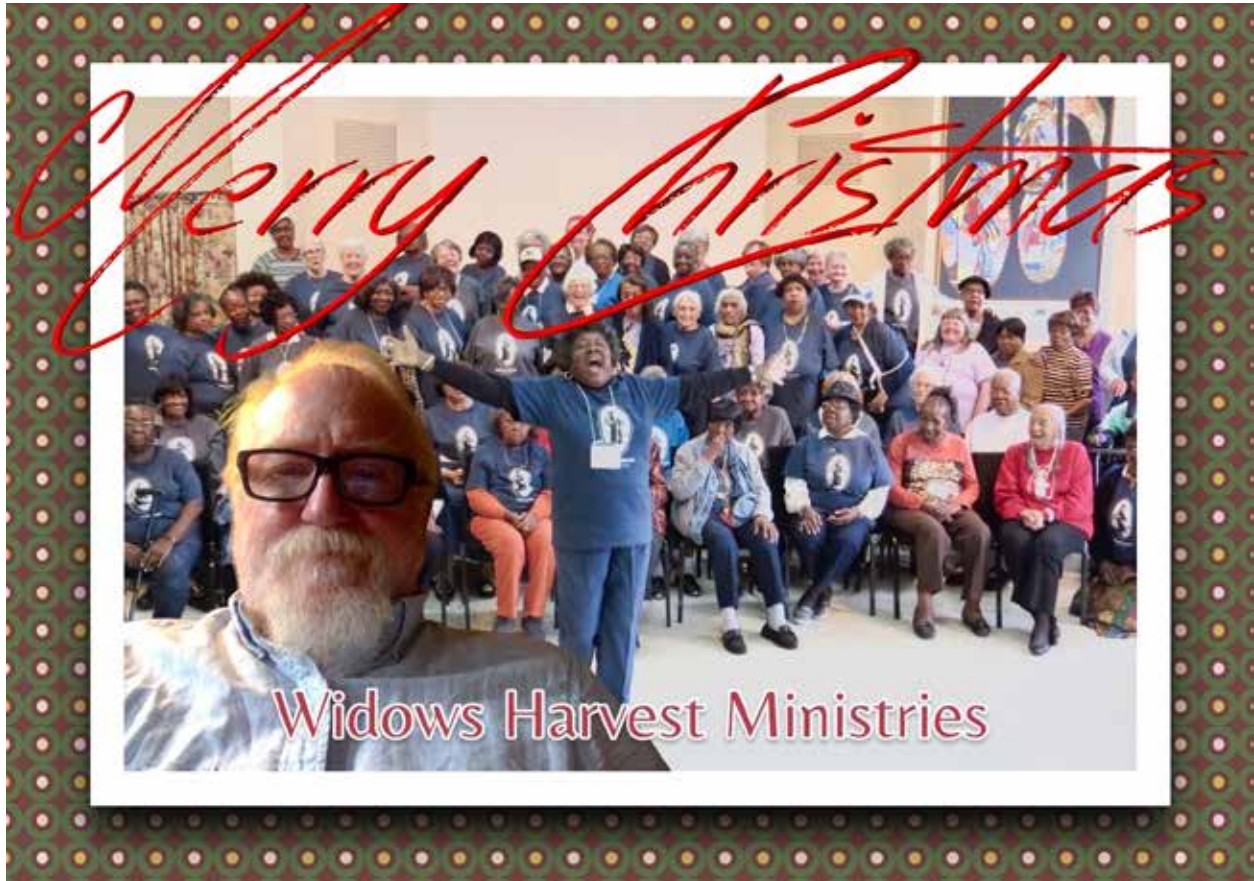




Widows Harvest MINISTRIES

In All Things Give Thanks to Our Heavenly Father In Christ Jesus Name | END-OF-THE-YEAR UPDATE 2025



“CHRISTMAS GREETINGS”

Dear Friends and Supporters:

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, and ever faithful bridegroom and husband. Who has promised to “never leave nor forsake us,” which means that under grace God has promised to never divorce us. Which was not the case under the first covenant. Because of Israel’s unfaithfulness, God divorced her and she became like the widow, desolate, bereft of a husband.

As a man I will never know what it is like to be a widow. Sadly, I now know what it’s like to be a widower. My dear wife, Gloria, passed away at home on June 5th in the early hours of the morning. I was with her just as she and I had been by the side of our daughter, Hadrienne, when she was taken off life support (2005), and 10 years later we were by Asher’s side when he died at home. All too much for anyone in a single lifetime. Much more than one should have to bear.



My wife Gloria pictured here with our children, Asher and Hadrienne.

Realization

When each of our children passed away, thankfully, Gloria and I had each other going forward. Now, though, I do not have Gloria, or either of our children, to be with through the only kind of loss that spiritually rips us in half according to scripture. I have also realized that in scripture there is no word in the Greek language that has been translated as the word, widower, or for the condition of a widower. Maybe, if I had not spent so much time in the study of James 1:27, as well as being in ministry with widows for as long as I have, I might have arrived at a different conclusion than the one I have for the reason why “widower” does not appear in the scripture.

In the book I wrote some years ago, “Spiritual Widowhood,” this title reflects the fact that apart from Jesus our spiritual conditions are that for being spiritually widowed and fatherless. When we accept Jesus’ proposal of marriage (the gospel) he takes away these two spiritual conditions: Jesus becomes our eternal husband and God becomes our eternal father.

