

"Wives, Be Subject To Your Husbands"

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Several years ago I was invited to present the "W. B. West Jr., Lectures for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship" at the Harding Graduate School, Memphis, Tennessee. I was particularly asked to deal with the Biblical passages on women, and so I entitled the lectures The Role of Women: New Testament Perspectives.¹ My purpose at that time was to focus on the passages that

¹ Students of the Harding Graduate School made arrangements for the publication of the lectures: The Role of Women: New Testament Perspectives (Memphis: Student Association Press, 1978).

especially have to do with woman's role in the public assembly, such as 1 Corinthians 11, 1 Corinthians 14, and 1 Timothy 2. Since I was not able to deal directly with passages on woman's role in the home and her relationship to her husband, I now welcome the opportunity to address the subject, "Wives, be subject to your husbands."

There are three main passages in the New Testament which devote attention to the husband-wife relationship in the home: Ephesians 5: 22-33, Colossians 3: 18-19, and 1 Peter 3: 1-8. In each case these husband-wife admonitions are parts of longer sections of exhortation directed to other members of a Christian household. Martin Luther called this sketch of household duties a Haustafel, that is, a "house-table."² The Ephesian Haustafel, for example, consists of instructions

² For a good summary on the Haustafeln (pl.), see P. T. O'Brien, Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 44, Colossians, Philemon (Waco, Tx.: Word Books, 214-220); cf. also D. Schroeder, "Lists, Ethical," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplement, 546-547; F. Stagg, "The Domestic Code and Final Appeal Ephesians 5: 21 - 6: 24," Review and Expositor 76 (1979), 541-552; E. G. Hinson, "The Christian Household in Colossians 3: 18 - 4: 1," Review and Expositor 70 (1973), 495-506.

to wives and husbands (5: 22-23), to children and parents (6: 1-4), and to slaves and masters (6: 5-9); and the passages in Colossians and 1 Peter may be divided similarly. Although the structure and message of the "house-tables" are important in their own right, I want to turn attention to the verses on wives and husbands.

Ephesians 5: 22-23 is perhaps the grandest piece in all of literature on the relationship of husbands and wives. It is a question whether the section begins with verse 21 or 22. Actually, verse 21 is transitional. "Be subject" is a present participle, the last in a series of five participles ("speaking" in songs, "singing," "making melody," "giving thanks" and "submitting") which are to be taken together and conclude the paragraph. But "be subject to one another" (v. 21) also introduces the Ephesian "house-table," a significant rubric by which the rest is to be interpreted.³ So understood, "be subject to one another" is

³ J. Paul Sampley, 'And the Two Shall Become One Flesh,' A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5: 21-33 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 117.

the general principle, with wives, children, and slaves as illustrations of the principle. (Clearly, "be subject to one another" does not mean that husbands are to be subject to wives any more than parents are subject to children or masters to slaves.) The principle of submission is to be followed out of "fear for Christ."⁴

⁴ Phobos is the word for "fear"; "respect" and "reverence" may well be under-translations of the concept.

The conduct of the Christian at home should be determined by his disposition toward Christ.

If, as Paul later says (v. 31), husband and wife in marriage become one,⁵ each necessarily has duties toward the other. Wives are to be subject

⁵ "One flesh" is the equivalent of "one person" or "one body." Arndt-Gingrich-Danker, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 743; cf. the translations of the NEB and the RSV.

to their husbands (vv. 22, 24) "as to the Lord" and "in everything." "In everything" should not be deprived of meaning, which in context probably denotes everything in the marital relationship. "As to the Lord" is further explained in the next sentence, with the meaning that the wife regards submission to her husband as submission to Christ. The concluding exhortation to wives (v. 33) is that they "respect" and "revere" (lit. "fear") their husbands.

The duties of husbands to wives are equally demanding, and even more so if judged by the extent of the verses involved. Three times Paul says that husbands are to love their wives (vv. 25, 28, 33). And they are to love as Christ loved and died for the church (v. 25), as a man loves himself (v. 28), as one leaves . . . and cleaves to. . . and is faithfully devoted to his wife (v. 31).

