

Roles of Husbands and Wives in the Christian Marriage Relationship (Ephesians 5)

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UDK:227.5:265.5
Review article
Received: July, 2009.
Accepted: September, 2009.

Abstract

Partners within the marriage relationship are equal before God because both were made in his image. Together they fully reflect the image of God. They are both bearers of the personality of God; both present the distinctive aspects of the character of God. However, husbands and wives received different roles. Within the context of the Christian marriage, as presented in Ephesians 5, partners are called to lovingly submit to one another. In light of that mutual submission, wives are specifically exhorted to submit to their husbands and husbands are specifically exhorted to love their wives. Husbands and wives are compared to Christ and the church, thus giving this relationship a special purpose and meaning, a unique place in the range of biblical relations, presenting it as meaningful, authoritative and vital. There certainly are some limitations to the cultural aspect of the roles, however, the comparing of this relationship to Christ and the church gives the roles within the marriage an eternal, culturally transmittable value. Christ will always remain the head of his church and will always love his bride, and the church will be forever called to submit to him and respect him.

Key words: *marriage, roles of husband and wife, the Epistle to the Ephesians, Christ, Church, submissiveness, love*

Introduction

In modern day Christianity, teachings about the roles within the Christian marriage relationship have taken different directions. On one side, it is popular to strive for things that will make partners happy and content. The influence for this comes mostly from the culture around us. We find ourselves fighting

against the Maker of Marriage, and in the pursuit of happiness, trying to win this battle that we lost long ago. On the other side, we concentrate on the roles of wives that need to submit to their husbands in such strength and vigor, that we tend to lose sight of the equality among men and women. We get entangled in behavioral legalism only to leave our hearts and common sense in the shadows of our churches. We misuse words such as authority and submission for our selfish ambition and forget they are biblical terms, used for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

Surprisingly, what we need is not a fresh perspective. What we need is a reminder of the intent of God for marriage and the roles within this covenant; we need the ancient scriptures to guide us and persuade us once more that there lies the secret to a sacred marriage. Terms such as authority and submission need to be accepted in honest humility. The roles within the marriage relationship are far from unspeakable, they are wonderfully presented and if applied, filled with fulfillment and blessing.

Where it all began

“The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’” (Gen 2:18). The marriage relationship, and the family unit as the product of such a relationship, is not a human idea. God ordained, in his ultimate wisdom, power, knowledge, and, of course, grace, the relationship that would ensure purposefulness in life, companionship, faithfulness and stability in the permanency of this bond (Stassen, Glen & Gushee, 2003). It is important to mention at this point that this permanency is limited to life here on earth and does not stretch to eternity. Jesus confirms this in his discussion with the Sadducees.¹

The specific purposes of marriage were tasks chosen by God (Gen 1:28). Together, as one flesh unit, the man and the woman were to procreate, rule the earth and all that is in it, and have an intimate relationship. The importance of intimacy is seen from the instruction to man to leave his mother and father and become one flesh with his wife. Within the new unit, companionship, faithfulness and permanency is a part of the integration process of the marriage relationship.

As sin entered the world, it distorted many of God’s original instructions. The commandment to procreate was made difficult by the serious child-birth pain that would accompany it. The stewardship over the earth which was

1 Jesus replied, “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven” (NIV Mt 22:30).

intended to be joyful and fulfilling work became wearisome labor. The intimate companionship took on a new turn as male domination pervaded the culture and mistreatment of women became a normal part of everyday life (Trull, 1997:163). Eden was lost, but not altogether. The hope for a new creation, the restoration of God of his original intent for marriage, and a glimpse of that being presented through the active salvation work of God, lingered throughout the history of the Jewish people.

A Biblical Example: Ephesians 5

By New Testament times, women were generally treated as lesser beings within society, restricted to the home and the family. They had few legal rights, were even perceived as carriers of evil to the world, and were mistreated in many different ways – politically, socially and personally. Their worth was measured and compared to that of a dog. As a result of such a worldview, they seldom participated in public activities and events. They were taught to stay at home and care only about what was placed before them, mostly children and household chores. There were exceptions to this rule, however not many.

Among the cultures addressed by the Epistle to the Ephesians, there are three that were prominent. The differences between the Roman, Greek and Jewish marriage relationships were visible; however, the mistreatment of women and the perception of women as lesser creatures were present in all three. It was a teaching rooted deeply in the mind of the ancient world and only few individuals ever questioned the origin or validity of such a teaching. Mostly, it was commonly accepted that the degradation of women was the way the gods had arranged society, thus making it the most natural and logical ordination.

The text of Ephesians entered a time of varied and strong cultural diversity and suggested a newness of thought and action. In the context of Christian thought, it offered radical change in the treatment of women and especially in the entire marriage relationship. To apprehend the full picture of the situation, a context of the letter, the themes, the author and the audience must be explored.

