

Lesson 14: Mutual Submission Between Wives and Husbands (Ephesians 5:21-33)

Ephesians 5:21/22-33, which addresses the relationship between wives and husbands in the body of Christ, is a controversial text. Some have read it as a directive for husbands to control their wives, or for wives to prioritize their husbands in a way that husbands do not prioritize their wives. Others have understood it as a relationship of mutual submission but where husbands nevertheless have authority over their wives. Still others have understood it as mutual submission where mutuality rather than authority is the point.

This text has been the basis for counseling abused wives to submit to their husbands as well as demanding that wives give their agency over to their husbands so that they have no independence like their husbands have. It is only in recent times (say, within the last 100 years) that wives could vote, own property in their own name, and have their own credit scores. Ephesians 5:22-24 was used to justify these past practices.

Consequently, it is an important text to think about, understand carefully, and seek its intent for the body of Christ. With abuse ranging from husbands as dictators to wives as autonomous agents in the family (neither should husbands be autonomous agents), Ephesians 5:21/22-33 needs to be heard in our assemblies, classrooms, and homes. What does the apostle have in mind? What does he teach?

Context

Ephesians 5:15-6:9 describes the nature of submission in the new creation. It is driven by a communal life filled with the Spirit but lived out in the context of evil days. What does “submission” look like when we live as new creation in cultures driven by a different set of values? More specifically, what does submission look like in a Christian community living in a Greco-Roman world? This is what Paul addresses in this section.

In this post, I will focus on the relationship between husbands and wives, though backing up into Ephesians 5:18-21 to see the thematic and grammatical links. The structure of the text of Ephesians 5:18-6:9 is:

Don't get drunk with wine, wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit
speaking psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves
singing and *making melody* in your hearts to the Lord
giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ
submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ
Wives (αἱ γυναῖκες) [supply “submit” from above line] to husbands as to the Lord
Husbands (οἱ ἄνδρες) love your wives as Christ loved the church
The profound mystery: union (σάρκα μίαν) in 5:31-32
Children (τὰ τέκνα) obey your parents in the Lord

Parents (οἱ πατέρες) raise up your children in the Lord
 Slaves (οἱ δοῦλοι) obey your masters as to the Lord
 Masters (οἱ κύριοι) do the same to your slaves—same Lord.

The imperative (be filled with the Spirit) is modified by five participles. These are probably attendant or result participles, though some suggest instrumental. In effect, when one is filled with the Spirit, they are engaged or their life will result in speaking, singing, making melody, giving thanks, and mutual submission. The community will experience the reality of the Spirit through mutual gifts in mutual submission as the community praises God through the Psalms and gives thanks in the name of Jesus the Messiah.

In other words, Paul does not begin his discussion of marriage in the abstract. Rather, the context is the mutuality of the whole letter and more specifically the connection to being filled with the Spirit in community. The discussion of the household is directly linked by syntax with the household of the church—the living body of Christ (Cohick).

The six groups named (wives, husbands, etc.) are directly linked to the participles, particularly the last participle: submitting to one another (Helton). The six groups are called to mutually submit to each other as part of the community, the body of Christ. More specifically, the verb submit in verse 21 supplies the verb for Ephesians 5:22. There is no verb for “submit” in 5:22. Rather, the word—and its attendant meaning—are brought down into verse 22 from verse 21. The supplied verb does not change meaning, and the participle “submitting” in verse 21 is a topic term for the whole of the following household code. Paul does not command wives to submit (there is no imperative for submit) but rather extends the idea of submitting to the wives by hanging his instruction on the previous participle (submitting). It is the sort of submission that belongs to the body of Christ and not particularly or especially to wives. Rather, it characterizes everyone in the body.

The point is not that what follows are three types of submissive relationships (wives to husbands, children to parents, and slaves to masters). Rather, both participants in the relationship are expected to be submissive to each other as the participle applies to each person in the relationships as part of the body of Christ.

How Different People Read Ephesians 5:21-33

Currently, there are four primary reading strategies for Ephesians 5:21-33 (see Witt).

1. Traditional Patriarchy or Hard Complementarianism (Most of Christian History and many Feminists)

James A. Allen. “It is the law of nature, and the law of God, that the influence of woman must be exercised through man, and when she takes the reins in her own hands it works evil to both man and woman by lifting her out of the sphere in which she was placed by the Creator. The influence of a woman is behind the achievement

of every great man who has figured in the destiny of the world. But God has not created her to take the lead or to occupy the platform in politics or religion.” (“The Woman’s Christian. Temperance Union,” *Gospel Advocate* 49 [December 19, 1907]: 812.)

