

Husbands and wives: Christ and the Church
Ephesians 5:22 – 33
Fairview Presbyterian Church
June 7, 2009

Context Issues

The ancient world context

There is virtue in reading texts that have stood the test of time. Writings from other time periods and other cultures help reveal to us our own assumptions, things we take for granted, and are not even aware that we are so doing. This passage offends many in the modern world. It should not, but it does, because it challenges modern biases, prejudices and assumptions. Before we look at the passage itself, I want to remind you of several of the realities of the ancient world context in which Paul lived and which formed the backdrop to his words. I wish to remind you of the status of women in the ancient world.

A faithful Jew in the ancient world would begin his morning prayers thanking God that he was not “a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.”^[1] The very influential rabbi Hillel taught that a man might divorce his wife “if she spoiled his dinner by putting too much salt in his food, if she walked in public with her head uncovered, if she talked with men in the streets, ...if she was troublesome or quarrelsome.”

Things were worse in the Greek world. Prostitution was woven into Greek life. The philosopher Demosthenes summed up Greek life, “We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure; concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation; we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately; and of having a faithful guardian of all our household affairs.” Marriage was a pragmatic matter, not a source of friendship or companionship.

In Rome, by the time of Paul’s writing, things were still worse. The Roman writer Seneca said that women measured the years by the names of their husbands. Family life was in ruins. St. Jerome writes of a woman who was married to her twenty-third husband and she was his twenty-first wife! Adultery was rampant.

This is the context in which Paul writes these remarkable words. He is calling for fidelity and sacrifice in marriage. He is seeking to restore the

^[1] This and the following material is taken from Barclay’s commentary on Galatians and Ephesians, pp 199 – 203.

standards of faithfulness. He encourages men and women in marriage to seek to serve one another. This is a high view of marriage. Those couples and cultures that embrace Paul's words are placed on a pathway of healing.

The context of Paul's argument

Paul's letters typically divide into two parts: in the first he writes doctrine and in the second he provides practical guidance and instruction. At this point in his letter to Ephesus, Paul is about to provide guidance on how Christians are to order their household. He is about to offer three paragraphs addressed respectively to husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves. As humans we are sexual beings, temporal beings and working beings. Paul offers guidance for each arena of life. Martin Luther called these instructions *house tables*, guidance for household duties.

We have looked at the ancient world context and flow of Paul's argument in the letter itself. Thirdly, we should consider this passage in the context of our Trinitarian theology.

The context of Trinitarian theology

²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

There are translation issues as to whether v. 21 is the conclusion of Paul's previous point, or the introduction and overriding principle guiding his instructions in the coming three paragraphs. My preferred Bible translation, the English Standard Version, treats the sentence as a conclusion. At the same time, there are good theological reasons for viewing v. 21 as the introduction to these paragraphs for it introduces a call to mutual submission in life, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. The call to mutual submission is something new in the world. Paul is the first person to say this.

Yes, I know that the notion of submission is out of fashion in today's world. The modern world demands its rights. We go to civil courts to enforce rights. Ours is an age of self assertion. Our music, television and movies celebrate rebels. We want to do things *my way*. The rock group Weezer in their song *Pork and Beans* sings over and over again, *I don't care. I don't care. I don't care*. In this song they are reflecting the attitude of our age. How often do we hear people declare, "I don't know and I don't care"? What matters is only what I want, what I desire, or what I need. I do not know or care about anything else. Ours is a world at war with the very notion of submission. This, of course, is not the teaching of the Bible.

The basic biblical principle is mutual submission. Submission does not mean inferiority. To submit to another does not mean that we are less than them. The concept of mutual submission is a reflection of the very nature of God himself. God is three in one: three persons, one in substance. There is no competition among the persons of the Trinity. There is perfect unity. The model for us is Jesus Christ. Paul writes in Philippians of Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.^[2] No one ever submitted more than the Lord Jesus Christ. His submission was costly, to be sure, but in no way did it *lessen* him. There is nothing demeaning in Christ's life. It was the reverse. His submission was the pathway to glorification. Paul continues in Philippians,⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.^[3] Submission is the pathway to finding God's purpose in our life.