Social Setting of the Epistle to the Ephesians

The Ancient World and its Customs

The Greek Marriage Relationship: The degradation of women began early in ancient Greece. The study and discussion of society was a major part of the philosophical agenda. The family was a core unit and was seen as society in miniature. Thus, it was of great importance and directed by the leaders of

the time, philosophers, who outlined the proper family relationships. Aristotle appointed men as the head of the family with all the authority to rule as he saw fit. A man was even compared to a king in his own little kingdom, just like there were kings over nations in the broader sense. Aristotle was convinced that “the male is by nature fitter to command than the female” (Bristow, 1991: 6). Women were mostly used for pleasure and for taking care of children and the home. The conviction that women were inferior to men was strongly rooted in the minds of the men as well as the women of the Greek community (Bristow, 1991: 3-9).

The greatest philosophical heritage comes directly from Athens where the devaluation of women originated and developed in its full force. Some surrounding nations such as the Spartans and the Egyptians had different views on women. Their women were a part of the public life, were able to work outside of the home, and even had legal rights that were not canceled after marriage, pointing to the more egalitarian system within those societies. However, these nations provided no philosophical heritage, so the Athenian heritage pervaded concerning the rights and treatment of women (Bristow, 1991: 9-11).

The ideal in antique Greek culture was a woman who “stayed at home, taking care of it and obedient to her husband” (Keener, 1992: 164-166). And in the culture where the achievement of the ideal was most valued, this was seen as the divine ordination of the society.

The Roman Marriage Relationship: In the Roman culture, women were seen as having little worth, much like in some of the other civilizations of the time. Little emphasis was given to their rights. What was emphasized were their obligations as housekeepers and child bearers. The influence from Greek philosophy was evident insofar as women in Rome never enjoyed political rights, “but their opportunities for education and social activity were greater in Rome than in Greece” (Bell, 1998: 3). By the time of the great Empire of the first century, many things had changed for women. They experienced social freedom and were able to run businesses, buy and sell properties, stay single and, in general, be very influential. “Women figured prominently in the social life of Rome. They enjoyed freedom of movement and socialization which was denied them in other ancient societies” (Bell, 1998:3). Many were unsatisfied with just staying at home and being mothers, so they soon assumed a higher place in society than in any other civilization in antiquity.

In the ancient Roman culture, the marriage relationship was a special bond between a man and a woman. It was not, however, seen as sacramental, and as such was completely in the hands of the participants in the agreement. If a man or a woman wanted to divorce, there was no legal or moral problem stopping the action. Marriages were mostly arranged by the fathers of the bride and groom, and the consent of the woman was not essential for the contract to be made. In

the religious life of the Roman couple, a wife was expected to abandon the gods of her father's household and worship the gods of her husband (Bell, 1998: 3).

The ideal in antique Roman culture was a woman who was "supportive and subservient, good daughter, wife and mother, meek, quiet, shy and self-conscious. Submission was even required by law" (Keener, 1992: 164-166).

The Jewish Marriage Relationship: From the beginning of humanity, and later during the time of the chosen people of God, marriage was ordained by God for the purposes of God. This covenant relationship was described as "sacred, God witnessed, public, mutually binding, irrevocable relationship between two parties who willingly promise and undertake to live by its terms" (Stassen, Glen & Gushee, 2003: 276). The ideal was set and provided by the Creator and Sustainer.

Before exploring the position of women in Israel and later in New Testament times, it is important to recognize how God views women from a biblical perspective. One sees from the text of Genesis 1:27-28 that both men and women were created in the image of God and both were given the authority to rule over creation, thus making them equal before God. As a result of the male-female character differences, only when together, they completely reflect the image of God. After the fall, God spoke specifically to the woman, saying "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Gen 3:16). In a similar aspect, Paul called on women to submit to their husbands, not as inferior beings, but in all humility to allow their husbands to lead (Packer, Tenney & White, 1997: 13). The conclusion is that in the eyes of God women are equal to men, bearers of the image of God and capable of ruling over the earth, however, instructed by God in a specific manner that in no way makes them inferior to men.

"The family was a unifying thread in Bible history. When threatened or challenged, the family unit struggled for survival. God used families to convey His message to each new generation" (Packer, Tenney & White, 1997: 412). Both husband and wife played an important role. The husband was the head of the family, responsible for the well-being of all, acting as a leader not only in everyday matters, but in spiritual religious matters as well. He played a major part in the training of his children, especially the sons. The way in which he taught them was the law of the Lord. The instruction for Israel is clear:

"These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (Deut 6:6-9).

A woman's marriage was usually arranged by her father. The expectations of the family and society were high. The relationship was entered into with full

expectation for children and for the wife's complete submission to the husband. She was to be a helper, especially caring for the home and children. If it was necessary for the well-being of the family, her role extended to the market place where she could trade and thus help provide for the family. She was also an important participant in the upbringing of the children, especially the daughters to whom she taught household chores and of the primary goal in life which was childbearing and caring for the husband and the family (Packer, Tenney & White, 1997).

