

Following is a sermon that explores the topic of mutual submission within the relational dynamics of marriage as presented in the Bible (Ephesians 5:21-33). We affirm this sermon as a clear and healthy reflection on this issue.

“Honour Christ and Put Others First”

Ephesians 5:21-33

Do you know what it means to come home at night to a woman who'll give you a little love, a little affection, a little tenderness? It means you're in the wrong house. - *George Burns*

My husband said he needed more space. So I locked him outside. - *Roseanne Barr*

My wife and I were happy for twenty years. Then we met. - *Rodney Dangerfield*

In olden times, sacrifices were made at the altar, a practice that still continues. - *Helen Rowland*

Building a happy marriage is a challenge in today's society, as these quotes attest. Our passage from Ephesians tackles the subject of marriage, yet the passage itself has been a source of controversy for centuries. It has been used to justify oppressive behaviour towards women. Some wives have never contributed their opinions about family matters based on this passage. Many today think these verses are out of step with current culture and that the Apostle Paul is just a male chauvinist in sheep's clothing. Does this passage reinforce male domination and female subjugation? What did this passage mean to the people it was written to? What does it mean for us today?

Let's see if we can uncover some answers as we begin with our Scripture. Many translations begin “furthermore submit to one another.” In order to help shed further light on the meaning, I'll be reading from the Contemporary English Version (CEV): “Honour Christ and put others first. A wife should put her husband first, as she does the Lord. A husband is the head of his wife, as Christ is the head and the Savior of the church, which is his own body. Wives should always put their husbands first, as the church puts Christ first. A husband should love his wife as much as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it. He made the church holy by the power of his word, and he made it pure by washing it with water. Christ did this, so that he would have a glorious and holy church, without faults or spots or wrinkles or any other flaws. In the same way, a husband should love his wife as much as he loves himself. A husband who loves his wife shows that he loves himself. None of us hate our own bodies. We provide for them and take good care of them, just as Christ does for the church, because we are each part of his body. As the Scriptures say, “A man leaves his father and mother to get married, and he becomes like one person with his wife.” This is a great mystery, but I understand it to mean Christ and his church. So each husband should love his wife as much as he loves himself, and each wife should respect her husband” (Ephesians 5:21-33).

As the first rays of the sun began to banish the shadows of night, Hannah got up from her bed. No one else stirred except the birds outside. The pleasant aroma of last evenings stew still lingered in the air, as she set about getting ready for her day. There was fresh water, and fuel to be gathered, and the daily batch of bread to be started. Along with sewing, cleaning, harvesting - and the children -- hers was a busy life. Her husband, Benjamin, was a good man. He would sometimes tease her by saying “God, I thank you that I am not a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.” Funny enough, that was the prayer so many Jewish men actually began their day with. But she knew that he cared for her. She was one of the fortunate ones, because women in her world had

few rights.

Life for many Greek wives seemed worse. The Greek speaker Demosthenes had summed it up well: "We have prostitutes for pleasure, mistresses for everyday life, and wives for the purpose of having our legitimate children, and to look after our households." Many Greek husbands got their sexual gratification with mistresses and prostitutes. And wives, often with the encouragement of their husbands, found sexual gratification with their slaves, both male and female. Sexual promiscuity and perversion took on many forms, and often the children bore the brunt of it all.

And for Roman wives, things weren't any better. Men could divorce their wives as easily as you took trash to the trash heap. Seneca said, "Women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married." In many cases, it wasn't much more than legalized prostitution. So in Hannah's world, though some things were changing, husbands had the best part of the deal and there wasn't much a wife could do about it. Men dominated; women deferred. The man in your life, whether father or husband, would teach you anything you might need to know. And he would be the one to speak for you as well. For most wives, the husband was the master of his home, the keeper of knowledge and the maker of important decisions. Your role as a woman and a wife was pretty clear.

