church, and still is for us today as Bl. John Paul II wrote, "Since the Creator of all things has established the conjugal partnership as the beginning and basis of human society," the family is "the first and vital cell of society."² Unfortunately we have seen in our present society the damaging effects on the culture of the breakdown of the family; this only confirms the important role that the family has in society. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states the basic outline of marriage and family life as, "The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman form with each other an intimate communion of life and love, has been founded and endowed with its own special laws by the Creator. By its very nature it is ordered to the good of the couple, as well as to the generation and education of children."³ Now let us examine the individual roles of men and women that make up the marriage covenant, specifically in the first Century and then the union of the two in Matrimony and furthermore in the role of family life.



The role of women in the first century was very different in comparison to what we live today, which is why it is crucial to take note of these differences when seeking to understand the role and purpose of marriage in that time period. Women were not considered equal to men although they did have a very prominent role in the home and therefore in the marital union; as well, and were valued as wives and mothers.⁴ Before law women were not considered equal to men in the political scene. They were seen as second class citizens, and not educated to participate in the political seen. They were subject to the authority of a man be it their father or husband.⁵ Although the political scene was reserved for men, "teachings in the Talmud emphasized that every individual possessed equality, dignity, and self-worth. But in practice this equality was defined in terms of strict male-female roles."⁶ As wives and mothers their role within the home included preparing meals, of which there were two main meals a day, making and washing the clothing, the caring for and education of the children mainly the girls and the up-keep of the house.⁷ A regular household may have also included unmarried children, parents of the husband or wife, who were usually all housed in a one to two room home with a dirt floor. As we can gather women were a critical part of making society and civilization run and they still are today. As previously mentioned the root of matrimony being the Latin word for mother (mater), helps us understand what a significant role the woman and mother plays in the union of marriage and family life. Women worked very hard but likewise found fulfillment in their role of wife and mother as they were entrusted with great tasks.

The Husband served as the spiritual and legal head of the household. He was the main provider and protector of the family.⁸ The man also had an important role in society representing his family, tribe and village. The Jewish people were a tribal people and lived in villages to support one another, family and working together were necessary to survival in those times.

The role, use, and purpose of marriage and family life in the first century Christian Church would have mostly derived from the Jewish marriage customs and traditions. Marriage has a long history and has shifted slightly in the past as even today some are trying to redefine it; however, the basics have for the most part remained the same.

"The first recorded evidence of marriage contracts and ceremonies dates to 4,000 years ago, in Mesopotamia. In the ancient world, marriage served primarily as a means of preserving power, with kings and other members of the ruling class marrying off daughters to forge alliances, acquire land, and produce legitimate heirs....In ancient Rome, marriage was a civil affair governed by imperial law. But when the empire collapsed, in the 5th century, church courts took over and elevated marriage to a holy union. As the church's power grew through the Middle Ages, so did its influence over marriage. In 1215, marriage was declared one of the church's seven sacraments... But it was only in the 16th century that the church decreed that weddings be performed in public, by a priest, and before witnesses."⁹

The actual marriage ceremony that would have taken place in the first century differs from how many celebrate a marriage today. Deriving from Jewish customs the marriage consisted in three main stages that can be summarized in the three C's; contract, consummation, and celebration. The contract or betrothal of man and woman was signed by the father of the bride and the soon to be husband and it served as a protection of the bride. The contract also known as a ketubboth,¹⁰ was a legally binding document, that was discussed and decided upon by the father of the bride and the groom. The use of marriage was the father's way to assure the continued lineage of the tribe. They would discuss the dowry, the bride's contribution to the husband's estate; this was paid by the father to the new husband. After this first stage of the Jewish marriage, the couple was legally married although they were not co-habituating nor had they come together in the marital union.¹¹

The second stage of a Jewish marriage custom was the sexual consummation. The time between the contract and the consummation could last years, if the child was promised at a young age then the groom would wait until she reached the appropriate age. However, it would most commonly last 12 months. "When the father consented to the groom, he was allowed to come to the home of the bride and consummate the marriage in her own house."¹² The third stage followed almost immediately after the second stage, the couple would commonly leave the home and process together to the home of the groom or of a family member and rejoice with friends and family. This celebration is read about in the New Testament where Jesus performed his first miracle at the wedding feast of Cana, (cf: Jn 2:1-11) and the marriage feast is alluded to in many parables; for it was a common societal event as well as a central theme in Christ(our)redemption.