By the time of Jesus and later Paul, the Jewish setting of the marriage relationship was no longer the same as that presented in the Torah. "Long before Jesus' time, the old Hebrew religion of Moses and the prophets had been replaced by a new religion called Judaism, which was based on the traditions of the Scribes and Pharisees" (Bilezikian, 1085:81). Women were often viewed as an evil necessity, a distraction and a nuisance. A known prayer of Jewish men reveals the atmosphere: "Thank you God that you did not make me a Gentile, ... a woman, ... a boor" (Bristow, 1991:20). The ideal in the Jewish culture was a wife that was "a slave to her husband, silent, restrained, modest and chaste" (Keener, 1992:164-166).

The social milieu of the Jewish-Gentile culture at the time of Paul's letter to the Ephesians was saturated with the mistreatment of women and tendencies to uplift men, and all this behind a veil of religious observances. Even though there were some differences between the Greek, Roman and Jewish marriage relationships, all three were interwoven with the same issues of devaluing women. Jesus showed a better way. Paul also suggested a better way, the way of a new community in Christ, the way of mutual submission, love and respect.

Specific Setting of Ephesians

The epistle called "the crown of Paul's writings" (MacDonald, 1995:1903) is filled with the blessings that are ours in Jesus Christ. The Epistle to the Ephesians was probably a circular letter that was sent to many different churches. The reason scholars believe this includes that it does not address any particular issue that could be troubling the church and its lack of personal greetings. The lack of personal greetings seems strange since Paul knew the Ephesians very well, having spent three years with them (Acts 19).

The author introduces himself as Paul two times (1:1 and 3:1) and his authorship was widely accepted for 19 centuries.

"No other Pauline epistle has such an early and continuous stream of witnesses, starting with Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Hermas, and going on with Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, and Hypolytus... the Muratorian Canon also lists Ephesians as by Paul" (MacDonald, 1995:1903).

In the beginning of nineteenth century, German scholars began to doubt Pauline authorship. Their reasons were mostly because of a different style and vocabulary that are introduced in this epistle. For a mind like that of Paul, this is not strange. “Different themes require different words, and changed circumstances create a changed atmosphere” (Stott, 1973:17).

There arose, however, two other arguments against Pauline authority – the historical and the theological arguments. The historical argument is based on the fact that Paul had stayed in Ephesus twice, first for a short time (Acts 18:19-21) and the second time for three years (Acts 19:1-20:1,31) in which he taught them in public and in their homes, getting to know them and they getting to know him. It is, therefore, curious that the letter is so impersonal, with no special greeting or listed names. This is certainly a surprise, but these are not grounds to dismiss his authorship. The theological argument claims that the sphere of interest is the cosmic dimension, that the focus is the church and that reconciliation or justification are not mentioned as much. But all these differences are still embedded within Pauline theology (Stott, 1973:18).

The letter is unique. In a way, written to strangers, but not really. It is first of all a prayer, and when somebody prays for another, the relationship changes. Second, it is affirmation. It is not apologetics or polemics; it is affirmation about the Father, Son and the Spirit. Third, it is evangelism, talking about the saving purposes and action of God (Stott, 1973:19-20).

The case for Pauline authorship is strong and reliable. There is internal evidence such as the author calling himself Paul, and the letter being filled with the Pauline theme of Jews and Gentiles reconciling before God in Christ. There is also the external evidence of centuries of witnesses.

The Epistle to the Ephesians is one of the so-called “Prison Epistles”, along with Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon. It was probably written from the first imprisonment of Paul in Rome around AD 60. The second imprisonment was in Ephesus and the third in Caesarea and in both he did not have much freedom to spread the news among many, but just among his friends. In Rome, he preached to many who came to his home imprisonment.

This letter was carried to the province of Asia by Tychicus (6:21-22), as was the epistle to the Colossians (4:7-9). This explains the similarity in theme and input.

Because of the impersonal tone of the letter, it is highly likely that the recipients were not only Christians in Ephesus, but Christians of the whole area of Asia Minor. Also, some manuscripts do not include “in Ephesus” in 1:1, and Paul also mentions that he has heard of their faith, which indicates that Paul was probably leaving out the geographical location. This was probably a circular letter addressed to many different churches in Asia Minor. If one copy started to circulate from Ephesus and then returned to Ephesus, it is possible the origin of

the name started there.

There are a few things that are clear of the recipients. First, they are saints, not pointing to certain people, but the new reality of the people of God as a holy nation. Second, they are faithful, trusting in the Lord. Third, they are in Christ.

“To be in Christ is to be personally and vitally united to Christ, as branches are to the vine and members to the body, and thereby also to Christ’s people. For it is impossible to be part of the body without being related to both the Head and the members” (Stott, 1973:22).

Fourth, some manuscripts add that Paul’s readers are in Ephesus. Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) and a busy commercial port, located at the intersection of major trade routes. It was also the center of the pagan worship of Diana (Artemis) whose temple, after being destroyed in the middle of the fourth century BC, was slowly being rebuilt to become one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

The main theme of Ephesians is what Paul calls the mystery. It is not something hidden but is a wonderful truth that is just now being revealed. Believing Jews and Gentiles are all members of the Body of Christ, in the present, seated in the heavenly places with Christ, and in the future, they will share his glory as Head over all things.