Doug Wilson: “Women have a deep creational need to be loved and led, so that they might submit and follow, and men have a deep creational need to be respected and followed, and when these needs are thwarted or otherwise frustrated, the end result is deep unhappiness for both sexes” (Thesis #9). . . “Submission that is invisible is not really submission at all. As submission is cultivated in the home, it needs to be expressed. It cannot exist as a set of hidden resolves or good intentions. Respect must be verbalized, and the demeanor of submissive deference must be plain to everyone in the home” (thesis #20). (<https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/21-theses-submission-marriage.html>)

2. Servant-Leadership Patriarchy or Soft Complementarianism (Since the 1970s)

Renew.Org. “In marriage, husbands and wives are to submit to one another, yet there are specific gender expressions: husbands model themselves in relationship with their wives after Jesus’ sacrificial love for the church, and wives model themselves in relationship with their husbands after the church’s willingness to follow Jesus.” (Renew Statement on Gender in Sproles (p. 5). Sproles writes, “Headship encompasses the concept of authority...while authority is part of headship, sacrificial love is also part of headship. While leadership is part of headship, submission, honor, and understanding are also parts of headship. . . Before giving particular instructions to wives and husbands, Paul calls for mutual submission. This is followed up with two clear calls: submission and agape love” (p. 73). In other words, there is an imbalance in the relationship: the husband has the authority.

3. Revolutionary Submission (Keener, Marshall, Witherington, Dudrey)

Ben Witherington. “The emphasis on the modified behavior required of the head of the household (who receives the bulk of the exhortations, as husband, parent, and master), especially in loving and acting in a Christian manner with family members, has the rhetorical effect of setting up a trajectory or momentum in a direction of a more egalitarian approach to the marital situation” (*Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians*, 323).

4. Mutualist or Egalitarian Submission (Barth, Witt, Padgett, Cohick, Gorman, Westfall)

Markus Barth. “The call to mutual subordination seems to relativize, if not blur and destroy, any clear notion of authority and subservience. . . The subordination of wives is an example of the same mutual subordination, which is also known by the husband’s love, the children’s obedience, the parents’ responsibility for their offspring, the slaves’ and master’s attitude to one another” (*Ephesians*, 2:610).

Greco-Roman Household Codes

1. Aristotle identified the male as a “natural ruler” and the female as a “natural subject” (*Politics*). Women are constitutionally or ontologically inferior to men (cf. Dudrey). Aristotle wrote: the master is “to rule his slaves like a despot, his children like a king, and his wife treating her like a rational being but one without inherent authority” (Witt).
2. Husbands are not identified as rulers as they are in Greco-Roman household codes (*Haustafel*; see Mutter). Xenophon (*Oeconomicus*): the husband is the wife’s instructor (παιδευτής). Aristotle (*Politics*) provided the social backdrop of these pairs (others followed). The husband rules (ἄρχω) his wife in his monarchy. He is ruler (ἄρχή). Arius Didymus (see Balch, “Household Codes,” 41-42) sees the husband as the ruler (ἄρχή) of the house with aristocratic authority (ἀριστοκρατικός)—superior and naturally functioning as master/ruler. This social world depicts the husband-wife relationship in terms of power and status. As Mutter argues, Christianity provides an alternative discourse that radically contrasts with Greco-Roman household codes.
3. Plutarch provides a nice summary of the marriage relationship. He spoke of wives obeying and husbands ruling like what is described in #2 above. The wife must be silent in public, modest and chaste for the sake of children and future inheritance, and “talk either through her husband or to her husband,” and follow her husband’s religion. [However, we should remember that women did have avenues of social agency in the imperial period; cf. Cohick.] The perfect wife says Aurelia Philmatio of the first century BCE, “I was chaste and modest; I did not know the crowd; I was faithful to my husband . . . He, through my diligent performance of duty, flourished at all times” (see Dudrey).
4. In this way, marital harmony in the Greco-Roman value system was for wives to conform themselves to the wishes of their husbands because the husband is supreme in the relationship (Cohick). While the husbands have a sense of importance and value independent of the marriage relationships, wives are wholly dependent upon the relationship for their significance and value. In effect, the husband was the patron, and the wife was the client (Westfall).
5. The household codes served to solidify social stability and, for Romans, were essential to the health of the city and state (see Gombis). In other words, the household codes had a political function within the Roman empire.

