

Reforming our culture - lessons from Abraham and Sarah



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INTRODUCTION

We have been called by God, just like Abraham. We've been called to leave our 'country' and its **culture**, for here we have '*no continuing city*' but are **pilgrims** on our way to a '*city that is yet to come*'. (*Gen 12:1; Heb 13:14*). In our pilgrimage, we have a lot to learn from the lives of Abraham and Sarah. Their pilgrimage is an example to every man and woman and to **every household** of faith. In fact, the lessons learned by the households of the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with their wives and children, give us a **complete manual** for our lifelong pilgrimage as households of faith.

In this booklet, we'll make a close study of some of the lessons learned by Abraham and Sarah. As we do, we should compare their situations with ours, and look at how to separate ourselves from familiar¹ culture in all its aspects. The Lord is calling us at this time to be properly separated, and to **reform our culture** so that we demonstrate one single, sanctified culture as the people of God.

Culture

We need to clarify what we mean by culture. Usually, we associate 'culture' with an ethnic group or with being 'cultured' or refined in our tastes toward dress, art or music etc. When **we** use the word culture, we mean the **entire way of life** that we cultivate as the family of God. God's people have a specific culture that distinguishes them from the world. This culture is the same from one family to the next, and from one nation to the next. Comparing Christian families in Australia with those in PNG for example, **lifestyles** in regard to work, dress, food, transport and social routines will be very diverse. But the basic **culture** of godliness, relationship, values, family order, and holiness will be the same.

1. The idea of a 'familiar' culture is from two sources. Firstly, Israel was warned to avoid 'familiar spirits'. This Hebrew word has the sense of an 'empty vessel' susceptible to something 'speaking in', rather like a ventriloquist doll. Secondly, the 'vain traditions' mentioned in 1 Peter 1:18 include all the family and cultural traditions of the world from which we must be redeemed.

Sanctification and separation

Before we talk about the culture of godliness, we must know what it means to be sanctified, or separated. We have to be sanctified **to** the 'holy ground' of godliness. (*Ex 3:5; Josh 5:15*). In practical terms, sanctification and separation are similar in meaning. Sanctification is more than cleansing.² To be sanctified means to be separated or **set apart** so as to be holy.³ Where the word 'to separate' occurs in its own right, it means to **draw lines of distinction**; (the Greek word is the root of the word 'horizon').

To come into the culture of godliness, we must be prepared to draw clear lines between what is of God and what is of the flesh and the worldly culture. Many of the difficulties we are facing arise from **lack of separation**. For some time the Spirit has been emphasising the themes of mourning and piercing. Why is this? Because we have to be 'pierced' to the 'thoughts ... intents' and motivations of the heart. (*Heb 4:12*). We have to be **cut free** from the familiar elements of history, tradition, fatherhood and family etc. Then we can each be sanctified to our distinctive identity within the holy ground of God's household.

Sanctification and relationship

Sanctification describes an entire culture of relationship. Separation **from** one another and **for** one another is the basis of Christian relationship. This way of relating is nothing like the worldly friendship and mateship loyalty that we see around us, which works by a particular set of rules and obligations. Of course we are friends, but this friendship is at all times **based on** sanctified, relational order.

Our friendship is not based on or dependent on the same kinds of common interests, activities, views and opinions as worldly relationships. We should not live with a whole set of expectations by which we judge the friendship of others. Neither should we live under a set of obligations that are placed upon us. We 'owe no man anything save to love (first love) one another.' (*Rom 13:8*).

Application. If we are sanctified in relationship, we will not be threatened when someone 'close' to us shows a giving attitude toward someone else. We are not insecure about being 'in' or 'out'. If we live in first love, we live at one level of openness - in 'open manifestation of the truth ... to every man ... in the sight of God'. (*II Cor 4:1*). We are not 'crafty' or partial toward certain people. In first love, we are all friends of one another in Christ, even though practically speaking, we do not have the same degree of contact.

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- Nearly all evangelical discussion of sanctification focuses on cleansing (such Scriptures as Deut 30:15 'circumcision of the heart', and Ezek 36:24 'cleansing from all filthiness'). Wesley came close to our present emphasis in highlighting the need for 'moment to moment **obedience ... which is the expression** of holiness and love'. He stressed 'the responsibility and power to express **love in relationship** with God and neighbour'. See 'Five Views on Sanctification' (Zondervan).
 - Sanctification and holiness are translations of the same Greek word.

<p>Peer pressure, (pressure by others to be of the same culture) can exist at any age and within any group of people, even leaders. The pressure from a peer group to be equal and not break rank, imposes a whole set of obligations to conform, and thus places limitations on the identity of others. Rather, we must allow the other to freely offer him/herself in the distinctive, sanctified identity that God expects.</p>	<p>Application. Leaders should note that there is a grave danger of interpreting the Ephesian pattern of leadership as a peer group of equals, rather than as a diversity of members sanctified to the Lord. Attitudes of equality affect our flowing together, and stall others in taking the steps forward they should take. Equality also has a damaging effect on our ability to honour others and receive ministry from them.</p>
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The incident in which the tribe of Levi stood ‘*on the Lord’s side*’, and wielded swords upon ‘*brother ... companion ... neighbour*’ and ‘*every man opposed his son and brother*’, is a helpful example of sanctification. (*Ex 32:26,27,29*). Those who wanted to be ‘on the Lord’s side’ had to be committed to putting the flesh to death. They couldn’t let loyalty or fleshly obligation stand in the way. Likewise, we are required to address the unreal carnal projections in others for their own good.

ABRAHAM’S SEPARATION - OVERVIEW OF HIS STEPS

To set the scene, we will look broadly at the lives of Abraham and Sarah, and comment on the overall lessons we intend to study in detail further on. As an overview, note that Abraham had to separate himself three times - firstly from his **father’s house** (Gen 12:4), secondly from the **world** (the Egypt episode, Gen 12:10-20) and thirdly from his **family**, (his nephew Lot, Gen 13:9).

<p>Each time he took a further step of separation, he ‘built an altar and called on the name of the Lord’. (Gen 12:8; 13:4; 13:18). These are an example of the steps we each must take in continuing to offer ourselves to the Lord.</p>	<p>Application. We must first of all separate ourselves, and then we must also set up altars in the new ways and contexts that we have chosen. The first questions we must ask ourselves are: ‘have we built an altar to the Lord?’ and ‘where is our altar pitched?’ In what context are we offering ourselves?</p>
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Three levels of prophetic meaning

The pilgrimage of Abraham and Sarah contains many direct examples from which we can learn. But theirs was also a prophetic pilgrimage. This means that it pointed forward and was a direct parallel to other events. Abraham’s journeys were prophetic of the later pilgrimage of Israel from Egypt to the promised land, and also that of the church in the New Testament era. New Testament references to Abraham’s faith, Sarah’s godliness and the law covenant typified by Hagar, and to the prophetic significance of the meeting with Melchizedek etc bear out this fact.