Another important theme is love, *agape*, the love expressed through the will. It is a major theme in the Epistle to the Ephesians, a love of God that is manifested in Christ. Such a love is assumed in the relationship of husband and wife. Paul starts and ends the epistle with this (1:4; 6:24) and uses the word *agape* more in this epistle than in any other. This was perhaps the Holy Spirit pointing out the importance of love, because thirty years later, this church would be rebuked by Jesus for having left their first love (Rev 2:4).

Other themes include the new society of God², the new creation of men and women through Jesus Christ, a biblical vision of the church, and the fight against the principalities and powers of evil.

The Epistle to the Ephesians can be divided into two main sections. First, the new life which God has given through Christ and society that He has created through Him, found in 1:1-3:21, and second, the new standards which God expects of his new society and new relationships into which God brings people, as expounded in 4:1-6:24. In the second section, there is a discourse on husbands and wives, found in 5:21-33, vital for the understanding of the marriage relationship as pertaining to this article.

2 Stott calls this the central theme of Ephesians.

Ephesians 5:21-33 as one Unit

This passage functions as a unit. Verse 21 is preceded by the theme of being filled with the Holy Spirit and is followed by the new theme of submission, which stretches throughout these verses. Two main relationships are clearly presented, namely Christ and the Church, and husbands and wives. The writer is interested in drawing from the heavenly relationship to address the earthly one. Some scholars have suggested that Paul is stressing one relationship and is not concerned with the other, however this is not likely. Paul is certainly giving exhortation that is specific to the marriage relationship between husband and wife, but is doing so in light of the much grander relationship, one that has its beginning in the heavens, the relationship between Christ and his Church.

This unit is structurally divided into four main parts. There is a thread of the theme of submissiveness, as well as authority and love throughout all four parts; however, the recipients of the message change. In the first section, verse 21 instructs all believers to be submissive to one another. In the second, verses 22-24, the instruction is specific to wives. They are to submit to their husbands in everything, as unto the Lord. In the third section, verses 25-31, husbands are being exhorted to love their wives as Christ loves the church. In the last section, in verse 33, the writer concludes and summarizes his thoughts. Both husband and wife are exhorted, starting with the husband, repeating that he should love his wife. He then moves to the wife, instructing her to respect³ her husband, and with this, bringing back the essential prerequisite for mutual submission – the fear of the Lord (Lincoln, 2002:354).

Ephesians 5:21

Submissiveness in Ephesians 5:21

This transitional verse holds the key to the unique understanding of Christian submission. It requires the pre-filling of the Spirit (Eph 5:18) and it leads into the exhortation to men and women about specific conduct toward one another. The fact that the verse is transitional in such a manner “enables it to be the appropriate link between the writer’s appeal to the whole community and his advice to specific groups within it. If believers are filled with the Spirit, this should manifest itself in their mutual submission” (Lincoln, 2002:354).

3 Other translations use words such as fear or revere, all pointing to the fear of God that is present in every believer.

The theme of submissiveness is oft repeated in the texts of the apostle Paul. However, only here in the Pauline corpus is the actual verb “to submit” employed for mutual relationships among believers. Elsewhere the notion of submission is only used for the attitude of specific groups — women, children and slaves — or for the attitude of believers to the state (Ibid.).

In connection to the rest of the passage of Ephesians 5:21-33, verse 21 seems, at first glance, a contradiction to the text which follows. Many scholars have argued this case, however it seems unlikely that Paul, giving careful thought to whom he is writing and why, would confuse his readers by contradicting himself. It is more likely that there are two aspects critical to this understanding. One is the mutual submission to which all Christians must attend, if they are to follow their commander in chief, Jesus Christ. This first aspect is widely accepted. The second aspect which includes specific instruction to husbands and wives found in verses 22-33, deals with the notion of different roles within this relationship. So even though husbands are to submit to their wives in the way as to seek what is best not for themselves, but for the wife, there is no denying the difference of the roles. A husband is to lead, and the wife is to submit to his guidance.

The mutual yielding is motivated out of fear of Christ. Many times, the word fear has a negative connotation; however, in the Biblical context, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise” (Ps 111:10). As was true in Old Testament times, so Paul confirms is still true in New Testament times. The fear of the Lord, the fear of Christ, is the ultimate motivation for all Christian conduct. This fear consists of awe of the presence of God, his amazing saving power and grace and the love that will also be expressed though righteous judgment.

Submissiveness as a Universal Christian Obligation

Submissiveness is a universal Christian obligation, extended to anyone who is a part of the new reality of living as a follower of Christ. Jesus Christ, as the ultimate authority, is the primary example of what real submission looks like and how it is lived out in practice. He lived and died as a servant, submitting completely to the authority of the Father.

Jesus, “who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Php 2:6-8). Yet he still holds all the authority in heaven and on earth, which he himself testifies to at the end of his life (Mt 28:18). From this passage, it is clear that he is dealing with a different understanding of authority and submission

than is portrayed in the world today. It is only through this heavenly submission that Jesus received the ultimate gift from the Father (Php 2:9-11). This kind of authority is not only conditioned by the submission that precedes it, but it also brings glory back to the Father.