Observations about Ephesians 5:21-33 in Contrast to Household Codes.

1. Wives are addressed whereas in Greco-Roman household codes only husbands are addressed. Typically, only the husband is addressed since it is his responsibility to manage his wife.
2. Wives are not explicitly commanded to do anything. No imperatives are addressed to the wives. But the husbands are twice commanded to love their wives (5:25; 5:33). Moreover, the word “obey,” which is used of both the children and the enslaved, is not used regarding the wife. [The statement that women are to fear or respect their husbands, though often translated as an imperative, is not an imperative. It is subjunctive: that a wife might fear her husband.]

3. Regarding wives, Paul uses the language of submission but not obedience as he does with children and the enslaved (6:1; 6:5). There is a contrast between the nature of the relationship between husbands and wives and those between masters and the enslaved or parents and children.
4. Husbands are not commanded to submit their wives to themselves or enforce their submission but rather “submitting to one another” in 5:21 is middle voice. In other words, “submitting yourselves.” It is a voluntary action, not a coerced one.
5. This also provides a different meaning for “submission.” It is not about the submission of rank, power, and authority but a deferential yielding to the other out of respect and love (what Padgett calls the central ethical teaching of the New Testament). This is not a hierarchical ordering but a relationship of mutual submission. The Greek word ὑποτάσσεται may mean submission to a higher authority, but it may also mean as “voluntary yielding in love” (according to BDAG). This is not a top-down submission, but a yielding in deference to the other out of respect or love. It is not subjugation to a higher authority but a yielding to the other in deference for the sake of community, respect, and love (Williams).
6. Moreover, this submission is out of a fear or reverence of Christ, and it is rendered as to the Lord (as are all ethical expectations in the body of Christ). This is the new perspective Paul brings to bear in the situation. Life in Christ as new creatures transforms the relationships so that we are serving Christ when we are serving or mutually submitting to each other. Thus, whether the husband loves the wife or the wife submits to the husband, it is a loving and submitting to Christ that is in view rather than an ordered and hierarchical relationship between the siblings in Christ (even as they are husband/wife, parent/child, and master/slave). Rather than hierarchy, it is a relationship of reciprocity (Dudrey). It is expected of all believers. Both love and submission is expected of both women and men (Cohick).
7. Also, when husbands are addressed, they are counseled to exhibit humility, kindness, and gentleness rather than exercising power or authority.

Reading Ephesians 5:21-33 in the context of Ephesians

1. The language of “one body” with a shared inheritance shapes how we read this text. The church is its own household or political economy. Submission in this context is not something to be asked of wives uniquely but is expected of all Christians as we mutually submit to one another. Ultimately the words addressed to husbands and wives are no different than the words addressed to the congregation as a whole.
2. “One another” (ἀλλήλων) expresses a communal standard (4:2, 25, 32; 5:21). It is mutual submission as in Romans 12:10, Philippians 2:3, and Galatians 5:13. This characterizes the whole body of Christ. It means mutual relationship; it is not something one group owes to another group within the body of Christ, but something owed to each other by all believers.
3. “Mystical Union”—husband/wife as example of the union of Christ and the church. The unity of husband and wife is parallel to the unity of Christ and the church. This union transforms the marriage relationship, and it is the primary ground for that transformation. Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:31. As “one flesh” they

mutually submit to each other. The head-body metaphor gives way to the more fundamental one-flesh idea of marriage.

4. We have been adopted into the household of God with God as father (πατέρα). We are all siblings organized in a non-hierarchical order (see deSilva). We have one father, and the relationship in the community (including marriages in community) have a sibling context. In the church community, and in our relationships with each other, we relate as sisters and brothers. The marriage relationship within the Christian community is grounded in the mutual submission of sisters and brothers within the church—this is our relation to God the Father.
5. Authority is not mentioned in Ephesians 5 unless is read into “head” and the mutual nature of the submission is minimized. In fact, when Paul discusses marriage in 1 Corinthians 7:1-5, he uses the word “authority” and claims it is mutual: the wife has authority over the husband’s body and the husband has authority over the wife’s body. Williams summarizes the significance of 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 with these points: (1) mutual authority in central decision making aspects of marriage, that is, sex and prayer; (2) equality of authority rooted in the nature of one flesh; and (3) joint-decision-making.
6. Ephesians 5:24 begins with “but” (ἀλλὰ), which is a strong adversative or contrast. If verse 23 means that the husband has authority over his wife, how does verse 24 stand in contrast to verse 23? If the point in verse 23 is that the husband is “savior” (understanding that explanation of “head”) instead of lord or higher authority, then the adversative makes sense. There is no reason to explain submission if head means authority. But verse 24 explains why wives should submit on the analogy of the church submitting to Christ (see Williams).
7. When Paul addresses the husbands in Ephesians 5:25-33, he addresses them in ways that would have been understood as “women’s work” within Greco-Roman culture. In fact, the man has become a bride to Christ. This subverts male dominance (Westfall).

