

The Bible and Incestuous Relationships

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The Bible and not culture must regulate the institution of marriage. For marriage is a creation ordinance established by God and regulated by God in His Word. A society that has long departed from biblical standards may seek to justify marriages between members of the same gender (“sodomite unions”) or may seek to advance the so-called individual rights of adults who divorce spouses for “irreconcilable differences”, but the Church of Jesus Christ can neither recognize nor sanction civil laws which strike at the heart of God’s institution and regulation of marriage without undermining the very foundation of the Christian faith which is this: God’s revealed will to man in matters of faith and practice has been clearly and authoritatively declared in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

Likewise, as we consider matters related to the subject of incestuous relationships, the divine institution of marriage cannot be ultimately regulated by relative cultural standards, by ever-changing civil laws, by emotional attachments, by perceived negative consequences to the individuals involved, by the presence of children in the incestuous relationship, nor even by the presence of mutual love in an incestuous relationship. Although our own hearts may be broken and our eyes filled with tears for those involved in an incestuous relationship, and although they may have ignorantly entered into this arrangement or may have even been counseled by ministers and magistrates to proceed with marriage, none of these circumstances can make lawful what is declared by God to be unlawful. To the contrary, the divine institution of marriage can only and ultimately be regulated by God Himself as He has revealed His will in Scripture. Thus, we must understand at the very outset of a discussion concerning marriage and incestuous relationships that only God can authorize what constitutes an incestuous relationship and what degrees of familial relationship are prohibited in a lawful marriage.

Incest Forbidden At Creation

When a man and a woman promise to live with one another as husband and wife “till death us

do part”, God declares that the man (and by good and necessary inference the woman as well) must leave father and mother, cleave to his wife (or to her husband), and become “one flesh.”

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

Clearly, incest (as a general category) is prohibited by God in the very institution of marriage. For how can a man leave his mother and cleave to his wife while at the same time taking his mother to be his wife? Or how can a woman leave her father and cleave to her husband while at the same time taking her father to be her husband? Such a thought is not only revolting to nature, but clearly and expressly contrary to the divine institution of marriage. Although incest as a general category was prohibited (by good and necessary inference) to all mankind even from the days of creation, nevertheless, the written regulation of the specific degrees of familial relationship forbidden awaited the time of Moses.

Incest More Clearly Defined

At the time of Moses, the Lord authorized that certain familial relationships be prohibited to those who would be united as husband and wife (cf. Leviticus 18:, Leviticus 20:11,12,14,17,19,20,21-24; Deuteronomy 22:30; Deuteronomy 27:20,22,23). A general prohibition against all incestuous relationships is given in Leviticus 18:6:

None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness: I am the LORD.

Then in the verses that follow (in Leviticus 18 etc.), the specific degrees of familial relationships forbidden are enumerated. The Lord declared these incestuous relationships to be so contrary to the divine institution of marriage that even the penalty of death was required of those who were convicted of particular aggravated cases of incest (Leviticus 20:11,12,14). The relationships explicitly mentioned and forbidden by God are the following:

1. A man’s mother (Leviticus 18:7).
2. A man’s step-mother (Leviticus 18:8; Leviticus 20:11; Deuteronomy 22:30; Deuteronomy 27:20).
3. A man’s sister or step-sister (Leviticus 18:9; Leviticus 20:17; Deuteronomy 27:22).
4. A man’s granddaughter (Leviticus 18:10).
5. A man’s half-sister (Leviticus 18:11).
6. A man’s paternal aunt by blood, i.e. his father’s sister (Leviticus 18:12; Leviticus 20:19).

7. A man's maternal aunt by blood, i.e. his mother's sister (Leviticus 18:13; Leviticus 20:19).
8. A man's paternal aunt by marriage, i.e. his father's brother's wife (Leviticus 18:14; Leviticus 20:20).
9. A man's daughter-in-law (Leviticus 18:15; Leviticus 20:12).
10. A man's brother's wife i.e. sister-in-law (Leviticus 18:16; Leviticus 20:21). The one exception to this prohibition is noted when a brother died without children. In which case, the oldest surviving unmarried brother was to marry his sister-in-law so as to raise up an heir for his deceased brother (Deuteronomy 25:5,6).
11. A man's step-daughter or step-granddaughter (Leviticus 18:17).
12. A man's wife's sister i.e. sister-in-law (Leviticus 18:18). It is likely that Leviticus 18:18 is not so much a prohibition against an incestuous relationship as much as it is a prohibition against polygamy.
13. A man's mother-in-law (Leviticus 20:14; Deuteronomy 27:23).