Through the years of close fellowship with their Master, Jesus' disciples were exposed to miracles of healing, redemption, and even the raising of the dead. They had sensed the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through Jesus. They wanted that same power and the pedestal they thought this would bring them. On one occasion they were arguing over who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. When they were unable to resolve this matter themselves, they came to Jesus, looking for answers that would clear things up. Jesus gives them an answer that was vital for them then, however it has an eternal application for all believers. There is no alternative to the exhortation of Jesus Christ. He said,

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:25-28).

In the eyes of the world, this kind of authority is seen almost as a weakness. There is absolutely nothing weak, however, in the power of the Lord Jesus Christ. He brings glory and honor to the Father, and his presence alone can leave a man in awe of his authority. Jesus has three amazing characteristics vital to his personality. First, he is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact representation of God. Second, he is sustaining this world only by the power of his word. And third, after providing purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (Heb 1:3). How amazing and breathtaking is this truth of the linking of great humility with great authority.

When a person receives Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, the former life, habits, and realities are substituted with the newness of life and godliness. This is, of course, not a surprise, for the price that was paid on the cross was extremely high and it is to be expected that it would lead to the transformation of one's life and one's whole being. Truly, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Co 5:17). With this newness, different concepts of values are attached to the process. There are many of these values and a few are of great importance to understanding submission and authority. As mentioned before, Jesus redefined the greatness in this world. The greatest one is the person who is the servant of all, and Jesus showed that by his own example.

The book of Ephesians is saturated with the sense of a new reality of living in Christ Jesus. The task is not easy. The Word of God, the instruction of the Almighty is never easy. However, it does not come as a command anyone can

achieve by his or her own will and power. The idea is that the Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus himself, and given in abundance to every believer, is ever present to assist in these amazing tasks. The text preceding Ephesians 5:21 points exactly to this vital and important truth:

“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. *Instead, be filled with the Spirit* [emphasis mine]. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 5:18-20).

In the context of God’s spiritual guidance and leadership and in thankfulness to God the Father, the instruction of mutual submission seems highly likely and possible. It is, in fact, only in this context, that it is possible. Only under the umbrella of the supremacy and authority of Christ can mutual submission be achieved and lived out.

Ephesians 5:22-33

The Role of a Wife

To Submit: Influenced by the preceding verse on mutual submission, Paul addresses the wives first in his further, specific instruction. He states, “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22-24).

It is noteworthy that the verb “to submit” is not present here, however, as a correlation to the preceding verse, it is obvious; it can be assumed it is referring to the act of submission. The action here is willing, voluntary and filled with joy since it has the connotation of submission to the Lord. All believers are to submit to the Lord with pure joy and thanksgiving, not to rebel or refuse his authority. The response to love must be love.

In other New Testament passages, wives are instructed similarly. In Colossians 3:18, the instruction is almost the same, which is not surprising coming from the hand of the same writer and written at approximately the same time. In the Epistle to Titus, Paul gives a broader instruction for women. They are to be “self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God” (Tit 2:5).

From the perspective of a different person, Peter gives instructions to the wives and confirms the same submissive attitude developed by Paul. He writes,

“Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives” (1 Pe 3:1-2).

Verse 23 of Ephesians 5 introduces the motivation behind the submission, “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.” John Stott recognizes two reasons implied for the submission of the wife; “The first is drawn from creation and concerns the husband’s headship of his wife, while the second is drawn from redemption and concerns Christ’s headship of the church” (Stott, 1973:220)

Here the divine analogy of Christ and the church is implemented in the scene. Not only do we have two actors, a wife and a husband, we have a parallel relationship that is providing illumination, giving light and guidance to the first pair. Christ illuminates the husband, the church illuminates the wife. The symbolism is not new. In the Old Testament, Yahweh has been perceived as the husband, and Israel, the chosen nation of God, his wife. It was a union between God and his people, a covenant not to be broken. Prophets of the eighth century often used this analogy to call Israel back to faithfulness in their relationship with God. Hosea wrote,

“‘In that day,’ declares the LORD, ‘you will call me ‘my husband’; you will no longer call me ‘my master... I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD’” (Hosea 2:16. 19-20).

In the New Testament, the church is the bride of Christ. He is her Savior through his blood and redeeming action. The roots are again found in the Old Testament where Yahweh is the Savior of his people (Is 45:5).

Making the connection between husband and Christ and wife and the church, the author makes his instruction more powerful and brings it to culmination. He writes, “Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (Eph 5:24). Observing the submission of the church to Christ, there is no doubt that it springs from reverence and awe and is therefore willing and voluntary. It is not forced or demanded; it is simply present as a natural flow, a logical product of the saving action of Christ on behalf of his church. With this in mind, the wife is instructed to submit in the same manner. Clearly, the instruction concerning submissiveness is not abusive or humiliating but rather one of purposeful, wonder-filled and humble faith.