Things for women have changed a lot since those days in Ephesus, haven't they? Women can vote, choose and discard their sexual and marriage partners, initiate divorce proceedings, choose if they want to have children, even abort them if they don't, make a living without a man's help and even become prime minister. Things unheard of in days gone by. So is Paul's advice hopelessly out of date? Is this passage an excuse to keep Christian wives in their place, even abuse them? What is meant by submit to one another as many translations read, and how does this relate to husbands and wives?

First of all, let's go back to Hannah's world. Women already deferred to men all around them. There wouldn't have been a particular need to tell them something they already knew. Instead, it may surprise us to know that Paul's words would likely have been welcomed by Hannah and other Christian wives. First of all, Paul addressed them directly as individuals in their own right, not through their husbands. Paul didn't say "husbands, make your wives submit." Contrary to culture, he spoke to women and wives directly. Secondly, the fact that Paul addressed wives directly shows he thought of them as equal partners and learners in the Christian life. They were equal recipients of truth who were able to learn and make choices for themselves. They did not need their husbands to make these choices for them. Thirdly, the fact that they weren't asked to defer or submit to all men was likely new thinking as well. To only be asked to submit specifically to one man, your husband, may have been rather refreshing. So rather than repressive, Paul's words were freeing to women in that day. Rather than being a chauvinist, he was part of "women's lib," as Jesus was.

Not only that, but husbands were being asked to submit as well. "Submit yourselves to one another" is how our passage begins. Most surprising. Christian brothers and sisters, including husbands and wives, are to submit to one another. Quite radical in a man's world. Bear with me for a bit of Greek grammar to explain. In the original Greek, verse 22 does not contain the Greek

verb “submit yourself” (hupotassomai). It is carried over from verse 21. Therefore, it seems logical that the two verses are directly connected. In this context, submitting to one another is the final evidence of being filled with the Spirit, which Paul spoke of earlier. And that is followed by specific examples of submission for wives and husbands, children and parents, and employers and employees. So where are we so far? Paul's words were revolutionary in their day. We are all called to submit to each other, and wives and husbands are given specific instructions as to what that looks like.

Secondly, what does “submit” (or hupotassomai) mean? First, it is not the word “obey” (or hupakuuo) used later for children. To submit, in this context, is to voluntarily lay aside your rights or “to place yourself at the disposition of” an equal. Let's be clear. Christ himself, though He was equal with God, submitted Himself to the Father's will for our benefit. The CEV puts it simply: “Honour Christ by putting others first.” In other words, for the sake of the Christian community, and unity, put off the old nature's me-first attitude. Think more about what's best for someone else rather than just what is best for you. What can happen when people only look out for their own individual interests?

A mouse looked through the crack in the wall to see the farmer and his wife open a package. "What food might that contain?" the mouse wondered. He was devastated to discover it was a mousetrap. Retreating to the farmyard, the mouse proclaimed the warning. "There is a mousetrap in the house! There is a mousetrap in the house!" The chicken, clucked and scratched, saying, "Mr. Mouse, I can tell this is a grave concern to you but it is of no consequence to me. I cannot be bothered by it." The pig sympathized "I am so very sorry, Mr. Mouse, but there is nothing I can do about it but pray. Be assured, you are in my prayers." The cow said, "Wow, Mr. Mouse. I'm sorry for you, but it's no skin off my nose." So, the mouse returned to the house, head down and dejected, to face the farmer's mousetrap -- alone.

That very night a sound was heard throughout the house, of a mousetrap catching its prey. The farmer's wife rushed to see what was caught. In the darkness, she did not see the venomous snake whose tail was caught in the trap. The snake bit the farmer's wife. The farmer rushed her to the hospital and later, she returned home with a fever. Now everyone knows you treat a fever with fresh chicken soup, so the farmer took his hatchet to the farmyard, for the soup's main ingredient. But his wife's sickness continued, so friends and neighbours came to sit with her round the clock. To feed them, the farmer butchered the pig. Still the farmer's wife did not get well; instead she died. So many people came for her funeral, the farmer had to slaughter the cow to provide enough meat for all of them. The mouse looked upon it all, from his crack in the wall with great, great sadness.

