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Author(s): Toews, John E.

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THE HUSBAND IS THE HEAD OF THE WIFE

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John E. Toews

The Husband and Wife Relation: Ephesians 5:21-33

Several passages were read rather regularly in family devotions. Ephesians 5:21-33 was one of them. As the boys in the family grew older they recognized that the marital model of their parents was a democratic one. They began to wonder what happened when their parents could not reach consensus. Finally one of the boys asked the parents. "Well," the mother replied, "I don't recall that the issue has ever really come up." "Oh yes it has," the father said. "You remember the time we couldn't agree and I had to break the tie?"

The father explained to the boys how these things work among well-married Christian people. The normal rhythm of marriage, he observed, is one of full equality and mutual submission. "We submit to each other; it's a sign that we have the Spirit of Christ." In some areas

the husband submits to the wife's superiority of judgment and expertise, and in others she submits to his. Neither worries that the other will take advantage.

But then one day a real disagreement arises. Each tries to submit to the other. So the husband says, "Dear, we'll do it your way." "Oh no," she responds, "you're right and we'll follow your lead." They are deadlocked. Finally, the husband stands up to his full height, and says. "Look, for once in our marriage I'm going to have to invoke the headship principle and break the tie. You are right, we're going to do it your way, and I don't want to hear another word about it."

"That's the kind of tie I had to break once," the father concluded.

Why a study of Ephesians 5:21-33 in a book on women in ministry? The text concerns the relationship between husband and wife in the family. It does not speak to questions of church leadership.

This passage is studied for two reasons. First, it says the husband is the head of the wife. This "headship" language is often read to mean that women are inferior and subservient. And this interpretation then has been applied to women in the church; women are to be subordinate to men in the church. Secondly, evangelicals are divided on how to understand this text. Does the text advocate equal or unequal relationships in marriage?

TWO VIEWS

View One: Women Are to Be Subordinate

Evangelical theologians S.B. Clark and J.B. Hurley state that this text teaches hierarchical relationships. Its focus is the order between husband and wife. The

wife is to submit to her husband. The text does not teach mutual submission, they argue. Only one person is exhorted to subordination, and that person is the wife. The phrase “to one another” means to the superior person and not mutually. This subordination involves the obedience of the wife to the husband “in everything,” meaning in every area of the wife's life. The purpose of her subordination is unity in the family, as between Christ and the church.

The wife's exhortation to submission is framed by “because you fear Christ” (v. 21) and “as to the Lord” (v. 22). The teaching is not based on human authority, but has the authority of the Lord. “The fear of Christ” corresponds to the “fear of God” in the Old Testament. It is a fear that produces obedience and an attitude of submission. The wife's relation to Christ shapes her subordination to her husband. She should act toward her husband as she would to Christ. The husband has authority over his wife because Christ delegated it. When the wife submits to her husband, she is obeying Christ.

The husband is exhorted to love his wife with a “service-love” like Christ has for the church. This love makes her subordination easier.

The exhortation to submission is grounded in the head/body relationship. The husband is the head of the wife. “Headship” means a governing and representative function. The wife must be completely under the authority of her husband.

View Two: Mutual Submission

Wheaton College's Gilbert Bilezikian offers a quite different interpretation. The point of the text is mutual submission. Submission is defined by “to one another.” The qualification rules out hierarchical relations, for to

be “subject to one another” is only possible among equals. Subjection is a vertical relation between ruler and subject, but mutual submission is a horizontal relation between equals.

The instruction to the wife is introduced by the exhortation to mutual submission in verse 21. Verse 22 does not have a verb, and so is nonsensical if the meaning of verse 21 does not control it. The entire passage concludes with a quotation from Genesis 2:24 (vv. 31-32), which speaks about the husband and wife becoming one flesh. Furthermore, because Christ is the model of mutual submission, “as to the Lord” means the wife is to commit herself to her husband in the same way she commits herself to Christ. Her devotion and loving service to Christ and to her husband have the same quality.

