

Interaction with Doreen Moore's *Good Christians, Good Husbands?*

Summary

In *Good Christians, Good Husbands?*, Doreen Moore explored the question, "...what biblical and theological convictions should govern how one views one's role as a minister of the gospel in relation to one's role as a husband and father?" [12]. Her concern was that, "Because many men and women have been used greatly by God while neglecting their families, neglect of one's family has often been justified" [i.e. viewed as justified; 28-29]. Her primary thrust is that she believes a family man [even if he is a minister for God] has scriptural obligations to his wife and children [142-143].

After examining the married lives of John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards, she concluded Edwards was the "solid and Biblical model, worthy to be an example to us," because he was devoted to his public ministry without neglecting his family [132]. She found Wesley's situation intolerable: with his view of ministry over family, he should have remained single or married a woman as committed to the ministry; and – having chosen a woman more needy than optimal – he should have devoted more of himself to her wellbeing [133]. Despite the success of Whitefield's marriage – which was to a woman committed to the ministry and which did leave both of them satisfied – Moore was disenchanted with it, citing scriptural examples of New Testament missionaries who either brought their wives with them or stayed home with their wives, in contrast to Whitefield [133-134].

Moore's summary of Wesley was that he put his public ministry before his family, expecting his wife to accept this arrangement, but she would not [132]. Wesley did not adequately screen his wife before marrying her, nor did he adequately prepare her for the life she would lead [34-39], though apparently he did inform her [54]. Perhaps, given his attitudes about ministry, he should have remained single [30]. He was not always compassionate or understanding [42], disregarded his wife's jealousy and was affectionate [though not adulterous] in his correspondence with other women [42], was indiscrete in whom he chose to confide about his marital troubles [44], seems to have put his personal 'rights' above the needs of his marriage [48], and definitely put the needs of the ministry above the needs of his marriage [56]. For her part, Wesley's wife was cruel to others besides her husband, temperamental, jealous, bitter, perhaps unbalanced, and vindictive, even selling out Wesley to his enemies [50-53, 57]. Despite these traits, in some ways, Wesley reacted to her with tolerance and enduring love [52]. It was not a happy marriage, and it seems clear that Wesley did not value his responsibilities as a family man highly enough, but his biggest mistake was in whom he married, for she was ill-suited to the life to which he felt called by God.

Moore's summary of Whitefield was that he too put his public ministry before his family, expecting his wife to accept this arrangement, and she did [132]. Whitefield, like Wesley, seems to have had a strenuous traveling ministry, to have lacked any desire to slow down after marriage, and to have had a wife who had many struggles, yet he and his wife were pleased in their marriage [65]. She, much more than Wesley's wife, was ready to accept the sacrifice necessary for carrying on the ministry [66, 86, 90], suggesting Whitefield was more careful and successful in choosing his wife [67-68, 84-88] and in preparing her for the life he was offering [86] than was Wesley. Throughout all the written evidence, the mutual respect and affection of

Whitefield and his wife are evident, but even more so their mutual agreement that doing God's work was their purpose, and family matters should not obstruct that work.

Moore's summary of Edwards was that he was committed in balance to his public ministry and his family obligations [132]. Edwards also married well, finding a woman devoted to the ministry and to doctrinal discussion [100-101], and capable of standing strong and running the household [104]. Edwards held just as strongly as Wesley and Whitefield that a minister should be ready to sacrifice, and worked long days [107]. Edwards and his wife studied and prayed together [101]; also, Edwards would take family members on his trips and tried to spend time relaxing with them when he was home [102]. Edwards attended to the spiritual education of his family [102-103], something of which Wesley and Whitefield approved but did not as evidently pursue.

Evaluation

I gather from the footnotes that Moore was a thorough researcher for this book, and I assume she was trustworthy in her presentation. She did a good job of presenting an interesting mini-biography of each of the three men under evaluation, packing her presentations with documented evidence without disrupting her narrative. Assuming she was fair in her selection of what to share, she did a good job of allowing the contrasts to develop and her points to become evident without continually intruding herself into the narrative [though she did comment as she thought appropriate]. The structure of the book was suitable both for exploring her questions and for comprehension by the reader. Her writing style was easy to understand. I like the concept of contrasting three men who were roughly peers and exceptional in their field, and then asking what relevance can be gleaned for those seeking to follow in their footsteps.

