

**“The Grace of Marriage”**  
**Ephesians 5:21-33**  
**January 20, 2002**

**Text Comment**

Now, as everyone knows, this passage has become suddenly controversial in our time. It used to be thought the most lovely passage in the Bible on the life of marriage and was read at many weddings. Now, it seems, it has become beset by problems. The change is due, of course, to the rise of feminism in the Western world and, therefore, to the increasing dislike of the Bible’s teaching about men and women. Now feminist-minded Christians, obviously, cannot dismiss the teaching of the Bible, and so great efforts have been made, here and elsewhere, to prove that the Bible is not, in fact, saying what it has always been taken to be saying. The goal is to demonstrate that, even in this text, there is no teaching, not really, to the effect that the woman occupies, in any sense, a lower place in the marriage than her husband or that the wife must submit to him. I will not spend the whole of my time discussing these efforts to reinterpret the text, but I cannot ignore them either.

v.21 The first argument the feminist interpreters use is that here, in v. 21, we are taught *mutual* submission. Submit to *one another*. So, the submission that is mentioned in the next verse as being required of women, is just a species of that submission that is just as well required of men. We are all to submit to one another. Wives may be required to submit to their husbands, but husbands are just as well required to submit to their wives. Usually, then, submission is then defined as thoughtfulness, a loving attitude toward others, consideration, putting the interests of others first, and the like. In that way, there is nothing left in the passage of any unique authority that belongs to the husband. What applies to the wife, applies to the husband as well.

But several obvious points should be made in reply. *First*, “to submit” in the Bible does not mean “to be considerate” but “to be subject to.” The word is used of the young Jesus’ subjection to his parents, of the subjection of the demons to the disciples, of citizens being subject to their government, of the universe being subject to Christ, of Christians being subject to God, and so on. What is more, never, in the Bible, are such relationships reversed so that God is also subject to Christians and Christ subject to the universe! Submission, as a biblical idea, places one person or thing *under* another. That is simply what the word means. Redefining words is a characteristic tactic of revolutionary movements and feminism is no different. To give the verb here in v. 20 and 21 a different meaning than it has everywhere else in the Bible, everywhere else in the Greek language for that matter, is a predictable move, but we should not be taken in by it.

*Second*, the “one another” in v. 20 hardly requires the interpretation of the feminists, as if every Christian is being commanded to be subject to every other Christian. Surely, in the passage that follows, for example, we are not being taught that parents are to be subject to their children in the same way in which children are to be subject to their parents. “One another” does not in fact mean “everyone to everyone” as the feminist interpreters claim. It *can* mean that, to be sure. For example the same word is used in John 13:34 where the

Lord commands us to “love one another.” But very often, in context, the word simply means “certain ones to certain other ones.” For example, in 1 Cor. 11:33 the believers are told that when they come to eat the Lord’s Supper, they should “wait for one another.” In context, obviously, that means that those who are already there should wait for those who are not. There are many such uses of the term in the NT. In this text, wives are to be subject to their husbands, children to parents, slaves to masters, but clearly not the other way round. This is just the ordinary meaning of language and to seek to overturn it for the sake of one’s ideology, however predictable a tactic, is a crime against truth and honesty.

The reason the church never saw this feminist idea of “mutual submission” in v. 20 before the feminist revolution of 30 years ago, is because it isn’t there. And, further, nowhere else does the Bible teach that husbands are to be subject to their wives in the same way that wives are to their husbands. Indeed, the Bible teaches everywhere the same thing Paul teaches here and, indeed, provides its larger context with its teaching of masculinity and femininity as divinely created orders of being, each with specific callings and characteristics.

Now, having said all that, let me say also that, of course, there is a mutual submission in the Christian life, even if it does not set aside all hierarchy of roles. For example, in 1 Peter 5:5 the exhortation “you that are younger be subject to the elders” is immediately followed by the further appeal “clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another.” [Lincoln, *WBC*, 366] We have an obligation to love and serve one another, but that does not nullify the relationships that God has established for the life of mankind and of his church. As one scholar writes, “The general injunction for all members of the Christian community, ‘Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ,’ is clearly spelled out for the Christian wife as requiring submission and inequality.” [Schussler Fiorenza in Lincoln, 366]

v.23 Now Paul explains the woman’s obligation to submit to her husband. It is an obligation grounded in the nature of things as God made them. The husband *is* the head of the wife.