Feminine Not Masculine

When we think about God’s relationship with his people, beginning in the Old Testament with Israel and now with us under grace as the church, his people are always characterized as daughter/bride/wife/widow and not son/bridegroom/husband/widower. And the pronoun most frequently used in the Old Testament for Israel is “she” and not “he.” However, in several instances, “the masculine singular pronoun is used when referring to Israel, but the use of this pronoun “does not imply gender according to grammatical convention.”

Plainly stated, “Hebrew and Greek often use masculine grammatical forms, even though the metaphorical identity being described is feminine. In other words, masculine grammar does not equal masculine identity, but on-the-other-hand, feminine metaphor does equal feminine identity. When we only read English translations of scripture it is easy to assume that gender works the same in Hebrew and Greek. Which often leads to the confusion between grammatical form with covenant

identity often resulting in the marriage structure of scripture being overlooked,” (as in our marriage to Jesus).

Years of Observation

Over the years working with older widows one thing that has always stood out to me is the difference that often occurs in a woman’s relationship with Jesus when she loses her husband that does not often, or in the same way occur in men. With many of the widows I have known, Jesus becomes increasingly related to and depended on as husband once her physical husband is gone. With men, it is often more time on the golf course as well as the need to find another wife. Understandably, men do not readily relate to Jesus as husband, nor, in general, do men ever embrace the idea that we are seen by God as a bride and not a bridegroom. It’s almost as if, as men, we subconsciously believe that we will be on Jesus’s side of the altar at the “Marriage of the Lamb” instead of the bride’s side.

For me, personally, I have considered the widows I have served with, as well as my own wife, Gloria, the ones who have most modeled for me, in my own relationship with Jesus, what it means to be a bride.

Calling Into Question

The realization, that as a man, I am equally considered to be a bride by God as women, occurred to me quite a number of years ago while reading through II Corinthians 11:1-4. What finally struck me was that Paul was speaking to the church, both male and female, when he expresses his fear, “that just as the first Eve had been deceived by the serpent so our minds might also be led astray from our pure and sincere devotion to Christ”. It is also important to note that he doesn’t make any mention of the first Adam and vulnerabilities we might have that are associated with him.

In I Corinthians 15:45, “So it is written: ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first,

but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven.”

For the church, being both male and female, there is only one identity we can claim in our relationship with Jesus: “Bride.” And as Christ’s bride, the first Adam, is no longer relevant. Meaning, our identity as bride, is all that remains. But unlike in the case of the first Adam and Eve who were both deceived, in our case, and with our vulnerability for being deceived our bridegroom and husband, Jesus, the Last Adam, can never be seduced in the way that the first Adam was.

Taking all of this into consideration, the questions that came to mind was: In our relationship with Jesus does God view us as his bride? And if so, as his bride, are we likewise, the last Eve? Especially when we consider that the first Adam was earthy, as was the first Eve. Jesus as Last Adam, though, is spiritual, and through him the church, is made his spiritual bride. And as such is it really a huge leap that we are, likewise, spiritually the last Eve?

Proving the Provable

Saying that Jesus specifically came to redeem a bride, and that bride is considered by God to be the last Eve, is obviously not the same thing as proving it. If true, though, it should be provable, right? Well, that’s what I was hoping would be the case when I first asked myself that same question. Where to start, though? The internet didn’t exist then, so, my only option was my Bible, a Strong’s Concordance and, most importantly, the Holy Spirit. What I guess would be considered old school, today, but it was the way people had been studying scripture for centuries. You begin with a question, pray, and then jump into scripture to search for an answer. There was no way of knowing how long it would take to find an answer, though, or if an answer even existed. And then, what happens if a provable answer is found? Would anyone else care what that answer was? Especially, if that answer potentially

exposed flawed interpretations of scripture that much of the church assumes is imbedded in the bedrock of truth that our faith practices have been based on.

Proving Jesus Came To Redeem

A Bride: The Church Like Eve

In order to prove that Jesus came to specifically redeem a bride, in effect the last Eve, it occurred to me the logical place to begin was the creation account of the first Eve through the first Adam. Genesis 2:21-24, "So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. 22.) Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. 23.) The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man. 24.) That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh."

My thinking was that if I could find correlating passages in the NT directly tied to Jesus, either symbolically, metaphorically or literally, would not only prove that Jesus came to redeem a bride, but as a bride, who would best serve as a model for us as a bride? It should also confirm the legitimacy for the belief that the vulnerability for being deceived is equally that for both men and women, not just for women. Which is contrary to prevailing views that continue to place Eve's guilt for being deceived only on women. Which, if proven to be unfounded, should compel us to question many of our beliefs and subsequent practices especially in our views and treatment of women, and especially the widows.

Obvious Correlations

The first correlation: Found in verse 21, "deep sleep," can easily be correlated with Jesus' death recorded in John 19:33. In this instance it is not a linguistic correlation, but a theological typology

connection. The first Adam's deep, or death-like sleep is a foreshadow of Jesus' death-sleep which is the fulfillment of God's promise to send a redeemer.

The second correlation: Also found in Genesis 2:21, is the word "rib". In most instances in Hebrew this word has been translated as the word, "side," i.e. the sides of the Ark of the Covenant, and the sides of the Tabernacle. The NT correlation, also seemingly obvious, is found in John 19:34, when Jesus' "side was pierced with a spear" which is translated from the Greek word, "pleura," which actually means, side. Additionally, in the Septuagint (Ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, 3rd century BC), this same Greek word, "pleura," has been translated as "rib" in Genesis 2:21.