One hazard in this process is contextualizing the differences in culture. I thought Moore sometimes neglected to account for these differences when she was critiquing these three men. Back in their day, they did not have fast and easy dissemination of information, whereas today we have the internet, television, and radio. Even the distribution of written material was slower, more labor-intensive, and – for lengthy pieces – less likely to reach the bulk of the population. There were fewer seminaries and insufficient seminary-trained pastors. It was an opportune time of history for religion in Britain and its colonies, with religious concerns increasing, the Great Awakening, and the growth of societal structures in the colonies; also it was a threatening time, with deism, universalism, Unitarianism, and other “enlightened” ideas beginning to sweep through and sometimes sway whole congregations toward the end of this period. These men had unique gifts and callings, and there was no other way for them to respond sufficiently than to travel extensively [without planes, trains, or automobiles], about which Moore was critical [27]. The same issues were evident for the great men in secular history, such as John Adams, who was away from his family [in other colonial cities or in Europe] more often than not while helping to establish this country.

Moore held up Charles Wesley as the good example in contrast to his brother [28], but I am not sure this is fair. Granted, he blessed his family by staying home and produced many impactful hymns while there, but perhaps hymn writing was more his calling from God than itinerant preaching; perhaps he had a more satisfying home to stay in! One also might ask, how those hymns were disseminated; I suspect by John Wesley in his travels. Moore argued that John

Wesley might have been more fruitful in ministry if he had been as devoted to his family [29]. I think a better argument is to admit he might have been less so, but yet been more obedient. Moore's question is where to find the balance between the obligations of public ministry and family, and she would find no reason for sacrificing obligations to family for those to the public ministry, though she apparently would agree to sacrificing the public ministry calling for family obligations. I agree with Moore that one who has committed oneself to having a family cannot get out of those obligations; and I would argue that while everyone has ministry priorities, a family obligation must be among the highest.

While I agree that Jonathan Edwards is the most praise-worthy of these men when it comes to family life, I think Moore gushed a little. For example, she credited Jonathan Edwards' attentiveness to his family with their long line of successful descendents [97-98], but that probably shows good genetics, family connections, and a culture of learning more than anything else. Moore did better when she stayed closer to her evidence. For example, to make her point that Wesley was not discrete in whom he confided his marital troubles, she had documentary evidence in the form of personal letters by Wesley in which he confided to his housekeeper about his marital troubles [44]. Moore also had letters which showed Wesley was overly affectionate in his correspondence with other women [42-49], but I wish she had shown us whether Wesley's letters to men were just as affectionate, and just as more so affectionate than Whitefield's letters to men, since she compared the two men's letters to women [45]. Perhaps Wesley was just a gregarious and affectionate person, in which case his indiscretion in this regard would be more understandable.

Moore often argued her point by asking questions. For example, whether a family is an entanglement or a way to serve God [32]. I would answer both, and say that no matter how much you prove the latter it does not preclude the former. Even Moore said married people have divided interests [31]. Later, Moore stated, "Children are also a blessing, not a burden" [141]. Surely they are both! I do not deny that every child is a miracle from God and that most can be a blessing to their parents, but no parent can deny that children require much of a parent's time, energy, and money, and the simple first-semester-economics concept of "opportunity cost" proves that this makes them a burden that can draw an adult's resources away from public ministry. Moore used an analogy of planting olive trees and waiting a long time for them to be productive, concluding it was worth the wait [141-142], but what she neglected is that even if it was worth the wait, that wait still entailed an ongoing investment which was a short-term burden. I am sure if one finds the Proverbs 31 woman [141] – and the church is producing too few of these! – then marriage [even with children] can bring positive returns to scale for the ministry: two producing more in ministry together than they could separately. But I note that Whitefield realized this as well as Edwards, and maybe better, yet earned less favorable reviews from Moore.

Sometimes, arguing one point, Moore would provide evidence against an earlier point. For example, in supporting her conclusion that "If one does marry, one should choose wisely," she quoted J. Oswald Sanders as saying "a man must have a wife who fully shares his spiritual aspirations and is willing to make the necessary sacrifices" [139]. This is exactly what Whitefield found, yet she argued against this being acceptable [133-134], perhaps because she could not have accepted it for herself. She said, "The intimacy of the marriage union includes

physical, emotional, and spiritual oneness” [143]. I agree that this is optimal and scripturally taught, but what about the person who cannot offer or receive physical or emotional intimacy in the same way as I can? Must he/she avoid marriage altogether? or, like Whitefield, may such a person find a suitable spouse who ‘suffers the same defects’ and thus would be fulfilled in the marriage offered? I do not think it is fair to criticize Whitefield’s marriage if it pleased them both [65]. Perhaps they simply were not romantic or passionate people, and could not be expected to sense or give such emotional attachment no matter whom they had married or what type of lifestyle they had lived. I would agree with Moore’s conclusions more easily if she merely contrasted Wesley with Edwards and left Whitefield out of it [or even contrasted Wesley with Whitefield].

