

Building Biblical
COMMUNITY *in* CHRIST

A MANUAL FOR MARRIAGE
Ephesians 5:21-33

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— 30 for we are members of his body. 31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." 32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. Ephesians 5:21-33

Today, we are looking at what many in our society would term the most politically incorrect words of the Bible. Two of these notions are found here: submission and headship. For the vast majority of those in our society, the real “dirty words” of the Bible are not those of verses 3 and 4 of this chapter: sexual immorality, obscenity, and impurity...but rather the ideas of verses 21-33: submission, respect and authority.

In a recent Gallup Poll, 69% of those interviewed disagreed with the statement: "A wife should submit graciously to the servant leadership of her husband." This percentage declined ever so slightly (to six in ten) when survey respondents were reminded that the concept was taken from the Bible.ⁱ

Yes, in the opinion of many, we have here some of the most politically incorrect words of the Bible.

I suspect that part of (but certainly not all of) the intense aversion to what Paul teaches here is due to a misunderstanding – even a stereotypical understanding – of what Paul is saying.

First, *we need to recognize that Paul's teaching is revolutionary in light of the trends of his day.* The Jews had an extremely low view of women. In a Jewish morning prayer, a Jewish man thanks God that he did not make him a “Gentile, a slave or a woman.” In the Jewish world, a woman had next to no rights at all (though this is not the perspective of the Old Testament). And in the Greek world, the situation was even worse. The average

Greek man expected his wife to run the house and care for his children while he found personal and sexual gratification elsewhere. But in these verses, Paul goes counter-culture, calling husbands to sacrificially love and protect their wives.

Second, *we need to understand that the basis of these instructions to husbands and wives is not personal opinion, but creation order.* The word “submit” means simply to place or arrange under in an ordered way.ⁱⁱ It does *not* mean “to obey in everything,” but to surrender one’s own rights or will.

There are several “orders” that are talked about in the New Testament other than the one here in Ephesians 5: citizens are to be subject to civil authorities (Titus 3:1; Romans 13:1); employees are to be subject to their employers (Titus 2:9); church members are to be subject to their leaders (1 Corinthians 16:16), children are to be subject to their parents (1 Timothy 3:4); and the church is to be subject to Christ (Ephesians 5:24).

Did sin create these “orders?” Did sin create the headship of the man and the submission of the woman? No, this divine order of creation is *not* the result of sin. It is rather the *distortion* of the divine order that is the result of sin. Domineering and selfish husbands and manipulative or demanding wives is the result of sin, but not the order itself.

Some, not understanding this, have been quick to point out that all Paul says about husbands and wives needs to be interpreted in light of verse 21: “Submit *to one another* out of reverence for Christ.” The reasoning goes like this: “Yes, wives are to submit to their husbands, but really no more than husbands are to submit to their wives; after all, Paul says that we are to submit to one another.” This has led one author to write: “By definition, *mutual submission rules out hierarchical differences.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

Though that sounds good, what is not understood is that this verse is really a chapter heading for the entire section from 5:22 – 6:9. Paul is going to address in this section three relational situations that call for submission: a wife to her husband, a child to his parent and a slave to his master. There is mutual submission in the sense that Paul is writing to the entire church and he is asking that submission be shown in these three spheres of relationship. In each paragraph, he discusses *first* the submissive partner: wife, child, slave. Husbands are not called here to submit to their wives any more than parents are called to submit to their children or masters to their slaves. But they are called to love sacrificially.

Third, *we cannot disassociate these verses from what precedes.* Paul here lists the results of being controlled by the Holy Spirit: speaking, singing, and submission. In other words, all that we said about the filling of the Holy Spirit (the *control* of the Spirit) applies to our relationship with our spouse. Apart from counting the cost and embracing the cross, we are only kidding ourselves if we think we can live out these principles in our marriages. What God calls the husband and wife to live out in their relationship demands supernatural power. It cannot be done apart from the control of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And the degree to which we try, apart from His supernatural strength, we will fail miserably.

When it comes to the marriage relationship, wives are to take their cue from the church and husbands are to take their cue from Christ. When they do this, the wife will be a completer not a competitor. And the husband will be a completer, not a dictator.

The Wife – Completer or Competitor

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Ephesians 5:22-24

Wives, in taking your cue from the church, you are to submit to your husband in everything as the Church submits to Christ.