The first Adam, whose pleura was opened – rib removed, bringing forth the first Eve, his bride; And Jesus, the last Adam (I Cor. 15:45), whose pleura was opened when he was pierced with a spear to bring forth the last Eve, his bride - the church. Or, in the words of Augustine, "that just as Eve came from Adam's side, "so the church came from the side of Christ as He slept in death upon the cross."

The Third and Fifth Correlations: In verse 2:22, "after the rib was removed, God made a woman from it and brought her to him...", verse 23, Adam said "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," and finally in verse 24, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh," but between these two statements Adam declares "she shall be called 'woman.'"

Sequentially, "Woman" should be the fourth correlation. In that making this correlation is the least obvious one, though, it would seem that by making the third and fifth correlations first the one for, "woman," will hopefully be made more obvious.

For the third correlation, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," is found in Matthew

26:26-28, the Last Supper account, where “Jesus took the bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for the many for the forgiveness of sins.’” Though, not an exact quote, it is a legitimate interpretation based on Typology (“a method of biblical interpretation where an earlier person, event or thing (the type) is seen as a divinely intended foreshadowing of a later person, event, or thing”). And as such, would fit under a number of typological categories.

But for both the third and fifth correlations, the most obvious ones are both found in Ephesians 5:30-32. In verse 30, though not an exact quote, Paul writes, “For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones,” (NKJV). Then in verse 31, Paul directly quotes Genesis 2:24, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

The body of scripture that these 2 passages have been included, beginning with verse 21 and ending with verse 33, are often interpreted to include a larger body of passages that have been misinterpreted for being “Instructions for Christian Households. Particularly, for being understood in the context of our physical marriage relationships and the hierarchical order for a wife to submit to her husband’s authority over their marriage and family.

If Paul had not included what he said in verse 32 this might be a plausible interpretation, but in verse 32 he makes clear that he is using physical marriage imagery in order to help us to understand our spiritual marriage with Jesus as the bride he came to redeem. Verse 31, “This is a profound mystery- but I am talking about Christ and the church.” And as such, those who are Christ’s bride, whether physically married or not, according to verse 21 we

are to, “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” And when we drop down to verse 33, the concluding passage in this body of passages, Paul exhorts us, in essentially the same way as verse 21, only he, more specifically, says it in the context of a husband and wife relationship, “Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.” Essentially, husbands and wives, “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

The Fourth Correlation: In Genesis 2:23, “...she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man,” is the only word or phrase that does not have an obvious correlation tied to a specific passage(s) of scripture in the NT. What I discovered, however, was that the answer was in plain sight, and spoken by Jesus himself in the Gospel of John.

The Gospel of John is the only Gospel account that focuses on Jesus as God starting with the very first line in chapter 1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The other three Gospel accounts really focus more on Jesus as man. Keeping this in mind it should come as no surprise that John, beginning with chapter 2, records the wedding



in Cana where Jesus, his disciples and his mother are all in attendance. Even though this account is understood more for being Jesus' first miracle, where he turned the water into wine, it is far more a foreshadowing of the "Marriage of the Lamb" when Jesus and his betrothed, the bride he came to redeem, will be joined together for eternity. And in this foreshadowing, it would appear obvious that Mary would be the one who symbolizes the bride that Jesus came to redeem.

John, more than in any of the other Gospel accounts, is the one who records Jesus' encounter with women, whose imagery symbolizes for us the bride that he came to redeem. There are five instances, but with 4 women who he calls "woman:" The Samaritan woman Jesus meets at the well (John 4); The woman caught in adultery (John 8, possibly added later and not from the original text); Mary Magdalene (John 20); but the one that is most important for us to recognize as corresponding with "woman" in Genesis 2:23 is Mary, the mother of Jesus, in John 2.

In all of the Gospel accounts there is not a single instance where Jesus addressed Mary as "mother." And John's Gospel account is the only one that records Jesus addressing Mary as woman, and even then, it is only in two instances. And with both symbolizing the very heart of the fulfillment of God's promise to send the Messiah, who would deliver, redeem and restore us, as the church, but most importantly, as his bride.

In the first instance, already mentioned, Jesus addresses Mary as woman after she informs him that the wine has run out and Jesus responds to her in John 2:4, "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. 'My hour has not come.'" When we understand not only this passage in the context of the broader theological narrative that Jesus came to redeem a bride or according to a, "Widow, Bride and Marriage" theological narrative, it becomes plain that this is meant to be understood primarily

as a foreshadowing of the Marriage of the Lamb and not this actual wedding ceremony. Jesus is, in effect, saying, "this is not my wedding. It is not for me to provide anything at this time and under these circumstances. That responsibility is for the bridegroom, or his representative, whose actual wedding celebration this is. I have not even offered up my life in order to redeem the bride I have come for."

The Greek word for woman is, "gynē," and means a woman of any age, whether a virgin, or married, or a widow. A wife. Of a betrothed woman." Historically, however, Mary's identity for being all of these throughout her lifetime, has been stifled, or placed in a box only allowing her to be identified as not only a mother, but most emphatically Jesus' mother. And by locking Mary's identity into this box, as Jesus' mother, the spectrum of her considered significance has been one that has ranged from deification to near nullification.

It is also important to note that in Genesis 2:23, "... she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man," in the Septuagint, the Greek word for woman is also, "gynē," which we already know is the Greek word for woman in John 2:4. Which, of course, in and of itself does not prove that Mary, addressed by Jesus as, "woman," represents for us the bride that Jesus came to redeem, nor does it disprove it either. In fact, the needle, at this point, is leaning more towards proof, than not.

