

Submission in Ephesians 5

This passage has created a great deal of controversy and consternation for many people. In particular, these verses have been misused by both legalistic pastors and self-centered husbands to argue for an excessive form of subordination of wives to their husbands. The basic assumption here is that Paul was commanding wives to be in total submission to the will of their husbands, and that should be the end of the discussion.

Unfortunately, there have been a number of reactions against this view that are either unconvincing or rooted in modern biases: calling Paul a misogynist, for example; or assuming that post-modern ethics are more compassionate than what we read in the Bible; or simply dismissing the entire conversation as a problem with ancient culture.

Attempting to dismiss Paul and his views as culturally irrelevant is not the answer. What is needed here is to view this specific passage in the larger context in which Paul is casting a vision for Christian community that is actually quite different from the pagan culture around them, even radically so, because it is based on powerful implications that are derived from the Christian worldview he laid out in the first three chapters of Ephesians.

A Better Approach

To make sense of this, we need to grasp both the larger picture of what Paul is communicating as well as the means by which he accomplishes this.

To begin with, we often lose a lot in translating Paul's Greek into modern English; it is simply an occupational hazard of translation. First century Greek allowed for matters of style and emphasis that we simply do not have in English literature. For example, Paul often makes use of incredibly long sentences, stringing several ideas together into a single concept. In English, we call these "run-on sentences" and chop them up into shorter ones, but at the cost of sacrificing the tone and cohesiveness that Paul intended.

Furthermore, whoever it was that broke up the letter into chapters could have done a better job. The greater context actually begins in verse 5:1 and goes through 6:9. where Paul is summarizing how the wonderful vision of chapters 1 and 3 would look if it were fleshed out in everyday life. The

overall sense of chapter 5 is best captured if we focus on the verbal forms¹ as in the following section. Imperatives are marked with [i] and participles which expand the meaning of the imperatives are marked with [p].

1: [i] Be imitators of God ... [i] walk in love

8: [i] walk in the light ... the fruit of which is righteousness and goodness ... [p] discerning what is well-pleasing to the Lord.

15: [i] Take heed how you walk ... [p] redeeming the time ...

18: [i] Be filled with the Spirit ... [p] speaking in psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, [p] singing and [p] making melody in your heart ... [p] giving thanks ... [p] submitting yourselves to one another.

Paul then expands what he means by this "mutual submission" and this section runs from 5:21 to 6:9. But this is all connected very closely with what he has just presented. "Submitting" is just one more aspect of his earlier command to "Be filled with the Spirit ... speaking ... singing ... giving thanks ... submitting to one another."

In addition to the chapter break, many English Bibles put another break between verses 21 and 22, as if Paul is changing gears and moving into a series of directives, something like this:

20-21: Always give thanks ... and subject yourselves to one another.

Marriage Directives

22: Wives, submit to your husbands ...

But in the Greek, Paul is in the middle of presenting one continuous thought about mutual submission, and verse 21 is strongly connected to the following verses, including those in chapter 6. So his overall structure is more like the following:

... giving thanks ... and submitting to one another: (for example)
 wives to husbands ... husbands to wives ... children to parents ...
 fathers for the good of children ... servants to masters ... masters to servants.

1 An *imperative* is a verbal command; a *participle* is a verb that acts more like an adjective that is used to expand the meaning of a word or phrase.

What we need to understand here, is that "mutual submission" was a radical proposal in the first century, where every interaction between people had to account for who had the power in the relationship and who did not. Male head-of-households had absolute power, including the power of life and death, over every other person in the home. Calling for anything close to mutuality was a radical idea.

Paul is actually casting a vision here that presents a beautiful picture of loving relationships, in which he uses very few imperatives (such as "love" and "be filled" and "take heed") followed by a string of participles whose purpose is to flesh out the meaning of those relational and highly moral commands. This creates a wonderful vision of life, which unfortunately gets lost in English where the participles all get translated as imperative commands. And it is only when we catch Paul's overall flavor and image that we can make sense of the particulars.

It is crucial to understand that nearly all English translations have given this passage a sense of imperative commands, while in the Greek text, from verse 18 on there are very few imperative verbs (e.g. for husband to "love" his wife; vs. 25,33). The word "submit" does not actually occur in verse 22. Rather, Paul is providing his first example of mutual submission that we would expect to result from being filled with the Spirit.

In fact, the manner in which the Greek is constructed would lead us to understand Paul's view of marriage relationships this way:

- Be filled with the Spirit ... submitting to one another:
- wives like the the way the church submits to Christ
 - husbands like the way Christ gives himself for the church.