It should be noted that all of the familial relationships forbidden above proceed from the perspective of a man rather than from the perspective of a woman. That is to say, God gives the various familial relationships forbidden to a man alone (in Leviticus 18 etc.), rather than going through the list and declaring the same familial relationships to be forbidden to a woman as well. Thus, we ought not conclude the following: Since a list (in Leviticus 18 etc.) is omitted that pertains explicitly to a woman in all the same familial relationships forbidden to a man, therefore, a woman cannot commit incest, or if she can commit incest she cannot commit it in the same familial relationships as a man. For it is often the case that certain prohibitions or commands are given expressly to a man, and yet equally obligate a woman (even though she is not specifically mentioned). For example, we ought not conclude that since a man is explicitly obligated to leave his father and mother and to cleave to his wife, that therefore a woman has no obligation to perform the same duty (even though she is not expressly mentioned in Genesis 2:24). Or consider that the Lord explicitly gives a man grounds upon which to divorce his wife, namely, fornication (Matthew 5:32; Matthew 19:9). Although the wife is not specifically given the same grounds upon which she might divorce her husband, we ought not to conclude that a wife cannot divorce her husband for fornication as well. There is a law of moral equity in such cases that equally applies to both men and women. Thus, in applying the same moral equity to the woman as to the man, the same degree of incestuous relationships are likewise forbidden to the woman as are forbidden to the man:

1. A woman's father (Leviticus 18:7).
2. A woman's step-father (Leviticus 18:8; Leviticus 20:11; Deuteronomy 22:30; Deuteronomy 27:20).
3. A woman's brother or step-brother (Leviticus 18:9; Leviticus 20:17; Deuteronomy 27:22).

4. A woman's grandson (Leviticus 18:10).
5. A woman's half-brother (Leviticus 18:11).
6. A woman's paternal uncle by blood, i.e. her father's brother (Leviticus 18:12; Leviticus 20:19).
7. A woman's maternal uncle by blood, i.e. her mother's brother (Leviticus 18:13; Leviticus 20:19).
8. A woman's paternal uncle by marriage, i.e. her father's sister's husband (Leviticus 18:14; Leviticus 20:20). It will be argued below that by good and necessary inference a woman's maternal uncle by marriage (i.e. the former husband of her mother's sister) is likewise prohibited.
9. A woman's son-in-law (Leviticus 18:15; Leviticus 20:12).
10. A woman's sister's husband i.e. brother-in-law (Leviticus 18:16; Leviticus 20:21).
11. A woman's step-son or step-grandson (Leviticus 18:17).
12. A woman's husband's brother i.e. brother-in-law (Leviticus 18:18). Although we have included this familial relationship as a prohibited relationship at this point from a good and necessary inference of one possible interpretation of Leviticus 18:18, it should be noted that we believe Leviticus 18:18 more likely prohibits any polygamous relationship (and not simply the marrying of two sisters while they both live).
13. A woman's father-in-law (Leviticus 20:14; Deuteronomy 27:23).

Degrees Of Blood And Affinity

As one looks over the list above, it will be readily apparent that the Lord forbade marriages that involved certain blood relations (blood relations are also known as Relations of Consanguinity):

1. A man's mother and a woman's father (Leviticus 18:7).
2. A man's sister and a woman's brother (Leviticus 18:9; Leviticus 20:17; Deuteronomy 27:22).
3. A man's granddaughter and a woman's grandson (Leviticus 18:10).
4. A man's half-sister and a woman's half-brother (Leviticus 18:11).
5. A man's paternal aunt by blood (i.e. his father's sister) and a woman's paternal uncle by blood (i.e. her father's brother, cf. Leviticus 18:12; Leviticus 20:19).
6. A man's maternal aunt by blood (i.e. his mother's sister) and a woman's maternal uncle by blood (i.e. her mother's brother, cf. Leviticus 18:13; Leviticus 20:19).