Certainty?

How certain are we, though, that Mary's identity as Jesus' mother is the most important one for us to consider? No doubt, and for obvious reasons, historically most of the church has identified Mary, only as Jesus' mother with great certainty, and according to some, that certainty is so great that she has been deified. What happens if it can be proven that her identity actually symbolizes that of the bride that Jesus came to redeem and not for being his mother?

Apostles Creed

At least 30 years ago, while I was reciting the “Apostles Creed” in a Sunday morning church service, something suddenly occurred to me that I had never considered before. It had to do with conception and the fact that conception is mostly recognized as a female function and not a male one. Biologically, however, it takes both a man and a woman for the conception of an embryo to occur. Nevertheless, while rotely reciting this Creed, and for the umpteenth thousandth time I had done so since I was a small child (growing up Presbyterian), I suddenly stopped reciting and started questioning as the words, “conceived by the Holy Ghost,” dropped from my brain, onto my tongue and audibly left my mouth.

“Conception,” is almost always thought of as a female function, I could hear myself saying in my head. Yet, in the Apostles Creed, taken directly from scripture, says that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, translated from the Greek word, “pneuma,” which is a neuter noun,” and often accompanied with the masculine pronoun, “he,” (not “she”). So, does that mean that the Holy Spirit functioned in a “male” role in the conception of Jesus with Mary, and/or does the Holy Spirit function in both roles with Mary? Just writing this, now, starts to confuse me.

At that moment, though, while reciting the Apostles Creed I knew I had to resolve my understanding, or misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit’s functioning role. Because, determining the Holy Spirit’s role might, in turn, change the way we identify Mary for only being the mother of Jesus.

Of course, thinking back to that time, there is no way to know what caused me to question the Holy Spirit’s role in the conception of Jesus. What it did, though, was led me to ask myself, that if the Holy Spirit’s role was for the female function in the conception of Jesus, and if so, did that mean that God the Father was also present? Since I had never

heard this taught, nor did I ever remember reading it in any of the Gospel accounts, the answer must be no.

Too many times, however, Assumption Theology wins the day and we never pursue what we have come to believe, and subsequently continue to carry on in our faith practices with theologically based certainty. And consequently, we never take the time to search out and study scripture for ourselves, or to even question whether it is scripturally based. If we did, how often would we discover that much of what we have come to accept might not be as scripturally sound as we once thought.

Ah Ha Moment!

Which is exactly what turned out to be the case when I discovered the actual role and function of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’s conception: God the father was present when Jesus was conceived. And it is recorded in Luke 1:35, “after an angel told Mary that she would have a child, and she asked, ‘how it would be possible since she was a virgin?’ Then the angel answered her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the, Most High, will overshadow* you. So, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.’”

*(In the Septuagint, the Greek word for “overshadow” is the same word used in Exodus 40:35 to describe the “Shekinah glory” that filled the tabernacle. Mary, in effect, becomes a living ark, a walking temple if you will, that has been overshadowed by the, “Most High God,” who is God the father).

Mother vs. Woman/Bride

Subsequently, when we realize that Mary’s role as the mother of Jesus is one of serving as the host vessel for carrying Jesus to term, it significantly helps explain why Jesus addresses Mary as “woman” instead of mother. And She, more than any other woman in the NT, even among the other three women Jesus also addressed as “woman,”

symbolizes not only the bride that Jesus came to redeem, but after Jesus has fulfilled God's promise for us, Mary then becomes our "model" for remaining a "bride pure as a virgin."

This is not based on the fact that Mary served as the host vessel for bringing Jesus to term, but her spiritual qualities for being selected to serve in this capacity. Mary found favor with God because of her, "humility, obedience, faith and virginal purity." Which are, likewise, the very same qualities that God desires for us as Christ's bride. There are no male examples in any of the four Gospel accounts, including any of his disciples, that would equally serve, on any level, as a model for us being Christ's bride, especially for remaining pure as a virgin.

However, the significance of the other three women that Jesus also refers to as, "woman," should not be discounted in that they symbolize for us the condition of Israel, that according to Jesus, their "house was left unto them desolate" (like the widow), at that time. And they, like Israel, were also in need of a "spiritual husband," to be their spiritual redeemer kinsman and deliver, redeem and restore them. None of them, however, could likewise be viewed as equally qualifying in the way Mary did for serving as a model for us as Christ's bride.

Proof Positive

If the first instance in John 2, where Jesus addresses his mother as woman, is not sufficient proof, perhaps, the second instance found in John 19 will be deemed conclusive. Because when both instances are viewed together, they should be found to demonstrate that Jesus did not merely come to redeem a bride; he identified Mary, His mother, as the typological representation of that Bride. From the beginning of His ministry to the moment of His death, Jesus identified Mary not merely as his earthly mother but as the symbolic representative of the Bride He came to redeem. In Mary, the "woman" of Genesis 3:15 and the expectant Bride

of Revelation 21 are brought together. She stands at the cross as the living icon of the redeemed people of God, receiving both her Son and her new family: the Church.

So, in order to understand the second and last instance where Jesus addresses his mother as, "woman" it is necessary for us to recognize it in the context of the theological narrative that Jesus came to redeem a bride or, Widow, Bride, Marriage theology. John's second account begins in 19:25 by first identifying Mary and two other women (Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene), likely all widows, standing together at the foot of the cross.

Verse 26-27, "When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, 'Woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home."

