

Husbands and Wives in Paul and Peter

Turn to Ephesians 5.

Complementarian vs Egalitarian

There is a difference of opinion among evangelical Christians these days on one part of the relationship between husbands and wives. On both sides people want to obey the Scriptures, and they want to live faithfully as God's children.

The different of opinion is mainly about the instruction to wives that Paul gives in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3, and that Peter gives to wives in 1 Peter 3.

Paul and Peter both teach that wives should submit to their husbands, they should defer to their husbands, they should give the lead to their husbands.

As we saw last week from 1 Cor 7, this is not all the Paul has to say about wives and husbands, not by any stretch. In 1 Cor 7 there is a lot of mutual submission, and that's in Eph 5 as well. But there is still that teaching that wives should defer to their husbands.

One side of this debate call themselves "complementarians," and they take at face value that wives should submit to their husbands.

The other side of this call themselves "egalitarians," and they believe that in Christian marriage the wife and husband have identical roles, that both submit to each other equally, and that wives do not have duty to submit that husbands do not share.

They get to this by taking lines like "in Christ there is no male or female" in Galatians 3, and concluding that such lines trump the teaching that wives should submit to husbands.

I think there is a basic philosophical difference underneath the two sides. Egalitarians have an instinct or intuition that in a relationship of love, one person needing to submit to the other is a barrier to pure and mature love, it taints real love.

Since marriage is a relationship in which two become one, according to the Bible, marriage is a relationship of deep love, then one cannot have a duty to defer to the other.

That's egalitarians. Complementarians, by their instinct or intuition, do not think one person submitting to another is a barrier to pure love. Complementarians believe love can grow and express itself freely in such a relationship.

It seems to me that this difference of instinct leads people to take one view or the other.

Key to godly marriage

A healthy marriage, a marriage that pleases God, does not rest on landing on the right side of this debate. On both sides of this there are good marriages and poor marriages.

The key to marriage is both spouses live out the basic Christian virtues toward each other. Husband and wife treat each other in the way the Lord calls *all* of his followers to treat each other.

That is, lots of undeserved kindness, forgiving each other, being honest with each other, pursuing peace, speaking to the other if someone has something against you, being devoted to each other, loving the other as we love ourselves.

The key to a godly marriage is *not* romantic love or sexual attraction. Romantic love will fade, and it doesn't take very long. Sex often lasts, but it is not enough. Don't marry for those. They will often be how the other person gets your attention, and that's fine.

But before you marry, you ask yourself if you can spend a lifetime giving that person underserved kindness, without getting help from romantic love or sexual attraction. Does that worry you? Good. That's why Paul said you'd be happier single.

It is normal for a married person to at some time after their marriage to feel romantic love and sexual attraction to someone else than their spouse. This happens to followers of Christ just like it happens to others.

If marriage is based on romantic love and sexual attraction, then once a married person feels that toward someone else, to whom they are not married, then the marriage is over, and they need to find a way to hook up with that other person.

There is enough of the world living exactly like that. The difference between a follower of Jesus and another person is not that the follower of Jesus is too good to feel that, to be tempted in that way.

The difference is that the follower of Jesus stays faithful to the one they married. In the words and actions, and especially in their mind, they don't go down that road.

The common Christian teachings are the key to a marriage that honours God. We have trouble living these out in the congregation as well as in marriage, but they are the key.

Ephesians 5: 22-24

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

One of the purposes of marriage is to show the world what the relationship is between Christ and his people, which is his bride. We don't think about that much, but the Bible's call to wives and to husbands also makes that clear.

Wives are to submit to their husbands, it says, because the husband is the head of the wife. People debate what "head" means, but I don't think it is very important.

That's because, whatever "head" means, the natural consequence is that wives submit to their husbands. Wives should defer to their husbands, give the lead to their husbands.