But it will be as readily apparent that the Lord also prohibited marriages that involved certain relationships that existed only by way of marriage (e.g. "in-law" relationships and "step" relationships which are also known as Relations of Affinity):

1. A man's step-mother and a woman's step-father (Leviticus 18:8; Leviticus 20:11; Deuteronomy 22:30; Deuteronomy 27:20).
2. A man's step-sister and a woman's step-brother (Leviticus 18:9; Leviticus 20:17; Deuteronomy 27:22).
3. A man's paternal aunt by marriage (i.e. his father's brother's wife) and a woman's paternal uncle by marriage (i.e. her father's sister's husband, cf. Leviticus 18:14; Leviticus 20:20).
4. A man's daughter-in-law and a woman's son-in-law (Leviticus 18:15; Leviticus 20:12).
5. A man's brother's wife i.e. sister-in-law and a woman's sister's husband i.e. brother-in-law (Leviticus 18:16; Leviticus 20:21).
6. A man's step-daughter or step-granddaughter and a woman's step-son or step-grandson (Leviticus 18:17).
7. A man's wife's sister i.e. sister-in-law and a woman's husband's brother i.e. brother-in-law (Leviticus 18:18). Although we have included these familial relationships as prohibited relationships at this point from a consideration of one possible interpretation of Leviticus 18:18, it should be noted that we believe Leviticus 18:18 more likely prohibits any polygamous relationship (and not simply the marrying of two sisters while they both live).
8. A man's mother-in-law and a woman's father-in-law (Leviticus 20:14; Deuteronomy 27:23).

It ought to be evident from the list just given that God not only prohibits certain blood relationships as incestuous, but bans certain "in-law" relationships and "step" relationships as incestuous as well. What is the biblical reason for the prohibition against certain "in-law" and "step" relationships? These specific relationships are forbidden on the principle that when a man and a woman become united in marriage, they become "one flesh" ("and they shall be one flesh" Genesis 2:24, cf. Matthew 19:5; Mark 10:8). Being "one flesh" implies that one's "in-law" and "step" relatives become as one's own blood relatives. Thus, a man is not only forbidden from marrying his own mother (Leviticus 18:7), but is forbidden from marrying his mother-in-law as well (Leviticus 20:14; Deuteronomy 27:23). Why? Because he is "one flesh" with his wife, so that his wife's mother is as his own mother according to God's law. Likewise, by virtue of a man becoming "one flesh" with a second wife, his son (by his first marriage) is not only commanded to abstain from marrying his own blood sister (Leviticus 18:9; Leviticus 20:17; Deuteronomy 27:22), but is also commanded to abstain from marrying his step-sister as well (i.e. the daughter of his stepmother, cf. Leviticus 18:9; Leviticus 20:17; Deuteronomy 27:22). Why? Because his father is "one flesh" with his wife which makes the relationship with a step-sister to be like that of a blood sister according to God's law.

One further observation should be noted before leaving this section. Where a specific relationship is omitted from the list of incestuous relationships on one side of the family, but

the same degree of relationship on the other side of the family is expressly prohibited, then by way of moral equity, the relationship that was omitted is also prohibited. Why? Because he is “one flesh” with his wife, and the same degree to which relationships are incestuous on his side of the family (whether his mother’s side of the family or his father’s side), to that same degree are relationships incestuous on his wife’s side of the family (whether her mother’s side of the family or her father’s side). For example, the Lord forbids a man to marry his paternal aunt by marriage (i.e. his father’s brother’s wife), and by way of moral equity the Lord likewise forbids a woman to marry her paternal uncle by marriage (i.e. her father’s sister’s husband) according to Leviticus 18:14; Leviticus 20:20. In both of these cases a nephew is forbidden from marrying his aunt by marriage (i.e. explicitly the wife of his father's brother and implicitly the wife of his mother's brother). We say the nephew is “implicitly” forbidden to marry the wife of his mother’s brother because it is not explicitly forbidden in Leviticus 18:14, but is, nevertheless, forbidden and necessarily so. Why? Because in both cases the nakedness of a near blood relative is being uncovered. In the marriage of a man to the former wife of his father’s brother the nakedness of his uncle, his father’s brother, is uncovered. Likewise, in the marriage of a man to the former wife of his mother’s brother the nakedness of his uncle, his mother’s brother, is uncovered. The same biblical, logical, and moral reason exists in prohibiting the marriage of a nephew to the former wife of his father’s brother as exists in prohibiting the marriage of a nephew to his the former wife of his mother’s brother:

None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness: I am the LORD (Leviticus 18:6).