In both instances, John 2 and John 19:26-27, Mary symbolizes the bride that Jesus came to redeem. Whereas, in the first instance it is a foreshadowing of the Marriage of the Lamb recorded in the book of Revelation, here Jesus makes provision for his physically widowed mother, who symbolizes the bride he came to redeem. Thus, calling attention to the provision that he is about to make for all of us through the offering up of his own life on our behalf and taking away our conditions for being spiritual widowed.

And Mary, who symbolizes the bride, but who is also both a physical and a spiritual widow, by making provision for her as a physical widow as his last act on the cross, Jesus communicates with crystal clarity, that through the offering up of his own life that follows, he makes provision for all of us, including Mary, taking away our own conditions for being spiritual widowed and fatherless.

Redeemer Kinsman

In addition to the significance of Jesus' provision

for his widowed mother, Jesus also breaks with the Levitical “kinsman-redeemer pattern,” when he places Mary in the care of John, “the disciple whom he loved,” “(In ancient Israel, the “kinsman-redeemer was essentially responsible for protecting family integrity through the redemption of property, freeing relatives from bondage, to avenge a wrongful death and to restore a brother’s lineage through levirate marriage)”.

This practice has been most notably recorded in the book of Ruth where Boaz, a relative and next in line as kinsman-redeemer for Naomi, a widow, as well as Ruth, her widowed daughter-in-law serves as their redeemer. All of which embodied the law itself. Boaz then marries Ruth and their son, Obed, is in the lineage of Jesus. What this practice symbolized most, though, “is covenantal mercy, or redemption through kinship.”

The Cross turned the tables on this practice, though, which Jesus also called attention to when he put Mary in the care of John, who was not a relative, and therefore, was not in line to be her redeemer-kinsman. By Jesus breaking with the established Levitical kinsman-redeemer pattern, he reveals that the new household that is about to be born, is now one from a covenant of grace, completely bypassing the Levitical pattern of redemption. Which, is in no way a disregard for family, but a declaration that this new household is not one born of flesh and blood but of the Spirit. And the new household born of the Spirit, Jesus is now our redeem-kinsman, through his death, he has made provision for all of us in our fallen conditions for being spiritually widowed. In the same way that Boaz, the redeem-kinsman for Naomi, which also includes Ruth whom he weds, Jesus will likewise wed the spiritually widowed that he has redeemed.

“Pure and Undefined Worship”

The final point, which is of equal significance, when Jesus makes provision for his widowed mother as his last act on the cross, and just before he gives

up his spirit, it is crucial for us to understand that this was not only an act of worship, but according to James 1:27, it was an act of “pure and undefiled worship.”

This passage in James, which says “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, (in order) to keep oneself unspotted from the world,” the word, “religion,” literally means worship. And, the fact that it says in this same passage that it is the “visiting” of the widow and the fatherless in their distress that God considers to be an act of “pure and undefiled worship,” when we step back and understand this act in the larger context of Jesus coming to redeem a bride, it would more than qualify. Isn’t that literally what John 3:16 means when he says, “For God so loved the world he sent his only begotten son?” Didn’t God send Jesus to visit us in our distressful/afflicted conditions as the spiritually widowed and fatherless? And when we accept Jesus’ proposal of marriage (the gospel message), he instantly becomes our eternal husband and God becomes our eternal father, thus taking away our fallen spiritual conditions.

Once we are Christ’s betrothed, the Holy Spirit, the comforter Jesus said he would send, dwells in us, and we become God’s temples – the physical temple is moved to us and we become walking, spiritual temples wrapped in flesh. And in the same way worship was identified with a high priest and a physical temple, worship is now identified and offered up through us as a priesthood of believers and spiritual temples.

And according to Hebrews 8:6 and Philippians 2:17, Jesus’ ongoing ministry and our ongoing ministry are the same. The word ministry in Hebrews 8:6 and the word service that Paul uses in Philippians 2:17 is the same Greek word, “leitourgia” (where the word liturgy comes from), which means “priest and almsgiver.” Meaning that all of us, regardless of office or position, have the same ongoing ministry

as Christs', and as his temples, wherever we are, and whatever we are doing is where worship is meant to be offered up to God through our deeds of mercy, compassion and insuring justice on the behalf of those like the widows, fatherless, foreigners and poor.

Perhaps, one of the greatest losses that occurred through the Reformation and the establishment of Protestantism, was our understanding of the true purpose of works in their relationship with worship. Then we would realize that works/deeds have to do with our ongoing purity as a bride, and they have never been for earning our salvation. When the Reformation took place in reaction to practices, like the belief that salvation could be earned through good works the pendulum swung, so far the other way that it has never come back to center. Our understanding today of good works in the context of acts of worship and not for earning our salvation may be one of, if not the, most critical consequences of this pendulum swing.

Keeping Pure

When Paul says in II Corinthians 11:2, that we are promised to one husband, Christ, and that he desires to present us as a "pure virgin," but "he fears that we will be deceived as Eve was and that our minds will be led astray from our pure and sincere devotion to Jesus," our acts of worship are what keeps us pure, and in the case of "visiting the widows and the fatherless in their distress," God considers such acts (works/deeds) of worship to be "pure and undefiled. James even adds in James 1:27, that such acts "keep us from being polluted by the world." Which literally means to keep us from living in an idolatrous/Adulterous relationship with the world.

Our ongoing purity, or impurity, has nothing to do with whether we keep or lose our salvation. That is not what either Paul nor James were talking about. They were, instead, telling us that despite our salvation, as Christs' betrothed, there are

consequences for us in our spiritual conditions that can have devastating consequences for not only us, but the world around us. And not only are there multiple accounts where this occurred in the OT, but it is actually what had occurred in Israel at the time that Jesus came to redeem a bride.