We need to read the story of Abraham and Sarah at three levels of prophetic depth and application. Firstly, in relation to our pilgrimage as **individuals**, husbands, wives and households in the covenant; secondly as lessons for each **church** ‘household’, and thirdly in relation to the **eschatology** of the church across history as we proceed on to the fulfilment of God’s covenant purpose.

Lessons for men

In the area of Abraham's fatherhood, we are provided with vast lessons concerning the faith, headship and fatherhood that every man must have. We are also shown images of alternative fatherhood, for example in the separation from his own father Terah, the episodes with Pharaoh and Abimelech, (Gen 12; Gen 20), and the example of Lot (who separated from Abraham, never built altars or made offering, and failed the tests in his own home).

Lessons for women

In the area of womanhood and motherhood, Hagar and Sarah (mothers of Isaac and Ishmael respectively) and their experiences, are so typical and prophetic that the two women became the figureheads of the two covenants, the two mountains, Sinai and Zion, of Jerusalem from beneath compared with Jerusalem from above, and of Babylon the mother of harlots compared with the church, the free woman, the mother of us all.

ABRAHAM - LEARNING FATHERHOOD THROUGH OFFERING

Looking at men first of all, the change of culture we must make can be illustrated from the life of Abraham. Gen 12-22 records the steps he took as he feared God and came to understand what God wanted for his life. As a man and a husband, the high point of his call was fatherhood. He was to become a '*father of many nations*'. (Gen 17:4). This destiny of fatherhood is the goal for all men whether young or older.

Abraham received a call and promise that God would make him a great nation, bless him, make his name great, and that he would be a blessing. (Gen 12:1-4). This is the same blessing that we are seeking for **our** lives. Abraham responded by building an '*altar and calling on the name of the Lord*'. (Gen 12:7,9; 13:4,18). Somehow in meeting the '*God of glory*' and receiving his call, Abraham must have understood the holy ground (cf Moses experience, Ex 4) and the fire of **offering** that was central to it. (Acts 7:2).

Abraham may not initially have known what the promise meant, but he soon learnt that he was to be a father participating with God - he was to inherit the way of God, of **godliness**. He was to participate in God's order, and His way was the way of **offering**. He could only fulfil the call and come on to holy ground by becoming a '*living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God*'. (Rom 12:1). Abraham feared God and became a man of altars.

Leaving his father's house

The first word to Abraham was to ' <i>get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father's house to a land ...</i> '. (Gen 12:1).	This is where we must begin as men. We have got to leave the culture of our father's house - meaning the tradition of fallen ways inherited from all our fathers since Adam.
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As a discipline upon the human race, the heavenly Father has placed us in a context '*under the sun*' which we may call mortality or vanity. (Ecc 1:3). Ecclesiastes is a complete commentary on the strange context of discipline, with all its cycles and laws of '*vanity*', into which the Father in His mercy has placed us. (Ecc 1:2). His purpose is that we may learn to '*fear God*', for '*fear is the **beginning** of wisdom*'. (Ecc 7:18; 12:13; Prov 9:10). Fear is the point of **escape** from the whole system under the sun.

Within this context of vanity, God has invoked certain laws of continuity. Part of the proclamation of His name (nature) is that the *'iniquity of the fathers is visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation. (Ex 34:7)*. We are unable to escape the traditions that are passed on until we are *'redeemed'* from them, until we move our culture and build an altar on the Lord's holy ground and learn a whole **new way of fatherhood.** (*I Peter 1:18*).

Application. As men, we have to become the fathers of another culture. The way of God under the sun is such that we are bound to become like our fathers in their unbelief and culture, and our children will become like us. Men are responsible to take the initiative in making a breach on the *'vain conduct received by tradition from your fathers'*. (*I Peter 1:18*). We must make a breach in ourselves so that we find the power of the cross to make a breach in our children's lives. Have we as men faced the fact that there are many cultural ways that we have passed on to our children?

Consider the life of king David. He didn't learn kingship in the house of his father. He had to **leave his father's house** and move to the ground of the heavenly Father and offer himself, just like Abraham. King Saul had anointing but no fatherhood. He never really offered himself and was always angry.

Application. Many of us need to make the shift from Saul's angry profile to David's worship profile. Paul tells *'men everywhere'* to *'pray lifting up holy hands without wrath and doubting'*. (*I Tim 2:8*). The man who doesn't lift up his hands and offer himself is always **angry**. King David, in his times of despair and anger, recovered himself through worship. Men who desire to be active in the headship of Christ and fatherhood of God must learn to offer themselves in worship.

Abraham's vision

'After these things' the Lord spoke to him in a vision about the fatherhood that would bring forth *'one from his own body'* as an heir. (*Gen 15:1-4*). Abraham *'believed in the Lord and it was accounted to him for righteousness.'* (*Gen 15:6*). This is where Abraham showed **relational obedience**. He made a choice to commit himself unconditionally to the person of God. He then asked *'how shall I know that I will inherit?'* The real knowing came through the experience of actual offering and actual participation. *'Faith was working together with his works, and by works his faith was made complete ... faith without works is dead.'* (*Heb 2:22,26*). We are stressing the word **actual** here, because a lot of evangelical Christian teaching has reduced faith to a position, with no actual substance. Invoking God's gifts as a position removes the need to make offering. Many Christians have a faith, but there are no works, there is no offering. As a result they have no actual life or experience.

The offering - the vultures

In his vision (Gen 15) Abraham was called to make sacrifice in a scene that was prophetic of Calvary. He became engrossed in the themes of Calvary - sacrifice, demonic opposition (vultures), darkness, burning torch etc.

God asked him to 'bring me ...' and Abraham obediently 'brought all these to Him and cut them in two'. (15:9-10). The cutting of the sacrifices 'in two down the middle' (15:10) indicated Abraham's complete willingness to be identified with the process of the 'cutting of the covenant'. (Compare *Ps 50:5* - 'my saints', or holy, sanctified ones, 'those who have **cut** a covenant with me by sacrifice.') He was willing to be sanctified, or 'cut in' to the covenant, separated to the holy ground.

In the vulnerability of this offering of himself, he then faced the persistent attack of **vultures**, symbolic of all the human and oppressive, demonic influences of his own traditions and 'familiar spirits'. For a whole day, a season of trial lasting until the setting of the sun he 'drove them away'. (15:12) He **held his ground** and sustained his faithful intention to make sacrifice to God and learn, through offering, how to inherit what God had promised regarding fatherhood.

