

Roles of Husbands and Wives

Summary Exegesis of Ephesians 5:22-33

... and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.

In simply determining an overall interpretation of the concept and meaning of a wife's submission to her husband in the above text, without going into a detailed, verse by verse exegesis, there are several points to consider.

1. Literary Context

The book of Ephesians, an instructional letter to a 1st century church, is focused and themed on the nature of the church and the headship of Christ over it. God has reconciled individuals to himself, these individuals to each other, and finally has united these reconciled individuals into one body, called the church. The need walk in unity/oneness with Christ and in the body of Christ is stressed. It's in this context that the instructions to wives and husbands, to children and parents, and to slaves and masters are delivered. In all these instructions, the need to be imitators of the example of God's love and Christ's submission to us is paramount.

Chapter 5 begins with that general instruction of imitation in governing all forms of social behavior, and in verse 21, we are told to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Then Paul dives into all three of the primary relationships of his time: the marriage relationship, family relationship, and master-slave relationship, before moving into the imagery of the armor of God as final injunction toward maintaining unity in the body of Christ. Throughout, there is the stress of maintaining unity through imitation of Christ and in mutual submission.

2. Historical Context

There are echoes of a culture clash here from an historical perspective. The culture of the ancient Jews was thoroughly collective-community based. That is, the function of the individual was only to serve the community. The community was seen as the basis for everything and needed to be maintained through proper, "clean/pure" functionality of all its parts, of which the family and the individual were included. However, the culture of Greco-Roman cosmopolitan cities in the first century had moved in the much more "western" direction of recognizing the individual as the basis for society. Women's rights and the prevalence of divorce were as common in the first century empire as today. In striving for unity in the body of Christ, Paul appeals to maintaining the stability of all the primary relationships of his day.

As difficult as it is to accept the idea of a woman submitting to her husband today, think of Paul's

implicit tolerance of slavery...an idea abhorrent to us, yet Paul instructs slaves to obey and be good slaves—no thought of freedom here. Converted slaves of this time were thinking along the lines of their freedom being implicit in Christ, but Paul instructs them not to rock the boat. One possible reason is that Paul and many in the early church believed Jesus' return to be imminent—within their lifetimes, so the instruction to maintain until the return was the best course of action. In fact, all of Paul's instructions are to maintain traditional roles in these primary human relationships in order to maintain stability and harmony in the body. But beyond this, Paul appeals to a higher order of relationship—the concept of mutual submission between husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and masters.

3. **Meaning of “Submit”**

A key to understanding the concept of Paul's instruction is a understanding of the term translated as “submit.” The term today has the fairly exclusive connotation of simply obedience. To submit is to obey. The term Paul used, the Greek word “hupotasso” was originally a military term meaning “to arrange [troop divisions] in a military fashion under the command of a leader. In non-military use, it was ‘a voluntary attitude of giving in, cooperating, assuming responsibility, and carrying a burden.’” (Strong's) It could mean to arrange under, to subordinate, to subject, put in subjection, to subject one's self, to submit to one's control, to yield to one's admonition or advice, to obey.

In other words, our understanding of “submit” is far too narrow. The primary meaning of hupotasso is not obedience at all, but the voluntary surrender of our rights or our will. Obedience is a natural byproduct of this surrender, but not the focus of the word.

4. **Mutual Submission**

In all three relationships Paul discusses, marital, familial, master-slave, he stresses the concept of mutual submission. That is there must be submission both up and down the chain of command, so to speak. Husbands submit to wives, parents to children, and masters to slaves, as well as vice-versa. In fact, of the 13 verses devoted to wives and husbands, only 3 ½ verses detail the wife's submission, while the balance deal with the husband's submission to his wife, an implicit testimony to the importance of mutual submission.

The submission here is to be understood as placing ourselves in subordination to the other. Or, better, to placing the other above ourselves. The meaning of this type of submission can be clearly understood in a husband's submission to his wife in the sense of his placing her and her welfare above that of his own. Paul again gives Christ's example of his submission to those around him and to his Father as the standard we are to imitate. Thought of in this way, submission is properly understood as no more or less than loving each other as you love yourself—doing everything possible to provide that which is needed at any given moment. Husbands and wives can both submit in this way.

Submission then, would include the concepts of surrender, sacrifice, and service. Interestingly, it may or may not include the concept of obedience. Sometimes doing the best for someone requires disobedience to any of their wishes at the moment. Scriptural examples of such “civil disobedience” would include 1Sam 25 where Abigail disobeys her husband Nabal in order to help David and his men and thereby save Nabal and her family from David's wrath over Nabal's refusal to help him. Abigail disobeys in order to provide her husband with what he really needed. Jesus, as model, showed time and again how the disobedience to the letter of the law was sometimes required by the needs of the moment. We should also be clear of the scope of Paul's instruction. Submission is only required by the wife to her own husband, within the marriage relationship, and in no way implies that women must submit to men in general. Paul is concerned with the foundational relationships that provide unity within the body here, and is making no general comment on the nature of the sexes.

5. **Christ and the Church**

A final point to consider would be Paul's analogy of the marital relationship to the relationship of Christ to the church. The idea of the church as the bride of Christ brings much cultural imagery

(such as the wedding feast) to bear on the nature of both relationships. The church, as Christ's betrothed, is waiting to be called to the feast, is to live in submission to him as the head of body. At the same time, we see Christ's example of perfect love and submission as the model of the true nature of submission by those in "subordination:" wives, children, and slaves. Paul is trying to get across this "mystery" of the nature of the body of Christ and the importance of walking in unity, that is, oneness in the Hebrew sense of distinct persons functioning as one and the same.

6. **Conclusion**

So what's the bottom line? Properly understood, there really shouldn't be such a difficulty with this passage. But from a current, Western, cultural perspective, it's understandable that women would find this passage objectionable. Really, the instruction is no more or less than the general instruction to love each other as you love yourself, or in this context, as Christ loves the church. The idea of submission as being obedience—obeying every command of the husband—is not the meaning here. In fact, the word obey does not appear in Scripture at all with respect to wives, though it does to children and slaves. The idea here is that wives are not slaves or children or property of their husbands. They are not required to blindly obey. In fact, their submission may require them to disobey if their husbands needs supercede their own directives. Wives are instructed to surrender their own rights and wills in favor of their husband's welfare, but then husbands are required to do exactly the same.

Placing the good of the spouse above the individual's own volition is a simple restatement of the law of love, and shouldn't be seen as an oppressive or chauvinistic attitude, or even as the product of an ancient culture and social system. Paul's instruction, properly understood, stands for all and all time and cultures. Even the idea of the husband as the head, when juxtaposed with Christ as the head of the church, takes out any of the dictatorial or oppressive connotations, or at least should. Women in Ephesus and other major cities around the first century Empire had many rights, including the right to own property and to divorce their husbands. They would probably have had difficulty dealing with their husbands in a "submissive" role much as women do today. Paul's concepts of balance in mutual submission and the model of Jesus and the church would have been necessary to their understanding of building proper and stable relationships, just as it is today.