Ancient Roman had different standards and traditions for choosing and carrying out the marriage, but it was similar to Jewish traditions, for the ceremony including a procession, and large feast.

"Marriage in Roman times was often not at all romantic. Rather, it was an agreement between families. Men would usually marry in their mid-twenties, while women married while they were still in their early teens. As they reached these ages, their parents would consult with friends to find suitable partners that could improve the family's wealth or class."¹³

The Roman objective and execution of marriage differed from those of the first century Christian Church, because many of the first Christians were Jews many of the marriage customs would have carried over at least initially. From this point we see that the role, use and purpose of Marriage were mainly for; the continuation of lineage and furthering the family name and tribe, the building up of society and village as it was for the Jews.

The role, use, and purpose of family life in the first century Christian Church is imaged often in the early writings of the Church and in the New Testament epistles. St. Paul states, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church. . . . This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church" (Eph 5:25, 32). The relationship of Christ and the Church serve as a model for the roles of Husband and Wife in a marriage. Then and now this imagery remains a mystery as well as a demanding call. The role of family life is to image Christ and the Church, the use is to fulfill the specific vocation within the home and the local community for the purpose of family life in the first century Christian Church is the continuation of life, survival, and glorifying God with one's body (1Cor. 6:20). The family then as now,

"has vital and organic links with society, since it is its foundation and nourishes it continually through its role of service to life: it is from the family that citizens come to birth and it is within the family that they find the first school of the social virtues that are the animating principle of the existence and development of society itself. Thus, far from being closed in on itself, the family is by nature and vocation open to other families and to society, and undertakes its social role."¹⁴

Family life indeed had a vital role in the first century Christian Church.

The role, use and purpose of marriage and family life in the first century Christian Church was interesting topic to research, and very beneficial for the understanding of the Scriptures and message of Christ. Although much time has passed and our societies are very different I was surprised to find so many similarities among the two time periods. This encourages the belief that although our surroundings may change our hearts are still created by God in the same manner and therefore seeking fulfillment which can only be found in Him and doing what He created us for; more specifically living faithfully our roles in marriage and family life. There are things that remain timeless such as the sacred scriptures and even what Bl John Paul II wrote in Familiaris Consortio in the year 1981 is applicable to families now and those of the first century Christian Church. This is lesson learned will bear fruit in further studies of The Acts of the Apostles and Sacred Scripture in general.

¹ "How Marriage Has Changed Over the Centuries" The Week (2012), at <http://theweek.com/article/index/>

²Blessed Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation On the Role of Christian Family in the Modern World Familiaris Consortio. (November, 22, 1981), 42.

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 1660.

⁴ "The Roman Empire in the 1st Century; Women" Public Broadcasting Station,(2006), at <http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/women.html>.

⁵ ibid

⁶ McDaniel, Violet. "A Women's Place in First Century" The Truth Magazine, Vol. XLIV: 9 (2000), 18. at <http://www.truthmagazine.com/archives/>.

⁷ Harris, MD. "Daily Life in First Century Israel and the Roman Empire" (2011), at mdharrismd.com/2011/12/19/daily-life-in-first-century-israel-and-the-roman-empire.

⁸ "Life of Jesus - First Century Context of Palestine" Jesus Central, at <http://www.jesuscentral.com/ji/historical-jesus/jesus-firstcenturycontext.php#Cultural>

⁹ "How Marriage Has Changed Over the Centuries" The Week, (2012), at <http://theweek.com/article/index/228541/>

¹⁰ Rudd, Steve. "The Three Stage Ritual of Bible Marriage" The Interactive Bible, at <http://www.bible.ca>

¹¹ Rudd, Steve. "The Three Stage Ritual of Bible Marriage" The Interactive Bible, at <http://www.bible.ca>

¹² Rudd, Steve. "The Three Stage Ritual of Bible Marriage" The Interactive Bible, at <http://www.bible.ca>

¹³ "The Roman Empire in the First Century, Weddings, Marriage and Divorce" PBS (2006), at <http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/weddings.html>

¹⁴ Familiaris Consortio, 42.

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