The Role of a Husband

Headship: Even before addressing the husbands directly in the Epistle to the Ephesians, the instruction to women intimates the notion of the headship of the husband. The analogy is clearly made to Christ as the head of the Church. This assumes that the head is carrying a certain authority and leadership over the other.

Earlier in the letter, the writer used the word head to point to the rule of Christ, stating that “God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Eph 1:22-23). Thus the concept of headship points to the concept of leadership. Even more, the notion of authority and responsibility is attributed to the head in the following passage: “And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the *supremacy*” (Col 1:18) [emphasis mine].

The problem today with the word head (very similar to the word submission) is with the understanding of the cultural setting of the era. The contemporary use is usually associated with negative meanings, such as boss, ruler or dictator. Authors Lewis and Hendricks offer an interesting observation:

“But if we are to ask that same ‘head’ question to the early Christians who first understood Paul’s radical usage of the term, I believe we would receive responses with a much different, life giving color: ‘protector’, ‘provider’, ‘lover’, ‘responsible for’, ‘developer of’” (Lewis & Hendricks, 1991:63).

Some of these descriptions are the basic roles of a husband, also mentioned in Ephesians 5:25-33.

The origin of the headship of men is found in two other passages written by Paul, and they are of great importance in understanding the concept as a whole. In the letter to the Corinthians, he writes, “Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God... For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man” (1 Co 11:3, 8-9). In the first letter to Timothy, he writes, “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tim 2:11-13). In both of these cases, Paul is presenting his argument from the story of creation. Stott writes,

“And since it is mainly on these facts of creation (order, mode and purpose of the creation of Eve)⁴ that Paul bases his case for the husband’s headship, his argument has permanent and universal validity, and is not to be dismissed as culturally limited... what creation has established, no culture is able to destroy” (Stott, 1973:221).

Scholars of the *Word Commentary* offer a careful conclusion on Paul’s view of the

4 My insertion of the facts which were stated in the previous paragraph in the text. They are based on the fact that a woman was made after man, out of man and for man. A man is also born of a woman, so they are both dependent on one another.

headship.

“The writer’s point is this: the husband’s headship or authority, which the wife is to recognize, is one that is patterned on the unique character of Christ’s headship over the Church, and, as the rest of the passage will make clear, that sort of headship included Christ’s giving his life for the Church” (Lincoln, 2002:370).

To Love: A wife’s love for her husband might be taken for granted, but a husband’s love for his wife is not so commonly expected. It was so in the ancient world and it is so today. The ancient Greeks taught their men to love their wives, however, the word used for love was *phileo* or *eros*, first describing the friendly love and second, the sexual union. The Bible uses another word altogether in describing marital love. The word is *agape*, a love that is beyond all that can be imagined by man, a love that casts out all fear and gives its life for another. It certainly never fails; therefore it is God-breathed (1 Co 13:4-8).

Paul goes directly to the core of the role of the husband. Wasting no words, he writes, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). Paul specifically states that this kind of love is primarily sacrificial. It is a love that all followers of Jesus Christ must implement in their lives (Eph 1:1-2; Col 3:12-14), but here it is specifically addressing men and giving them two analogies to show how this should look. There is no better way to demonstrate an action that is so divine than with a heavenly example.

A husband must love his wife as Christ loves his church. Already noted, Christ showed his love for the church by sacrificing himself on the cross. The love of Christ is concerned with two areas of a husband’s love for his wife. Not only does the love of Christ become the model, but also the source from which the love of a husband should be expressed. The sacrificial death of Christ provides the moment in history when love was presented in action and where a relationship with his church was supremely expressed. His death unmistakably garnished his love for his bride (Eph 2:13).

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ sprang out of pure agape love; however, it was not without purpose. It was for the sake of the church, to be first cleansed and then sanctified. Sanctification is an important concept for Paul. He uses the term “holy” throughout his letter to the Ephesians and helps them to realize that sanctification includes being set apart for a purpose, to achieve moral purity. He calls them saints (Eph 1:1,15,18; 3:18) and reminds them that they were chosen before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in God’s sight (1:4; 5:3).

The process of sanctification is important to all believers. It is accompanied and accomplished “by the washing with water through the word.” The aorist

participle of the verb “to cleanse” carries a continuous meaning and thus the translation “cleansing” and not “have cleansed” (Lincoln, 2002: 375). It is a continuous process that is, at the beginning, accompanied with washing with water, alluding here to New Testament baptism (Stott, 1973:227).

Although sanctification and water cleansing are metaphors for salvation, here the reference is directly to water baptism. We read of such a cleansing in Hebrews 10:22. A secondary meaning is included in the phrase about washing with water. One part of the Jewish marriage preparation called for a bride to be cleansed with the bridal bath. Sampley comments that,

“thus Ephesians 5:23-27 has close affinity to Ezekiel 16:8-14 in that both reflect a *hieros gamos* (YHWH-Jerusalem, Christ-church) in which the groom cleanses his bride by washing with water and in which the result is a strong emphasis on the beauty and purity of the bride” (Sampley, 1971:43).