For us, submission means recognizing the divine ordering of life. We submit to the way God has created the world. We play by the rules because this is how God has ordered life. How many people make a mess of their life because they refuse to play by the rules that God has established?

Let us look at the passage itself. The first point is this: wives – how you view your husband is a reflection of what you think of Christ.

Wives – how you view your husband is a reflection of what you think of Christ

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Both husband and wife are to submit in marriage, but the nature of that submission is different because we are made male and female. God has given man headship. Woman finds fulfillment in voluntary submission. Within marriage there is equality before God. Husband and wife share equal dignity. At the same time, equality of worth is not the same as identity of role. Husband and wife have different offices. We make a distinction between the office of husband and that of wife. Husband is an office of responsibility. With the office comes duty, authority and responsibility. I will have more to

^[2]*The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Php 2:6-8). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

^[3]*The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Php 2:9-11). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

say about this in a few minutes. Thus, the nature of the submission is different because of male and femaleness. Men and women are different. Paul's argument is from creation. This is how God has ordered the world. Might we rebel against it? Of course we may, but we do so to our, our families', and our society's cost and sorrow.

The authority of Paul's argument is Christ himself. Paul's call of submission is "*as to the Lord.*" Christ is the head of the church and the church submits to Christ. A husband is the head of his wife, the wife submits to her husband as though she is submitting to Christ. We obey this command out of reverence for Christ.

Practically, what does submission mean? How does it reveal itself in a marriage? The expectation of submission is not absolute. The husband's authority is the authority of Christ. It is under Christ's authority. Therefore, a husband cannot command what God forbids, nor can he forbid what God commands. A wife's submission will be different depending upon whether or not her husband is also a believer. One facet of submission involves remembering the priority of relationships. Both husband and wife must make clear to the children that the marriage is the primary relationship in the family and that from it the relationship of parent to child flows. A wife should never place her relationship with her children in competition or ahead of her relationship to her husband. If a husband is a believer, then the wife should resist the temptation of taking over the spiritual leadership in the household. Yes, I know that many wives feel that their faithful, believing husbands do not do all that they wish they would in the area of spiritual leadership. The wife's perception is probably accurate, but it does not change the applicability of Paul's call. Wives, how do you speak of your husband before friends, other family members, or your children? For moms who are raising boys in their household, part of submission is encouraging and letting go of your sons during adolescence as their sense of identity shifts from mom to their father. Submission means refusing to nurse the memories of how your husband has disappointed you. Men and women are different. One facet of submission means simply learning to live with and accept those differences.

Wives, how you view your husband is a reflection of how you view Christ. Husbands, how you care for your wife is a reflection of your love of Christ.

Husbands – how you care for your wife is a reflection of your love of Christ

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as

their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,

Again, we see how revolutionary Paul's words are. We have records of many ancient marriage codes describing the respective duties of husband and wife in a marriage. The codes spell out what was required of each party. No ancient marriage code ever listed *love* as a duty of a husband in marriage. Love is simply not on the radar screen. Paul's instruction is unlike anything else the ancient world knew. In light of the earlier instruction regarding wifely submission, note that the emphasis of Paul's words fall not upon husbandly *authority*, but upon husbandly *love*. In the marriage codes of the ancient world a husband's authority to command his wife was unquestioned. It is in the light of that unquestioning attitude that we must view Paul's instruction.

The fascinating thing is that the image Paul uses as a model for how a husband relates to his wife is that of Christ's relationship to the church. The doctrine of the atonement is the husband's model for his relationship to his wife. Paul says much more about husband's responsibility than he did about wifely submission. Let's look at Paul's instruction in detail. He uses five words to describe a husband's relationship to his wife. First, a husband loves.

A husband loves
as Christ loved

The imagery here includes the idea of steadfastness, of focused attention. Husband, your wife needs to be and remain the object of your attention. Christ is focused upon his church. Christ prays for the church. A temptation a man faces in marriage is to transfer the object of his attention from his wife to his career. (The wife faces a similar temptation of transferring her attention from her husband to her children.) Husbands, work on your marriage. Pray for your wife as Christ prays for the church. Date your wife. Continue to do those things you did to reveal your love and affection during your days of courtship. Do what needs to be done so that your attention is focused upon her.