Ephesians 5:25-31

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, people have never hated their own bodies, but they feed and care for them, just as Christ does the church— ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

There are all kinds of interesting things in this paragraph, and we'll take a look at some of them. You can see again that one of the purposes of marriage is to be a concrete illustration of the relationship between Christ and his people.

In that way, wives deferring to their husbands and husbands loving their wives as they love themselves is worship, and it is also witness to the world.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Did you notice that it never says to the husband that he's to be the head? There are two places in the Bible that say the husband is the head of his wife, here and 1 Corinthians 11.

In both places, Paul is talking primarily to wives, not to husbands. I'm resisting the temptation to explain 1 Cor 11 here, but section corrects something wives were doing.

The husband being the head of the wife is never God's instruction to the husband. It is a part of God's instruction to wives. Husbands are never told to lead, to take charge, to be the head of the home. Never.

By the way, while we're talking about what the Bible does not say, we should also observe that the Bible never says the man is the head of the home. The parents together are the head of the home. Children obey parents, mother and father both.

The Bible tells the wife that the husband is her head. It does not say that to the husband. And the parents together are the head of the home. The man is not the head of the home.

The traditional family and the Biblical family are not the same. Our goal is not to be traditional family. Our goal is to be a Biblical family.

Husbands are told to love as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. The picture of a husband's role in marriage is a crucified man dying on the cross for the good of his wife, so that she can live and be complete. It is blunt, and entirely clear.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Paul gets sidetracked here a bit, and talks about Christ's care for the church. Maybe we should get sidetracked here, too. ²⁹ *After all, people have never hated their own bodies, but they feed and care for them, just as Christ does the church.*

Christ feeds the church and cares for it, the way we take care of our own bodies. Is that not a great picture? Some of you are here today and you are pressed and stressed and distressed, distracted and worried, and can barely pay attention to any of this.

Jesus, with the nail-scarred hands, feels that the way we feel an ongoing pain in our bodies. We are his body, and when we ache his own body aches. And he does not just endure his pain, he cares for it, he actively helps it and soothes it.

Ephesians 5:21

Now we should go back to the line that opened these instructions: ²¹ *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

Both husband and wife give first place to what's good for the other person. It looks a little different for the wife than for the husband, but this in common, that both wife and husband make what's good for the other a high priority.

The call to the husband, to imitate Christ on the cross in giving himself for his bride, only repeats what all believers are called to do for each other.

John 15:12-13 says, *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.* ¹³ *Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

1 John 3:16 makes this even clearer: *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another.*

Submission also, as in Eph 5:21, is also something all believers do for each other. So there are specific emphases for wives and husbands, but not outside the call to us all.

1 Peter 2 18, 21-25 - Peter talks about these things too, and adds something important.

¹⁸ *Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.*

Peter gives these slaves an example of submission, and it is Christ being crucified.

²¹ To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." ²⁵ For "you were like sheep going astray," but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Like Paul, Peter gets distracted when he starts talking about Christ dying for us. He means to be giving the slaves an example to follow in their submission to their masters, but he goes on a bit.

"He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed."

The greatest illness that a human can have is not interest in living God's way, satisfied to carry on in sin. That is the worst sickness humans can have, and we all were born with it.

By Christ wounds we are healed from this. We actually would like for our whole lives to look like God wants them to look, we'd like to please God. That is greater healing by far than any other.

We have come to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. What kind words to us, who regularly have trouble in our souls. When we come to Jesus, we have come to the one who has scars on hands and feel so our souls would be whole. He's taking care of us.

Leaving Peter's sidetrack, he's telling the slaves to submit to their masters the way Christ submitted to people in his being crucified.

Jesus didn't have to submit to these people. When Jesus was being arrested, he said this to his followers: *Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?*

A legion was a Roman army of 6,000 soldiers. Twelve legions is 72,000 angles. That would nicely have taken care of the gang that arrested Jesus. Jesus was not a victim. He chose to submit. That, says Peter, is the example the slaves should follow.