Someone has said: “Submission in marriage is learning how to duck so God can hit your husband.” And that’s not far from the truth. Submission on the part of the wife is rooted first in creation order which Paul explains in greater detail in 1 Corinthians 11: God, Christ, Man, Woman. That’s why Paul adds: “submit to your husbands *as to the Lord*.” In submitting to your husband you are submitting to the Lord, because you recognize that God has built into all of creation a certain order of operation. As John Stott has put it, this is not chauvinism, but creationism.

This order of creation has absolutely nothing to do with inequality or inferiority, but everything to do with role and responsibility. In fact, the same distinction of roles exists in the Trinity. Jesus is equal to God, for he *is* God. And yet he submits to the Father’s will. One has put it this way: “Equality of worth is *not* identity of role” (J.H. Yoder).

Social psychologists have identified at least five types of “social power,” authority, or influence that people exert over others.

- *Information authority* comes from having inside information and using it to influence the thinking or behavior of others.
- *Referent authority* comes from being such an example that others naturally submit wanting to be like the one with the authority.
- *Expert authority* refers to those who influence by knowing more and being able to do something better than those under them.
- *Coercive-reward authority* that comes from the threat of punishment or the motivation of reward. But finally...
- *Positional authority* is authority that is inherent to the position.^{iv}

Why do I mention this? Because according to the Bible, only the latter – *positional authority* – belongs to the husband.^v The type of authority invested in the husband is the *only* type that does not depend on some inherent superiority on the part of the one exercising the authority. It depends *only* on the position God has given him in the overall ordering of human society. No wonder that Paul encourages wives to submit to their husbands “as to the Lord.”^{vi} Your submission, wives, has absolutely *nothing* to do with

his *person* (any superiority of your husband) and *everything* to do with the *position* God has given him in the order of creation.

We often forget that this same tension exists in many areas of our lives. Take for example the authority invested in our President. We acknowledge that authority and submit to it, including the various levels of authority all the way down to the local level. Nothing in the President's position implies that others are inferior to him. Our own Constitution states that every citizen, whether president or pauper, is equal and possesses the same inalienable rights.

Such an ordering of authority and responsibility does not enslave us, it frees us. Freedom without structured relationships doesn't exist. This past summer, I was riding bikes with my son on the Santa Fé trail in Colorado. On the side of the trail were box cars from a train wreck dating back to 1905. There they sat, for the last 100 years, going nowhere. A train is free to move forward to the extent that it stays on the tracks. And the "tracks" for the married relationship are the order of headship that God outlines for us here. *A woman is never more free to be herself than when she is living in respectful submission to her husband.*

But that raises the question: What about if my husband is an unbeliever? Or what about when my husband wants me to do things that go against God's will and my conscience? After all, Paul says "in everything." Notice that the verse says, "as to the Lord." That means two things. First, behind the husband stands the Lord. In a very real sense, God "hides" behind the husband. In submitting to the husband, a wife is submitting to the Lord. And this calls for trust. This is what Peter says: "That is the way the holy women of old made themselves beautiful. They *trusted* God and accepted the authority of their husbands" (1 Peter 3:5 NLT).

But it also means that our allegiance is *first* to the Lord. The wife submits first to Christ and then to her husband. This rules out the possibility of submitting to an ungodly husband's demands to do something contrary to Scripture. In Exodus 1:15-22 the Hebrew midwives spared the lives of Jewish children in direct disobedience to Pharaoh's edict. And in Acts 5:17-32 the apostles continued to preach the Gospel even though directed not to by the authorities. Our submission is *first* to Christ.

The Husband – Nurturer or Dictator

In fulfilling her role, the wife is a completer not a competitor. And in fulfilling his role, the husband is also a completer and not a king. Notice what Paul says in verses 25-31:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ

does the church- for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. Ephesians 5:25-31

If the wife takes her cue from the church, the husband takes his cue from Christ. A wife is to submit as the church submits to Christ. And the husband is to love as Christ loves the church.

Some husbands view themselves as lord and master of the castle. These same men see the wife as inferior and relatively unimportant. Her existence is only for the purpose of meeting the needs of her husband. All of her intellect, feelings, opinions, personality and potential as a human being are subsumed in the needs and wishes of the husband.

This is a far cry from the role defined for the husband in these verses. Paul's lengthy parenthesis in verses 26-27 paints an exemplary picture that the husband is now to "trace" into his own experience with this wife. Paul uses five verbs to unfold the various stages of Christ's love for his bride: (1) loved the church; (2) gave himself up for her; (3) make her holy; (4) cleansed her; (5) present her.