The second move made by feminist re-interpreters (and I call them *re*-interpreters to remind you that the feminist exegesis of this passage amounts to saying that the Christian church in all of its parts has completely misunderstood Paul from the very beginning. A consensus of interpretation existed for nearly 2000 years until these feminist interpreters told us that the church had universally mis-read its Bible); the second move, I say, is that they interpret the Greek word *kephale* as “source” rather than “head.” The husband is the source of the wife, in the sense that Eve was created from Adam’s rib, and nothing is being said about his being her head or having authority over her. Long articles have been written on both sides of this question and much heat generated, but the battle is over, it was over before it began. The word here means “head” and with obvious implications of authority. The feminist interpreters have tried to find somewhere in the corpus of the Greek language a single clear use of *kephale* meaning “source” but have not yet succeeded in finding one, though now it is possible with computer searches to survey the entire body of ancient Greek literature with its thousands of uses of *kephale*. Serious

lexicographers – that is the scholars who produce the dictionaries of ancient languages – most of whom are not evangelical Christians and have nothing at stake in the debate, do not recognize “source” as a possible translation of *kephale*.

We have the word used in Ephesians in 1:22, where Christ is said to have been appointed by the Father “head over all things for the church.” Everybody knows what the word means. The effort to evade its obvious meaning is the proof that ideology is at work here, not an honest effort to understand the Holy Scripture.

- v.26 “Christ loved the church not because it was...lovable, but in order to make it such.” [Westcott in Lincoln, *WBC*, 375] This cleansing takes place in time through baptism – which marks the new beginning in life -- and the “word” or “gospel” which is believed for salvation.
- v.28 Now Paul returns to the husband’s love of his wife for which Christ’s love for the church is a pattern or model.
- v.32 The mystery is that we are members of Christ’s body, the marriage between Christ and the church to which human marriage points and from which human marriage receives its pattern.
- v.33 The word the NIV renders “respect” is the word “fear,” but, clearly, in context, it is fear understood in the sense of respect and reverence for his God-given role, not a slavish fear of his anger or his power over her.

When I am talking to a young couple in anticipation of their marriage, in what, alas, is nowadays called *pre-marital counseling*, we come in due time to Ephesians 5:21-33 and the question of “roles.” And I ask them at the outset what they think Paul means. I ask the young woman, “What exactly does it mean for a woman to submit to her husband? I mean, what does it mean, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday; what does it mean in ordinary life? How is this worked out?”

Ordinarily, she purses her lips, thinks for a while, and then says something along these lines: “Well, I suppose it means that if there is a matter about which you do not agree and cannot, after trying, reach an agreement, the husband must make the decision and the wife must submit to it.” And, I reply like this: “Well, I suppose that might be one meaning of Paul’s words, but I can’t remember that ever happening in my marriage and I can’t believe that Paul, in this great text that speaks about such fundamental things, is talking about something that may never apply to your marriage. Clearly he is talking about what is always to be true in your marriage!” So, what do you think he means. And then I get silence. Fact is, we argue about this text a great deal in the church nowadays, but we understood it a lot better in those days when no one thought about as much and just assumed that he or she knew what Paul was talking about.

For, the fact is, no devout Christian husband or wife, feminists notwithstanding, ever thought that Paul meant that a husband was to give his wife a list of duties as he left for the office in the morning and then check her work when he returned. The godly and gracious, from the very

beginning, knew that a man's headship did not make him his wife's boss! Nor did it mean that she was never to open her mouth or voice her opinion; certainly not, if as Peter says, husbands and wives are to live as heirs together of the gracious gift of life. From time immemorial godly men knew that woman was taken not from the head of a man to be his master, nor from his foot to be his servant, but from his side, to be his partner. [Peter Lombard, *Sent.*, Lib. II, Dis. xviii] Certainly, his headship over the woman was established by God when he was created first, when Adam named the first woman, and by their very natures as God made man and woman, but, upon her creation, Adam greeted his wife with the extravagant speech of love, gratitude, celebration, and personal fulfillment. And throughout the Bible, this is always the picture of true marriage: an ardent love, personal completeness found in a husband or wife, happy companionship, the profound sharing of life, the one flesh, as Paul mentions here, and the romantic/erotic fulfillment of desire for another person. The young woman, in the Song of Songs, who describes herself as "faint with love" does not anticipate and did not get a husband who ordered her around as if she were his servant. She got a husband who treasured her and who found her partnership with him in life God's second greatest gift to him and the joy of his life.

People will, of course, throw up the obvious fact that men have often been abusive and dismissive toward their wives, that many women have suffered in unhappy marriages because their husbands did not love and respect them. True enough. Shame on those miserable excuses for men! But, no one can read Paul here in Ephesians 5 and suppose that he would approve of such a man or such a marriage. It is not hard for us to imagine how the great Apostle would thunder against an unloving and harsh and disrespectful husband!

