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PAUL'S RADICAL VISION FOR THE FAMILY

John E. Toews

*“Paul
addresses
the critical
marriage/
family
issues...”*

The status and nature of the family was a much discussed subject in the ancient world, as in our own. The viability and structure of the family was shaped profoundly by the view of women and men in society and the home.

First Century Family

Women in Greco-Roman and Jewish society were generally viewed as inferior to men. They were closer to animals than to men. Women were a sneaky trick of the gods to get men into trouble. Women, in short, were held in low esteem.

The consequences of this ideology, with some qualifications from a minority of writers, were enormous. 1) Men were preferred as sexual partners to women — a low view of women was the ideological basis for a widespread preference for homosexuality in the ancient world. 2) Philosophers debated the desirability of marriage. Many argued that marriage was incompatible with wisdom and civic duty. 3) Men dominated, ruled over women in marriage and in the household. Abuse of

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wives was a common practice. In fact, wife abuse was such a problem that in the early first century A.D., the Emperor Augustus devised a system called "marriage without hand" (*sine manu*) to protect women from husband abuse. The law provided that the woman and her dowry remained under the jurisdiction of her father's family. A woman could be taken back by her family and married to another man if the husband mistreated her too severely. The law was intended to reduce the divorce rate and stabilize family life, but in fact only contributed to further instability in marriage. An historian of the first century claimed that "the only enduring relationship a married woman had was the one with her blood relatives," not her husband. 4) Marriage instructions were directed almost exclusively to the wife. She is to defer to the wishes of her husband, to worship his gods, to have no friends of her own, to understand and forgive his sexual relations with courtesans and men.

Paul's Alternative

Paul addresses the critical marriage/family issues of his time in his marriage instructions in I Thessalonians 4.3-8, 1 Corinthians 7, Ephesians 5.21-33, Colossians 3.18-19. When Paul instructs men to abstain from sexual immorality, to know how to obtain his own wife, to not transgress against a brother by defrauding him in sexual relations, to engage in sexual relations only with one's wife and to do so regularly, he is addressing critical moral issues in first century culture. Paul's instructions outline a radical alternative vision for marriage and family.

The focus of this study is on one of those instructions, Ephesians 5.21-33.

The Language of Ephesians 5:21-33

The two critical terms in the text are "headship" and "submission." "Headship" (*kephale*) has two meanings. First, it is a biological term; as such it denotes source or origin. Secondly, it is a political word; as such it means authority or leader. It can mean either, and is used both ways. Therefore, the meaning of the word in any given text is determined by the context. Most scholars agree that in 1 Corinthians 11 "headship" means "source" or "origin." The creation account states

that woman was created from man, man was born from woman. Man as the head of woman means he is the source of her life just as she is the source of his life. Headship in 1 Corinthians 11 is not a power term, but a word denoting origin or source.

The context in Ephesians must also determine the meaning of headship. The term is used in three texts. 1) In 1:22 Christ is made the head of all things for the church. Christ is made the prime minister of the cosmos for the church (to sit at the right hand means to be made the prime minister in the ancient world). Headship is a power or authority term here. 2) Christians grow into Christ as the head (4:15). Christ as the prime minister expresses his kingship in the world by distributing gifts. Headship again is leader language. 3) In 5:23 the husband is defined as the head of the wife. "Traditional" interpreters read "head" as a power term here. "Liberationist" interpreters read it as source language. I see it is a political word that means power or authority because of its other uses in Ephesians. The meaning of this power language, however, is radically re-defined by the example of Christ, a point that is missed if headship is defined as source.

The word "submission" (*hypotasso*) is a military term that means to attach one person or thing to the right unit and to order or arrange properly. Troops that are properly committed and "lined up" are said to be "in submission." They are attached to the right unit and ready to function as a unit in battle. Similarly, a husband and wife mutually submitted to each other are properly committed and lined up, ready to function as a family unit. A wife who is committed to her husband and properly ordered is ready to function as a unit with her husband.