The love of Christ is an active love that is showered on the church. In the same way, the love of a husband is to be active, reflected in the sanctification of the wife. A wife who is loved is a radiant wife. The second purpose of the sacrificial love of Christ closely follows this form of love.

He, the groom of the wedding ceremony, is presenting himself with a bride that is radiant, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish. She is the perfect bride. She, by herself or by her own efforts, is not that pure. She is pure because of the preparation done beforehand by the groom, as discussed above. Now she is sanctified, and as such, she is presented to Christ.

The imagery of the bride and groom relationship between Christ and his church comes to culmination in Ephesians 5:26 and 27. Paul also explained this image to the Corinthians when he wrote to them saying, “I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him” (2 Co 11:2). However, he does not put the relationship between husband and wife to the side, rather, all the more, he is elaborating on the divine ordination and preparation for such a commitment. In the Epistle to the Ephesians Paul makes it abundantly clear that Christ himself is the one preparing the bride for himself, where in the letter to the Corinthians, Paul was expressing his own role in the presentation of the church to Christ.

Again, the church Christ is presenting to himself will, after his sanctifying work, be “radiant and without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish.” *Word Commentary* notes that,

“She is to be holy and blameless, the two terms found so frequently in OT contexts of cultic and ethical purity, used with the language of presentation in Col 1:22, and already taken up earlier in this letter in 1:4, where the display of such holiness and blamelessness is seen as the purpose of God’s election of

believers from before the foundation of the world. Impurity is what characterizes outsiders (cf. 4:19; 5:3); purity is the distinguishing mark of Christ's Church" (Lincoln, 2002:377).

It is important to understand here that husbands are incapable of accomplishing the complete sanctification of their wives. The point Paul was trying to make in giving this example was not to instruct husbands to be the savior of their wives and perform some sanctifying work in their wives. In all logic, this would truly be an overwhelming instruction, not a sensible one, since only Christ can save and sanctify a person. However, the implications of the role of the husband carry greater weight, as one would imagine. Here, Paul is exhorting husbands to love, explaining to them in great detail the role that is placed upon them. He uses the perfect example of the love of Christ in which it is crucial to include the salvation and sanctification process, to show this love to be sacrificial and unique. This is the kind of love husbands are to strive to have. There is only one who can save and sanctify, only one who has complete authority over all humanity — Jesus Christ. The husband, however, does have a responsibility to his wife.

Paul instructs them further in Ephesians 5:28-30. Bringing the exhortation back to the main role of the husband within the marriage relationship, he writes,

“In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church — for we are members of his body.”

At first glance, a striking regression occurs. The culmination of the divine sacrifice and cleansing of Jesus Christ through his love leads Paul to exhort husbands to love their wives as themselves. Many biblical commentators have tried to alter the translation, because it conveys a sense of a lower standard, that of self-love. However, the second sentence where Paul clearly repeats that “he who loves his wife loves himself” permits no other translation. Stott notes that “the probable explanation for Paul's descent to the more mundane level of self-love is that he is always a realist” (Stott, 1973:229). Paul truly is concerned with giving husbands and all believers reading this letter not just a theoretical instruction, but a practical one that can be followed with ease. This love of self is natural to mankind, and even in the Old Testament, God used this to give a law that was to be followed and was easily understood by all (Lev 19:18).

It is natural that man does not hate his body, but cares for it. Husbands are reminded by Paul that they are to treat their wives in the same way. Under their care, wives are to experience freedom and encouragement to achieve the full potential God has for them. If a child, for example, is nourished and taken care of, it is more likely that he will develop into an upright adult. If a child, or even an

adult, experiences physical or emotional malnutrition, neither can develop into the full potential intended by their Creator.

Paul brings back the example of Christ. He has always fed and cared for his church. Here Paul shifts from the analogy of church as bride and presents the church as the body of Christ, and with this, includes all the readers of the epistle as partakers of this wonderful nourishment from Christ (Eph 4:12-16). Paul reminds us all that we are members of this body and as such, must realize that we are the beneficiaries of the feeding and caring of Jesus Christ. Because of this, husbands must care for their wives in the same way and all believers should care for one another in the same way.

Concluding Words in Ephesians to Husbands and Wives

In the Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul stretches the idea of the mystery he so loved talking about. This mystery was, of course, no other than Christ, his Savior and Lord. At the close of the exhortation on the marriage relationship he quotes and interprets a verse from Genesis 2:24 and relates it to Christ and the church. He writes, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church” (Eph 5:31-32). In the quotation of Genesis, Paul is surely thinking of the close relationship between a man and a woman, however, in the second part, he introduces his own interpretation, wielding a deeper symbolism in connecting this passage to Christ and the church. Stott rightly states that,

“it is appropriate for him to do so because a ‘mystery’ is a revealed truth, and the profound ‘mystery’ here, namely the church’s union with Christ, is closely akin to that of Jewish-Gentile unity in the body of Christ, which had been revealed to him and of which he has written in 3:1-6” (Stott, 231).

In the view of the apostle Paul, the marriage relationship is a wonderful model of the union of Christ to his church.