Moore was quite comprehensive in her conclusions [136-154], going beyond her thesis to begin with “Being in the ministry is hard work!”; admitting “It is entirely possible that family concerns can be given too much priority”; and including discussion on the advantages of singleness and of choosing the right spouse. The conclusions she most wanted to emphasize were obvious from her text: that “Marriage and family are also God’s gifts and strategic in building up the Kingdom of God”; “Husbands have Biblical responsibilities to fulfill”; and “Fathers have Biblical Responsibilities to Fulfill.”

I think Moore is right to question how many Christian marriages today are characterized by self-denial and obedience to Christ instead of selfishness [118]. If we taught our youth more correctly about the attitudes for marriage required by God [and required for success], then we might have less divorce and more happy marriages. Of course, while self denial and obedience to Christ are obligations for every husband, they are also obligations for every wife, and another of Moore’s conclusions exhorted wives to do what is right in God’s eyes. She also discussed having correct motives and pursuing obedience. Yet there is always a tension for her that public ministry obligations might distract men away from meeting family obligations. She argued that God will give us the time necessary to do what he wants us to do. I suppose that is true to the extent of his determinative will; but often he allows us choices and asks us to choose priorities, and we cannot get everything on the list done but must rather be satisfied with achieving the highest priorities and treading water on the rest.

I agree with Moore that a minister of God must take care to minister to his family. But I think Moore believes one can have a typical family life within one’s culture and still be a good Christian, and I would disagree. Everything Christ calls us to is counter-cultural and requires sacrifice. She was critical of Wesley not being deterred in his ministry schedule by his marriage [33], and I see her point about Wesley’s neglect of his family obligations, but I also see that we are in a spiritual war, a war beyond that of World War II when every family felt called upon to sacrifice for the cause. Wesley, Whitefield, and no doubt also Edwards, all not only believed they should sacrifice for Christ, but that all good Christians should, including their wives and children. Before coming to seminary, I told my wife that it would be two years of challenging sacrifice for her as well as for me, and if she was not up to that challenge yet then I would rather not go. I praise God that she was ready and has proved willing. If she had not been ready, I would have put her needs first and worked longer to prepare her; but I would not have abandoned the vision that her sanctification, obedience, and pursuit of Christ required an increasingly sacrificial attitude, just as mine do.

Sometimes Moore's conclusions seemed weak. She noted in one of her conclusions that family concerns can turn into idolatry [138], but she offered no evidence of this in her discussion of the three evangelists, so this conclusion was unrelated to her text. On the other hand, she was concerned that some would go the complete opposite and neglect their families to the point of hunger [144], but the reality is that most family men [if not ministry men] will err on the idolatry side, confusing needs with desires. She referred to Luke 18.29-30, in which Jesus said that those who had given up even children for the sake of the gospel would be rewarded. Maybe Wesley sensed his wife could not be satisfied no matter what he did, so he was not willing to sacrifice his ministry to keep on trying. And I wonder how Moore would apply Luke 14.26, in which Jesus clearly said the cost of discipleship is to subordinate even family to him and his cause.

My willingness to argue points with Moore does not indicate that I did not enjoy reading this book. I did enjoy my time in it, and it provoked in me enough thoughtful questions that I hope to discuss these issues with my wife after she has read it, and maybe even with my small group if they will read it. I plan to recommend the book to others also. If I had to sum up three negatives, I would say this: she showed some bias by imposing her own values upon these three men under inspection, and was especially unfair to Whitefield; she did not consider adequately the unique opportunities and challenges of the church in that century; and she sometimes descended into fallacy when making her points. Overall these weaknesses were more than offset by her positives: she used history effectively to engage her reader in a serious dialogue about important issues; her presentation of that history was excellent and interesting; and she offered many good ideas, questions, and observations which were relevant for ministers and their families today.

Personal Application

One distinction notable about Edwards is he stressed cultivating intimacy with God [110]. Perhaps Wesley and Whitefield did too, but it was not brought out as much in these short biographies. What this suggests to me is a balance between the tasks of ministry and the devotion to God that brings character change, which character change might result in a more sanctified approach to marriage. The theme of pursuing intimacy with God as a priority over pursuing ministry for God has been thrust at me several times in the past couple of months, in chapels, in Spiritual Formation lead labs, in small group lessons, and in conversations. Moore brought it up again, and I feel led to declare an intention of always putting my relationship with God and my character [spiritual growth, integrity, obedience] first in my life, before I look to what he might have for me to do in public ministry [may God help me fulfill that intention].