New Creation Values in the Wife-Husband Relationship.

1. The point of this section is not so much a tactic to lower the profile of Christian communities in the imperial world (as if it functions as an apologetic of some sort). Rather, it provides a new way of being in the world as new creatures or new humanity in Christ (see Gombis).
2. Submission (ὑποτάσσεται), love (ἀγαπάτε), and respect (φοβῆται) replace the language of ruling and authority found in Greco-Roman *Haustafeln*. The command to love, given to the husbands, is a way of saying that they should relinquish the sort of power and authority granted and expected by their culture.
3. While the Greco-Roman context is hierarchical, the language of Ephesians 5 is mutual and reciprocal. It is mutual submission. Jesus himself is the example; his self-giving is the model for the husband, and that is also the content of the woman’s “submission”—self-giving. Jesus models submission.
4. The Christological rationale recontextualizes the relationship (“as to the Lord”). It is the Lordship of Christ that defines these relationships rather than social order. “As to the Lord” is not something the wife alone does, however. It characterizes all

believers in the community of faith. We all submit to each other “as to the Lord” (Cohick).

5. The use of head (κεφαλή) instead of “ruler” (ἀρχή) or even Lord (Paul does not call the husband a Lord or “boss”) suggests it is not about authority but relationship to the body, which is about mutuality, interdependency, and oneness (unity as in speaking of Christ and the church). This “submission” is not hierarchical but an expression of the *unity* of head and body as one flesh (Hemphill). It is important to hear “head” in connection with the “body” rather than as a distinct metaphor for authority. It is about connection, not authority. Head (κεφαλή) occurs only 1:22; 4:15; 5:23 (cf. Col. 1:18; 2:10, 19). I think “head over” in 1:22 (authority or prominence) is quite different than “head of the body” (unity as in 4:15). Headship in Ephesians is more about giving life and unity rather than authority. Paul asks husbands to be head of their wives in the same sense in which Jesus is head, that is, by sacrificial love and self-giving. It is not a statement of Christ’s authority but of his service (submission). See Witt, Westfall, and Cohick for more analysis of the word “head.”
6. Another, but complementary understanding of head (κεφαλή), is to see “savior of the body” in Ephesians 5:25 as appositional, that is, it explains the meaning of head. Consequently, it refers to the source or origin of care and love, saving and nurturing love. He gives his life for the body. This is what the husband should be for the wife whom he ought to love more than his own body, like Jesus (Williams). In this text, Jesus is savior, not lord. And this is the meaning of “head” in this text.
7. If the husband is to treat his wife as his own body, this implies that she is an equal, or at least mutuality. She is given the status of a male body (Westfall).
8. The women submit and respect, and the men love. Why does not Paul use the language of “submit” regarding men if the point is mutual submission? Perhaps Paul is sensitive to how this would have been heard in a Greco-Roman hierarchical world (as Cohick puts it, “it would have sounded nonsensical” to an audience steeped in patriarchy). Instead of using the word, he describes submissive actions with language that typically describes the work of women such as laundry, bathing, clothing (spinning and weaving), feeding, and nurturing, etc; cf. Westfall). Paul describes the husband’s submission. This is how Paul carefully navigates the slavery relationship. For example, he does not explicitly call upon Philemon to release Onesimus, but Paul does seemingly expect Philemon to do so. This is a matter of social realism while also seeking to transform that reality in the context of the Christian community. Paul does this by commanding the husband to love his wife, which in the context of patriarchy is a submissive self-sacrificial act.
9. This is a paradigm shift from authority and power to mutual submission for the sake of the other. The husband must love his wife *so that* (ἵνα) she may respect her husband (5:33; see Miller & Walsh).
10. Paul has radically transformed the expectations of the Greco-Roman household into a new humanity shaped by the values of the new creation. Paul redeems the hierarchical marriage expectation through a call to mutuality, humility, and self-sacrificial service. There is no call for authority or its execution in this section of Ephesians.

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