Application. There are lessons in this story of the 'vultures' for all of us. But we'll apply it first of all to men, because God wanted Abraham to learn headship. Men must exercise headship in the matter of culture, for the worldly and 'vain traditions' are 'received from your **fathers**'. (1 Peter 1:18). The husband and father in every home must take the initiative to drive off the vultures of his own familiar cultural ways, not just once but as a constant exercise. He must lead the shift from vain tradition to godly culture. Then the woman, wife and mother can become the cultural heart of the home and can cultivate the new godly tradition as the centre and facilitator in the home.

Having made an offering, Abraham had to drive off the vultures. The lesson here is that we 'have need of endurance, after we have done the will of God ... for if anyone draws back my soul has no pleasure in him'. (Heb 10:36).

Application. As men, we must not draw back. Christ Himself experienced the same oppression and attacks of the enemy as Abraham - right at the point where He was presenting Himself as an offering. We will have exactly the same experiences. We must learn to expect them and make our attacks **work for us** instead of causing us to 'cast away our confidence'. (Heb 10:35).

Learning and teaching

Abraham had to **learn** the way of offering in his **own** life, so that he could then **teach** it to Isaac when he took him up Mount Moriah. Isaac of course had to carry forward the things he was taught and learn the way of offering for his own life. It is encouraging to know that every man must learn fatherhood for himself, regardless of the positive, negative or neutral examples in his background. Solomon said that, 'we know neither love nor hatred by anything that is before (ie from history). 'One event' (life itself) still 'happens to all'. (Ecc 9:2). He meant that while our history has an impact, we still face the same set of lessons for ourselves.

<p>What we learn and come to ‘know’ is not based on history, but on the fresh responses we make for ourselves. Is there then any place for fatherhood? Yes indeed, for if fathers do make a breach on vain lifestyle, they can teach the way of offering, knowing that each child will have to make his own offering in learning fatherhood and standing up in identity under the fatherhood of God.</p>	<p>Application. This is a great encouragement to those who feel they have a disadvantaged background, for they can make a breach on the ‘love or hatred’, make a new beginning, and become part of the new continuity of offering and godliness that will come after them.</p>
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ABRAHAM AND SARAH’S THREE TESTS - EGYPT, HAGAR, ABIMELECH

We will concentrate on three specific tests that came to Abraham and Sarah. First there was the test of **Egypt** and Pharaoh, who represent the **world**. Next there was the test of **Hagar**. She represents the **flesh**, the law and legalism. Thirdly, there was the test of **Abimelech**, who represented the alternative fatherhood of Satan. We’ll call this the test of **patriarchy**. (In a moment we’ll show the connection between Abimelech’s name and this term ‘patriarchy’.) The words ‘patriarchy’ and ‘patriarchal’ comes from the word ‘patriarch’ which means a father or ruler, particularly one who is revered as a founder of head of an order. We will be using these words in a negative sense to refer to an **alternative** form of fatherhood, society and **culture** - one which is not from God, and which we want to avoid.⁴ (We’ll be applying the principle of patriarchy to both men and women.)

Israel as a nation proceeded through these three identical stages of testing and trial - firstly in **Egypt**, secondly in the **wilderness** dealing with the attitudes they carried with them, and finally in the **promised land**, where they were required to drive out the enemies themselves. In this latter phase God, as Israel’s husband (cf Abraham with Sarah), having previously fought all their battles, now expected the nation to **stand up in identity and make offering**. This is the main focus. All the examples we’ll study point to the need to stand up in identity and make offering to the Lord.

SARAH’S OFFERING

Following his call, Abraham built an altar and called on the name of the **Lord**. We highlight that Abraham’s offering was made in the **specific context** of calling on the name of the Lord, ie the holy ground, in the fellowship of headship, the ‘presbytery’ of the trinity so to speak.

Sarah was to be the mother of the covenant, just as much involved in the call as Abraham. Yet there’s no mention of Sarah building an altar and calling on the name of the Lord. There **is** evidence however that she made an **identical offering** in relation to her call as the mother of promise. We find clear record of such an offering in the very first story that follows Abraham’s altar. She made her **offering**, she built her **altar**, in the **context of the home**. The story we’re referring to is the incident where

4. Our entire view of origins and eschatology pivots on making a clear distinction between the fatherhood of Satan, which is a lie, a presumption by law, and the fatherhood of God working in and through His body the church in the last days. Our prophetic destiny lies either in Babylon the mother of harlots (answering to Hagar), or in Jerusalem the mother of us all, the bride of Christ.

Abraham discussed with Sarah that she was a 'very *beautiful* woman', and as they approached Egypt and the Pharaoh, he asked her, 'Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you'. (Gen 12:10-20). Sarah submitted to this request, and 'did well without any fear or terror'. (I Peter 3:6). Although she was in danger, she obviously trusted God, Who then plagued Egypt⁵ and enabled the two of them to be 'sent away' and separated from Egypt. (Gen 12:20).

When the apostle Peter discusses godliness in his first letter, he tells us that all the 'godly women of old' took their example from Sarah who 'obeyed Abraham, calling him 'lord'. (I Peter 3:5-6). Peter's commendation refers to her **whole** exemplary attitude and not just to this specific incident. But we can confidently say that Sarah called her husband '**lord**' in **this** particular incident that follows on immediately from Abraham's 'calling on the name of the **Lord**'. Sarah freely offered her submission to Abraham as 'lord' in responding to his request to call herself his sister. (Note, calling on the Lord is the theme here.) It is noteworthy that Abraham's altar was built where he called on the Lord. Sarah trusted in the same Lord when she called her husband 'lord' and demonstrated that her place of altar was in the home.

Abraham's headship request and Sarah's submission and 'kindness' were both needed if they were to be the parents of the covenant seed. (Gen 20:13). By heeding her husband's request to stand in sisterhood in life and warfare, she delivered the family from death. She was protected because of God's support of headship, and fatherhood lived because of her.

Application. Do we clearly understand that both elements of fatherhood and motherhood are needed if the blessing of Abraham is to come to every family and to the church?

In that she protected him it is true to say that she 'covered' him. On the subject of covering, a woman's head is 'covered' according to Paul, if she walks in right relationship to headship. (I Cor 11:6). However 'covering' works in both directions, as the testimony of Sarah shows. She certainly covered Abraham.

Application. Do we as women insist that **we** are the ones who must be protected? Do we demand a covering from our husbands that only God can give. In the test of the world, are we prepared to act as responsible sisters and protect our husbands?. Wives must cover their husbands (not just out of jealousy) to see that they are not manipulated by feminine charms. This principle applies to young men and women as well, who must exercise discretion in showing favour that could be misleading.