A husband gives himself
and gave himself up for her

Jesus Christ loved the church. Jesus Christ died for the church. As someone once said, "*No woman will have trouble submitting to a man who is willing to die for her.*" The call for women is to submit in marriage. The call for men is to sacrifice in marriage. One of the costs of the modern feminist

movement has been the reduction, almost elimination, of deference to women. Men had a societal obligation to protect women, expressed in small but meaningful habits such as giving up a seat on a bus, or holding a door, or doffing one's hat. In a crisis the rally cry was "women *and children first*." A husband is to sacrifice for his wife and men are supposed to sacrifice for women. Again, this is a thoroughly Christian concept. Paul's words are unheard of in other ancient writings. We learn this principle from the example of Christ.

A husband is to love his wife and sacrifice on her behalf. Thirdly, he sanctifies.

A husband sanctifies

might sanctify her

At this point it becomes clear that the words Paul is choosing reflect the process of betrothal and wedding. The word *sanctify* traces its roots back to the dedication of the various vessels and items used in the Jewish Tabernacle. The objects were *sanctified*, made holy, by being set apart for holy use. It is the setting apart that makes something holy. How does a husband *sanctify* his wife? The imagery here is akin to the period of the betrothal. A betrothal is a promise to marry. The agreement has been struck. The marriage has not happened yet, but the promises have been made. If a man takes a concubine, a woman who simply moves in with him, then that man has not sanctified her. He has not set her apart as wife. He is simply using her for his own pleasure. In English, when two people who have been living together get married, we say that the man has "*made an honest woman out of her*." He has gotten around to doing what he should have done at the beginning.

In the case of Christ and the Church, we are living in the betrothal period. When God's purposes are complete and this world comes to an end, those who belong to Christ will gather at the **Marriage Supper of the Lamb**.

A husband loves, sacrifices and sanctifies. Fourthly, a husband cleanses.

A husband cleanses

having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

Part of the preparations for the bride in the Jewish world on the day of the wedding was the bridal bath. This is the imagery Paul is drawing upon now. What is it that produces spiritual cleansing? Paul tells us: water and word; baptism and spiritual instruction; the sacraments and the word of God, the scriptures.

Husband, your spiritual responsibility is to see to it that the word is at work in your home. It is your responsibility to see that your children are baptized and that you and your wife together fulfill the baptismal promises made: read to your children Bible stories; provide for their instruction for first communion; place a Bible in their hands; teach them the Apostle's Creed, The Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. Husband, the spiritual direction of your home is your responsibility. It is your God given duty. You should be the one who typically leads in prayer at mealtimes. Fathers, pray with your children before they go to bed at night. See to it that the family is in church each Sunday for their most important hour of the week. Over Sunday dinner, initiate discussions around the table about the morning worship and the sermon. Pray with your wife. Men it is your job to be the spiritual leader of your home. Rise to the task.

A husband loves, sacrifices, sanctifies, cleanses and, finally presents.

A husband presents

So that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

Typically, on the wedding day the groom does not see the bride until the wedding begins. All of the preparations involved in the wedding dress, makeup, hairstyling, jewelry and adornments, are hidden from the groom until the moment in the ceremony when the organist begins to play and the doors at the back of the sanctuary swing open *presenting* the bride. The bride is present now, in all her splendor. She is prepared for her wedding day. All the planning and preparations are focused and resolved in this moment. The word translated *splendor* in the ESV refers to the radiance of God, to God's glory. Christ is preparing his church, his bride. The church today appears weak and ineffective. The church is not all that she should be. But Christ is at work. One day, the true nature of the church will be made apparent. One day, the church will be presented in the splendor of God's glory.

The application to marriage is this: the purpose of Christ's love, sacrifice, sanctification and cleansing is that the church be prepared for her presentation, prepared to be all that she is meant to be. Christ sacrifices in service of the church in order that she might become all that he longs for. Husband, your love for your wife, your sacrifices on her behalf, your faithful and honorable relations with her, your spiritual leadership in your home – these things combine to free and enable your wife to develop fully. Husband, if your wife is not all that you wish she would be, perhaps it is because you

have not loved her, served her, protected her, or provided the spiritual leadership that would enable her to grow and prosper.