This is very much in harmony with Jesus' teaching that, "In the world, people confuse greatness with the power to rule over one another ... it shall not be so among you ... greatness is found in serving one another."

In English, it is easy to miss Paul's view of husbands living in an attitude of giving themselves sacrificially for the good of their wives.² But this is fairly visible in the Greek construct, as well as in his extended description of how

2 Paul is actually repeating himself here. In 5:1 he sets the tone for the rest of the letter, telling us that imitating our self-giving Savior is the pattern for Christian living.

Jesus gave Himself sacrificially for the good of the church. We don't normally use the word "submission" to describe Jesus' sacrifice, but it was definitely a supreme act of costly giving and serving the needs of people. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve ..." In the same manner, a husband who is "filled with the Spirit" and learning to "be an imitator of God" and "live in love" (all imperatives in the previous verses) will serve the needs of his wife (physical, emotional, spiritual, etc.).

The truth is that Paul spends a great deal of time on this matter of a husband loving his wife as Christ loved the church. This would actually be a radical departure from the cultural norms, but in such a way that would bring life to the family and act as a light in the world. Paul even makes a case for the husband viewing his wife and himself as "one" so that he would care for her needs as he would his own.

On the other hand, his admonitions toward the wife are in line with what most people would see as maintaining harmony in the home. Paul is not trying to start a culture war, but instead he is promoting the value of love between people (looking out for the good of one another) whether they might be a slave, master, child, father, husband, or wife.

So we have here a beautiful picture of mutual submission in marriage. We would expect it to take different forms (based on gender) in the ancient world, because women were completely dependent on men for their well-being. And Paul was carefully laying out what godly mutual submission would look like for them, in the only context anyone knew at the time.

Another area of interest is the meaning of verse 5:33 in this section. Almost without exception it gets translated along the lines of, "In conclusion, the husband should love his wife, and the wife should respect her husband." But this sort of glosses over the way Paul wrote the sentence. When Paul says that the husband should love his wife, he uses an imperative form of the verb – it acts as a command. But in referring to how the wife should respect her husband, he uses another form of Greek verbs (technically a *subjunctive*) that lacks the force of an imperative. The question is why. He could have just as easily made it another imperative. And virtually every English translation assumes that Paul intended the verb to be taken as a parallel command. And while the sentence structure clearly presents the two sides in a parallel manner, Paul's emphasis seems to fall somewhere

between the force of "ought to respect" and the idea of "if the husband truly loves his wife, it would lead her to respect her husband."

Also, it would not be too difficult to make a case for healthy families being the foundation for a healthy, functioning culture. And one of the keys to a healthy family is a mature, nurturing husband and father. One of the best ways to raise good men and strong daughters is have parents who live in joyful harmony with each other. And in particular, to have a father who uses his power for the good of everyone around him, especially his wife. That is an imitation of Christ, who brings life to those who know Him.

Finally, a cultural observation. It is tempting to judge Paul's view of family from the perspective of modern first-world family life. However, the ancient world relied on certain social structures for survival. For example, Paul tells servants to obey their earthly masters. We moderns find this objectionable, because we believe that servitude is bad. But in the ancient world, servants existed for many reasons, including economic necessity, as what a person might need to do who would otherwise be homeless or bankrupt. Similarly, family survival depended to a great extent on the physical stamina of the men in the family. Over 95 percent of the population depended on farming for a living, all done by hand. In many ways, this placed men in the position of making life-sustaining decisions on a regular basis for the well-being of everyone. Indeed this was the case for most of humanity for most of history, and even today for much of the third world peoples.

Consequently, Paul was never in a position where he could propose a radically different social structure than what already existed. His intent in his writings was to help people live well within the circumstances in which they found themselves and lived in day by day. So he instructs men to be the best family leader possible, and for women to be the best possible wives, all within their culture as they found it. Whether he might have written this differently in the 21st century West, is perhaps up for debate. But at the very least, we should be careful about being too dogmatic.

What we can say with confidence, is that Paul encouraged loving marriages in which husbands and wives looked out for the good of each other. And it would be a misuse of this passage to try to justify dominating another person (be it a servant or a wife) or to force first-century cultural norms into our present context.

We need to go back to the beginning of chapter 5 and see that Paul is trying to describe what it means to "live in love" and to be "imitators of God" and to "be filled with the Spirit." This was never meant to be a set of legalistic commands.

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