But, then, what is Paul saying here? How should the young couple sitting in my office answer my question?

Well, I tell them, "You know, Christians in previous generations had little problem with this text because they did not doubt the fundamental assertion of v. 23 that the husband *is* the head of his wife." That is not the point that Paul is attempting to prove here. He asserts it as unchallenged fact and, to be sure, it hasn't been challenged in almost all human history up to the present time, and even now, in our feminist society, there are a hundred ways in which men and women confess that the man is the head of the woman, the husband is the head of his wife. The man *is* the Head of his wife. He is not commanded to be the Head, he is not urged to be the Head, he is not scolded for failing to be the Head of his wife. He *is* her Head. God has made him so and nature – the nature of men and women – reproduces God's intention. This is also Paul's point in 1 Cor. 11. The man *is* the Head of the woman. But a man can exercise his headship sinfully or righteously.

Once you accept that fact, which is, of course, taught directly many places in the Word of God, you are free to see that Paul is not concerned *to defend* the distinction between men and women in marriage, but *to sanctify and purify* each gender, both man and woman, in married life. The man *is* the head of his wife. He simply is; God made him so. It is his nature and hers and no man or woman can change it. Sin will cause the woman to chafe under that order – we are told that by God when he cursed the woman in Genesis 3 for her part in the sin which plunged the human race into sin and death. "Your desire will be to control your husband, but he will rule over you," is what he said then to the woman. But the order itself, the relationship between man

and woman as God made it and ordered it, masculinity and femininity as two created orders of being, these are all very good. God made them and all that he made is very good.

So what Paul is saying here in these verses is that he expects these men in their marriages to be *distinctly and thoroughly Christian* men and for women, in their marriages, to be *distinctly and thoroughly Christian* women. The masculinity and femininity will take care of themselves. The purification and sanctification of those genders to fulfill the will of God, *that* is Paul's interest. Be a Christlike *man*; be a Christlike *woman*, that is what Paul is saying. And that is why Christian folk, even non-Christian folk weren't troubled by this passage a generation ago. They knew very well that God had made men and women different and that those differences prepared them for different places, different roles, different callings in life.

The best illustration I have come across to drive this point home is that of the ballet. It is a remarkable thing, I think, if you think about it, that you cannot really tell who is the better dancer when comparing an accomplished ballerina and a great male dancer. Who was the better dancer: Dame Margot Fonteyn or Rudolph Nureyev? No one can say. For they danced completely different roles and their roles required of them completely different things. All you know for sure is that, beautiful as *Swan Lake* was when they danced it together, it would have been grotesque had they attempted to switch roles, and Fonteyn attempted to lift Nureyev over her head. They might have done that for a joke, but never seriously. Each role is suited to a particular gender. Well, as in the ballet, so in life!

But what Paul is after is a man, a dancer if you will, who fulfills his role in Christ-likeness. His headship is one of authority to be sure, but it is an authority defined by his love and self-sacrifice and has nothing of selfish domination in it. And, in the same way, what Paul is after is a woman, a ballerina, who fulfills her femininity in a truly Christian way, who lives in her marriage, not unwillingly, not grudgingly, but lovingly and cheerfully and gratefully.

Unlike the feminists, we do not resent God's plan in creation. We do not resent that he made men to be men and women to be women, that he made the difference between men and women – however much they are in so many other ways and profound ways the same – to be so significant and so important. We say, with the French, *Vive la difference!* Long live the difference. But, as Christians we must also then say, Lord make me a Christian man and a Christian woman. Make me like Christ in the self-sacrificial love I give to my wife and make me like Christ in the loving submission I offer to the one whom God has placed above me. Let us be like Christ in the way he loved and ruled, and let us be like him in the way he so willingly subjected himself to the will of his Father. There was nothing forced in his obedience, nothing coerced. It came from his heart and was an offering of love and loyalty.

The feminist supposes that to require submission of the woman places her in a position of weakness and diminishes her personally. The Bible teaches, on the contrary, that such a submission, practiced as an act of faith, exalts her and renders her like Jesus Christ her Lord and Savior. It makes of her life something decisively Christian. The feminist supposes that this feminine submission places the man in a position of advantage over the woman. Only someone who knows nothing of Christ's self-sacrifice, nothing of the cross, nothing of Christ's love for

the church, could think such a thing. The Christian husband is fully embodied only in the man whose marriage, on his part, is most like a crucifixion! [Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 148]

Do you see the point? What Paul is after is *the grace of marriage*. That a man and a woman, according to the special nature of each, would bring into their marriage the spirit, the love, the principle of self-sacrifice that we find in the gospel of Jesus Christ, his saving love for us. This marriage, this Christian marriage has *nothing ordinary* about it. It is life as human beings can live only by the grace of God. It is life such as human beings *would want* to live only by the grace of God.