The Literary Context of Ephesians 5:21-33

Ephesians 4:17-6:9 exhorts Christians to live in contrast to the lifestyle of the world. Paul warns against a relapse into pagan conduct. To help the church Paul outlines the ethical standards that are to characterize the church. The point is that there are two distinct peoples living in the world, each with its own ethic. Ephesians 5:21-6:9 discusses the meaning of this Christian ethic for household relationships. The husband-wife relationship is the first addressed in 5:21-33. The question is whether Messiah Jesus and the community of the church in

any way influence the lives of men and women at their most intimate and critical point.

Structure of Ephesians 5:21-31

The text begins and ends with a concern for reverence and respect. V. 21 asks the husband and wife to show reverence for Christ; v. 33 the wife to show reverence for her husband. This is a literary technique which says that the passage is concerned with issues of reverence and respect. The second mention of respect for the husband is clearly dependent on the first, respect for Christ. The point of 5:21-33 is reverence and respect in the household.

Secondly, the text begins and ends with exhortations supported by a single motivation — Christ. Reverence for Christ is the motivation for mutual submission (v. 21). Christ's headship of the church is the standard of the wife's submission to her husband (vv. 22-24). The Messiah's love is the ground and measure of the husband's love for his wife (v. 25a). The unity of Christ with his body is the basis for the husband's love of his wife as himself (vv. 28-30). Paul says nothing about the relationship of the two partners in marriage unless he can show a messianic and churchly basis. Paul's intention is to show that Christ and the church give husband and wife the basis and example to live in that peace to which God has called them.

Thirdly, it is important to note that Paul directs commands only to the husband, not to the wife. The only true commands appear in vv. 25 and 33; the husband is commanded to love the wife. The wife is not commanded to submit to the husband; she is invited to do so.

V. 21 - Mutual Commitment/Submission

The passage is introduced by an exhortation to mutual commitment and subordination. Literally the sentence begins, "being continuously committed/subordinate." Paul's concern is that the wife and husband be properly committed and ordered. The translation of "being continuously subordinate" as a command to "be submissive" is alien to the sense and intent of the verb. Paul is calling husbands and wives to be committed exclusively to each other and to be ordered properly to each other. It appeals to free and responsible people to heed voluntarily.

The object of the verbal phrase "being committed/subor-

inate” is the phrase “to one another”. The “commitment/ordering under” is to be in relationship to one another. “Being committed/subordinate” does not refer to the ordering of an inferior to a superior but an ordering of relationships between equals.

The context for this mutual ordering is “in the reverence of Christ,” literally, “in the fear of Christ.” This is the only use of the phrase “in the fear of Christ” in the New Testament. It carries the Old Testament sense of the “fear of God.” God is feared when he reveals himself in mighty deeds of salvation for his people. Their appropriate reaction is awe before his majesty, rejoicing over his victory, and fear before his mighty power. In Deuteronomy “the fear of the Lord” and “love” are used as synonyms. Both the fear of God and the love of God mean to adhere to God faithfully. Husbands and wives are exhorted to voluntarily commit/subordinate themselves to each other out of faithfulness to Christ.

The point of the text is silenced whenever the dominating position of the request to “be continuously committed/subordinate to one another” over the entire unit is neglected. The issue is not ordering by rank but the mutual commitment/ordering of equals in intimate relationship with Christ and each other in a marriage relationship.

Vv. 22-24 - The Commitment/Subordination of the Wife

V. 22 does not have a verb; it reads literally “the wives to their own husbands as to the Lord.” The phrase is dependent on the “being committed/subordinate” verb of v. 21. The first example of mutual commitment/subordination is the wife. The wife is asked to voluntarily commit/subordinate herself to her husband within the framework of mutual subordination. She is treated as a person responsible for her own ethical decisions and is called to take a stance. This is a very revolutionary development in ancient ethics. Wives generally were not recognized as ethical decision-makers independent of their husbands, but as subordinates to be commanded to action by their husbands without the involvement of their will.

