

Session 10 - The Relationship of Husbands and Wives in Christ

(Eph. 5:21-33, Col. 3:18, 19, I Pet. 3:1-7)

“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.”

Ephesians 5:22, 23

- I. Ephesians 5:21 – 33 and the relationship between husbands and wives.
 - A. This passage is not primarily about wives and their husbands but rather about the relationship between Christ and the church. The key verse is 5:21, “submit to one another out of reverence to Christ.” The spirit of mutual submission is key to the entire Christian concept of social relations.
 - B. Paul clearly has the traditional (patriarchal) family order as a backdrop. It is not clear. Whether this is a divine order or whether this is an order derived from the prevailing culture of the time is the source of debate regarding this passage. It should be noted that the common interpretation of this passage through the ages is that of a divine order, not a cultural tradition.
 - C. This passage appears to describe the relationship of husbands and wives in the Lord (5:21). Other passages describe the relationship when the husband is not in the Lord (I Corinthians 7:13, 14; I Peter 3:1, 2).
 - D. The debate derives in part from the interpretation of the Greek words for submission (*hypotasso*), for head (*kephale*) and for love (*agape*). We will explore this passage in light of differing interpretation of these words.
 - E. The verb *hypotasso* means “to subordinate”, “to subject” or to “to place in order”.
 1. Other words could have been used for subjection. One is *hypakouo*, the word that a parent might use regarding a child (the word Paul uses in Ephesians 6:1). Another is *peitharcheo* (built on the Greek word for ruler – *arche*), means obedience to one in authority (Titus 3:1).
 2. Paul, rather, uses the word *hypotasso* and he uses it in the passive form. In other words, husbands are not to *hypotasso* their wives.
 3. In addition, Paul is instructing wives, not describing them (in other words, they are not by nature from this passage “subjects”. Subjection was voluntary.
 4. Paul probably means that wives are to voluntarily, willingly and actively be subject to (give allegiance to or even tend to the needs of) their husbands.
 5. *Hypotasso* is a discipline as well as a duty, a Christian discipline. Perhaps it is a duty which especially disciplines the Christian wife, just as Paul instructs the slave to voluntarily accept his position of subordination. In other words, submission was a discipline to train the Christian to be

submissive to Christ. On this view, culture will be used in the service of Christian discipline yet culture cannot totally equate with submission to Christ. (In Roman 13:1, we are commanded to submit [same word] to secular authorities which, though established by God, are not necessarily good authorities and which eventually may be overthrown. Even as we submit to our present government, we do not place ourselves in situations which can be obviously harmful to us if possible. We recognize that governments can be fallible. At the same time, we don't desire complete control over government. In contrast, we completely submit ourselves to Christ.)

6. On the other hand, if one accepts a created order in which man (in this case the husband) is the head over the woman (in this case the wife), then this passage naturally follows as a further elaboration of the need to maintain the divinely created order: Christ --- man --- woman. (In Ephesians 1:22, *hypotasso* is also used to signify an order divinely instituted. We would not question the relationship between God and Christ. It was established once and for all.)
- F. The Greek word *kephale* means head or that which goes first (like the prow of a ship or the mouth of a river). It also meant the head of the body, that is, the part of the body which is foremost
1. Other words could be used for head. One is *arche* (from which we get our word archetype). It means "temporal beginning" or "primeval". The word is frequently used in the New Testament to indicate "from the beginning" (Hebrews 1:10) or "in the beginning" (John 1:1). Frequently the word is used to signify dominion or power (Luke 12:11).
 2. Some has therefore suggested that, if Paul had meant for husbands to command their wives (as did Aristotle), he would have used the word *arche* rather than *kephale*. Rather Paul meant for the husband to be the one who goes before, such as the soldier who goes first into battle.
 3. For those who support the idea of male spiritual leadership based upon the created order, however, this distinction of words does not damage their argument. Man would be "first in creation", "first in headship" and "first in spiritual responsibility".
 4. Those who support a more equal relationship between sexes would suggest that *kephale* does not denote a "general" in an army or a "boss". Rather *kephale* suggests the one who went before (perhaps as a scout goes before the Calvary).
- G. The Greek word for love is *agapao* as opposed to *erao* or eros (sexual desire) and *phileo* (feelings of fondness, such as for a friend). *Agapao* was an almost uniquely Christian word (I Corinthians 13). This word does not involve emotion as attitude and action. These distinctions are well known by Christians.
- H. The more traditional interpretation is an interpretation which derives from male spiritual leadership grounded in the created spiritual order. Christ has made in the marriage relationship the symbol of His relation to the church.
1. Family life is lifted into a divine and spiritual light in Christ.