This incident was surely the first of many in which Sarah proved herself as the exemplary prototype of all motherhood, and as the prophetic forerunner of the church itself. We conclude from the account that Sarah **first** of all made a commitment of **submission** without fear or terror. The fruit of this submission was the proclamation of a **sisterhood** which took visible priority over her position as wife. This profession of sisterhood in turn, honoured and served the **marriage** at the **highest level** of God's call.

5. Prophetic of the plagues preceding Israel's passover.

Wifhood and sisterhood

To emphasise the point, we note that the term ‘wife’, while it describes a woman’s married status and role, doesn’t describe her identity. Unless we define the ‘sisterhood’ identity of the woman as centre and mother, ‘wifhood’ can become an empty position.

<p>Take for example the situation where a husband struggles with inadequacy and gives no direction. Is the wife subjected to being a reflection of this?</p>	<p>Application. Are we as women prepared to stand as accountable in our own identity whether our husbands are fulfilling their roles or not? What if they are uncommitted or backslide? Are we prepared to be so sanctified to the home and to the role of motherhood that we will stand on our own if necessary, to release the children from being ‘unblessed heathens’; (ie without the blessing of Abraham). (<i>1 Cor 7:14</i>)</p>
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<p>At the opposite end, ‘wifhood’ can also produce the temptation to reflect a husband’s authority, (eg ministry authority), when the wife should function in her own identity and sisterhood. It is often commented that the wives of army officers, doctors, lawyers etc in the community assume and contend for the same status, within the feminine society, as their husbands have.</p>	<p>Application. The same error can be seen in the church where leaders’ wives draw some status from ‘wifhood’ and function in a kind of delegated headship, instead of discovering the true authority of motherhood within themselves. There is a danger that earnest collaboration as a co-worker can lead to the negative aspects of ‘wifhood’ and not the positive demonstration of sisterhood. The hallmark of this error is the tendency to dispense the authority of the husband and treat other women with discrimination.</p>
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When Paul says that woman is ‘of the man’ and man is ‘through’ the woman, he is talking about the circle of headship ‘in the image’. He is not saying that a wife’s identity and validity is drawn from the man. Certainly the wife is a help-meet to him, not he to her. But within this order, she still has her own warfare. In the faith she exercises, she is an individual. In her identity, she is an individual. In the context of the battle, she walks in right order but must fight **her** battle alongside, and not expect her husband to carry her responsibility.

Sarah’s first test

Sarah’s first test took place in Egypt, typical of the world. This test, as we’ve discussed above, had to do with her beauty, and her commitment to be Abraham’s sister. The background to this scene we should remember, was the promise of a godly seed to Abraham and Sarah. This required their safety. The seed could not be born if Abraham was killed, and we are convinced Abraham was motivated toward Sarah’s safety also. The agreement they made definitely showed a mutual commitment toward protecting the covenant seed. (Our interest in these lessons is for the same reasons - the ability to pass on godliness, the blessing of Abraham, to our children and within the body of Christ.)

As Abraham's beautiful wife, if she impressed Pharaoh, there was the risk of **his** being killed. As his 'sister', **she** was the one in danger. Nevertheless, her commitment was such that if beauty was going to put them at risk in either case, then she was prepared to stand up, be in control of her own destiny and **not expect his protection**. She made no demand upon him, she showed no pathetic, subservient or objectionable attitude. On the way to Egypt she agreed, (we can suggest that there was a process of heart searching and mourning alone for Sarah) that whatever befell them (disease etc), '*in every place*', **in each and every situation involving faith and warfare**, she would avoid any subservient or pathetic response that demanded her husband's protection. (Gen 20:13). Having made this commitment, she then carried these attitudes into Egypt to be tested and refined - in the same way that in the church presently we would agree that motherhood must be adjusted in attitude so that the church can come out of Egypt and its familiar culture.

This first test was the issue of feminine control by charm. In the matter of her beauty, the potential for her to maintain control, refuse Abraham's covering and exercise her feminine power, we are provided a timeless and classic example of the choice by Sarah to lay down image, romance, status, possessions and power.

Abraham drew her attention to the fact and **potential** of her beauty, to its potential as the source of acceptance, identity and power. We may further suggest that Abraham was highlighting the **potential** for the romantic projection, wisdom from beneath and control that typifies **all fallen femininity**. He drew attention to her power to control him and others by demand, beguile him from simplicity (classic fallen dynamics), and finally, make him powerless to overcome as the father of the covenant promise.

Feminine culture

<p>What was the test of Egypt? Abraham drew attention to her natural beauty (and by implication to the entire feminine culture and its potential for abuse) and asked for a mature, sanctified response toward their marriage. Such is the test for every married couple to whom the Abrahamic call has come.</p>	<p>Application. Do we as Christian women understand the '<i>desire</i>',⁶ the demand for status and power that are inherent in fallen feminine identity? (<i>Gen 3:16</i>). Are we willing to be sanctified from this demand, and make an offering by calling our husbands 'lord'. Do we see this as total freedom? Will we then stand up in true identity and freedom to facilitate the mandate of headship?</p>
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The woman's offering

What kind of offering is each wife bringing? Asked another way, 'what is the basis of her identity?' Is it identity through beauty? No, there must be a different foundation. The test of Egypt is the question of **the basis for identity and acceptance**. What image do we desire to have?

6. Nancy Groom in 'Married Without Masks' points out that the word for 'desire' also appears in the story of Cain and Abel where Cain was told, 'sin is crouched at the door; its **desire** is toward you ...'. This gives a helpful view of the fallen attitude of demand and control that must be mastered before it masters us.

Is identity based on attractiveness and charm that can be used for soliciting flattery, creating romance, controlling and eventually conquering the other? The test and stumbling block for women is the use of beauty for manipulation; (by beauty we mean the whole feminine image). All the mechanisms used to sustain this image are part of the curse.

Application. The focus here is the entire feminine culture and its preoccupation with beauty, image, presentation and appearance. What response must we make? Can **young women** accept that godliness, with discretion and '*chaste conduct accompanied by fear,*' is the definition of true Christian beauty? (*Titus 2:5 I Peter 3:2*). Approaching the age of **courtship**, can we commit ourselves to the way of '*sanctification and honour*' rather than the '*snares and nets*' that are the way of fallen romance, in seeking God's will for a partner. (*I Thess 4:3-8; Ecc 7:26*). As **mothers**, are we prepared to confront this whole culture of fallen romance in all its features, and teach the culture of godliness.

