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Bridging the Ephesians 5 Divide

A fresh look at what this controversial marriage passage says--and doesn't say.

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Marriage is a mystery: The Bible says that husband and wife become "one flesh," as head and body, in the likeness of Christ and the church. The husband is the head; the wife is the body. Together they project a spiritual image, a bizarre picture of a male-headed female body.

The language of "one flesh" and "head" is metaphorical, of course. And as Eugene Peterson wisely puts it, "A metaphor, instead of pinning down meaning, lets it loose. The metaphor does not so much define or label as it does expand."

But as metaphors expand into mystery, we become impatient, and we start reading into the metaphor things that are not there.

For example, it is often assumed that the word head means "leader"--though the Bible never says the husband is the "leader" of his wife. The mystery of one flesh is exchanged for a business model in which the husband is the boss and the wife his assistant.

In addition, many evangelicals assume that the husband is the head of the house. But the Bible does not say that. It says that the husband is the head "of the wife" (Eph. 5:23). He is the head of her. That makes sense in light of the biblical picture of one flesh. It's nonsensical, by contrast, for anyone to think that the husband is one flesh with his household.

The back-and-forth crossfire in the gender wars can, in part, be traced to our tendency to attempt to solve an uncomfortable mystery rather than honoring the biblical metaphor that describes it. But a careful look at the biblical teaching on marriage may well transcend the gridlock that we're in. Let's take Ephesians 5 as a prime example.

One Tricky Passage

Most evangelicals would probably agree that Ephesians 5 contains the most vivid biblical teaching on marriage. Many, however, argue over which verse--Ephesians 5:21 ("be subject to one another") or 5:22 (translated as "wives, be subject to your own husbands")--marks the beginning of the paragraph on marriage. This disagreement is significant because the first line of the paragraph, particularly in this case, may determine the practical meaning of the passage.

Everyone agrees that chapter 5 begins by addressing a general audience of believers. Verse 1 says, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children." Verse 2, "And walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave himself up for us." If we skip down a ways, we find that Ephesians 5:18-21, still addressing a general audience, forms a single sentence in the Greek. The New American Standard Bible renders it this way:

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our

Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

It's inconsistent to say that the first four commandments--not to be drunk with wine, to speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, to sing and make melody with our hearts to the Lord, and to give thanks to God for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--apply to everyone equally while the fifth and final commandment--to be subject to one another as a matter of fearing the Lord--is suddenly one-directional, applying only to some, but not to others. Yes, we need leaders in the church. But the verse is pretty clear that mutual submission in the Christian community applies to all Christians generally.

If we look at the Greek, the very next verse says literally, "Wives, to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22). In the Greek there is no verb. Wives do what? To find out, we have to refer to verse 21. In Ephesians 5:21, the verb is "be subject," so that's what it is in verse 22. This, by the way, explains why many scholars believe that Ephesians 5:21-22 are inseparably interconnected. The verb in verse 22 must be supplied by verse 21. Otherwise, Ephesians 5:22 is verbless.

So, then, where does the paragraph begin? In Ephesians 5:21, where the verb is supplied? Or in Ephesians 5:22, where Paul addresses wives?

If we start with Ephesians 5:21, it appears that a husband and wife should "be subject to one another" within marriage. Egalitarians refer to this dynamic as "mutual submission." They say husbands are commanded to submit to their own wives just as wives are commanded to submit to their own husbands.

However, if we start with Ephesians 5:22, it appears that only a wife should be subject to her own husband, since the passage doesn't tell the husband specifically to be subject to his wife. Notice that both sides agree that God commands the wife to be subject to her own husband. Evangelical feminists are not so feminist as to deny the biblical mandate for wives to be submissive to their husbands.

Granted, I have seen female students in Christian higher education calling themselves "Christian feminists" as a hopeful way of escaping the act of submission. They are so afraid to submit that they call submission "the S word." But in reality, evangelical feminism offers no escape from submission. Contrary to popular belief, the disagreement between conservatives comes not with regard to the biblical duty of the wife, but rather the biblical duty of the husband. The question has to do more particularly with him. Does the Bible command the husband to be subject to his wife?

This is a tricky question. If we say the answer is no, then the logical conclusion is that a husband is supposed to "be subject" to every believer (Eph. 5:21) except his wife. That's a little difficult to swallow. At the same time, we must, at the minimum, concede that Ephesians 5:22?"Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord"--means something. It is not a mere repetition of Ephesians 5:21. On the contrary, it suggests something different insofar as the verse commands the wife alone to be subject to her own husband.

Though it's scary for some to admit, the Bible nowhere explicitly commands the husband to be subject to his own wife. It's the evangelical feminists who keep saying that

husbands should submit to their wives. They have little motivation to bring attention to the fact that mutual submission is not mentioned in the context of Paul's teaching on marriage found in Ephesians 5:22-33. The truth is that when the passage narrows to the more specific audience of husbands and wives, Paul tells only wives to be subject.