“Headship” in this interpretation means source, not ruler. The husband is the source of the wife's life, not her ruler. Therefore, the wife is never commanded to obey the husband, and the husband is never commanded to exercise authority over his wife.

The husband is to love the wife. The demands on the husband are more stringent and exhaustive than on the wife. It is impossible to love without submitting. The nature of the husband's loving submission is defined by the example of Christ as servant on the cross.

Is a Resolution Possible?

The two interpretations highlight the issue. What is the meaning of “headship” and “submission” language? Does the text teach that husbands are over their wives or that both are equal? Are wives to submit to husbands, or are wives and husbands mutually submissive to each other?

THE LANGUAGE OF EPHESIANS 5:21-33

The two critical terms in the text are “headship” and “submission.” “Headship” (*kephale*) has two possible meanings. First, as a biological term, it denotes source or origin. Secondly, as a political word it means authority or leader. It can mean either. 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” (see Ch. 8). 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 descriptive word denoting origin or source.

The context in Ephesians must also determine the meaning of headship. The term is used in three texts: 1:22, 4:15 and 5:23. In 1:22 Christ is made the head of all things for the church. Christ is made the prime minister (to sit at the right hand means to be made the prime minister in the ancient world) of the cosmos for the church. Headship is a power or authority term here. Christians grow into Christ as the head (4:15). Christ as the prime minister expresses his rule in the world by distributing gifts. Church leaders are to enable the many and different gifts to function in unity. The purpose is to build up the body of Christ to the fullness of Christ. Headship again is leader language, and thus a power term. In 5:23 the husband is defined as the head of the wife. Most “traditional” interpreters read “head” as a power term here. “Liberationist” interpreters read it as source language. I see it as 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 order or arrange properly. It is concerned with the right “lining up” or alignment of troops for battle. Troops that are properly “lined up” or “ordered” are said to be “in submission.” They are ready to function as a unit in battle. Similarly, a wife who submits is lined up, 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. The church is to show a striking unlikeness to immoral paganism. To help the church achieve this goal, Paul outlines the ethical standards that are to characterize the church. The first section, 4:17—5:20, describes the difference between Christianity and paganism: truth/falsehood, light/darkness, saintliness/immorality, wisdom/folly, spirit/devil, etc. The point is that there are two distinct peoples living in the world, each with its own ethic. The church is to walk in the truth, light, wisdom and spirit of Christ. Ephesians 5:21—6:9 discusses the meaning of the Christian walk 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 in their most intimate and critical relationship.

STRUCTURE OF EPHESIANS 5:21-31

The text begins and ends with a concern for reverence and respect. Verse 21 asks wives to show reverence for Christ; verse 33 to show reverence for their husbands. 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. So 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. The peace between human and human, and between God and human, which Paul described in Chapter 2, shall be extended to the conduct of husband and wife.

Thirdly, it is important to note that Paul directs commands only to husbands, not to wives. The only true commands appear in verses 25 and 33; husbands are commanded to love their wives. Wives are not commanded to submit to their husbands; they are invited to do so.

Verse 21 — Mutual Submission

The passage is introduced by an exhortation to mutual subordination. Literally the sentence begins, “being continuously subordinate.” Paul’s concern is that wives and husbands be properly ordered, that they be mutually “ordering under.” The translation of “being continuously subordinate” as a command to “be submissive” is alien to the sense and intent of the verb. It appeals to free and responsible people to heed voluntarily, not by the breaking of the will.

The object of the verbal phrase “being subordinate” is the phrase “to one another.” The “ordering under” is to be in relationship to one another. “Being subordinate” does not refer to the ordering of an inferior to a superior, which is the normal use of the word, 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 revealed in mighty deeds of salvation for Israel. Their appropriate reaction is awe before majesty, rejoicing over victory, and fear before 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 live faithfully according to God’s covenant and law. Husbands and wives are exhorted to subordinate themselves voluntarily to each other out of a profound sense of faithfulness to Christ.