Submission led to freedom

Sarah's obedience and calling Abraham 'lord' led to the freedom and full identity of her profession. If beauty was the basis of her identity, she could have been seduced in Egypt and later in Abimelech's harem. But she was the example and prototype of the free woman (cf Jerusalem, the mother of us all) who went without fear and terror, with no threat of seduction, and stood in sisterhood. In offering herself as a sister, she stood up in full identity.

We could sum up the scenario this way: Abraham said to his young wife, 'you're beautiful, you're an individual, you've got power; but will you stand up and be a sister to me in matters of covenant life and family; will you make a relational offering as a wife?' Once Sarah stood up, there was no impropriety, indiscretion or adultery that could touch the marriage.

Applying the lesson of the vultures (familiar traditions and spirits) attacking Abraham's offering, we may say that Sarah had to sustain her commitment and drive off the vultures, the temptations aroused by the need of acceptance, the desire for control, the fear-driven anxiety for safety etc.

Elder women teaching the younger

From this foundation, the entire agenda for the training of younger women emerges. The image of the fairytale **princess**, the child that never grows up but lives in expectation of happiness, must be put off. Each must learn the right and godly presentation of beauty, the true attitude of sisterhood and the true exercise of godly romance and marriage etc.

Application. Young women - do we accept that to some degree, the 'princess' syndrome is in all of us? Are we prepared to set our altar in the homes of our mothers, to learn the new culture of God's household? Do we realise that many of us are **untaught**? We haven't wanted to learn a new culture. We have even used self-righteous claims to manipulate and **conquer** our parents and 'bring **them** up'.

<p>Many who are married make the assumption that they are mature and now able to teach others. In many cases the unmothered and untaught are trying to be mothers and teachers, when they really need to submit to true motherhood and relearn the first principles.</p>	<p>Application. The usual fallen scenario for a young woman is that she discovered how to conquer her father, then was able to conquer her mother. In becoming the ‘teacher’ of her mother, she will now conquer her own husband and children. The more control she has, the less accountable she becomes as a person, and the less responsible she is for the situation. In Christ, a lot of unlearning and relearning is needed for a new culture to be established.</p>
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SARAH’S SECOND TEST - HAGAR

Abraham and Sarah’s second test followed immediately from her experience in Egypt. We’ll call this the test of **carnal parenting**. They left Egypt **taking a part of Egypt** with them - the servant girl Hagar. Having in mind the episodes that followed, and speaking symbolically once again, we may say that they brought with them an entire **culture and program** of issues to work through. We take these thoughts from the part of the story where *‘Sarah, Abram’s wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid-servant whose name was Hagar. So Sarah said ... please go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her ... So he went in to Hagar and she conceived ... and despised her mistress.’ (Gen 16).*

Amplifying the scenario, let’s interpret that Sarah began to struggle in identity, inferiority and incapacity. These eventually dictated the need for Hagar to bring forth the child. We must link Sarah’s own works with those of Hagar, for she promoted them. Remember, the focus in this phase of their lives is post-Egypt - the problem is not Egypt but the carnal nature. Failure in faith leads to carnal mechanisms which are put in place for survival, the survival of the ministry and of God’s purpose.

<p>The promise wasn’t working. There was no power or life in the flesh; (cf no incarnate life). The only option was to resort to the legal option (Hagar) that had its source in Egypt. When Sarah should have been given to prayer and faith-identity, the attitude of performance to gain success dictated the next steps.</p>	<p>Application. As parents, how similar we are! When things aren’t working out, we resort to the methods of Egypt, the world. We try to make things perfect in the flesh instead of continuing in the Spirit. We must highlight that Sarah promoted this whole culture in the home, until she repented and had to drive it out. What strong typical and prophetic lessons are contained here!</p>
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Sarah’s ‘idols’

If Sarah’s first idol was **acceptance**, then her second was **success**, the need to be needed. In the events surrounding Hagar, Sarah was to face her second test, involving the promotion of the works of the flesh. From the story we can imply lessons about the temptations to success, to performance and to the carnal rewards of success, and about living by law instead of faith. As time went on, Sarah sought to promote her ‘own works’ through Hagar, only to have to drive out and sanctify herself and her home from this influence. In the process she had to face the threat to her whole

validity and identity as the covenant mother of promise, and furthermore she had to learn to be **barren** and trust God.

Hagar represented the alternative to true motherhood, for she became a figurehead, like Sarah, but of the motherhood of the flesh, the culture of religious legalism that is typified by Hagar, Sinai and Jerusalem, the wisdom from beneath. (Gal 4:25-26).

Sarah's first test was with basic worldliness compared with godliness. Her first idol was that of acceptance, and fundamental feminine identity (involving a contention with the fallen elements of romance, image etc.) Her second test involved legalistic motherhood. Her idol here was that of success, the need to be needed and valid through a successful performance. Her struggle was to do with value, worth and respect; (cf the lesson of Cain's offering). These impulses are the motions of sin, which works by law.

'My injury be upon you'

One of the most important lessons about married life came from the incident where Sarah found she was despised and mocked by Hagar after the successful conception of Ishmael. This really tested her sanctification to sisterhood and her individual accountability. When she became despised, Sarah sought to invoke the hurt, embarrassment, shame and **blame back on Abraham**. '*My wrong (injury) be upon you ... I gave my maid into your embrace ... I became despised; the Lord **judge between you and me.***' (Gen 16:5). The final fruit of her wrestle with success, presentation and legalism was to put the obligation back on her husband. In her judgement, she had a watertight theological proposition. Her injury, her loss of identity and dignity just had to be the fruit of his failed headship. All this injury', she proclaimed (paraphrase), 'is on you Abraham, and may the Lord **judge** it to be so, for it **is** clearly so'. In truth, she was the one doing the judging, not the Lord. Her loss of worth was put to his account. This was the final end of the matter - this was the only judgement that could be allowed.

'No', he said (paraphrase), 'the fruit of all this in **your** hand; you professed to have done all this in sisterhood; now **you** dispose the matter in your own identity'. '*Indeed your maid is in **your** hand; do to her as you please.*' (Gen 16:6). She felt she had applied commitment and identity to the Hagar plan. When it didn't work, she sought to opt out of accountability. We all do the same. We try to control our circumstances, and then shift the blame when things don't turn out?

There are many more lessons to be drawn from this. Loss of faith (and face) and the threat of being replaced in identity, in motherhood, (ie Hagar mocking Sarah after the successful conception) led Sarah to invoke the judgement on Abraham. She felt that Abraham's love, as well as her own respect, worth and position were on the line.

Application. There are a range of situations like this that lead women to judge their husbands. Feeling that our worth as a person is under attack (cf Hagar's mocking) is usually at the base. We can even feel that living in submission demeans us, comparing ourselves with others who find happiness without complying with divine order.