Colossians 3: 18-19, though brief, contains similar injunctions to those in Ephesians. If wives must responsibly submit to their husbands, husbands must show loving care for their wives and not be sharp with them. An additional reason is given for submission of wives--"it is fitting in the Lord," that is, it is the right thing for a Christian to do.

1 Peter 3: 1-7 in its general import is not unlike Paul's teachings on husband and wife in Ephesians and Colossians. Peter, however, addressing the situation of a mixed marriage, gives specifics on how a believing wife is to relate

to her unbelieving husband. She, too, is to be submissive. She is not to be self-assertive, she is not to nag him because he is not a Christian. Instead, her chaste behavior does her speaking for her, behavior that is adorned by a "gentle and quiet spirit" in submissiveness. Sarah well illustrates such conduct. She "obeyed" Abraham, a point made explicit by Peter, showing that subjection to one's husband involves obedience. Submission, then, according to Peter, is a character trait and concerns one's whole way of life, which Christian wives are to exemplify.

As for Christian husbands, they are to live with their wives in a "considerate" and "understanding" manner.⁶ The husband is to recognize that his wife is the

⁶ Literally, kata gnōsin, "according to (Christian) knowledge"--with tact and understanding based on a knowledge of the gospel. Perhaps above all things, wives want "consideration" from their husbands.

"weaker vessel," that is, that her body, generally speaking, is not as strong as his (cf. the NEB here), and that together husband and wife are equally heirs of eternal life. Failing this, the mutual prayers of husband and wife will be blocked. On the other hand, living with understanding toward one's wife requires the husband especially to "honor" her.

These primary passages on the husband-wife relationship present special exegetical difficulties which need to be discussed. I might point out, however, that these would not be major problems if it were not for a recent surge of books and articles questioning the role of women. Again and again the relevant texts have been distorted and manipulated to mean what they obviously do not say. As always, what is needed is simply the careful exegesis of the texts in their

appropriate contexts. Certain terms in particular need explication and set correctly within their contextual frameworks.

1. Head (kephale). Paul expressly declares that "the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church" (Eph. 5: 23). Ephesians 1: 22 describes Christ as "head over all things to the church" (cf. Col. 1: 18; 2: 10), and Ephesians 4: 15 further speaks of Christ as head. When, therefore, the original readers of Ephesians read of Christ as head of the church and of the husband as head of the wife, they knew what Paul meant. They knew that the word "head" (kephale), in the words of the Arndt-Gingrich lexicon, denotes "superior rank."⁷

⁷ Arndt-Gingrich-Danker, 430.

Now what has changed? Rather recently, Stephen Bedale wrote an article entitled "The Meaning of Kephale in the Pauline Epistles," attempting to demonstrate that the word "head" does not indicate authority but means "source." Others, including C. K. Barrett, F. F. Bruce, and Colin Brown, have joined in with Bedale.⁸ But the evidence

⁸ C. K. Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), 248f.; F. F. Bruce, 1 and 2 Corinthians (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1971), 103; C. Brown, "Head," New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology II, 162, but Brown apparently contradicts K. Munzer in the same article.

for this, in all of Greek literature, is practically nil. Wayne Grudem's recent article has demonstrated this, in which he classifies more than 2,300 examples of the use of "head" (kephale) and ends up with only two possible occurrences of "head"

as "source"--and these are highly questionable.⁹

⁹ W. Grudem, "Does kephale ("head") Mean "Source" or "Authority Over" in Greek Literature? A survey of 2,336 Examples," in George W. Knight III, The Role Relationship of Men and Women (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 49-80.