The object of the women’s commitment/subordination is not men in general, but “their own husbands.” V. 22 does not say that women are inferior to men. Paul is announcing a drastic restriction of women’s commitment/subordination; it

is due only to "their own husbands" just as the husband's marital love is due only to his wife (vv. 25, 28, 33). Furthermore, Paul does not use the word "obey" or "serve" to describe the wife's relationship to her husband, but "commitment/ordering under." She is a person who stands on the same level with her husband and is able to make her own decisions.

The motivation for the wife's mutual commitment/subordination is "as to the Lord." A wife's commitment to order herself under her husband should be of the same quality as her commitment to Christ. The parallel text in Colossians 3.18 makes this even more explicit: "wives, be committed/subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord." Paul does not refer to nature, to general standards of decency, to the law, or to the fall for the ground of his exhortation. Only Jesus is the source, standard, and motivation for a wife's "commitment/ordering under."

V. 23 provides the rationale for the wife's commitment/submission. It is rooted in redemption, in Christ as the head of the church. The husband is the head of the wife, meaning the head as leader or authority. But, he is the head "as Christ." Christ is the model of headship; he the measure and the limit of the husband's headship. Thus, a very qualified headship is attributed to the husband. Christ is made the head of the church "for the church" (1:22) and as the Savior of the church (v. 23). He proves himself the head by saving. The Christ-church relation is the model of the husband's headship.

V. 24 reverses the role-model example. The church-Christ relation is the model of the wife's subordination. Just as the church chooses to "order itself under" Christ, so the wife chooses to be committed/subordinate to her husband.

The nature of mutual commitment/subordination for the wife is startling. Wives are not commanded to obey their husbands or to submit to the authority of their husbands. Wives are not ordered to "be subordinate" to men or to their own husbands. Wives are invited to choose subordination. Furthermore, the call to subordination is qualified at least three times: (1) the opening call for mutual commitment/subordination; (2) the limitation of subordination to "her own" husband; (3) the definition of the wife's subordination in terms of the church's subordination to Christ.

*Vv. 25-33 - The Commitment/Subordination
of the Husband*

V. 25 defines the meaning of mutual commitment/subordination for the husband with an imperative. The only commands in the passage are to the husband, not to the wife. The husband is commanded to love the wife. Love is defined by Christ's giving up of self for the good of the church. Jesus alone is the criterion of marital love as mutual commitment/subordination. Love is not defined by a principle, but by the person of Jesus. And it is not Jesus' power, lordship, or authority that is upheld as the model, but his humility and servanthood. Headship language is turned on its head. Power is redefined as love and self-giving, not as exercising authority over another person.

The metaphor changes to the groom/bridegroom relationship in v. 27. The bridegroom's love has the will and power to confer a dignity and wholeness which the bride does not possess on her own.

V. 28 translates literally as "in the same manner also husbands owe it to love their wives for they are their bodies." The "also" before "husbands" makes it clear that the "in the same manner" at the beginning of v. 28 refers to the love of Christ described in vv. 25-27, not to love of self. Only if the "and" were placed before "bodies" would this verse affirm that husbands must love their wives "as" (or "because") they "love also their bodies." The husband's love is compared with Christ's love (as in v. 25), not a man's natural love of his own body. Only after the husband's love has been compared with Christ's love does Paul describe the effect of such love on the wife. She is her loving husband's body. Mutual commitment/subordination for the husband means loving the wife so that the two become so intimately one that he can call her "his body;" and call his love for her, love for his body.

The logic of the husband's loving his wife is important. The movement is not from love of self to love of wife to love of Christ. Rather, it is from the love shown by Christ, to the love shown for the wife to the love of the husband for himself. This way of thinking about marriage was radical in Paul's day, as it is in the twentieth century.

Vv. 29-30 explain v. 28 further, "for no one ever has hated his own flesh." No husband hates his wife, for she is his body.

