

# CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP LETTER

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## When Did You Leave Your Wife?

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Bill Lawrence is 38 years old. He has a pretty wife, two beautiful children, and is considered one of the outstanding pastors in his city. Bill and June were married while Bill was still in seminary. Their first child was born during his senior year. June never completed her college education but took a job to help Bill through seminary. Bill is an effective preacher and is greatly respected by both his assistant pastor and the congregation. He works hard on his sermons. His church is growing.

Bill's wife will leave him next week.

Bob Ramsom is the executive director of Christian Commitment Abroad which he founded 22 years ago. He has travelled all over the world and is a much sought-after speaker. After a shaky start, CCA began to grow rapidly about ten years ago. Much of its growth is due to Bob's high level of commitment and his willingness to give himself unstintingly to the work of Christ.

Bob doesn't know it, but he left his wife eight years ago.

### Where Are You?

Where are you as a Christian leader? Where does your commitment lie? Could it be that you too are one of those, perhaps without even knowing it, who has left his wife?

How do you sort it all out? Where do your Christian priorities lie? How does one find a balance between commitment to the task and commitment to one's family?

### Three Priorities

In one of our earliest *Christian Leadership Letters*, (March 1973), we laid out what we consider to be three levels of Christian commitment, three levels of priority. Simply stated they are:

First - Commitment to God and Christ

Second - Commitment to the Body of Christ

Third - Commitment to the work of Christ

We picture these as foundation stones, one built upon another. We begin with the initial commitment to God through His Son. But the visible evidence of this vertical relationship with God is found in this second priority of horizontal relationships with the sons and daughters of God. The Bible calls us away from a Western individualism back to a biblical corporate unity. It is on this foundation and within the framework of this body-like relationship that the work of Christ is to be carried out. "It was he who 'gave gifts to mankind'... He did this to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service, in order to build up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11,12, TEV).

These priorities cannot be exclusive of one another. All three are needed. One of the conditions for effectively carrying out the work of Christ is the relationship that exists within this body. "If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are My disciples" (John 13:35, TEV).

### Where Is Your Wife?

We are addressing ourselves here as Christian leaders, and especially as married men. Where does your wife fit in these priorities? Certainly of all the relationships described in the Bible the highest and most mystical is the relationship found in marriage. Paul could only compare it to the relationship of Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:21-33). The disruption of this relationship can have tremendous spiritual consequences. Peter tells us that interruption of the relationship can even interfere with our prayers (I Peter 3:7).

Is your ministry as a Christian leader built upon a foundation of a strong marriage relationship, or does it move forward in spite of that relationship?

### What About Your Calling?

Some of us immediately respond in our own defense, "But this is the ministry to which God has called me! My wife understands that. That's one of the sacrifices that we are making together."

Perhaps. But perhaps that is your view of the situation, and although it may be outwardly shared by your wife, perhaps inwardly (consciously or unconsciously) she feels quite differently.

Too often the Christian wife is put in the position of appearing to oppose the will of the Lord if she does not feel at ease with the circumstances within which her husband is moving. Many men and women marry before they have a clear picture of the ministry to which they (or he) may be called. Too often they overlook what the Spirit may be saying to her and what gifts God may have bestowed upon her.

### It's An Uphill Battle

The wife of a dynamic pastor or Christian leader is in an uphill battle for survival as a person. Many times she has

sacrificed herself and her own education only to see her husband be educated right out of her intellectual life. The public affirmation that comes to him, the sense of accomplishment that he feels in pursuing his career, can only be shared by her in a secondhand way.

Of course, there are many husband/wife teams who really are teams. They truly have had a common call to the work for which the husband may be employed. They see themselves as sharing a joint ministry. But for many this is far from the case. And as the initial intensive occupation with raising a family and "becoming established" is exchanged for the changing realities of mid-life, many wives of executives (Christian and otherwise) begin to wonder whether this is all there is to living. Many conclude that it is not.

Gail Sheehy, in her book *Passages* (Dutton, New York, 1976), gives us another dimension of the problem. Adults, like children, go through different crises (passages) in life. "Life begins at 40" is true in different ways for men and women. Often it signals a divergence of common interests which can put severe strains upon a marriage if the reasons for them are not understood.

### How Do You Stand?

Here's a little test for you to take:

- ( ) I usually take work home at night.
- ( ) I haven't had a date with my wife in two weeks.
- ( ) I don't have a date with my wife listed in my appointment book.
- ( ) I usually work away from home more than 10 hours a day.
- ( ) We have had two fights in the last two weeks.
- ( ) We haven't had a fight in five years.

- ( ) I have four or more years education than my wife.
- ( ) We married before I was called to my present task.
- ( ) Our youngest child is 16 to 20.
- ( ) My wife hasn't been on a trip with me in four years.
- ( ) Most of our social relationships are at my work.
- ( ) We've been married 15 to 20 years.
- ( ) The family dinner is often interrupted by phone calls for me.
- ( ) My wife has little understanding of how my organization works.
- ( ) My wife has had no additional formal education since we were married.
- ( ) My wife does not have any career plans outside of our marriage.

If you answered yes to most of these questions, perhaps you've already left your wife or are in the process of leaving her.

### What Can You Do About It?

Begin by asking yourself "What does this mean?" to each of your answers above. This question may suggest to you some steps which you could take immediately.

Start asking your wife for dates, just you two together. Use them to explore how she feels about what she's doing and what you're doing. For example, share your appointment books and calendars together. What do you jointly think about the way you're spending your time? Who have you been with? Who are your friends?

Ask her to evaluate how she sees you spending your time. What does she picture you doing? For each item does she feel it's too much, too little, just right?

Make a list of your individual and joint commitments, commitments to things like work, children, friends, the bank, church, whatever. Are you committed to different or similar things?

Try to fantasize what you believe would be the very best situation for you as individuals and as a couple ten years from now. Where would you want to be living, what would you be doing, what would your relationships be? What are your wife's gifts? What is her calling? Where do her gifts and calling fit into the picture for the future? Together set some long-range goals for your life together and for your individual development. Decide on some immediate steps to meet those goals.

Consciously reschedule your life in terms of leaving blocks of time available, unscheduled. Use these to give yourselves more time together, to be more able to respond to each other's needs. Most of us can't instantly change our lifestyle, but we can plan to become free of some future responsibilities.

Prayerfully consider whether you really do believe that the priorities suggested above are biblical and operative in your life. God's work will get done without you! God is really not nervous about the future. Isn't He much more concerned with what you are than what you accomplish, and isn't what you are demonstrated by the relationships that you have? And isn't the most profound of those relationships the one that you have with your wife?

Have you left your wife?

We pray she will take you back.

### For Further Reading

In *Strategy For Living* (Regal, 1976) we have tried to suggest some ways how you might work towards corporate goals for your life.



## For Further Reading (Cont.)

In *Tools For Time Management*, by Ed Dayton (Zondervan, 1974), there is some useful information on both the concepts and the practice that we have suggested above.

Our pastor and his wife, Ray and Ann Ortlund, have looked at part of the problem in *The Second Half of Life* (Regal, 1976).



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