The point of the text is silenced whenever the dominating position of the request to “be continuously subordinate to one another” over the entire unit is neglected. The issue is not ordering by rank but the

mutual ordering of equals in intimate relationship with Christ and each other in a marriage relationship.

Verses 22-24 — The Mutual Subordination of the Wife

Verse 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 subordinate” verb of verse 21. The first example of mutual subordination is the wife. The wife is asked to subordinate herself voluntarily 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 subordination is not men in general, but “their own husbands.” Verse 22 does not say that women are inferior to men. Paul is discussing only the special relationship between husband and wife. Paul is announcing a drastic restriction of women's 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 “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 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 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 "ordering under." That also means that Jesus is the limit and reward of a positive decision to be mutually subordinate.

Verse 23 provides the rationale for the wife's 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 the husband is not the absolute authority over the wife. He is the head "as Christ." Christ is the original model of headship. Christ is the model, the measure, and the limit of the husband's headship over the wife. 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.

Verse 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 subordinate to her husband.

The nature of mutual 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 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.

Verses 25-33 — The Mutual Subordination of the Husband

Verse 25 defines the meaning of mutual subordination for husbands with an imperative. The only commands in the passage are to husbands, not to wives. The husband is commanded to love the wife. Mutual subordination for him is defined as loving the wife. Love is defined by Christ’s giving up of self for the good of the church. Jesus alone is the origin and the criterion of marital love as mutual subordination. Love is not defined by a principle, but by the person of the Messiah. Husbands are exhorted to give themselves up for their wives. When Christ is upheld as the model for husbands, it is not his power, lordship, or authority which is presented, 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 head/body metaphor is changed to the groom/bride relationship in verse 27. The bridegroom’s love has the will and power to effect a total transformation. He confers a dignity and wholeness on the bride which she does not possess on her own.

Verse 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 “so” or “in the same manner” at the beginning of verse 28 refers to the love of Christ described in verses 25-27, not to love of self. The husband’s love is compared with Christ’s love (as in v. 25), not with 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 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.

Furthermore, the logic of the husband's love for his wife is very important. The movement is not from love of self to love of one's 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 manner of reasoning about marriage was radical in Paul's day, as it is in the twentieth century.

Verses 29-30 explain verse 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 (notice the shift from past to continuous present tense) for her. 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. It attributes to Christ the basis for and model of the behavior expected of husbands. When Christ's care for the church is the model for husbands, they will care for their wives and hatred will have no place. What the church experiences from Christ is what wives should expect from their husbands. Nothing is asked of husbands that has not first been realized in the church.

Verse 31 quotes Genesis 2:24, now applied to the Christ/church model of verses 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 verses 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 original 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 verses 28-32 is made explicit in verse 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 verse 33 from verses 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 by his behavior toward her, but I do not command it."

REFLECTIONS

Ephesians 5:21-33 concerns family order, not church order. This text cannot be used to argue for the submission of women in the church. The text says nothing about church order.

Paul's concern for family order is directed more to husbands than to wives. The demands on husbands are significantly heavier than on wives. Wives are asked to order themselves appropriately as ethical agents in a relationship of equals. Only forty words in three verses are addressed to wives. Furthermore, wives are 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. Women are not inferior persons who must submit to all men.

Husbands are commanded to love. Ninety-two words in eight verses are addressed to them. Paul commands husbands to love three times: verses 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 is 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 leadership. Headship language concerns the husband/wife relationship, not the woman/man relationship in church leadership.

Furthermore, in the upside down world of Christ's kingdom, headship means taking the lead in self-sacrifice. The hostility of the fall has been overcome. There is a new creation order and community, the model

of Christ and the body of the church. All things are made new in the new creation.

The problem in Ephesians 5:21-33 is not women, but men. The modern church would do well to let Paul's vision for men and husbands correct our distortions. To take Ephesians 5 seriously would certainly address the family crisis of our time, and the problem of abuse of women in the home and in the church. The church would do well to use Ephesians 5 as Paul intended it, to call men to change.

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