Rather, he continuously nurtures and cares for her (notice the shift from past to continuous present tense). For the third time in this passage (vv. 23 and 25) the phrase "just as the Messiah" is found in the second half of a statement. Christ is the basis for and model of the behavior expected of the husband. When Christ's care for the church is the model for the husband, he will care for his wife and hatred will have no place. What the church experiences from Christ is what the wife should expect from her husband. Nothing is asked of the husband that has not first been realized in the church.

V. 31 quotes Genesis 2:24, now applied to the Christ-church model of vv. 29b-30. The phrase "for this reason," which in Genesis 2 referred to the creation of Eve out of Adam, now refers to the Christ-church relationship described in vv. 25-30. Christ's salvation of the church fulfills all that was said of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2. The miracle of union of husband and wife predicted in Genesis 2 has occurred in the Christ-church relationship. The concept is so revolutionary that Paul calls it a "mystery," an end-time secret previously hidden but now revealed. Earlier in Ephesians Paul writes that the mystery concerns the incorporation of Gentiles into God's people. Christ's relation to the church, which includes the incorporation of diverse peoples, is the model of the marriage relationship. Mutual submission pertains to the very nature of Christ and his relationship to the church in all its diversity.

What is implied by the application of the Christ-church relationship to marriage in vv. 28-32 is made explicit in v. 33, "in sum, one by one, each one of you must love his wife as himself." The strong command, "must love", the emphatic inclusion of "every one", and the address to husbands before the wives distinguish v. 33 from vv. 22-25, where the wives were exhorted first. The sharpness of Paul's address to the husbands in comparison with the soft manner of encouraging the wives indicates that Paul considers the men more reluctant to show love for their wives than for the wives to subordinate themselves to their husbands. "And the wife in order that she may reverence the husband" is a hesitant statement compared with the direct words to the husband. Paul seems to say that "I expect that the wife will be enabled to reverence her husband, but I do not command it."

Reflections

Ephesians 5:21-33 concerns family order. Paul's concern for family order is directed more to the husband than to the wife. The demands on the husband are significantly heavier than on the wife. The wife is asked to order herself appropriately as an ethical agent in a relationship of equals. Only forty words in three verses are addressed to her. Furthermore, the wife is not ordered to submit to "the order of marriage." Paul has no theology of orders. The only order for Paul is the Christ-centered one. The Christ-church relation is Paul's substitute for the law of marriage. The call for submission is a limited one, to the husband only. The woman is not an inferior person who must submit to all men.

Furthermore, the woman is like the man. She is his flesh, his body. As the creation story asserts, she is bone of his bone, she and he are one. Paul rejects the dominant ancient view of woman as inferior, and presents her as man's equal. Therefore, Paul affirms heterosexuality. The husband is exhorted to be committed to one person, his wife as his body, not some other men or other women.

The husband is commanded to love. Ninety-two words in eight verses are addressed to him. Paul commands him to love three times: vv. 25a, 28, 33. Love and love alone is the husband's critical obligation to his wife. Further, Paul does not leave it to the husband's imagination to define love. The example of Christ defines the nature of love. Headship and power language are redefined in the most radical terms. ~~To be the head is to love and to give up self for the sake of the other, the wife.~~ Ephesians 5:21-33 is a profound and radical family order text.

Headship language here and in 1 Corinthians 11 cannot be used to argue that women are inferior or that women must submit to male church leadership. Headship language concerns the husband-wife relationship, not the woman-man church leader relationship.

In my experience the church has used the Ephesians 5:21-33 text to exhort women to be subordinate to their husbands and to men in the church. I suggest that we have misinterpreted the text. Paul wrote the text to exhort men to love their wives. Paul saw men as the problem, not women. We would do well to let Paul's vision for men and husbands correct our

distortions. The family crisis of our time, as I see it, is fundamentally a crisis of the male ego and role as husband, first of all, and then father.

Paul's vision for the family was radical in the first century. It is no less radical in our time.

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