2. Affirmation of the role relationship God established at creation grounds specific instruction to husbands and wives (the divinely form instituted [5:22 – 24] precedes talk about how to live within it [5:25 – 31]).
 3. The wife submits to the spiritual head of the family, that is she voluntarily yields in love. (The husband is never commanded to subordinate nor to subject his wife.) The husband, rather, exercises his divine authority as spiritual leader.
 - a. The husband's love, like the love of Christ, is to be sacrificial (5:25).
 - b. The husband's love, like the love of Christ, is to be beneficial (5:26, 27).
 - c. The husband's love is to be according to the golden rule (5:28, 29).
 - d. The husband's love makes the wife and the husband one (5:31).
 4. This interpretation does not suggest that the wife shows no love to her husband. The focus is upon the husband rather than the wife because the focus of the passage is upon Christ love and care for the church, not the church's love and care for Christ.
- I. The more recent interpretation is an interpretation which derives from the perspective that the husband and wife are one and voluntarily enter the marriage relationship (as Christ and humankind enter their covenant relationship).
1. Christ is not head of the church in order to rule the church. He is not *arche* of the church. (See Mark 10:42 – 45 where Christ contrasts *arche* with servanthood.) Rather, Christ voluntarily submits Himself to the church in sacrifice.
 2. Wives voluntarily submit to their husbands, as the church voluntarily submits to Christ.
 3. Husbands are to be head of their wives in order to love them. In other words, headship does not derive from who the husband is but from what he does (he loves and sacrifices).
 4. Both interpretations are virtually identical regarding the nature of the husband's ideal relationship toward his wife, so there is little debate regarding verses 25 – 31.
 5. Paul emphasizes that the two are to become one (not like Aristotle, who described a husband as the soul and his wife as the body).
 6. Head (*kephale*) suggests that the husband is at the point, the spearhead. Perhaps Paul wishes to emphasize that husbands cannot take their wives for granted, as they often did in Greco-Roman culture. They cannot exhibit little regard for their feelings and needs. In this culture, the image of a military leader who goes before his troops accompanied by the image of bravery and sacrifice, was needed in order to establish the responsibility (rather than the role) of the husband in the marriage.
 7. Paul emphasizes that submissiveness is mutual, patterned after the example of Christ. Though he specifically instructs the wife to submit, he instructs the husband to submit through the ultimate example, Jesus Christ.

8. Paul contrasts the cultural norms of usual marriage, in which the wife was little more than a slave, by turning the idea of headship inside out (you are head to serve rather than to be served).
9. Paul therefore elevates marriage to the highest possible ideal.
- J. In reality, few take issue with Paul's instruction to husbands in the marriage relationship. Therefore the debate over this passage derives from the debate over the meaning of headship and the coupling of this passage with passages such as I Timothy 2:13 – 15, a debate which we address elsewhere during this series of lessons.

II. Colossians 3:18, 19

- A. This passage is set within a series of instructions suggesting a tension between various segments of the churches in Colossae, a tension which probably arose due to a heresy that was in part gnostic and combined with a binding of Jewish laws upon Christians (1:18; 2:8).
- B. The passage is basically a constriction of Ephesians 5:21 – 33. The wording parallels the Ephesian passage.
- C. The word used by Paul and translated “fitting” (anekei) implies “what is seemly” with a hint of ethical obligation, i.e. what you ought to do (Philemon 8). Again the emphasis is upon voluntary submission to a standard and has a Stoic ring. Yet Paul lifts it above the Stoics when he adds the words “in the Lord”.
- D. Paul uses this phrase “in the Lord” about 40 times (e.g. Col. 4:7, 17, I Cor. 7:22, 39). He usually applies the phrase to domestic relationships between fellow members of Christ. Christian relationships do not replace earthly relationships but lift earthly relationships to a higher plane. A more egalitarian interpretation would hold that the operative concept in this passage is that of mutual submission and maintenance of societal norms so that disorder does not reign in the family of God.
- E. The traditional interpretation would hold that there is a divinely instituted hierarchy in the order of creation and in this order the place of the wife comes next after that of the husband, referring back to Ephesians 5:22, 23 and I Corinthians 11:3, 7 – 9. The Christians at Colossae are instructed to remember and abide by that hierarchy (not a hierarchy of spiritual worth but one of roles).
- F. As in Ephesians, Paul uses agapao to refer to the husband's obligation toward the wife. Such love has been described by Paul in detail in I. Corinthians 13.