The real issue was **her** failure to stand up and take accountability. Her charge was that Abraham had applied himself as husband to these actions that led to her despair; (indeed he did go in to Hagar). Her loss of value must, in some way, be his responsibility.

<p>Abraham had to refute this charge and place the accountability and the future back in her hand. This he did in the statement, 'your maid is in your hand!'. In this way, the story became a prophetic example for all husbands.</p>	<p>Application. This principle highlights the test that every man faces. Will he bow to the charge of hurt and the demand to compensate to her? As soon as he accepts her proposition as the truth, he immediately takes all her accountability on board. He agrees to carry her identity in the marriage and in life generally. The question for men is, 'Are you prepared to stop compensating and doing it for her? Are you prepared to drop the patriarchal attitude?'</p>
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Abraham's test of patriarchy

In this whole incident, Abraham faced a significant test. He had to overcome the temptation to practise patriarchy. **If** he had accepted Sarah's proposition, he would have come under law, put a veil over his headship, and given in to the pressure to 'patriarch' the situation. He faced the principle of patriarchy - namely the **obligation** to take the issues 'on board', and **carry the identity/accountability of another individual** in relation to the matters of life, culpability and warfare that they must themselves dispose before God. Patriarchy removes the burden from others, and offers a religious order that **accepts accountability and dispenses absolution from blame**. This is the principle and sin of patriarchy. Much traditional Christianity has functioned according to this system.⁷

The niceness of religion - or the 'pillar and ground of truth'

Having developed these principles, Sarah's appeal for niceness and Abraham's response to her legal judgement, we can examine the foundation of how we operate as a church.

<p>If the church exists as the pillar and ground of truth to challenge every individual about his/her fallen corruption, then things are not always going to be 'nice'. Satan and familiar spirits are always trying to divert the church back into the niceness of religion. The oppressive elements work this way.</p>	<p>Application. When someone is challenged, he/she either submits to the living word spoken through an imperfect vessel, and trusts God to be sanctified by the truth, or he protests as Sarah did, that the injury is not nice or hasn't been done nicely, and is therefore unjust. From there a whole range of sophisticated discussions proceed that begin to invoke legal structures, calling people to account (often leaders), supposedly seeking to find the truth. Usually, a group of sympathisers is found, and leaders are made to feel accountable for the 'un-nice' thing that has happened.</p>
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Eventually, these dynamics rob the church of the authority to confront anything, and lead us back to evangelical positionism. In this event, there is no validity for us to exist as a church. **This ethic of relational obedience to the living word is the only alternative to positionism.** We can see why these lessons are so important. While women tend to struggle with the **idol of niceness**, men have to make a choice not to patriarch the situations by bowing to the basis of 'right and wrong'. They must stand up in true headship, not in legal judgements they imbibe from their wives.

7. Babylon is the systematisation of this whole legal proposition.

SARAH'S THIRD TEST

Sarah's third test and third idol involved the power that can be drawn from relationship with patriarchy. The culture of patriarchy had to be driven off.

To develop this theme, we need to examine Abimelech, the king of Gerar, the land of the Philistines. (Gen 21:32,34). Abimelech, according to the New Bible Dictionary means **'the (divine) king is my father'**. It was a common cognomen (nickname) for Philistine kings. We meet different kings by the name of 'Abimelech' in three significant situations: Abraham (Gen 20), Isaac (Gen 26) and Abimelech the son of Gideon (by a concubine) who was mortally wounded by a millstone thrown by a woman from a tower (typical of Satan's bruising by the church; Rev 12).

Abimelech

We are taking note of this Abimelech episode for three reasons: the **meaning** of the name 'Abimelech', the fact that he was **associated** with the land of the Philistines (Israel's constant enemies within the promised land), and the fact that the incident with Abimelech had such **prophetic** significance - ie it was just before the birth of Isaac, the manchild. (The theme of the manchild links us directly with Rev 12; the bride of Christ and her manchild that is caught up to the throne.)

<p>Wherever the Philistine kings by the name of Abimelech featured, they were a threat to the purpose of God. Hence, they are prophetic of the threat of a style of alternative fatherhood, claimed by divine right, that seeks to impose itself upon the covenant process.</p>	<p>Application. We are taking this lesson of Abimelech seriously because of the issue of false fatherhood. The lesson is applicable to individual men, husbands and fathers, and also to leaders in the church. We must admit that the church across history has traditionally been a patriarchal institution; (not in the sense of having men as leaders, but as regards the principle of patriarchy defined above).</p>
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The incident with Sarah, Abimelech and his harem has strong prophetic significance for the future. Why? Because we can draw the implication from the story that it was Abimelech's intention to make Sarah, the mother of promise, a part of his harem, right at the point where she was being refreshed for the miraculous conception of Isaac. These implications link the story with the church in the end times. The question then, and now, is **'which fatherhood** is going to bring forth the **blessing** of Abraham?' There was another fatherhood trying to get in on the act.

Abimelech's harem

Returning to the story: as Abraham and Sarah proceeded to the test of Abimelech, they were overcomers already. Abraham was called a *'prophet'* by God Himself. (Gen 20:7). By this time (this was after meeting Melchizedek and making offering Gen 14-15) he understood what God was doing, and he understood the prophetic, eschatological significance of the events. He has separated from Lot,⁸ and symbolically speaking, he was walking with Sarah in the 'promised land of fatherhood and motherhood'. The tests of worldliness (Egypt) and legalism (Hagar) were behind them. What else were they to face?

8. His third sanctification, see page 3.

The significance of this episode lies in the fact that Sarah was at the point in her life where she was being supernaturally, physically **refreshed** to bring forth Isaac, the child of promise, the manchild (cf Rev 12). Sarah had a supernatural touch of resurrection life for the approaching conception. She was to be the vessel of the life of God, shall we say 'incarnate life', to connect us to the New Testament implications.

But Abraham and Sarah were to be tested by the temptation of patriarchy troubling the marriage. Who was going to have the child, as Sarah became fertile? Would the child be born of true fatherhood, or of patriarchy (in Abimelech's harem?). Another fatherhood was threatening to impose itself upon the woman. (Note - this is precisely the global issue in the church today.) Sarah, the type of the church, was finding power and resurrection life to bring forth the blessing. The child was to be the heir of Abraham and not the heir of patriarchy. But there was another danger, another test.

By drawing this analogy, we are making a key prophetic point. In these last days, religious patriarchy (false religion under Satan) will seek to use the true motherhood of the church to bring forth and thus hijack the incarnate blessings.⁹ But traditional, evangelical Christianity which is patriarchal in nature will only lead to **barrenness**; (note in the story, all the wombs were closed; Gen 20:18).

