

More About Defining Adultery

A few weeks ago I sent you “Two Presidents: Defining Adultery” (Freedom’s Ring, 124). In that essay I proposed that, in addition to sexual violations, marriage may be adulterated by any number of foreign and destructive elements introduced into a marriage. Most of your responses were approving.

Below is a letter offering an additional consideration which I pass on to you. I am omitting any identifying information.

“Cecil, my husband is a minister and licensed counselor. He often asks me to join him when he is faced with counseling a couple having marriage problems. This experience has led me to give MUCH study to this subject. I have seen just about every situation imaginable. And I have studied every verse related to marriage and unfaithfulness that I can find. My husband and I have drawn the same conclusions that your studies have led you to. And you have astutely covered most relevant material. There is one issue that we would like to offer you for consideration on this subject.

“Putting another god before Jehovah was called Idolatry. Turning away from God and following after another religion, would again be universally referred to as Idolatry. But go back and read what the Lord Himself called it. Time and time again, God referred to Idolatry as Adultery.

“When the Israelites put other beliefs, other gods, other religions, other interests, self-interest, indulgences, and carnalities before their faith and trust in Him, He said they prostituted themselves. God called them harlots. The Lord filled the Old Testament scriptures with analogies that likened Idolatry with Adultery. If turning your heart away from God was "adultery," why wouldn't turning your heart away from your spouse be likewise? If Idolatry and Adultery were synonymous in the Old Testament, why isn't it so in the New Testament?

“The verses that have given us peace and a clearer understanding of how God views the marriages we struggle to help are the verses where God explains how He feels and how He defines it when His beloved stray from Him.”

This studious reader was invited to write a fuller treatment on these points but she preferred that I do it. I do not see how I can add to her clear logic but I will add some scripture references which uphold her premise.

“Again, the word of the Lord came to me: ‘Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations...’” Thus Ezekiel began his long Chapter 16 which was an extended indictment against God’s people for their infidelity in adulterating their covenant with him. Israel’s affections were like that of a “brazen harlot,” an “adulterous wife, who

receives strangers instead of her husband” (v.30-33). Over and over in this long chapter, Ezekiel equates infidelity to God in turning to idolatry as spiritual harlotry and adultery. So the message is clear that their disaffection and conduct contrary to their covenant relationship with God was denounced as adultery.

Similar indications are seen in the new covenant writings. Paul argues that holding on to old covenant law while claiming Christ was like a woman becoming an adulteress by living with another man while married to her husband (Rom. 7:1-6).

Writing about destructive teachers among the disciples, Peter used imagery of sexual sins to describe their spiritual misconduct: *“They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls...”* (2 Peter 2:14).

John wrote to the disciples at Thyratira: *“But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will throw her on a sick-bed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her doings ...”* (Rev. 2:20-22). The term “spiritual adultery” is not used by either writer, but John indicated that following a destructive teacher into immorality and idolatry was committing adultery with the teacher. That could hardly be interpreted as a physical sexual act; so, “spiritual adultery” aptly describes it. Just as attitudes and actions contrary to our covenant with God adulterate its purity, so attitudes and actions contrary to our covenant with a spouse adulterate its purity.

Our correspondent’s premise is substantiated by these references. We will not belabor the point by piling on more which you may add by your research. She asks, “If turning your heart away from God was ‘adultery,’ why wouldn’t turning your heart away from your spouse be likewise?” I will add a question: If this is not the case, then did not God employ an inappropriate literary device and an illogical analogy? We leave these questions with you to answer as you may wish.

(Cecil Hook; June 2002) []