Jesus told the religious leaders in the seven woes, Matthew 23:38, "your house has been left unto you desolate." The meaning of widow in the OT is desolate, and in the NT it means bereft of a husband. Essentially, what Jesus was saying was that God had left the building, but because there had been no physical changes in either the physical appearance of the church, or for its form and function, they didn't even realize he was gone. And the actual evidence that he was gone was not physically manifested for another 40 years when the temple was completely destroyed as well as a third of Jerusalem by the Roman army.

In the OT, the evidence for the, cause and effect, relationship between impure and defiled worship and the very land itself being made desolate (like the widow) by Israel, and not by God, has been plainly recorded in Zechariah 7. In this chapter God questions whether the Jewish people had been fasting and feasting unto him (going to church, celebrating Christmas and Easter, etc.), because they had not, according to Zec. 7:9-10, "Administered true justice; shown mercy and compassion to one another." And in verse 10 Zechariah plainly tells us who God includes under the "administration of true justice, ...Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor..."

Which literally means that in order for us not to be guilty of oppression requires that we do something to prevent it. In other words, to do nothing at all, in God's eyes, makes us just as guilty of oppression as it would if we were to intentionally seek to do them harm. And in verse 14, because the people turned their backs on God when he called out to them, "I scattered them with a whirlwind among

all the nations, where they were strangers. The land they left behind them was so desolate that no one traveled through it. This is how they made the pleasant land (a land flowing with milk and honey) desolate (like the widow).

Just “Visit”

One final point, and an important one to this discussion, is for calling attention to the importance of “visiting, or to visit.” In James 1:27, “to visit the widows and the fatherless,” the word for “to visit” carries with it, whether stated or not, God’s “deliverance and restoration. There are several instances in both the OT and the NT that prove the basis for this claim. The first is in Exodus 3:16, when God visits Israel and delivers, redeems and promises to restore them, which is also the basis for the Passover meal and what the four cups of wine represent. Second, is in Luke 1:68 when Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist said that God had visited his people, Israel, and redeemed them. Third, in Matthew 25:31-46, when Jesus reveals his criteria for separating the sheep from the goats some form of the word “visit” is used 4 times. And finally, this word is used in Acts: 6:3 when the minority Greek widows were not being included in the daily distribution of food and the disciples sent those, who brought the widows neglect to their attention, “to choose seven Men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them.”

“Choose, or select” has been translated from the same Greek word as “to visit” in James 1:27. This account in Acts 6, where minority Greek widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food that was being provided for the majority Hebraic widows, has not only been largely misunderstood and interpreted, but discounted for having any real meaningful significance for the successful formation of the early church. This passage is often cited by pastors as justification for devoting themselves primarily, if not completely, to “the ministry of the word.” Citing the disciple’s example for maintaining

their attention to the ministry of the word and delegating the widows’ needs to others. What the disciples literally say, though, is that “it is not desirable or it is not pleasing for them to stop” what they are doing and take on the responsibility for meeting this need. However, this is not in the form of a command, nor do they say that this will be true in all cases under all circumstances. Furthermore, the fact that they are Apostles and not pastors, how can this be the basis to make this claim in the first place. Especially when we realize that Jesus placed his own mother in the care of John, an Apostle.

The other, erroneous, claim is for this being the basis for the office of Deacon. Again, there is nothing in scripture that would scripturally prove this to be true. In I Timothy, considered to be a “pastoral book” because it prescribes church offices and their qualifications, in chapter 5, it gives the general instruction for widows to be cared for by both the church and individual family members. And in particular, verse 8, says that “Anyone who does not provide for their own relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” And given the context this has been written, family and relatives are meant to include, if not especially include, all widows in a family, both immediate and extended.

Of special note is the fact that Stephen is one of the seven chosen to wait tables. Stephen has far more of an identity for being a pastor based on the description that follows beginning with verse 8. In fact, Acts 6:1-7, should be equally understood as an introduction to Stephen and his faith in that the rest of chapter 6 and all of chapter 7 is about him as the only person that scripture records that Jesus stood up in heaven for, as well as his arrest, being found guilty and resulting in his death by stoning, thus, making him the first Christian martyr. That alone should give us pause, especially when we consider that the Apostles actions for putting this need in the hands of others in that moment, has become the justification for pastors as well as other church

office holders to hand-off the care of those, such as the widows, to others.

Cause and Effect

In addition to all that has already been brought out in Acts 6:1-6, verse 7 records the literal outcome that scripture has already revealed to us will occur when we “visit” as an act of worship: deliverance and redemption. Verse 7, “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” Not only was the “Great Commission” fulfilled, but Jewish “priests became obedient to the faith.”

This does not say, or even imply, that these priests “prayed a prayer and received Jesus,” it says that “they became obedient to the faith.” These Jewish priests were already in the faith, but they had not been obedient to it. Both hearing and seeing for themselves firsthand what they would have already known, that actual obedience in their faith, was not realized through ritualistic and ceremonial practices, but for caring for those such as the widows. They would have also understood the care of widows in the context of worship. In effect their lives, formerly obedient to temple worship, became obedient to the actual worship of God as Christ’s bride.