III. I Peter 3:1 – 7

- A. I Peter is probably addressed primarily to Gentile converts (4:3) who have been removed from their families and traditional communities (1:18) and who suffer as exiles (1:6, 1:17). The letter is written in order to assist these alien

(and subjected) Christians in their sufferings. They are new Christians (2:1 – 3) living in a hostile world.

- B. The instructions on the relationship of husbands and wives in I Peter 3:1 – 7 belong to a wider context of specific instructions that involve Christian conduct in relation to governmental authorities (2:13 – 17) and the conduct of Christian slaves in relation to their masters (2:8 – 15). Unlike Ephesians 5, this series of injunctions focuses almost exclusively upon those who are in submission (e.g. there is no command for how masters should treat their slaves in 2:18 – 25 and no command as to how governments should treat their subjects).
- C. The command to these Christian wives is to voluntarily subordinate themselves to their husbands, many if not most of whom are not Christians (3:1). To put this another way, Peter is asking the wives to adapt to the expectations of the society in which they lived as long as this does not interfere with their Christian walk (2:11, 12).
- D. Of course, this submission had limits, for many of these wives had undoubtedly gone against the wishes of their non Christian husbands by following Christ (3:1). These husbands not only disobeyed the word of God, they probably slandered Christians. So how does a Christian woman live in such a circumstance?
 - 1. She, like Christians under a secular government, is to live free yet not to abuse that freedom nor forget the call to servanthood. (2:16)
 - 2. She is not to submit to suffering only for the sake of suffering. Rather she is to submit if the suffering leads to good. (2:20). In other words, if she is being abused (just as if a slave is being abused) she is not bound to endure the abuse. Her behavior has an evangelistic goal.
 - 3. Outward adornment is to be seen as an unnecessary pride and a challenge to the authority of the husband in Jewish and Greco-Roman society. (3:3, 4) See Isaiah 3:16 – 24. Peter is not condemning appropriate, even attractive dress. He is condemning ostentatious dress, dress meant to “put others down”.
 - 4. The gentle (meek) and quiet spirit parallels 3:15. Remember, these women were evangelists, hoping to win over their husbands to Christ. In addition, a gentle and quiet spirit may have provided a measure of protection (3:13). Finally, a gentle and quiet spirit is the spirit of those who are persecuted (3:16, 17).
 - 5. They are to emulate Sarah. Sarah may seem a strange example, for she was not exactly an obedient wife. In addition to her laughter at the prophesy of God, she insisted that Abraham take Hagar as a “wife” and later to send her away. Yet Sarah represented the ideal Hebrew wife because she is the first wife. The Hebrew race begins with Abraham and Sarah (it was Abraham called out in Genesis 12:1-3).
- E. This passage does not fit as easily as the Ephesians passage into the argument of the created order given the context of the passage (e.g. It would be difficult to argue that the created order supported slavery and freedom.). Peter does

not invoke the argument of the created order to support his instructions but rather refers to holy women of the past.

IV. Conclusions

- A. Husbands are consistently (and unequivocally) instructed in the New Testament to love their wives, to sacrifice for their wives and to act with all consideration toward their wives. Few debate the characteristics of Christian behavior by husbands toward their wives.
- B. The submission of wives to their husbands is a consistent theme in the New Testament. The meaning of this submission has been debated, yet some aspects of submission appear unequivocal.
- C. Submission is central to the Christian walk and therefore instructions to submit must always begin with our voluntary submission to the will of God in Christ.
- D. Submission by wives to their husbands is therefore voluntary, the act of the wife, not the husband. The husband is never called upon to subject or submit his wife. The Christian wife is first and foremost free in Christ.
- E. The custom during New Testament times in marriage was one of submission and subjection, so the New Testament does not simply follow the prevailing custom.
- F. Submission by wives to their husbands is viewed by the New Testament writers as not only bending to the outward form of custom but also to be of use in spiritual growth.
 - 1. Submission is a spiritual discipline which instructs the wife in the nature of the relationship of Christ and His church. (Of course, this is true for the husband as well as the wife.)
 - 2. Submission can be, at times, a means to win the husband to Christ (and this could be said to be true of the Christian husband in relation to the unchristian wife).
 - 3. Submission, when voluntary and with a gentle and quite spirit, is the best means at times to deal with persecution (and this certainly applies to men as well as to women).
- G. There is no evidence that wives were to be submissive to their husbands if the situation was dangerous or abusive. In fact the scriptures teach just the opposite.

References

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