Application. Only the true order (family, first love and Ephesian pattern) will bring forth the promise of incarnate life. At present, the '*vision ... tarries*'; the blessing of Abraham, the coming forth of a worldwide king-priest nation seems to be delayed. (*Hab 2:2-3*). But if we will **strengthen** ourselves in fatherhood and motherhood, and maintain right order in the family and church, we will overcome this final opposition, find resurrection life, and the blessing of Abraham will come forth.

'Call no man father' - understanding the Abimelech principle

Jesus also confronted **another fatherhood** when He came as the promised Son. He ran up against the false fatherhood and patriarchy of the Pharisees. Religious **teachers** (Rabbis) had assumed positions of power over the people of God. As implied in the name Abimelech ('the divine king is my father'), they had made an assumption of divine kingship that was opposed to God's fatherhood.

Jesus warned the people against this kind of leadership when he said, '*call no man your father*'. (*Matt 23:9*). Leaders that behaved like the Pharisees did not belong to the fatherhood of God. Jesus told the presumptuous Pharisees that they were of '*your father, the devil*'. (*John 8:44*).

Application. The church throughout its evangelical heritage has become a patriarchal harem like Abimelech's. We say this because the church with its 'altar' has overshadowed the home and its altar. Men and women have been allowed to pitch their altars in the church instead of in the family. As with an immoral harem, uncommitted religious association, spiritual harlotry and mixture have replaced faithfulness to family order. The **conception of godliness** has been taking place in the church 'harem' instead of the family.

9. The 'fadish' promotion of spiritual blessings and signs is part of this tendency toward misappropriation.

The need of true headship and fatherhood

Abraham had to stand up as husband and head against this threat. This gives us an example of true headship (and eldership and fatherhood) that must **guard against** the imposition of patriarchy, and preserve a sanctified culture. Even the church itself must never impose on the orders of the home. Traditionally, the church, in a patriarchal manner, has imposed on the sanctity of the home, and thus undermined the Ephesian pattern. The 'big church' model is a major culprit in imposing on the family and failing to protect the family institution. The institutionalised church has **failed to bring the gospel of godliness that establishes every family**. Where true fatherhood and eldership bring the true gospel, the result is koinonia - a network of homes with altars, where the offering of relational obedience is made.

The church and the home

Where the church becomes patriarchal, it takes on the form of a harem for both men and women. The church meeting becomes a bit like a hotel bar, where individuals escape from identity, dignity, responsibility and family order in the common euphoria and 'dissipation' of ecstatic, mystical experiences. (*Eph 5:18*). Abimelech's harem is a symbol of this historic dimension of false church society.

Application. For some time we have been aware of the snare of assuming a form of patriarchal fatherhood that is not of God. Now we are being urged to understand more closely the principles whereby the church and its leaders can fall into the **sin** of desiring control, and violating the sanctity of homes by calling individuals to make an **offering that is other than in the home**. (Consider the obvious example of service and missionary activities which neglect and even abuse the home for the sake of the ministry.)

We can begin to see a whole legacy of church structure and leadership that uses theology and divine right to assume a form of kingship in the world. This dimension is definitely worldly, ie of the Philistines, and ultimately links itself with the principle of Babylon.¹⁰

HOW PATRIARCHY DEVELOPS

Again, there are three levels of pastoral implications we can draw from the pilgrimage of Abraham and Sarah: firstly, illustrations of the adjustments we must make in **each covenant household**, secondly the adjustments that an **individual church** fellowship must make, and thirdly, **prophetic** implications toward the church in the world. Pastorally, we are being led to consider, in both the male and female aspects, how and why this principle of patriarchy operates.

In the case of the **men**, when they feel inadequate in their fatherhood, when their fatherhood isn't really working, there is the tendency to develop a patriarchal image as a source of identity and significance. At the very least, this is a specific phase of novice immaturity which must be worked through. More seriously however, inadequacy can lead to idolatry, eccentricity and a presumption of authority.

10. The presumption of divine kingship (by law, and therefore linking to the **fatherhood** of Satan) together with **motherhood** of harlotry (all religion as part of the harem) are the two principles that 'marry' to form Babylon.

Two types of patriarchy

<p>There are two separate but interrelated foundations and images of patriarchy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inadequacy - as typified by Lot and Saul; in this area we can include hurt background that produces inadequacy etc; • presumed authority - as typified by Abimelech; where there is deliberate, patriarchal presumption. The first of these can easily bridge over to the second. These two elements together have hijacked the whole of evangelical Christianity toward a structure that replaces the home as the place of altar, (thus negating the 'house to house' dimension of the Ephesian pattern). 	<p>Applications. Men, particularly leaders need to examine themselves against the following points. Do you have a back-ground of hurt, abuse or inadequacy that still affects your responses? Are you highly insecure, or else partial, discriminating and patronising as a result? Do you demonstrate eccentric relational symptoms including talking down or at people? Do you tend to become sophisticated, independent, and over against (particularly toward fatherhood of the church) in trying to make out you are bigger than the situation?</p>
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Historically, the church has structured itself as a clear cut institution of patriarchy, both in the Protestant and Catholic arenas. In this sense, linking with the lesson of Abimelech, God's house has been turned into a harem. The result has been a constant wave of drunken excesses and spiritual dissipation.

Patriarchy and matriarchy

<p>When we talk about patriarchy, we are not just speaking to men. The attitude of patriarchy has its feminine equivalent in matriarchy and the attitude of the harem. (See next section.) In a marriage, there is something out of order in both the man and the woman that produces this result.</p>	<p>Application. In the church arena, we have the obvious example of the patriarchal counsellor who tends to gather a number of unfulfilled, wanton religious women in his 'harem'. This is an extreme example but highlights the principle.</p>
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In the case of women, there is an innate fallen drive to pitch an altar and make offering outside the home. In this action, a woman is beguiled into the same collusion as between Eve and the Devil. She believes there is an offer of identity that comes from interaction with patriarchy. When she marries herself to these deceptions of reason, she links herself to Satan's harem, so to speak, and begins to manifest a whole range of 'harem' attitudes.

The error of patriarchy, for leaders and for the church as a whole, can be illustrated in this way. Abimelech could have said, 'You're only a sister to that fellow; I'm the divine father with kingly authority; come and pitch your altar here!' Such a scenario illustrates exactly the kind of practical indiscretion, indiscriminate counselling, and 'fatherly' **invasion** which must be avoided like the plague.