As such a model, certain responsibilities are set in place and Paul closes his exhortation by again coming back to both husbands and wives. This time he directly addresses the husbands first, then indirectly addresses the wives and summarizes the instruction of the whole passage. He writes, “However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband” (Eph 5:33). The word respect here is the Greek word *phobetai*, which literally means “fears”. Modern translations would rather use one of the possible variant readings incorporated into “fear”, such as “respect”. The word “fear” has mostly negative connotations as understood today. However, the Greek

dictionary clearly states that this same word means fear in its basic form, but can be translated as respect (Amerl, 2000:188), reverence or even adoration (Stott, 231).

The exhortation for husbands to love their wives incorporates a love that is sacrificial and uplifting. It is a love that feeds and cares for another, and it borrows its motivation and example from the perfect love of Christ for his church. The exhortation for wives to submit and respect, reciprocates and willingly accepts this love and lets the husband achieve his full potential as the leader appointed by God. The primary example is the church; the one that is fed and cared for by Jesus Christ and joyfully accepts his encouragement.

Conclusion

In the beginning God created man and woman; he created them both in his image to bear the distinct characteristics of his personality and gave them specific tasks. They were to multiply and be fruitful, to fill the earth and be good stewards of all that was given to them. Adam was created first and from him and for him, Eve was created. She was called his helper, but in the most respectful and fulfilling way. She was not to be a slave with no rights, rather the closest companion and helper, to assure that Adam would achieve the full potential that God intended for him. When sin entered their world, many abnormalities of this divine plan came upfront and such a state led to the mistreatment of women that was present throughout all of antiquity and even to this day. By the time of Jesus, marriage relations were so distant from the original intent; God himself intervened and through Jesus made new humanity possible. Paul, as a disciple of Jesus Christ himself experienced this newness of life and was determined to teach it forth to people that called themselves Christians.

In the fifth chapter of Ephesians, there are important and deliberate instructions to men and women regarding their marital privileges and responsibilities. The writer is clear and understandable. All believers and followers of Jesus Christ must, first of all, live in the new reality of life, where mutual submission and love are the basic principles in any relationship. Jesus himself spoke of this amazing way of life. He said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). He himself was the first who did this for all by sacrificing himself on the cross.

Within the marriage relationship, the role models for husbands and wives are Christ and the church. This amazing divine relationship sets the tone of the entire reality of Christian marriage. Husbands are challenged to look at Christ's relationship to the church, to observe the way he sacrificed for her, loved her, cleansed her and made her holy and blameless and then live according to that

example. In a similar way, wives are challenged to observe the church, the bride and body of Christ, to notice her willing submission and respect and to then follow that same way. Both husbands and wives are called to willingly submit to one another, naturally springing from submission to Jesus Christ. However, wives are further and specifically instructed to submit to their husbands and husbands are called to lead and love their wives as themselves. The tasks set before each are not easy, however they are achievable in the power of the Holy Spirit of which Paul speaks of before entering into the exhortations to husbands and wives. The reality that a husband and wife are one flesh is the assurance of the divine approval which motivates and inspires all.

Counterarguments are understandable and important to this research. In today's culture, as was true even before, women were badly mistreated and thus the fight for the egalitarian view and equality sprung in all fields of life, including marriage. However, the roles presented in this paper do not allude to any kind of mistreatment or demeaning of women. It does look on the roles of men and women as different and unique to both husbands and wives. Wrapped in love and humility, these roles are presented as something useful for the growth of individuals and ultimately of the body of Christ and then the kingdom of heaven.

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Uloge muža i žene u kršćanskom bračnom odnosu (Efežanima 5)

Sažetak

Partneri su u bračnom odnosu jednaki pred Bogom zato što su oboje stvoreni na njegovu sliku. Zajedno oni u potpunosti odražavaju sliku Božju. Oboje su nositelji Božje osobnosti; oboje odražavaju određene aspekte Božjeg karaktera. Međutim, muž i žena dobili su različite uloge. U kontekstu kršćanskoga braka, prikazanog u Efežanima 5, partneri su pozvani na podložnost jedno drugome u ljubavi. U svjetlu te uzajamne podložnosti, žene se posebno potiču na podložnost svojim muževima, a muševci se posebno potiču ljubiti svoje žene. Muševci i žene uspoređeni su s Kristom i Crkvom, što tom odnosu daje posebnu svrhu i značenje, jedinstveno mjesto u okviru biblijskih odnosa, prikazujući ga kao značajnim, mjerodavnim i vitalnim. Dakako da postoje određeni kulturalni aspekti uloga; međutim, uspoređivanje tog odnosa s Kristom i Crkvom daje tim ulogama unutar braka vječnu, kulturno prenosivu vrijednost. Krist će uvijek biti Glava svoje Crkve i uvijek će voljeti svoju Zaručnicu, a Crkva će uvijek biti pozvana na podložnost i poštivanje prema njemu do kraja.

Ključne riječi: brak, uloge, Poslanica Efežanima, Krist, Crkva, podložnost