But suppose there are a hundred examples of "head" (kephale) used as "source." This by itself would not prove anything. A hundred examples of the word in Greek literature would show that this is a possible meaning in the New Testament. Always what has to be determined is the actual New Testament use of the word, and this always according to the meaning the context supplies. In Ephesians 1: 22 Christ as "head" is in connection with "far above all rule and authority and power" (v. 21) and "put (lit. "subjected," from hypotasso) all things under his feet" (v. 22). In Ephesians 5: 23 Christ as head of the church is followed in 5: 24 with "as the church is subject (from: hypotasso) to Christ." In both cases "head" (kephale) is contextually related to "subject" (hypotasso). I ask you, "in these passages, is Christ the "source" or is he "head over" the church? Likewise here, is the husband the "source" of the wife or "head over" the wife?

2. "Subject" (hypotasso). What does Paul precisely mean when he says, "Wives, be subject to your husbands" (Eph. 5: 22, 24; cf. 5: 24; Col. 3: 18; Tit. 2: 5; 1 Pet. 3: 1, 5)? The verb "subject" (hypotasso) is found in the New Testament about forty times: in the active, "to subject" or "to subordinate," in the passive, "to be subjected," "to be subordinated," "to obey," "to subject oneself."¹⁰

¹⁰ Arndt-Gingrich-Danker, 848.

A few illustrations may clarify its meaning. Jesus was subject (RSV, "obedient") to his parents (Lk. 2: 51); everyone is to be subject to the governing authorities (Rom. 13: 1); Christians are to submit themselves to God (Js. 4: 7); the younger men are to submit themselves to the older men (1 Pet. 5: 5); and so forth.

There has been an increasing effort in recent years to soften the meaning of "subject." In a society where "coheadship" and "female leadership" in the home are advocated, submission of wife to husband cuts across the grain. J. B. Phillips had translated that wives were "to learn to adapt" themselves to their husbands. Others suggest that "submission" really means "devotion."¹¹ Such

¹¹ E. g., D. Fennema, "Unity in Marriage," Reformed Review 25 (1971), 65.

contortions of the text are scarcely worthy of comment, for any diminishing of the term "submission" takes away from the "submission" that the church renders to Christ. "As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands."

On this entire subject another term is often overlooked and frequently misunderstood. Yet it is the very term that explains the nature of headship and transforms the meaning of subjection.

3. Love (agape, agapao). As we have seen, husbands are not to be bitter against their wives. They are to honor them, they are to love them. But why is "love" required of husbands and "submission" of wives? Some describe this as unfair and go so far as to say that this reveals Paul's ingrained prejudice against women.

The word "love," whether in Greek or English, is wide-open to misunderstanding. The English word "love," to varying degrees, covers a whole universe of feelings and affection. There is, likewise, much overlapping in the meaning of the Greek words for love, eros, phile, and agape. As generally defined, eros is love that seeks to please self, that satisfies self whenever and by whatever and by whomever. Agape, by contrast, is a giving, active love for the sake of someone else. Phile lies between these two extremes and is simply the term for affection. But these terms for love cannot be so sharply and systematically distinguished, as is often done by popular books and indefensibly by some exegetes. For example, in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, agape is used for all kinds of love. It is not surprising, then, that in the New Testament, which reflects a marked Septuagintal influence, agape has various shades of meaning which must always be detected from the context.¹²

¹² Careful students of the Fourth Gospel know that John uses phile and agape interchangeably. Cf. parallel statements in the Gospels, for example, Mt. 23: 6 = Lk. 11: 43, where Matthew uses agapao and Luke uses phileo. On agape, among other works, see C. C. Tarelli, "AGAPE," Journal of Theological Studies 1 (1950), 64-67, and W. Harrelson, "The Idea of Agape in the New Testament," Journal of Religion 31 (1951), 169-182.

Sometimes agape means "affection," as when Jesus looked at the rich, young man and "loved" him (Mk. 10: 21); sometimes agape is void of affection and aims at good for the other person--so "love your enemies" (Mt. 5: 44).

What does Paul really mean, then, when he tells husbands to love their wives? First, it needs to be stressed, in the context of Ephesians 5,^{not} Paul is issuing a strong command for love. Husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the church. The Greek verb is agapao. This is a positive love, an act

of will which reaches out for the other person and desires the other's best interest. But this, too, involves affection. When we read that Christ loved the church, does this not convey his affection for the church? In the same way, when we read that husbands ought to love their wives, this clearly includes affection. Yet there is more: love in Ephesians 5 means eros as well.