Similarly, Leviticus 18:14 does not explicitly forbid a woman to marry her maternal uncle by marriage (i.e. the former husband of her mother’s sister) nor does it explicitly forbid her to marry her paternal uncle by marriage (i.e. the former husband of her father’s sister). In this relationship, we now move from a consideration of what family relationships in marriage are forbidden to a nephew, to consider what family relationships in marriage are forbidden to a niece. We ask: Upon what biblical, logical, or moral grounds could we deny that the same relationship that exists between a nephew and his maternal aunt by marriage (i.e. the former wife of his mother’s brother) also exists between a niece and her maternal uncle by marriage (i.e. the former husband of her mother’s sister)? In both cases, the nakedness of a near blood relative (and a near blood relative to the same degree) is being uncovered. In the marriage of a nephew to his maternal aunt by marriage (i.e. the former wife of his mother’s brother), the nakedness of his own blood uncle is being uncovered. In the marriage of a niece to her maternal uncle by marriage (i.e. the former husband of her mother’s sister), the nakedness of her own blood aunt is being uncovered. Therefore, the same biblical, logical, and moral reason exists in prohibiting the marriage of a nephew to his maternal aunt by marriage (i.e. the former wife of his mother’s brother) as exists in prohibiting the marriage of a niece to her maternal uncle by marriage (i.e. the former husband of her mother’s sister):

None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness: I am the LORD (Leviticus 18:6).

Carefully note that there is no reason given in Leviticus 18 (or any of the other passages dealing with incest) for the prohibition of these relationships than the one just given in Leviticus 18:6. It has been suggested that perhaps the reason why a nephew is expressly prohibited from marrying the former wife of his father's brother (i.e. his paternal aunt by marriage) is because a man who enters into marriage should not hold an inferior relationship to his wife (i.e. as a nephew, he is inferior in relationship to his aunt). And this line of argument then leads to the conclusion that the reason a niece is not explicitly forbidden from marrying the former husband of her mother's sister (i.e. her maternal uncle by marriage) is because in this marriage, the man holds a superior relationship to his wife (i.e. as an uncle, he is superior in relationship to his niece). The problem we see with this suggestion is that there are other relationships of affinity (i.e. familial relationships by way of marriage) expressly prohibited in Leviticus 18 that would place a man in a superior relationship to a female relative. For example, a man is forbidden from marrying his daughter-in-law (Leviticus 18:15). This relationship is prohibited, even though it would not bring a man into a marriage by means of an inferior relationship to his wife (i.e. a father-in-law is a superior relationship to that of a daughter-in-law). Likewise a man is forbidden from marrying his step-daughter or his step-granddaughter (Leviticus 18:17). Again this relationship is prohibited, even though it would not bring a man into a marriage by means of an inferior relationship to his wife (i.e. a step-father or a step-grandfather is a superior relationship to that of a step-daughter or a step-granddaughter). We cannot emphasize enough that the only reason given for the prohibition of the relationships in Leviticus 18 is that they are near of kin (Leviticus 18:6) and not that they bring a man into a marriage by means of an inferior relationship to his wife.

If any should object by saying that only the explicit relationships mentioned in the biblical passages cited above are prohibited, and that we cannot add any further prohibited relationships not expressly mentioned, we would ask whether a father may marry his own blood daughter? For a man is explicitly forbidden from marrying his own mother (Leviticus 18:7). Moreover, a man is specifically prohibited from marrying his daughter-in-law (Leviticus 18:15; Leviticus 20:12). But where is a man expressly banned from marrying his own daughter in the Mosaic legislation? There is not an explicit word of prohibition found therein against this relationship. Nevertheless, we must conclude that it is condemned implicitly by a good and necessary inference drawn from this principle of "one flesh", wherein by way of moral equity God prohibits the same degree of relationships to the mother's side of the family as to the father's side, and to the husband's side of the family as to the wife's side.