Whether good or bad, what affects one of us, affects all of us. This is part of the reason why one of the key themes in Ephesians is unity in Christ. Submitting means admitting “I don't know everything.” “I can learn from you.” “Let's do it your way.” “I can set aside my preferences” (e.g. for music). “Your problems are my problems.” “I will listen.” “I will help.” “I will support.” Submitting is the example Christ gave us when he left His throne on high to become a human being bound by human flesh.

So mutual submission for the benefit of unity in the community is expected of all Christians.

Does that mean being a doormat, accepting any abuse any Christian gives you? Of course not. Let's be clear. Paul admonishes us to follow God's example in everything. So there is nothing to justify a Christian man or woman practicing intentional abuse of any kind, be it verbal, physical, emotional or otherwise -- because there is a name for that kind of abuse -- it's called sin. And no one is required to accept it in the name of Christian submission. Our first submission is to Christ and we do not need to submit to something that is sinful. If as a woman or man you are being abused, please speak to someone who can help you. A pastor or counselor, and if necessary, the police.

Now what does it mean for the husband to be head of the wife? Well, let's begin with what it doesn't mean. Again we return to the Greek. Paul could have easily used the word "archon" or any of its variations meaning "ruler," as he does elsewhere. But he didn't. Or, he could have used the word "exousia" meaning "authority," but he didn't do that either. Instead he used the word "kephale" meaning "head." And though this has more than one interpretation, there is good evidence to support its meaning in this context as source or origin. As the source of the St Lawrence is the Great Lakes. This metaphor stresses the interconnectedness or unity of the head and body. A headless body or a bodyless head makes no sense. The two belong together. Woman had her origin in man. The church has its origin in Christ.. However, even if "head" is interpreted as "leader," it is primarily as one who goes "ahead" to face any danger and lead the way. For example, in the movies when there is a noise downstairs, it's never the wife who has to go down to see what it is; it is always the poor husband who has to go first. Additionally, it would not be very difficult for a wife to encourage her man by submitting to him as spiritual leader, if he is striving to match the description that follows in Ephesians. Or as Doctor and former Pastor Emerson Eggerichs puts it, to "give husbands 51% of the responsibility therefore 51% of the authority."

What is Paul's counsel to Christian husbands? Unfortunately it all too often gets overlooked in discussions about submission. His main point is this: Husbands love your wives. Husbands love your wives. Husbands love your wives. He emphasizes it three times and takes nine verses to explain it, as opposed to four verses related to wives. The Greeks had several words for love. This is not "eros" or sexual love. Nor is it "phileo," the affectionate love between family and friends. Paul says husbands "agape" your wives. This love is the same unconditional, self-giving, self-sacrificing love Christ has for the Church. This is the example that husbands are called to follow. Christ does not "crush the Church." Christ does everything to make the Church all it can be. And a husband is called to do the same. The Message puts it this way: "Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church—a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness." Husbands giving themselves in sacrificial love for the benefit and growth of their wives, giving their very lives for them if need be. Being a wife in this case, is beginning to look pretty good!

In a mysterious way, as Paul says, Christian marriage is meant to be a living representation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church submits to Jesus Christ who loves the church and gives it everything to make it beautiful. In the same way, a wife submits herself to love! As John Stott puts it □ "Submission is something quite different from obedience. It is voluntary self-giving to

a lover whose responsibility is defined in terms of constructive care; it is love's response to love.” Again, counter-cultural to the culture of the day where very little was said about love in relation to marriage. And even if the culture you've grown up in today advocates male domination over women, make no mistake, that is clearly against the Bible's teaching. Today, as in Paul's day, Scripture takes first place over culture or tradition.