1 Peter 3:1

Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives.

Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands. In the same way as what? In the same way as the slaves. How did the slaves submit?

By imitating Christ as he went to the cross. Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands by imitating Christ as he went to the cross.

This is really where I have been heading through this entire sermon: husbands and wives both imitate Christ on the cross in the way they treat each other.

I'll say it again: the Bible gives husbands and wives both the example of Christ being crucified as the model of how to treat their spouse.

Paul says husbands should love their wives with the kind of love Christ showed by being crucified. Peter says wives should submit to their husbands as Christ did when he submitted to the cross. This is incredibly strong language, but clear.

I find it distressing, even frightening. (That's why Paul says in 1 Cor 7 that if you can live single without being too distracted, he thinks you'll be happier.)

The kind thing about this teaching is that generally what we have to put with from our spouses is quite a bit milder than this.

Neither of these models are unique to marriage. Every believer is to imitate Christ on the cross in laying down their lives for other believers.

Every believer is to imitate Christ on the cross in submitting to authority. Peter clearly includes slaves, and commentators on 1 Peter understand Peter to be including all the ways in which all believers submit to authority.

Phil 2:8 says Christ Jesus *humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross*. He humbled himself, became obedient, right to death, even cross death. This is Jesus our example, Jesus who we follow.

Then Jesus called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. (Mark 8:34-35)

Marriage is one more way to live this out. Through Peter, Christ calls wives are to submit to their husbands in the same way as he, Christ, obediently submitted to the cross.

Through Paul, Christ calls husbands to love their wives in the same way as he, Christ, loved his bride when he obediently went to the cross.

Appendix One on "there is no male or female" (Gal 3:28)

In the Roman world, sons had inheritance rights that daughters did not share.

The Gentile Galatian believers were worried, because of false teachers, that since they had not been circumcised, they would not inherit the blessing God promised to Abraham and his descendants.

Paul argues that with God, all people who are in Christ have the full inheritance rights of Roman sons. Again I say, this Scripture is about who inherits God's full blessing, the blessing God promised to Abraham. Read the whole passage in that light:

²⁶You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

¹What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. ²He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. ³So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. ⁴But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. ⁶Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." ⁷So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

Male and female, along with Jew and Greek and slave and free, are equally heirs of God's blessing. Male and female equally share the special inheritance rights of Roman (and Jewish?) sons, male and female in Christ are equally God's heirs.

It is not apparent to me why this Scripture can not be given its full force, and Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 2-3 also be given full force. There is no tension, no reason why any of these Scriptures must yield and give place to another.

(The more gender-friendly TNIV, which in general I like very much, consistently translates the "sons" in this Scripture as "children," which is a sad mistake. I think Paul's profoundly gender-friendly discussion here loses force when we can no longer see that male and female equally become inheriting "sons." The translation above is from the older NIV.)

Appendix Two on abusive marriage in 1 Peter 3

1 Peter 3 can be understood as teaching believing wives to stay in abusive marriages. It does not say the wives must stay, nor does it say they may leave. It does assume that the wife will stay.

I suspect that the reasons are mostly practical, not theological. Theologically, a truly abusive relationship breaks the covenant of marriage, and the wife is free to go.

In Exodus 21 we read that if a husband takes a second wife and then neglects the first, he is obliged to set the first one free to go. That marriage is over. I assume that abuse would qualify as one kind of neglect.

That's theology. But practically speaking, it is hard enough for a single woman in our day to survive decently, and it was much worse then. If the wife of 1 Peter 3 should leave, how will she support herself?

If she stays she at least has house and food and clothing, for herself and their children. She no way to provide those if she leaves, outside of begging and prostitution. Like the believing slaves with unjust masters in 1 Peter 2, these women don't have much choice.

So Peter gives the wives and slaves (and whoever else groans under unjust authority) a "theology" of submission: the example of Jesus himself submitting to crucifixion. It's strong theology for a big problem.