Thus, when we apply this principle of “one flesh” by way of moral equity to the same degree of relationships equally to the mother’s side of the family as to the father’s side, and to the husband’s side of the family as to the wife’s side, it will yield the following complete list of incestuous relationships prohibited by the Word of God:

1. Relationships Prohibited By Way Of Blood (or Consanguinity):
 - a. A man’s mother and a woman’s father (Leviticus 18:7).
 - b. A man’s sister and a woman’s brother (Leviticus 18:9; Leviticus 20:17; Deuteronomy 27:22).
 - c. A man’s granddaughter and a woman’s grandson (Leviticus 18:10).
 - d. A man’s half-sister and a woman’s half-brother (Leviticus 18:11).
 - e. A man’s paternal aunt by blood and a woman’s paternal uncle by blood (Leviticus 18:12; Leviticus 20:19).
 - f. A man’s maternal aunt by blood and a woman’s maternal uncle by blood (Leviticus 18:13; Leviticus 20:19).
2. Relationships Prohibited By Way Of Marriage (or Affinity):
 - a. A man’s step-mother and a woman’s step-father (Leviticus 18:8; Leviticus 20:11; Deuteronomy 22:30; Deuteronomy 27:20).
 - b. A man’s step-sister and a woman’s step-brother (Leviticus 18:9; Leviticus 20:17; Deuteronomy 27:22).
 - c. A man’s paternal aunt by marriage (i.e. the former wife of a father’s brother) and a woman’s paternal uncle by marriage (i.e. the former husband of a father’s sister, Leviticus 18:14; Leviticus 20:20).
 - d. A man’s maternal aunt by marriage (i.e. the former wife of a mother’s brother) and a woman’s maternal uncle by marriage (i.e. the former husband of a mother’s sister, Leviticus 18:14; Leviticus 20:20).
 - e. A man’s daughter-in-law and a woman’s son-in-law (Leviticus 18:15; Leviticus 20:12).
 - f. A man’s brother’s wife i.e. his sister-in-law and a woman’s sister’s husband i.e. her brother-in-law (Leviticus 18:16; Leviticus 20:21).
 - g. A man’s step-daughter or step-granddaughter and a woman’s step-son or step-grandson (Leviticus 18:17).
 - h. A man’s wife’s sister i.e. his sister-in-law and a woman’s husband’s brother i.e. her brother-in-law (Leviticus 18:18).
 - i. A man’s mother-in-law and a woman’s father-in-law (Leviticus 20:14; Deuteronomy 27:23).

The Perpetual and Moral Obligation To Abstain From Incestuous Relationships

1. These incestuous relationships are not cultural or ceremonial for they are prohibited on the grounds that a couple united in marriage become “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24), and that such incestuous relationships are between those who are “near of kin” (Leviticus 18:6). To the contrary, these two stated reasons for prohibiting incestuous relationships are moral and perpetual, and therefore, the degrees of familial relationship (either by way of blood or by way of marriage) prohibited by God in His Word continue to be prohibited to all mankind.
2. One of the stated reasons given by God for the Gentile nations being cast out of the land of Canaan was due to their practice and toleration of these incestuous relationships (Leviticus 18:24-30; Leviticus 20:22,23). If the Lord bound Gentile nations to these laws and held them accountable for engaging in these incestuous relationships, then it cannot be argued that such incestuous relationships were forbidden to the Jews only. It should be noted that prior to the giving of the Law through Moses, certain marriages were tolerated by God in the lives of the patriarchs (e.g. the relationship of Abraham to Sarah, or the relationship of Jacob to Leah and Rachel). But now that God has given express prohibition concerning the degrees of familial relationships forbidden in marriage (in Leviticus 18 etc.), there is no biblical or moral reason that can justify violating the degrees of familial relationships prohibited by God in marriage.
3. When John the Baptist accused Herod of entering into an incestuous relationship, he demonstrated that these laws against incestuous relationships had not ceased (Mark 6:18). John condemns Herod for marrying his brother’s wife (i.e. his sister-in-law) which was forbidden in Leviticus 18:16 and Leviticus 20:21. John did not condemn Herod for committing adultery, nor for committing polygamy. To the contrary, John condemned Herod for committing incest in marrying his brother’s former wife. Although the law was until John, yet he was a prophet of the New Covenant. He specifically prepared the way of the Lord, and even administered Christian baptism to Jesus and some of Christ’s disciples. Thus, John as a prophet of the New Covenant upheld the perpetual obligation of God’s moral law against such incestuous relationships.
4. The apostle Paul likewise demonstrates that the incestuous relationships condemned by the Lord in the law of God are also forbidden in the New Covenant (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). There Paul humbles the Corinthians by saying that even the Gentiles about them did not practice such incestuous relationships. Paul evidences the perpetual and moral obligation to abstain from all such incestuous relationships by judging that church discipline ought to be brought against the man who had engaged in such an illicit and obstinate incestuous relationship. It is worthy of note that the incestuous relationship condemned here by the