There's something else we have to confess. Nowhere in Scripture is a husband told to lead his wife. As I noted earlier, this idea is very popular, but it doesn't derive directly from God's Word. Complementarians are the ones who keep saying that husbands should lead their wives. The apostle Paul never says that once in all his letters. Jesus doesn't say it either. Neither does Peter or John. No one in the New Testament ever says it. In fact, God never says it in the Old Testament, although many like to think that it's found somewhere in Genesis 1-3. But complementarians are not interested in publicly pointing out that the words *lead*, *leader*, *servant leader*, and *spiritual leader* cannot be found in any Bible passage on marriage.

What the Bible Does Say

One of the main reasons I don't take sides in this debate is because Ephesians 5:22-33 says something different from what I hear either side saying.

By way of explanation, let's do a quick exercise. Try to match the words on the left with the correct words on the right to form the three biblical couplets introduced in Ephesians 5:22-33:

1. *body* a. *sacrifice*

2. *submit* b. *love*

3. *respect* c. *head*

The correct answers, of course, are 1-c, 2-a, and 3-b. This exercise is helpful because it illustrates so simply the relational dynamics that should characterize a husband and wife. It also exposes the most popular misconceptions about marriage.

Look at the text below, and then I'll show you what I mean.

²²Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³For 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. ²⁴But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶so that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷that 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. ²⁸So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; ²⁹for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body. ³¹For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. ³²This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. ³³Nevertheless, 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 (NASB).

Three couplets are presented in the passage:

1. **SUBMISSION/SACRIFICE:** The wife is to be subject to her husband in everything, and he is to sacrifice himself for her. The dynamic is for her to submit and him to sacrifice (vv. 22, 24, and 25).
2. **BODY/HEAD:** The wife is the body, and the husband is the head. Together they form one flesh (vv. 23, 28, and 31).
3. **RESPECT/LOVE:** The wife is commanded to respect her husband, while the husband is commanded to love his wife (vv. 28 and 33).

Yet the majority of Christians have been taught to believe that submission correlates to headship. Space constraints forbid exploring how these relational dynamics might be better understood and lived out today, but suffice it to say that we should think about these issues based on the biblical correlations, not our own.

When this passage is explained in traditional terms, it's too often seen as applying only to crisis situations. The husband is told to prepare himself to die for his wife if ever her physical life might be endangered. Many Christian women think the commandment to submit applies only during times of marital conflict. When it's time for a family decision, the wife is to submit by deferring to her husband's final judgment.

The problem with this model of emergency-time sacrifice and impasse-time submission is that it fails to meet the scriptural standards. The Bible says that wives are to be subject to their husbands "in everything." Likewise, the sacrifice of husbands is a full-time relational posture.

What does it mean for the husband to sacrifice and the wife to submit? In what sense is the husband the head and the wife the body? How exactly are husband and wife one flesh? These are important questions that cannot be answered briefly. For now, a careful look at what this passage actually says shows that a fresh approach to gender issues can be very fruitful, even surprising.

If nothing else, it may suggest a reason why the divorce rate is so high among evangelicals--though, of course, that's merely speculative. Our current understandings of marriage inadvertently pit husband and wife against one another: as leader and assistant, or as two individuals protecting their prerogatives. The Ephesians metaphor moves to a climax, so to speak, of the two becoming one. I can't help but wonder if the divorce rate in the church might decrease if we would recognize the mystery of God fusing a husband and wife into "one flesh." It's not very disturbing for a leader to break up with his assistant, or for two equal individuals to decide to go their own ways. But it is utterly disconcerting to imagine a bloody rupture between a body and its head. That's why God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), and that's why he commands every husband to cleave to his wife.

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Jot, Tittle, and Paragraph Marks

In many ways, we in conservative churches stand at odds with one another not over a matter of orthodoxy or salvation, but rather because we sharply disagree on where a certain paragraph begins. Whereas egalitarians usually say the paragraph on marriage begins with Ephesians 5:21, complementarians usually say that it begins with Ephesians 5:22.

It's important to identify where the paragraph begins. But it's much more important for us as members of Christ to respect those who contend for an opposing position, especially since the answer is unknown. Rather than accusing one another or holding one another in suspicion for reading the same Bible slightly differently, we could be striving for unity. After all, it's not liberal to insist that Ephesians 5:21 informs Ephesians 5:22. Nor is it unscholarly to insist that the paragraph on marriage begins with verse 22. It's not heretical to begin with either verse.

It's important, even critical, to be accurate. We are held responsible to handle the Word accurately and to discern the proper meaning of every principle and practice the Bible teaches. But a minor discrepancy such as this one shouldn't be so divisive. We all agree that Christ belongs at the center of every marriage.

--Sarah Sumner

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