The joy of Christ will be to present to himself the Church, cleansed, holy and without blemish. That will be our moment of greatest joy as the Bride of Christ. Likewise, the joy of the husband is found in the joy of this wife. Husbands, you will never find joy and fulfillment in your marriage until your greatest joy is the joy and fulfillment of your wife. You will never be happily married to you wife until you get a divorce from yourself.

It is said that Cyrus, the founder of the Persian empire, once had captured a prince and his family. When they came before him, the monarch asked the prisoner, "What will you give me if I release you?" "The half of my wealth," was the prince's reply. "And if I release your children?" the monarch asked. "Everything I possess." "And if I release your wife?" The prince replied, "Your majesty, I would give myself." Cyrus was so moved by this man's devotion, that he freed them all. As they returned home, the prince said to this wife, "Wasn't Cyrus a handsome man?" With a look of deep love and respect for her husband, she said to him, "I didn't even notice. I could only keep my eyes on the one who was willing to give himself for me."

This is often seen in the little everyday things of life. Several years ago an article appeared in the New York Times reporting on a study done by Dr. John Gottman, professor of psychology at the University of Washington in Seattle. After years of research, he concluded that it is the mundane things of life that build love in a marriage. He calls it the "toilet-seat theory" of marriage. When a man puts a toilet seat down, it's a sign that he understands and respects his wife's needs and is taking the initiative that leads to long-term stability. In his study of over 670 couples, he concludes that only 20% of divorces are caused by an affair. "Most marriages die with a whimper," he says, "as people run away from one another, slowing growing apart."^{vii}

This love is sacrificial, supernatural. It is not about getting, but about giving. The headship of the man speaks of care, not control; of responsibility, not rule. In this spirit, the husband lovingly leads his wife according to Luke 22:26 – "Let the leader become as one who serves."

Completer and Nurturer – Uniting the Roles

The wife is to complete, not compete. The husband also completes through sacrificial love, not ruling as King. Husband and wife function together in a *symbiotic* relationship. What does this mean? *Symbiosis* is a biological term referring to two different organisms that live in close association, even union with each other and in which they mutually benefit from their proper role in that union.

Paul summarizes this in verse 33: "However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."

I am going to ask my own wife, Mary Alice, to come and join me as we share together how this has – or at times *has not* – be experienced in our own marriage.

(Testimony on tape)

Husband: Not because I am inherently wiser or better, nor because I am right (although I believe I am or I wouldn't stand firm in this decision), but because it is finally my responsibility before God...we will take the course which I believe is right. If I am being sinfully stubborn, may God show me, forgive me and give me the grace to follow your advice.

Wife: Not because I believe you are wiser in this matter (I don't!) or more righteous, nor because I accept that you are right (because I don't or I would not oppose your decision!), but because I am a servant of God who has called me to honor your headship...I willingly yield to your decision. If I am wrong, may God show me. If you are wrong, may he give you grace to acknowledge it and to change.^{viii}

ⁱ *Emerging Trends* (April 1999); based on a Gallup Poll, conducted June 22-23, 1998, of 1,016 adults. Taken from www.PreachingToday.com

ⁱⁱ Comes from two compound words *υπο* meaning "under, below" and *ταγμα* meaning "that which is ordered, ranked, or placed in rows."

ⁱⁱⁱ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles*, p. 154 as cited in a message by John Piper.

^{iv} Idea suggested by A. Duane Litfin, "A Biblical View of the Marital Roles: Seeking a Balance," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (October-December, 1976), 333-34.

^v And even here it is not without exception. According to 1 Corinthians 7:4 the wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. In fact, the actual word "authority" is used in this verse! The other types of "authority" are available to both husband and wife (except for, perhaps, "coercive-reward" authority). For example, in 1 Peter 3:1-4 the wife is encouraged to use *referent authority* to influence here unbelieving husband. And Proverbs 31, which described the wife of noble character, seems to speak to a certain degree of *expert authority*.

^{vi} A command repeated two other times in the New Testament: Colossians 3:18; 1 Peter 3:1.

^{vii} Hara Estroff Marano, “Rescuing Marriages Before They Begin,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 1997 as cited in Nelson’s Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, & Quotes by Robert J. Morgan

^{viii} Adapted from James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 151.