apostle Paul was not one of blood (i.e. his own blood mother), but rather was one of affinity (i.e. his step-mother, the wife of his father, cf. Leviticus 18:18; Leviticus 20:11; Deuteronomy 22:30; Deuteronomy 27:20). This clearly proves that all of the incestuous relationships prohibited by God in the Old Testament (Leviticus 18 etc.), whether they be by way of blood or by way of marriage, are likewise prohibited by God in the New Testament as well, and therefore, are of perpetual and moral obligation.

The Testimony of History

If the position represented in this paper is indeed biblical, one would expect to find faithful assemblies of divines, faithful churches, and godly and learned teachers from the most pure times of reformation also representing the same position concerning the subject of incestuous relationships. Let us consider and firmly establish that historical testimony also confirms the conviction presented in this paper.

1. The Second Helvetic Confession, Chapter 29 (1566).

We teach that marriages ought to be made lawfully, in the fear of the Lord, and not against the laws which forbid certain degrees to join in matrimony, lest the marriages should be incestuous.

2. The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 24 (1647).

Marriage ought not to be within the degrees of consanguinity or affinity forbidden in the Word; nor can such incestuous marriages ever be made lawful by any law of man, or consent of parties, so as those persons may live together, as man and wife. The man may not marry any of his wife's kindred nearer in blood than he may of his own, nor the woman of her husband's kindred nearer in blood than of her own.

3. The Church of Scotland (1565).

In regard to the question, Whether any man might marry his wife's brother's daughter [i.e. his niece by marriage—PRCE], or his wife's sister's daughter [i.e. his niece by marriage—PRCE], or what order should be taken in any such marriages [that—PRCE] were made; It was voted, and found by the Word of God, that none may marry his wife's brother's daughter, or [wife's—PRCE] sister's daughter, and if any such marriages were contracted, to be null, and not to stand (*Book Of The Universal Kirk Of Scotland*, p. 38, archaic words in the excerpt have been revised).

4. The Reformed Presbyterian Church In The United States Of America (1807).

Marriage ought not to be contracted within the degrees of consanguinity [i.e. relatives by blood—PRCE], or affinity [i.e. relatives by marriage—PRCE], prohibited in the word of God; nor can any law of man, or consent of parties legitimate [i.e. legitimize—PRCE] such incestuous connections....

We therefore condemn the following errors, and testify against all who maintain them:

“That a man may marry any of his wife’s kindred nearer in blood, than he may of his own.”

“That a woman may marry any of her husband’s kindred nearer in blood, than she may of her own” (*Reformation Principles Exhibited*, Part II, pp. 99, 101).

5. John Calvin (1509-1564).

In the collateral [or corresponding—PRCE] line, the uncles on both sides represent the father, and the aunts [represent—PRCE] the mother; and, consequently, connection with them [in marriage—PRCE] is forbidden, inasmuch as it would be of somewhat similar impropriety. The same rule affects affinity; for the step-mother, or mother-in-law, is held to stand in the relation of mother; and the step-daughter, or daughter-in-law, in that of daughter; as also the wife of the paternal or maternal uncle is to be regarded in the relation of mother. And, although express mention may not be made of it here, we must form our judgment by analogy as to what is prohibited; —the uncle on the father's or mother's side is not here [explicitly—PRCE] forbidden to marry his niece; but, since the nephew is interdicted [i.e. prohibited—PRCE] from marrying his paternal or maternal aunt, the mutual relation of the inferior to the superior degree must prevail. But if any should contend that there is a difference, the reason added by Moses refutes his objection, for it is said, "She is thy father's or thy mother's near kinswoman." Hence it follows, that a niece is guilty of incest if she marries her uncle on either side. As to brothers and sisters, God pronounces that marriage with a sister, although she be not uterine [i.e. a blood sister—PRCE], is unlawful; for He forbids the uncovering of the turpitude [or nakedness—PRCE] of a sister, who is either the daughter of thy father or thy mother (*Calvin's Commentaries*, Volume 3, pp. 103, 104).