Critical Mass

Alas, when we read and study this account in Acts 6:1-7, we should recognize it for the critical mass moment it was in the formation of the early church as Christ’s bride. The first thing that happens is a plea is made for the Greek widows. This comes directly from Isaiah 1:17, “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow,” an echo not only of Zechariah 7, but also Isaiah 58 which describes what “the true fast” includes as opposed to just going without food for a day.

In order to truly understand why this should

be considered a critical mass moment, though, it is necessary to return to the last account that describes Jesus’ with all his disciples in the temple. Found in Mark 12: 38-40, it is right before Jesus points out the faith of the widow whose faith was so great that she put all she had into the treasury. And yes, she also represents or is a typology of the bride that Jesus came to redeem.

Beginning with verse 38, Jesus warns his disciples to “...Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widow’s houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.” And without missing a beat, in the very next section of scripture Jesus points out one such widow whose house, no doubt, was among those widows whose houses were being devoured.

Just based on this alone, is it any wonder that Jesus’ last act on the cross is for making provision for his widowed mother’s care? More significantly, though, is the fact that making this provision was considered by God to be an act of “pure and undefiled worship.” And the outcome, we all know is the outcome that “to visit” carries with it: deliverance and redemption, with the hope for being fully restored as Christ’s bride for all eternity.

So, the account in Acts 6:1-6, was not just another mercy ministry opportunity in the early formation of the church as Christ’s bride. If it had been ignored, or maybe even put off, it would have said to God the father and Jesus as our ever faithful bridegroom, they had forgotten what he did on their behalf. Or, perhaps at the very least, that they had taken much less seriously than he had only recently proven through the offering up his life for them as the spiritually widowed and fatherless. Which is also true for us when it comes to James 1:27. To ignore, pass off, or just forget the plight of

the widows and the fatherless is to emphatically say to Jesus, “we have forgotten what you have done on our behalf.” In which case, we are considered by him to be living in an adulterous relationship with the world.

Now, perhaps, Acts 6 hopefully being understood for the critically mass moment that it was and why, will mean that we will no longer ignore it, overlook it, or pass it by any longer. That the care of those in need, especially in the case of the widows and the fatherless, will no longer be categorized as falling under the responsibility of either a specific church office, or a ministry that is identified as a “mercy ministry.” We are all equally, as Christ’s bride, called to be both merciful and compassionate regardless of church office, profession, or positions in the community (inside or outside the church). When we come outside the church (which isn’t even scripturally prescribed), or the camp so to speak as it says in Hebrews 13:13-16, “Let us, then go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore,” the playing field is a level one for all of us. Because it is where God really desires us to worship through acts of mercy and compassion on behalf of others: Literally modeling what Jesus modeled for us, “to serve and not be served, and to think more highly of others than we do ourselves.”

Precedent For Worship

When we realize that the precedent for worship is not modeled on Israel and their temple form of worship, nor is it based on any scriptural text in the NT. Yes, scripture records that believers gathered together, and that we shouldn’t forsake these gatherings, but it has been based on Assumption Theology that these gatherings were worship services for the purpose of worshipping God, and not any scriptural text that identifies them as worship.

What does that mean for us, then, that what we call worship, and consider to be worship, and the houses where we gather as we consider to be

houses of worship, actually aren’t considered by God to be worship? And instead, the worship that God actually desires from us is as our offerings of good works/deeds through acts of mercy and compassion on behalf of others? Knowing, now, that it is the latter our condition as Christ bride may be far worse than any of us might have imagined. And for us to even consider that all of the years that we have believed that what really validates our faith for being sincere and legitimate in the eyes of everyone we gather with, might be questioned by God as even being for him, is certainly more than any of us could possibly fathom, or would even want to try to.

Works = Worship

The first example or picture of worship that scripture describes for us is found in Genesis 2:15 with Adam and Eve while they are still in the garden of Eden. God first tells Adam (who presumably then tells Eve) that he can eat anything fruit-bearing in the garden except fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And then, before Eve is created through Adam, this verse tells us, “And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.”

In the Hebrew language the word for work and the word for worship is the same word, “ābad.” “To dress,” or to cultivate in some translations, is this Hebrew word, “ābad,” that means both work and worship, which in the beginning was the same thing. Work and worship were the same because Adam and Eve had no self-awareness until after they committed an act of “self-worship.” Which, in their relationship with God was considered by him as an act of idolatry/adultery.

Obviously, there was no physical building in the garden designated as a house of worship. And there was no prescribed or otherwise order of worship that required blood sacrifices, or the singing of songs, a sermon or an offering taken up. The law, once handed down by God to Moses, included instructions for building the tabernacle, the Ark

of the Covenant and a prescribed system for both their religious practices and the establishment of a theocratic form of government to rule over them, and with a high priest serving as the ruling authority over both (Theocratic Rule).

Which we know failed completely and, not once, but many times. Yet, we somehow and for some reason, want some form and fashion of this both for our churches, and even, on some level, incorporated into the rule of law in the countries where we live. Even knowing that as Christ's bride our primary citizenship and the only one that is eternally lasting has been established in heaven. Making us all strangers and aliens here, literal ambassadors in chains, serving as representatives of the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

As I said at the beginning of this message, after losing Gloria, my very dear and lovely wife, I discovered that there is no word in all of scripture for "widower." If I had not lost my wife this would have probably never occurred to me. Obviously, the dynamics that occur for a man when he loses his wife are very different from that of a woman who loses her husband. Yet, God sent Jesus to all of us, both men and women, when we were in distress because of our conditions for being spiritually widowed and fatherless. And through the offering up of his own life he then extended his hand to us as a proposal of marriage, with the hope and promise that one day we will be joined with him at the Marriage of the Lamb, as his cherished bride, to remain with him for all eternity.