<p>The lines of male/female, husband/wife, parent/children, elder/flock distinction must never become blurred or confused.</p>	<p>Application. For example, a wife (cf Sarah with Hagar) can never allow another woman to hold the kind of relationship to her husband, her home or her children that she herself alone must have and must protect.</p>
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Dealing with idols

Eccentricity, whether in disposition, body language, social behaviour or image projection, is the evidence of the idols that we have maintained to establish our sense of worth. The cross has to cut us free from the backgrounds of hurt, inadequacy and complexity, as well as from the unnatural and unwarranted degrees of injury that we have sustained.¹¹

<p>It is a dynamic of fallen nature to hold on to these hurts in an overstated way, as a trading tender with which to bargain with others. Very often the origin of such hurt and bitterness is not genuine rejection, but rather the rejection of the images (idols) that we have tried to sell without success.</p>	<p>Application. The hurt shows the idol. Why are we so greatly hurt? When we are hurt, we make the assumption that the other needs to apologise. Are we waiting to receive an apology before we forgive?</p>
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Patriarchy is a corruption that develops by law. It's a culture of reason, where law is the reference point for image, identity and power. This idolatry (ie image projection) must be rejected. **Patriarchy is the ultimate idol.** It becomes a problem when an individual tries to stand up in theology, in a position, and tries to ascend to a patriarchal profile instead of standing in true identity. The antidote is to stand up in true identity, to make an offering by being who you are. There is no greater idol than the image we create for ourselves. These images are gods of imagination, to which we can bring no life.

THE HAREM, THE MATRIARCHAL EQUIVALENT OF PATRIARCHY

The study of implications would not be complete without a comment on the equal and opposite temptation that produces patriarchy.

<p>The group dynamic of unsubmitted women quickly becomes a culture of its own, a sub-culture in the midst of the church. This is a global problem. The common talk, 'intuitions' and assessments of such women become an entire wisdom which surreptitiously pervades an entire church culture. This talk becomes an entire wisdom that is seductive and immoral in the true sense given expressed in the book of Proverbs, where the true woman, 'wisdom' is compared with ... (cont)</p>	<p>Application. Paul taught that women had a place to '<i>pray and prophecy</i>'. (<i>I Cor 11:1-5</i>). He was speaking about the arena of the church's life, not the public meeting. His teaching on silence was to do with not usurping the place of sight and talk in which women are '<i>beguiled</i>' from the '<i>simplicity</i>' of divine order as in the original deception. (<i>II Cor 11:3</i>). The antidote to deception is '<i>learning ... from their own husbands at home</i>' (<i>I Cor 14:35</i>) which describes a mode of submission where an agenda of true sight and ... (cont)</p>
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11. See "Reforming our Culture - Dealing with our Idols", M.Wylie.

the 'immoral' woman. The matter of women keeping silence in the church can now be clearly understood.	simplicity is maintained by headship. Both husbands and wives must exercise themselves to understand this principle of silence.
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These two women represent two entire cultures: godliness with Sarah as figurehead, and the other wisdom which seeks to feminise and control the whole culture. False wisdom seduces and thus controls by selling a range of assessments to husbands who are pushed to patriarchy (as defined above); they are placed under an **obligation and pressure to be accountable for the situations** as judged by their wives.

The women plead 'diminished responsibility', and the men are forced to justify themselves theologically. A whole lifetime of this dynamic leaves men with no identity of their own; it kills fatherhood (as in Egypt, cf Abraham with Sarah), and replaces it with patriarchy - viz. the hollowed out image of kingship that professes headship but is at all points controlled by the abuse of feminine beauty.	Application. This dynamic that pushes men to patriarchy toward women, who will not be accountable for their own actions, and will not pitch their altars in their own homes, is the foremost problem across the church. The issue is rarely sexual impropriety, but a seeking of acceptance, success and power, the three idols mentioned above. Women must be asked to take full responsibility for these indiscrete and seductive ways, which rarely seek a sexual conclusion, but always seek worth and power through the manipulation of fatherhood.
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When Abraham said, in response to Sarah's judgement, 'indeed the maid is in your hand', he refused this dimension of seduction. In effect, he said, 'I'm not accepting this other woman; don't lay that one on me; there's not going to be any harem mentality here!'

Two heads - husband and 'father'

No woman can relate to two heads for headship. What must be identified and put off, is the attitude and activity which pitches its altar, even by a small measure, beyond the home, and lays hold upon a patriarchal figure, circumstance or ministry opportunity to find identity (sisterhood) in a context other than the marriage and the home. This has been the classic sin of matriarchy and patriarchy. The church with all its monastic overtones, the pursuit of serving God, sacrificing family culture etc, has been fostered by the traditional church promotion of ministry, service, counselling etc. Women, both single and as married wives, in ministry serving positions and roles, have held two heads - their husbands and the patriarchal oversight of the church. Claims of divine inspiration made by unsubmitted women are in the least creating confusion, and where ecstasy is sought through religious duty and mystical experiences, they are becoming explicitly immoral.

As the church blatantly uses sex appeal to adorn the gospel in a culturally relevant garment, **the lessons of Sarah and Abraham have never been more relevant and crucial.**

The greatest pastoral threat and lesson upon us at this time, is the element of patriarchy, where church fatherhood takes the place of family, and where a female sub-culture leads to a harem mentality, brought about by the tendency of women to

place their altar of offering outside the home. Abraham built altars and called on the name of the Lord. The lessons of Abraham and Sarah show that Sarah's place of offering (altar) was to be within the marriage relationship and home.

Sarah's offering must be within her own home. The danger is that she will pitch her altar beyond her house, past her husband, to enhance her prospect of conception and success; eg in the house of Abimelech. Every woman must wrestle with the bottom line of all temptation, the attraction of patriarchy (cf the fatherhood of Satan), and the temptation to gain power through imbibing the culture of the harem. (The push for 'big church' success is akin to the trend toward becoming a 'harem' style institution.)

Application. As women, we need to examine all these cultural elements of matriarchy and the attitudes of the 'harem'. Do we **parade education**, training or experience to defeat headship and seek a broader arena of expression; (cf the harem)? Do we become empowered by trained reason, claiming that submission is illogical and demeaning? Have we thought ourselves superior to those women who do demonstrate godly motherhood? Have we argued that we are just 'different', and actually reacted against the image and culture of true motherhood? Have we made a commitment to being the daughters of Sarah?

Conclusion

As men, we are called to become the fathers of another culture. We are responsible to take the initiative in making a breach on the '*vain conduct received by tradition from your fathers*'. (1 Peter 1:18). We need to have a good look at our familiar, cultural ways that do not belong to godliness. We must make a breach on these in ourselves so that we can find the power of the cross to make a breach in our children's lives.

The blessing of Abraham will not come forth without the true expression of motherhood. As women, we are called to motherhood and to sisterhood in relation to our husbands. We are to provide the cultural centre in the home and church. The time has come to make a full cultural shift to the image of Sarah.



Victor and Lorraine Hall. Easter 1997
Notes edited M Wylie.