6. Ministers In London At The Time Of The Westminster Assembly (1657).

By the same reason that a man is forbidden the bed of his father’s brother’s [wife—PRCE] or uncle’s wife, or aunt, a woman is forbidden the like nearness to her aunt’s husband; for as in logic, so in divinity, the difference of sex varieth not the case so much as to make it unlawful in the one land [or in the one case—PRCE], [and—PRCE] lawful in the other... and for the Jews, who at this day observe it not [i.e. do not observe a prohibition against a woman marrying her aunt’s husband—PRCE], it may be thought to be a part of their apostasy from true religion (*The Westminster Annotations*, Vol. 1, Leviticus 18:14).

7. Richard Baxter (1615-1691).

Quest. V. What should those do that are married in those degrees which are not [explicitly—PRCE] forbidden by name in Lev. xviii. and yet are at the same distance from the root with those that are named, and seem to have the same reason of unlawfulness?

Answ. If there be clearly a parity [or equality—PRCE] of degree, and also of the reason of [i.e. for—PRCE] the prohibition, then no doubt but they must part as incestuous, and not continue in a forbidden state (*A Christian Directory*, p. 405).

8. Wilhelmus a Brakel (1635-1711).

Thirdly, there is incest; that is, if persons that are too closely related enter into a relationship, be it outside of marriage or within marriage (although it is no marriage). The blood relationship is too close if the relationship is closer than cousins, that is, the children of brothers and sisters. Marriage between first cousins is not prohibited anywhere. The Lord has left man free in this, and such persons do not need to be secretly troubled in the heart. The degrees of relationship which are forbidden are parents with their children and grandchildren, this being true in all generations. It is also considered to be incest if one marries either two sisters or two brothers; that is, the one after the death of the other. It is incestuous to marry children of one's sister or brother; that is if an uncle or an aunt marries someone whose uncle or aunt they are; or if a nephew or niece marries an uncle or an aunt in all descending degrees. To determine who are too near of kin one must refer to Leviticus 18: 6-18 and [Leviticus—PRCE] 20: 11-12 (*The Christian's Reasonable Service*, Volume 3, p. 207).

9. A.A. Hodge (1823-1886).

Incest consists of sexual intercourse between parties forbidden by the divine law to marry, because of their relationship. Marriage between these parties is impossible; and no matter what may be the provisions of human laws or the decisions of human courts, such pretended marriages are void *ab initio* [i.e. from the initiation or beginning—PRCE]—invalid in essence as well as improper and injurious....

The only law on this subject in the Scriptures is the Levitical law recorded in Lev. xviii.6-23; xx.10-21. If this law is still binding, it carries with it the principle that it is incest for a man to cohabit with any one of his deceased wife's relations nearer in blood than it is lawful for him to do of his own. If this law is not binding now, there is no other law of God remaining on the subject of incest except the law of nature.

The Greek and Roman Catholic Churches agree in holding that this law is still binding, since the reason of [i.e. for—PRCE] the law rests upon permanent relationships, and not upon any special circumstances peculiar to society among the Jews. All branches of the Protestant Church—Episcopal, Lutheran, and Presbyterian—have maintained the same principle in their Confessions of Faith or canons of discipline. It is [also—PRCE] asserted in these sections of our Confession [i.e. The Westminster Confession of Faith, 24:4—PRCE] (*The Confession Of Faith*, pp. 306, 307).

10. John Murray (1957)

Are marriages within similar or equal degrees of kinship prohibited as well as those expressly mentioned by Moses [in Leviticus 18 etc.—PRCE]? For example, the prohibitions in Leviticus 18:7-18 are viewed from the standpoint of the man; they are stated in terms of the kinship he sustains to the woman in question in each case. But must we not suppose that if we take the standpoint of the woman and think in terms of the kinship she sustains to the man, the prohibitions apply to the same types of kinship? To be specific, Leviticus 18:12 reads: ‘Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy father’s sister’—a man may not marry his father’s sister. But does it not follow by inference, because of the identical nature of the kinship, that a woman may not marry her father’s brother or, for that matter, her mother’s brother?... But it seems to me necessary to understand that Moses has not specified all the prohibitions which are involved in the degrees of consanguinity [i.e. relationships by blood—PRCE] and affinity [i.e. relationships by marriage—PRCE] enunciated. Leviticus 18:6-17 provides us with the principles in terms of which the prohibited degrees of consanguinity and affinity are to be determined. Of course Moses does not do this in the form of principles. That would not be consonant with Old Testament method. Moses declares the law in terms of the concrete. But these concrete instances are not to be isolated from the kind of relationship which they exemplify. And that is what is meant when we say that Leviticus 18:6-17 provides us with principles, that is, with the principles of relationship in terms of which we are to interpret the degrees of consanguinity and affinity within which marriage is illicit (*Principles Of Conduct*, pp. 255, 256).

