

LIKE A MARRIAGE

“This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32)

Ephesians 5:22-33 seems to be a passage about husbands and wives. It is not! At least not primarily so. What this passage teaches about husbands and wives is true, but the primary focus is Christ and the church. The church, as you know, is the bride of Christ. Christ died for His church and intends to present her to Himself without a stain or wrinkle, or any other blemish. The book of Revelation describes the church as the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev. 21:2). The analogy of marriage is one that almost everyone can relate to and understand.

Judaism, by contrast, was not like a marriage. It was based upon law, not love. It was a religion of rituals, rules, and regulations. No spontaneity was permitted and no real intimacy was allowed. One day each year the High Priest was permitted to enter into the Holy of Holies but his encounter with God was nothing like a marriage. Instructions for that day are found in Leviticus 16. The chapter begins with a reminder that Aaron's sons died when they offered strange fire before the Lord (Lev. 10:1-7). The implication, of course, is that one false step by the High Priest and he would also die. Is this like a marriage?

Before entering into the presence of God the High Priest was required to go through a series of elaborate rituals. They included: bathing, dressing in holy garments, presenting a bullock for a sin offering, presenting two goats to the Lord, casting lots over these goats (one to be killed and the other released). Then the priest killed the bullock to make atonement for himself, but he was still not permitted to enter into the presence of God. Next he was commanded to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense. When this incense was put on the fire it created smoke that concealed the atonement cover above the ark. The Scriptures state explicitly that if the priest did not use that smoking incense he would die (Lev. 16:13). These first 13 verses present only a fraction of the rules, rituals and regulations required of the Jewish High Priest to enter into the presence of God. I ask you again, “Is this like a marriage?”

The difference between Christianity and Judaism is so dramatic that the two cannot be combined. Jesus said that to do so would be like trying to put new wine in old skins, or new cloth in an old garment (Matt. 9:16, 17). Christianity is like a marriage, Judaism is not! A wife does not approach her husband by means of rules and rituals, and vice versa. Neither is a marriage built upon fear. Rules and fear, however, are an integral part of Judaism. Husbands and wives approach each other with boldness and confidence. Perfect love casts out fear. The veils have been taken away. There are no secrets.

The failure to understand that Christianity is like a marriage has led some to lead B.C. lives in an A.D. world. They do not enter in boldly beyond the veil (Heb. 10:19) but approach God timidly with fear and trepidation. They read the Law and assume that some of it is still in force. While ministering in California many years ago I saw a classified ad in the San Jose Mercury News seeking a church that had “prayer first”. I phoned the number and a very troubled sister called my attention to 1 Tim. 2:1. In this passage Paul urged Timothy that first of all, requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone. The church she was attending started their services with a song. She felt this was a violation of a divine ritual and would be like the “strange fire” offered to God by Nadab and Abihu. She lived in fear of their fate. How sad!

Christianity is not like Judaism, it is like a marriage. In the first marriage Adam and Eve were both naked and unashamed (Gen. 2:28). Their relationship was without rituals or fear. They were free to share their most intimate thoughts and desires. They were free to touch and explore. They were free to experiment. The two became one. They were one physically, emotionally, and spiritually. This is a “great mystery”, but still quite small by comparison with the glorious union of Christ and the church. **“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out” (Rom. 11:33).**