As a man who has lost his wife, my relationship with Jesus as his bride doesn't change, but it does put me in a position for making a choice. Just as I have seen so many women over the years who have lost their husbands choose to embrace Jesus more fully as their husband, will I choose to do so as well? Or, will I choose to try and deny being a bride, and try to preserve the false belief for what the identity

of Christian manhood should project? And then what?

If we are truly secure in ourselves, but most importantly, in our identities in Christ as his bride, then choosing to see him not only as our husband when we are physically married, but even more so if we should out-live our wives. Why would we desire to make any other choice?

The Greek word for repentance is, "metanoia, a feminine noun," and means, "a change of mind, as it appears to one who repents, of a purpose one has formed or of something one has done.

In Acts 26:20 Luke writes, "First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds." The Greek word for deeds is, "ergon," and in most instances appears in the Septuagint as the replacement for the Hebrew word, "avodah." The root of which is, ābad, the Hebrew translated as "dress, work or cultivate in Genesis 2:15.

Perhaps it is time for us as Christians in America, instead of continuing to wage war against that which we have been convinced are America's greatest sins and that we fear will bring God's judgement down on all of us (if it hasn't happened already) and be willing to look inwardly and examine ourselves in order to discover what our greatest sins are that will cause our own houses to become desolate places. Or as Jesus said to the religious leaders that "your house is left unto you desolate," and as God said through Zechariah, "this is how you made the pleasant land desolate.

Wedding Invitation

In Revelation 22:17, "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost."

This passage is the fifth from the last verse in the entire Bible. If we had never read the Bible and this was the first verse we read, in our search to understand who the bride and the Spirit are and what it is they are inviting us to and why, would the answers we came up with have as its beginning the creation of Eve through Adam?

The place where we must all begin if we are to truly understand that the bride extending this invitation in Revelation 22:17 is actually us. And John, who was also the author of the book of revelation and who also recorded the account of the wedding in Cana, would have understood that fixed time and eternal time are not the same. And he would have, therefore, also understood that the invitation being given by the Spirit and the bride was not from a place of fixed time, but from a place unbound by the physical laws of time that constrains us.

As we celebrate Christmas this year, perhaps, we will imagine the manger scene in a way that has never occurred to us before. In our imaginations we see Joseph and Mary gathered around the newly born Jesus lying in a manger. And then we will remind ourselves that Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus, but he accepted and adopted him as his own. But then, Joseph seemingly disappears from the pages of scripture after the account where he and Mary found Jesus in the temple when he was 12 years old. And Mary, in our imaginations, the mother of Jesus, we see her looking down on her newly born son not yet comprehending, perhaps, that she has just given birth to the savior of all mankind. In her heart and mind, though, she is fully his mother and he is fully her son, and to imagine otherwise, in that moment, would be completely unrealistic. To have been chosen by God to be his surrogate, a host, her womb, the ark of the new covenant of grace to be birthed as the word made flesh in the form of a newly born infant named Jesus, "God is our salvation," but in that moment Jesus is just her newborn son.

Then, we open up our eyes, but only for a few seconds and when we close them again the manger scene we had been imagining before is similar, yet looks and feels different, other worldly, perhaps. Joseph, Mary and Jesus, recognizable, yet also changed. Jesus is no longer a baby in swaddling clothes lying in a manger, he is dressed as a bridegroom, and instead of lying in a manger he is standing at the altar, it is now the "Marriage of the Lamb." And standing next to him is Mary, not as his mother, but as his bride, who he came into this world as an infant to one day redeem. And Joseph is also there, not as the father of the bridegroom or husband of Mary who had once been his wife, but as the representation of God the father, who accepts and fully adopts into his family; all who have been born in the spirit through his own son.

The birth of the New Covenant of Grace, though, was a violent one. From the time of Jesus' physical birth until his death on the cross a trail of violence followed. After the birth of Jesus an order was given by King Herod, to slaughter all babies 2 years old and younger in the hopes that Jesus would be among them. This "Massacre of the innocent" forced Joseph and Mary to escape into Egypt with Jesus in order to protect him. Egypt, the land where the Jewish people had spent 400 years as slaves, but where Joseph, Mary and Jesus are now received as refugees who are fleeing for their lives in order to protect the life of the future redeemer of the world.

This time of year, especially for the baby boomer generation I was born into, we have always had a way of turning the Holy Family, the manger scene and the birth of Jesus into a "Leave it to Beaver," tv episode. We have all imagined our own family's lives being like the idyllic "Beaver" family when we were growing up, or at the very least, we hoped our family's lives could have been like theirs. Either way, this time of year reminds us of an imagined manger scene, with an imagined Joseph, Mary and Jesus more suited for an imagined family television episode than one based on the violent reality of



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the world that Jesus was born into, as well as the world we have all been born into. The violence, evil, hunger, poverty, widowhood, fatherlessness, persecution, oppression, discrimination and so much more, continues on, Christmas celebrations or not. For most of the world the idyllic Christmas manger scene we have made it into does not exist. Do we see them, do we hear them, do we really care about them? Because Jesus was born into a world filled with unimaginable acts of violence all around him, and 33 years later he was finally overtaken by the violence that had been relentless in its pursuit of him. The only difference is that he already knew it was coming for him throughout his entire life, but he never ran away from it, he ran right into it instead.



Most Sincerely,

Andy Mendonsa
A Servant, A Bride