Thirdly, Paul [in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5—PRCE] is not here establishing a law in the exercise of apostolic inspiration. He is simply applying the law [in Leviticus 18:8; Leviticus 20:11; Deuteronomy 22:30; Deuteronomy 27:20 —PRCE] which he recognizes as established and expresses his consternation that a law of universal obligation should be violated within the Christian community and the violation regarded so lightly by the church there. Paul’s exasperation underlines the grossness of the wrong involved (*Principles Of Conduct*, p. 258).

The position represented within this paper is not a novel, nor isolated perspective unheard of before the present time. To the contrary, we affirm that it has been the position embraced by the greater part of the church (and certainly by the faithful church in her most pure times of reformation). In fact, it is undoubtedly the position historically embraced by nations which have been favored to have had the light of the gospel.

The Status Of Incestuous Relationships

Can those who are involved in an incestuous “marriage” continue therein?

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein (Romans 6:1, 2)?

The answer to that question is not one in which we can merely offer an opinion, or a set of options from which to choose. The answer to that question can only be decided by the Lord speaking in His Word.

To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them (Isaiah 8:20).

We have established from the testimony of God's Word, and from the testimony of God's Church in history, that those degrees of familial relations (by blood and by marriage) forbidden in God's Law (Leviticus 18; Leviticus 20:11,12,14,17,19,20,21-24; Deuteronomy 22:30; Deuteronomy 27:20,22,23), are illicit relationships and no marriages at all. Therefore, those engaged in an incestuous relationship can do nothing to make the relationship a marriage, for they cannot alter the fact that they are within the "nearness of kin" forbidden by the Lord. No amount of pleading with the Lord, no amount of repentance, nor seeking God's forgiveness can possibly alter the fact that they are living with one who is a near relative prohibited by God. Thus, the only way to receive God's gracious forgiveness and to demonstrate true repentance when one has been guilty of the sin of incest is to discontinue the incestuous relationship immediately. We cannot imagine the apostle Paul counseling the man (in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5) who had married his step-mother to repent of his past sin, and yet exhorting the Church to receive him back into fellowship while he continued in the same incestuous relationship. When such an incestuous relationship is discontinued, there is properly no divorce that occurs (even though that may be necessary in nations that sinfully disregard the degrees of familial relationships in marriage prohibited in the Word of God), since there was properly no marriage established from the beginning. Rather, an annulment, which recognizes the fact that a marriage was never legitimately contracted, ought to be issued in all nations that would submit themselves to be governed according to the moral law of God. However, an annulment is still the civil sanction taken by all civil jurisdictions in Canada and the United States where a relationship is judged to be incestuous. Even the light of nature tells us that a marriage that is judged to be incestuous is no marriage at all—it is null and void. Likewise, once a relationship is judged to be incestuous by the Church court, the only possible course of action within the Church of Jesus Christ is to declare that incestuous "marriage" null and void. Of course, such a course of action is heart-wrenching, and will be unpopular with many. However, no member of the Church of Jesus Christ can sincerely repent of an incestuous relationship and yet continue therein. Genuine repentance will be evidenced by immediate discontinuance. The Lord Jesus Christ will uphold, by His sustaining grace, all those who love Him more than father, mother, brother, sister, husband, or wife (or who love Him more than those who were perceived to be a husband or wife). The Puritan Reformed Church, as a member of Christ's Visible Church, herein goes on record as declaring that it will not forsake those lambs of Jesus Christ who make this most difficult decision for the sake of Christ. We will love, support (by way of food and shelter), encourage, and weep with those

who seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness in discontinuing an incestuous relationship. Such a godly decision will not be easy (it may even be the most difficult decision to be made in this life), but it will be a decision honoring to the Lord Jesus Christ who gave His life to redeem us from every lawless deed.