As Ronald Knox says to the young couple about to be married:

“Oh, you want to get married, do you? That means, you want to imitate the action of Jesus Christ in his incarnation. Well, God bless you; you will want all the grace I can rout out for you if you are to do that, a whole trousseau of graces.” [cited in Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction*, 210-211]

You men don't have to ask exactly how you are to exercise your authority over your wives. The Bible never tells you to do this and that. Your headship is natural in the truest sense of the word. All you have to concern yourself with is how to be her head in a truly Christ-like, self-sacrificing, loving way. Do that, you do all. And you women, hardly need to spend time parsing the verb “to submit.” The place of the woman is a fact of life. Claims sometimes made to the contrary, there has never been identified a culture in the history of the world in which men have not occupied the dominant position in relationships with women. She *is* the weaker vessel, as Peter puts it. It is kicking against the goads to protest this fact. But Christian women know that a woman's gender, her nature, is not something she should resent, or chafe under, but something she should receive from her Maker and practice in a genuinely humble, self-effacing, and grateful way. You have only to ask how in your marriage you can be a woman in as completely Christian a way as possible, as completely subject to the Lord and to the principle of his love as possible. Submit to your husbands *as to the Lord*, Paul writes. There is the issue, do what you do in your marriage *as to the Lord Jesus* and, as the generations of the godly have easily found, you will slip into a way of relating to your husband that is natural, and satisfying, and the beginning of a very great deal of pure pleasure.

This is why Ephesians 5:21-33 was, until very recently, thought to be the most beautiful passage in the Bible on marriage, and the favorite text to read at a wedding. If one accepts the reality of gender as God-created orders of being, as it is assumed and stated here by the Apostle Paul, and as Christians have always accepted it through the ages, what is left is not controversial, but inspiring and elevating: a summons for both men and women to be unreservedly Christian in the conduct of their marriage: men as men and women as women. Until recently, and really still today, no Christian really wants anything else: a woman wants a *man*, but a *Christian* man; and a man wants not another man, but a *woman*, but a *Christian* woman! Then what we find in marriage is the best of each gender, what each gender was made for, and how each serves the other, because each gender is sanctified by obedience to Christ and by the Spirit of Christ. In this way, especially today, as we read in v. 11 last Lord's Day, we can shine the light into the darkness of the world around us and demonstrate the goodness of the Lord in making men and

women as they are, in saving them by his grace, and in calling them to live out that grace in their own unique ways as men and women. When that is done, you have the furthest thing from a marriage that disadvantages one spouse or the other. You have rather such a marriage as everyone wants and everyone knows – believer and unbeliever alike – a marriage ought to be. In Paul’s day as in ours marriage as an institution was chaotic and to very many, women especially, deeply disappointing. But we have it in our hands to show the world what marriage should be and can be, if only we practice our faith in God and Christ.

Samuel Davies, the great preacher of colonial America, once took a trip back to England. At one stop he was arrested by a gravestone in an English churchyard. It read:

“She was – but words are wanting to say what;  
Think what a wife should be, and she was that.”

Paul’s point is that such a wife, or such a husband – what a husband or wife should be – is found where the man and the woman gratefully embrace their distinctive creation by God and seek in marriage to respond to God’s marvelous grace to them in Jesus Christ. They look at God’s creation of men and women, they look at Christ’s redemption, and they are entirely satisfied. They know both how they are to live and why. *No wonder that the world that does not know God either as creator or as savior, cannot make sense of Paul’s teaching on marriage!* It is one of the wonderful privileges of being a Christian: you know exactly what to make of and to do with your marriage! And to those who still worry that somehow, by surrendering themselves to the love and the law of Jesus Christ our Savior their rights may be jeopardized, here is another epitaph, an epitaph that could have been written about ten thousand times ten thousand Christian marriages which were built in happy thanksgiving upon the foundation Paul has laid here.

They were so one, that none could say  
Which of them rul’d, or whether did obey.  
He rul’d, because she would obey; and she,  
In so obeying, rul’d as well as he.

It is so, it is always so, where the love of Christ reigns! We may be his servants, but we are also his friends. We may be his slaves, indeed, but we are also his brothers. We may be required to obey him as our Master, but, more than that, we love him as our Savior. Obedience, submission, headship and rule are never so sweet as when they come as love from the heart.