"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one" (Eph. 5: 31). Leaving, cleaving, and joining here cannot be explained except with reference to the strong sexual attraction of male and female. In other words, the husband should love his wife in terms of her best interest, but in marriage there is also a special place for romance.

How does all this relate to the husband as head of the wife and to the wife as subject to her husband? The answer is that true love between husband and wife transforms it all and makes it all work! Earlier, I said that I do not believe that Paul in Ephesians 5: 21 is speaking of mutual subjection, that is, that Paul is requiring the husband to submit to the wife as well as the wife to submit to the husband. Now I want to take this one step further: the idea of mutual subjection is taught in Scripture, and it is in the word "love." There is no love between husband and wife where there is not mutual subjection, and mutual subjection is only possible in an atmosphere of love.

So it is not true, Biblically speaking, that in marriage more is required of the wife than the husband. Anyone who says this has simply failed to recognize the demands of love. Biblically speaking, husband and wife are to give to each other sexually (1 Cor. 7: 2-5). If they are to give in to the needs of one another sexually, how much more are they to give in to each other in other matters as well! Love and submission go together. When a Christian lady marries,

she voluntarily yields herself in subjection to her husband. When a Christian man takes a wife, he voluntarily submits to her in his love for her. He nourishes and cares for her as Christ does the church.

The problem, in reality, is not so much what the Bible teaches about headship and subjection, but rather what the Bible teaches about love. The reason why husbands cannot "give orders" to wives is because love does not command. "Love does not insist on its own way" (1 Cor. 13: 5). The reason why wives cannot rebel and revolt against husbands is because love seeks to serve and "bears all things" (1 Cor. 13: 7). Either husband or wife that "loves to rule" abolishes the Christ-principle of the "rule of love."

I want to conclude with some brief statements on other matters that I had intended to discuss, but will not be able to do so because of lack of time. Perhaps some of these points will be raised in the question and answer period.

1. The Biblical teaching on headship and subjection does not concern inherent superiority or inferiority. Jesus was subject to his parents. Was he inferior to them?

2. The Biblical teaching on husbands and wives is perfectly consistent with Biblical teaching elsewhere. Paul who teaches that the husband is the head of the wife in the home is the same Paul who does not allow the wife to teach or rule in the church.

3. The Biblical teaching on husbands and wives is not temporary. Because Paul seems in 1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Corinthians 14 to be dealing with Christian women who perhaps were causing problems, nevertheless this is not the case in Ephesians 5, Colossians 3 and 1 Timothy 2 (nor in 1 Peter 3).

4. The Biblical teaching on husband and wife is not cultural. Because Paul and Peter directed slaves to obey their masters (Eph. 6: 5-9; Col. 3: 22 - 4: 1; 1 Pet. 2: 18-25), -- directions which would give way with the end of slavery--this does not argue that "husband headship" has no application in our culture today. In Ephesians, for example, immediately after the section on husbands and wives, children are told to obey their parents (6: 1). Is obedience to parents cultural? As to slavery, the New Testament treats it altogether differently from the divinely instituted relationships of husband and wife and of parents and children. Gerhard Delling has written an extraordinarily fine article on the meaning of hypotasso (subject").¹³ Concerning slavery

¹³ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, VIII, 44.

in the New Testament, he states: "The submission of slaves to their masters is demanded. . . , but not because slavery is ordained by God. . . .Slavery is accepted as a social reality which primitive Christianity was not in a position to abolish externally. Among Christians it could be overcome in agape. . . ." The last statement is significant. Slavery, and problems connected with it, "among Christians could be overcome in agape."

This has been my purpose in this paper. To paraphrase the above statement: among Christians any problem pertaining to husband's headship and wife's subjection can be overcome by agape. "My beloved is mine and I am his" (Song of S. 2: 16).