

Peter's Marriage

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The early church re-invented marriage. The three men whom we credit most for 'founding' the church – Jesus, Paul and Peter – all had views on marriage that were profoundly different from the various cultural norms of their day. But only one of these men was actually married: Peter. And his wife might just be the most important invisible person in scripture. When I tell people that I'm researching Peter's wife they say "He had a wife?!", or "Poor thing, I guess she got left behind in Galilee while Peter went off and changed the world." Aha, not so!

I have long had a fascination with this Invisible Woman. Who was she? How did she feel about it all? Who was Jesus to her? What might have been her role in it all? I used to carry a sense of sorrow for her. At what cost is Christian mission? Did she pay the price for Peter's radical discipleship, stuck at home with the kids, with no man to pay the bills or hold her at night?

Then I discovered one little verse that dispelled this grief: 1 Corinthians 9:5. Paul is arguing for the rights of those in ministry; it's about getting paid, but it is also about being married, the right to be accompanied by a "sister" (i.e. believing) wife. And who does Paul use as the example of this? Peter!¹

This one verse tells us a huge amount about marriage in the early church, and Peter's marriage in particular. First, he was married still, 25 years on from that unforgettable day when a travelling preacher first walked into their home in Capernaum and healed his wife's mother.

Second, she was an active Christ-follower. Well, of course she was! Surely she got to know Jesus as well as anyone, back in the days when he practically lived in their house, when he held her children in his arms², when the crowds finally left them in peace and they could talk.

Thirdly, Peter's wife "accompanied" him, i.e. she walked the whole journey with him, moving to Jerusalem after Jesus' death, and then travelling with him. After the Jerusalem Council in AD 49 Paul records Peter's arrival in Antioch, and the stand-up argument they had (Galatians 2:11).³ The fact that Paul mentions Peter twice in 1 Corinthians⁴ surely means that Peter (with his wife) was known to the church in Corinth, had actually been there. Look on your map; it is a mighty long way from Antioch to Corinth!

Fourth, what does "accompanied" mean, do you think? Why not assume that she was an active partner in leadership, ministry and mission!?

¹ Remember that he had 3 names: Simeon, his Hebrew name, and 'the Rock' which Jesus kept calling him until it stuck, which is Cephas in Aramaic and Petros in Greek.

² Matthew 18:1-5

³ Church tradition is that Peter stayed on in Antioch, the main base for mission in Asia, for several years as the first bishop there.

⁴ also in 1 Cor 1:12

At this point we run the risk of imposing our own values about marriage back onto the text. Perhaps we'd be safer staying with scripture, so here's the next question: what did Peter himself say about marriage, in which we might see a reflection of his own marriage?⁵ In 1 Peter 3:

- a) Peter asks women to choose to respect their husband's authority.
- b) Peter asks men to choose to respect and honour their wives.
- c) Peter calls women to grow into "the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit" (1 Peter 3:4)⁶ instead of wasting money on external trappings of beauty.
- d) Peter places on marriage the same calling as for the wider church: unity, kindness, love, humility, truth, blessing instead of retaliation, peace instead of fear (1 Peter 3:8-12).

There's nothing out-dated about these ideas! Peter names here dilemmas and principles that are deeply relevant to my marriage, maybe yours too. What I love about this is that he lived it, he and his wife together forged a way to do marriage and ministry over the long haul and to come through it still singing of love.

Peter's wife married a head-strong fisherman in a small corner of nowhere, and ended her days (quite possibly) at the heart of the Roman empire, having shared in the founding of (in our unbiased view!) the largest and most influential organisation in the history of the world. Quite a woman, in her quiet way. Quite a marriage.⁷

⁵ This assumes that we accept that Peter wrote 1 & 2 Peter (with Silas' help, 1 Peter 5:12), most likely in the mid-60s in Rome, just before he was martyred. (This makes much more sense to me than some alternative authorship.) It is well worth reading these books in The Message translation.

⁶ NRSV

⁷ Peter surely fits the saying (attributed to Hubert Humphrey): "Behind every successful man stands a surprised mother in law"! It is hard to imagine how the pragmatic, impetuous young Peter could possibly have become such an incredible leader without a loving woman beside him.