At this point Paul quotes the foundational passage in the Bible explaining God's purpose and intent in marriage, Genesis 2: 24. A Christian understanding of marriage is that the two, husband and wife, become one flesh.

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³¹ "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

The sexual union between husband and wife is emphasized in the last words of this verse: *the two shall become one flesh*. Recall that in the creation story, the emphasis falls upon Eve as being taken from Adam's side. When something is missing, we look for it. The attraction between a man and a woman includes an element of restoration, of seeking a return of what has been lost. There is a mysterious union that occurs between husband and wife – *the two become one flesh*. This mystery, this reunion, does not happen in lesbian or homosexual encounters. In a lesbian or homosexual encounter, you still have two of the same. Part of the mystery and blessing of sexual union in marriage is that in married sexual intimacy we meet the sexual other. We meet our other half, our better half, our spouse.

God's blessing of married sexual intimacy is seen in the reality of the possibility of a child resulting from sexual intimacy. A sexual encounter between two men or two women is not fruit producing. Yes, I know that there are modern technological ways around this fact, but such efforts are just that, efforts to get around the way God has woven things in creation. It is no longer politically correct to refer to homoerotic encounters as *unnatural*, and it is not my intent to cause offense in doing so. Rather, there is good reason why this term was used. The way of creation, of nature, is reproduction. Sexual encounters which cannot produce children are, by definition, against nature, in opposition to God's command to Adam and Eve, and to all of humanity ever since, to "be fruitful and multiply." Let me underscore that it is not my intention to be mean or judgmental. We all know persons who engage in homosexual behavior. Homosexuals have been present and active in nearly every church where I have served as pastor. My job is to explain the world as God has made it, as the truths about our world are revealed in the pages of Holy Scripture. What I am teaching you today is the teaching of the scriptures, nothing more, and nothing less.

The last thing Paul tells us in this passage is the most profound. He says that the mystery of Christ and the church is that Christ is bound to the church privately, publicly, decently, decisively and legally.

The mystery of Christ and the church is that Christ is bound to the church privately, publicly, decently, decisively, and legally

³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

What does a groom do on his wedding day? Let me set the stage for understanding Paul's words here. Prior to the wedding day, the groom would have followed the cultural norms of his society in order to obtain the consent of the bride and her family for the marriage. In our society, the groom would have followed the expectations of courtship, meeting each other's family, imagining how the future might unfold, and at some point confessing his love towards her and asking her to marry him. He would have approached the bride's father to obtain his consent for the marriage. All of these things are more or less private. They occur between the couple or the couple's respective families. Prior to the wedding day the groom has confessed his love for his bride privately. On his wedding day, he stands publicly and with solemn promises declares before family and friends his love and devotion to his bride. In doing so he emotionally, publicly and legally binds himself to his wife. A bride wears a special dress to her wedding. Typically, it is a dress that she will wear only once. Yet, after wearing that dress once, everything changes: she is no longer Miss, but Mrs.; no longer single, but married; no longer in her father's house, but in her husband's house. Everything has changed for the groom as well. Because of that day, because of that ceremony, he is now publicly bound to his wife. He has forsaken all others. What had been a private romance is now publicly endorsed and legally ratified. A man has left his father's house. He clings to his wife. A new family is created.

This helps us understand what Paul means in saying that marriage is a mystery that points to Christ and the church. Jesus Christ is God incarnate. He is God descended into our world. In his advent, childhood, adult ministry, passion, suffering, crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ has bound himself to his church. When a person confesses faith in Jesus Christ, that is, at first, a private matter. An individual is brought to a moment of faith and belief. That is a good thing. But it is not the only thing. Jesus Christ has bound himself to his church in the same manner that a groom binds himself to his wife. This is what Paul means comparing Christ's actions to that of the bridegroom. Christ has done what is necessary to bind himself to his church, his people. Christ's union with the church is a public fact. Because of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, everything that needed

to be done has been done. Those who are in Christ are a new creation. They are his and he is theirs.

Say "Amen," Somebody.

²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives and Husbands

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.
