

Missionary Marriage Issues: Marriage or Ministry?

When faced with competing demands and “impossible” schedules, missionaries may feel trapped into making very difficult choices. They may feel like they have to choose one thing over another, often forced to choose one good thing over another.

Marriage or ministry?

On April 4, 1793, William Carey thought that was the choice he had to make as he took his 8-year-old son and boarded a ship to become a missionary to India. He was leaving his pregnant wife, Dorothy, and their other two sons. He did not want to leave his wife and break up his family, but he apparently believed he had to choose between marriage and ministry.

When he could not reach India at that time, he returned home and was able to convince Dorothy to come with him, but his ministry was still more important than his marriage. Things did not go well with his marriage in India.

After Dorothy’s death in 1808 William married Charlotte in 1809. By then he realized that he did not have to choose between ministry and marriage but that he had to blend ministry with marriage. William and Charlotte were able to build a loving relationship in ministry. After her death in 1821 William said that his wife’s death was the greatest loss a man could live with.

Today probably no church or agency would allow anyone to break up marriage and family to go the field. However, even today some people still believe that the choice has to be between marriage and ministry. If marriage

and ministry schedules conflict, some choose ministry over marriage thinking that they must make an “either-or” decision.

What does the Bible say?

Fortunately, the Bible gives us a good example of a husband and wife in cross-cultural ministry together. Priscilla and Aquila always appear together in ministry. Sometimes they are referred to as Aquila and Priscilla, and sometimes as Priscilla and Aquila, but always together (Acts 18, Romans 16, 1 Corinthians 16, 2 Timothy 4).

Aquila was a Jewish TCK growing up in Pontus near the Black Sea on the north side of what is now Turkey. People from Pontus were present at Pentecost (Acts 2:9). Aquila and Priscilla became Christian missionaries to several countries.

- They served in Italy but had to leave when Jews were ordered out (Acts 18:2).
- They then became tentmakers in Corinth, giving hospitality and work to Paul (Acts 18:3) as well as hosting a house church there (1 Corinthians 16:19).
- They later served in Ephesus where they engaged in a discipleship ministry in their home (Acts 18:26).

Thus we see this married couple moving from Jewish to Roman to Greek to Asian cultures. Always serving together in a variety of ministries and viewed as a team with neither one more important than the other, they were a great example of marriage and ministry. For them it was not a question of choosing ministry or marriage, it was a matter of serving together in a “both-and” situation, both marriage and ministry. They were in ministry together, and people viewed them as a team.

Marriage is ministry?

Many missionaries have found that their marriage is a ministry. As one lady put it, “We realized that our students at various levels of theological training were reading our lives more intently than listening to what we taught.” What you do may speak so loud that nationals cannot hear what you say.

Few people in ministry have students or parishioners come up to them years later and tell them how a particular lecture or sermon changed their lives. However, many have had people tell them how observing their actions, their lives, and their marriages had influenced them profoundly.

Missionaries, more than most people, would understand what an ambassador is. Missionaries, like other believers, are Christ’s ambassadors through whom God makes his appeal to people of other cultures (2 Corinthians 5:20). When nationals come into missionary homes, they are entering the residence of God’s ambassadors. The way husbands and wives relate to each other and to their visitors affects God’s appeal to them.

What about ministry and marriage in the early church?

The Bible does not deal specifically with husbands and wives in ministry together as missionaries. However, it does deal with husbands and wives as leaders of churches planted by missionaries.

Timothy grew up as a TCK in the town of Lystra in Lyconia. His mother was a Jewish believer and his father was a Greek (Acts 16). Timothy joined Paul during Paul’s second term of missionary service and traveled with Paul and Silas to many

countries, including Greece, Macedonia, and Asia.

One time when Paul, the senior mission administrator, was leaving for Macedonia, he asked Timothy to remain on-site in Ephesus to deal with problems in the national church there (1 Timothy 1:3). Later, probably from Rome, Paul wrote a letter to Timothy instructing him how to deal with several issues including the qualifications of church leaders (1 Timothy 3).

- Church leaders (all men in that church) were to be respectable, self-controlled, hospitable, gentle, not quarrelsome, etc. (1 Timothy 3:2-10).
- Their spouses (wives) were to be respectable, temperate, trustworthy, etc. (1 Timothy 3:11).

Leadership in the church was not only the role of the one designated as leader, but also of the spouse. Though these instructions were for nationals in church leadership rather than for the missionaries themselves, certainly the missionaries overseeing them would have at least as much expected of them, probably more.

Marriage and ministry?

Although God does not make us choose between ministry and marriage, and ideally our marriage is often our ministry, missionaries usually still have to make some difficult choices. So many demands are made on their time that they cannot do everything they want to do in both ministry and marriage. Here are several things to consider when faced with this choice:

First, everyone has 24 hours in each day. People vary greatly in how much money they have, the physical stamina they have, the intellectual prowess they have and

so forth. However, everyone has exactly 24 hours each day. Each person is responsible for how they use that time. When people say that there is “no time” to do something, what they mean is that other things are more important. Everyone must be careful not to let the good crowd out the better and the better not crowd out the best.

Second, what you do is more important than what you say. Paul did not need to urge the Corinthians to imitate him. Children imitate their fathers! Of course, before you urge people to imitate you, you must make sure that you “walk the talk.” Paul sent Timothy, the same person he had sent to the Ephesians, to remind the Corinthian church that Paul’s way of life agreed with what he taught “everywhere in every church” (I Corinthians 4: 16-17).

Third, intentionally schedule both marriage and ministry times. Missionaries may come from time-oriented cultures where their agencies and supporters are more interested in “results” than in relationships. Such missionaries are likely to become more involved in doing things that show up in reportable statistics than in maintaining relationships with spouses, children, colleagues, and nationals. Without “relationship time” marriages suffer.

Many years ago my wife and I were invited to a marriage enrichment weekend, but we found out that the leader was going through his second divorce at that time. Would you go? We know a couple who were both marriage counselors, but they had divorced and the husband married a client. Would you go to either of them for counsel about your marriage? What about nationals going to missionaries who are so busy conducting marriage retreats that they have no time for each other?

What did Paul tell an early church he had planted about husbands and wives?

Paul wrote to the Ephesian church, the same one where he had left Timothy, to teach about marriage. Rather than being seen as about the “Christ as the head,” the last part of chapter five has often been interpreted as being about the “Husband as the head” (Ephesians 5:21-33).

Missionaries serving in countries where the macho male already sees himself as vastly superior to his wife must be very careful what they say. Macho men, and even their wives, may quickly pick up the phrase, “Wives, submit to your husbands...” and miss the previous verse which says, “Submit to one another...” (v. 21).

Note how often God is mentioned:

- (v. 22) ...as to the Lord...
- (v. 23) ...as Christ is...the Savior...
- (v. 24) ...to Christ, so...
- (v. 25) ...as Christ loved...gave himself up...
- (v. 27) ...to himself as...
- (v. 29) ...as Christ does...
- (v. 32) ...about Christ and...

Just as Jesus said that the two parts of the Great Commandment summarized the Law, the parallel commands here summarize this whole passage: “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (v. 25)” and “Each of you must also love his wife as he loves himself (v. 33).

Relationships are often more important than “results.” Be careful to maintain your marriage as well as your ministry. When you model this in your own lives, it will not only enrich your lives but also nationals will imitate it in theirs.

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