

"Wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything"



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I consider myself a rather "conservative" scholar on matters of interpretation, though, honestly, I do not think labels such as "conservative" or "liberal" ought to be applied to interpretation of the Scriptures. The real issue in interpreting the Scriptures, the major dividing line, is whether one considers the Scriptures the inspired word of God, revealed for our guidance and salvation, or interesting, ancient writings which have no particular hold on us 2,000 years later, except for antiquarian reasons. I place myself on the side of the Scriptures as the word of God, but also believe that as the Word was revealed historically we can, and ought, to study the Scriptures in historical context. A passage such as Ephesians 5:21-32 brings to bear many of the historical and cultural realities which impinge on our appropriation of God's word.

The first reality, though, is the text itself. The passage begins in this manner:

Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord.

For the husband is head of his wife

just as Christ is head of the church,

he himself the savior of the body. As the church is subordinate to Christ,

so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. (Ephesians 5:21-24)

The first verse is one that is compelling to most Christians today: be "subordinate" to one another. The verb that is used here and throughout

Ephesians 5 is *hypotasso*, which is well-translated by "subordinate," but could also be translated as "be obedient to" or "be subject to." The sense of mutuality and equality here is appealing, and seems to fit with both Jesus' instructions to his Apostles to live a life of service to one another (see Mark 10:35-45) and Paul's discussion of the Christian life in Philippians, particularly in chapter two, both prior to and including the Hymn to Christ. Philippians 2:4 is a good example of Paul's understanding of self-giving, cruciform love: "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."

Then we come to more particular instructions: "wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord"; and "wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything." We will come to some of the qualifiers in short time, but let's allow these verses to resonate and sink in. In the same way that the Bible emerges from particular cultures, in the case of Ephesians the 1st century Greco-Roman world, so too do we emerge from a particular world. And in my 21st century world I do not know how to make sense of these commands. I do not want my wife to be subordinate to me in everything, as she has gifts and abilities that I do not; these are not simply mundane skills, but spiritual gifts and I would not prefer that she subordinate these to my own needs and desires. I would prefer to subordinate my own needs and desires to reality and out of love for her, our family and, frankly, me. I also know that these verses have been used to justify the abuse of women. This is a crude reading of these verses, but I know of men who have grasped these verses as a license to do much that is abhorrent with the supposed blessing of Scripture.

The 1st century, though, knew the *patria potestas*, "the power of the father," which was theoretically unlimited, though in practice often muted by familial and social concerns. In theory, though, it gave the father unlimited power over his family, including the right to reject a child from the family and so have it exposed or killed, which did indeed happen. The wife, like the children (often including married children), servants and slaves were all a part of the hierarchical family, subsumed to the authority of the *pater familias*. This passage in Ephesians seems to reflect some of the realities of the *patria potestas*, though it must be noted that Christians, following the Jewish example, rejected exposure and infanticide without exception.

Ephesians 5, though, does reflect the hierarchical structure of 1st century family life: "the husband is the head of his wife."

The passage does move, however, to a more palatable consideration of hierarchy for Christians today: "Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body." The Lordship of Christ is not a cultural or social manifestation of a particular historical period is it? No, it is a reality. Christ's hierarchical position with respect to us is not made manifest in abuse of power or rampaging selfishness, but in the absolute giving of himself for us. This, says Ephesians, is the model for husbands: Christ's sacrificial giving.

*Husbands, love your wives,
even as Christ loved the church
and handed himself over for her to sanctify her,
cleansing her by the bath of water with the word,
that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or
wrinkle or any such thing,
that she might be holy and without blemish.
So also husbands should love their wives as their own bodies.
He who loves his wife loves himself.
For no one hates his own flesh
but rather nourishes and cherishes it,
even as Christ does the church,
because we are members of his body. (Ephesians 5: 25-30)*

If this is the case, that we are to love our wives as Christ loved the Church, the body of Christ, how does hierarchy enter into our relationships with our wives? Christ is God, his hierarchical position is his very being, God of God, light of light, true God of true God. The husband, like the wife, is simply a creation of God, stained by original sin and tempted by sin. Hierarchy in the marriage relationship as described in this passage seems to me to be a cultural byproduct of 1st century marriage and the understanding of hierarchical relationships within the family as a whole. While Christ's Lordship is the essence of his being, the husband today need not mimic the hierarchical order of the 1st century family, but only the eternal model of Christ, who gave himself for the Church and subsumed his power to weakness in order to save us.

I cannot accept that the model father and husband in the 21st century is based upon an obsolete model of the hierarchical family of the 1st century Greco-Roman world; this element of the passage - "wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything" - is a remnant of a cultural reality that need not be ours. I take as my model two aspects of the passage: "be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ;" and "husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church." We must be able to maintain the theological truth of the Bible, as the word of God, as Truth - let me give it a capital T - but need we maintain every cultural strand woven into the text from the historical context out of which it emerged? I do not think so, though I know the task is difficult, as it seems then that the word of God is relativized or made palatable for a culture that does not want to confront the Truth. Is this the case? Is this a flight from meaning? Sometimes it could be, but I would argue it is not always the case. Each passage must be considered carefully on its own terms. I have tried hard to imagine what "subordination" to the husband in the marriage relationship would look like, thought seriously and meditated on this passage, and I do not want my wife to be subordinate to me in everything. I want a relationship based on the love of mutual give and take, in which Christ's love is the model for both of us.