Paul summarizes the responsibilities of submission in the final verse of this section: “So each husband should love his wife as much as he loves himself, and each wife should respect her husband.” Do any of you recall Aretha Franklin's great female anthem “Respect?” Would you be surprised to learn, as I was, that it was actually written by a man? It was Otis Redding who first wrote and sang “What you want, honey you got it, what you need, baby you've got it. All I'm asking for is a little respect... It's what I want from you. Respect is what I need.” Comedian Rodney Dangerfield always complained “I don't get no respect,” often in reference to his wife. Could it be that these men tapped into something Scripture identified long ago? That husbands have a deep need to know that their wives respect them? And does Scripture speak to wives about a specific need deep within them, to know they are deeply loved by their husbands? That's the main premise of a book called “Love and Respect” by Dr. Emerson Eggerichs. “Men and women have vastly different emotional needs: men need to feel respected in order to give love, while women need to feel loved in order to give respect.” Doesn't a husband need love, or a wife need respect? Of course they do. It is like our need for food and water. We need both but can live longer without one. Now I haven't read the entire book, but here's some food for thought for husbands and wives to consider:

He suggests that the best way for husbands to motivate and encourage their wives is by meeting her need for love. “Never tell a wife she must earn your love in order for you to love her inner spirit created in God's image.” Conversely, the best way to motivate and encourage your husband is by meeting his need for respect. “Never tell a husband he must earn your respect in order for you to respect his inner spirit created in God's image.” So to move discussions along when you have a disagreement that is hurtful, a husband could say “That felt disrespectful. Did I come across as unloving?” Or the wife could say “That felt unloving. Did I come across as disrespectful?” If the answer is yes, ask forgiveness and really listen as to how you can be more loving or more respectful.

There are many tools, books and seminars that you could use to help improve your marriage. Perhaps the best thing you can do is communicate clearly and lovingly what it is that you need or want from your spouse, rather than leaving them guessing. But before you do that, I challenge you to let your wife know this week some of the specific reasons why you love and appreciate her. And let your husbands know some of the reasons why you respect and appreciate him. And then talk and pray together about your marriage, and the positive things you can build on, as well as the things you can change. And determine to take positive steps forward with God's help.

Eggerichs tells the following story. “One of the finest examples of a loyal husband I have found is the story of Robertson McQuilkin, who left his position as president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary after twenty-two years because his wife had developed Alzheimer's disease. The disease had progressed to the point where his wife simply could not stand having him gone, even for a few hours. It was clear to McQuilkin that his wife now needed him full

time. His decision was difficult, but in a way it was simple. He said, 'The decision was made in a way forty-two years ago when I promised to care for Muriel in sickness and in health 'til death do us part.' He went on to say that he wanted to be a man of his word, and he also wanted to be fair. His wife had cared for him sacrificially during all of those forty-two years, and if he cared for her for the next forty-two years, he still would not be out of her debt.

And there was more to it than just keeping a promise and being fair. 'As I watch her brave descent into oblivion, Muriel is the joy of my life,' he said. 'Daily I discern new manifestations of the kind of person she is; the wife I always loved.' Mcquilkin wrote a book about his experience, *A Promise Kept*, and in it he mentioned how startled he was by the response to his resignation as president...to care for his wife. Husbands and wives renewed wedding vows. Pastors told his story during sermons. It was all a mystery to him until a distinguished oncologist, who dealt constantly with dying people, told him, 'Almost all women stand by their men; very few men stand by their women.'" And we are very blessed in this church to have remarkable examples of this kind of love and faithfulness. Men who have faithfully and sacrificially loved and cared for their wives no matter what the circumstances. Men who walk a different path than most men do, and in the process are examples of the Christlike commitment, submission and love this passage calls for.

As I thought about this passage, it really asks us to put aside our me-first attitudes. That's why I think the Contemporary English Version sums it up so well. Brothers and sisters, let us honour Christ by putting others first. Husbands and wives, glorify Christ by putting each other first and building a marriage that reflects the love and commitment of Christ and the church.

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