John Wesley's warning about not turning the family into an idol [29] rings true for today, with the many church families which center their lives on fun activities for the children [school, clubs, sports, church, socials, etc.] instead of on spiritual development or service. However it is ironic that I can think of many pastors whose families have struggled with the opposite problem, the one which Moore was stressing: of the pastors being practically guilty of negligence of their families so as to better pursue church ministry. Moore has reminded me and exhorted me to live out what I believe: that as a spiritual leader, I must model total devotion to the Lord, but that includes [not precludes] obedience to the Lord in the area of family life.

I do think Wesley was wrong, that once he did get married he had a familial duty from God, for I think your family is your first ministry priority. If you choose to be married and have children, then this is the ministry God has entrusted to you first, above all other possible ministry activities. However, as we are all called to sacrificially serve the cause of the gospel of Christ, family life should be oriented around spiritual development [health and growth] and ministry service. Even Moore held up Edwards' decision to stand strong on his beliefs at the sacrifice of his salary, though to do so she had to frame it as good for the family in the long run [104]. Because of reading this book, I will engage my wife further on these issues. We already have an ongoing dialogue about this topic. For example, when we were preparing to move to Dallas so I could resume my seminary studies, a DTS alumnus and his wife counseled us that I should not work or study in the evenings for the protection of our marriage; but, afterward, I told my wife that if God was calling us to seminary, it was going to be a sacrifice for her too, and if she was not ready for that sacrifice then I would rather not go at all than go and not give my best.

Moore asked where the line is between neglecting the material needs of the family and neglecting to call them to sacrifice for the cause [71]. If we consider Paul sitting under house arrest and writing to the Philippians that God would meet all their needs, we see that we have gotten fat and happy in our biblical understanding and application. I know a couple who are living in a trailer in the center of Chad [Africa] so they can minister to indigenous pastors. They have little beyond what they need to survive and carry out the ministry, and are at constant risk [in fact, their grown son was kidnapped for over a year by Muslim bandits from another mission site nearby]. Are any of us called to a lesser height? Are we settling for one if we insist on providing our families with the comforts of the age and culture? I think about this all the time, regarding what are the goals of sanctification for the average believer, but Moore brought this family aspect of the question to my attention.

Like the story of William Carey [upon which Moore touched in her introduction], Wesley's story provoked in me an amount of sympathy at least equal to any criticism: I might not agree with the post-marital priorities of these men, but they did not have much to work with in their wives. One big lesson from this is not merely to choose your spouse carefully – good advice for any person who does not believe in divorce! – but also to explore each other's approach to life before joining lives. Even Moore said, “the foundation of a healthy Christian marriage is not that my psychological needs are met. Rather, the foundation of a healthy and God-honoring marriage is Jesus Christ and obedience to Him” [118]. Before I asked my wife to build a life with me, I had yet one more in-depth conversation with her about my interest in ministry and my intention of not living a mundane, “normal,” life, but rather to chase after God passionately [and upon reflection seven years later, I sure am thankful that I married this woman and not any of the others whom I seriously dated over the years!]. I am not sure what I would do if I found my wife suddenly hesitant to pursue such a life. If it were a matter of one ministry decision, I would have to engage Moore's question [12] of whether this could be a sign that God's blessing was not in it [of my wife being more discerning than I] or whether my wife was being led by the flesh [less discerning]. If it were total denial to participate and sacrifice for the ministry, I would know she was in the flesh, but it is a good question what my response should be then: I think to be a good husband I would have to minister to her needs and patiently seek to help her grow, but I also would have to uphold the biblical standard for Christian life as the vision of that to which she was trying to grow.

I don't think Moore changed any of my views of history, though I thoroughly enjoyed that aspect of the book. I had not been aware of some of the details Moore shared about the marriages of these three men, but what she did share did not change my perspective on them, with the possible exception that I might wish Wesley had been less impulsive, more discreet, and more attentive to family matters; but then he might not have been Wesley!

I would like to use this book to engage others in the questions relating to Moore's theme of how to balance the obligations of family life with those of public ministry [I would ask them to read this book and then participate in a group discussion]. The questions this book provokes certainly are necessary for any couple thinking of vocational ministry or for anyone actively pursuing a life of ministry who is thinking of getting married. But I think this book might be useful for every person in the church, as it raises questions about our approach to, and obligations for, marriage and service. Thus, I think it would be useful in pre-marital counseling, in teaching new believers about the Christian life, and – really – for anyone in the church who either has, or might someday have, family obligations and so need to balance those with his/her calling to public service in the name of Christ.