



THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

STUDY 7 CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

Ephesians 5:15-33

To understand this passage it is absolutely essential that we first understand the man-woman relationship in the ancient world. Paul lived in an age where women were dependent and under a male authority for all of their life. She was first under her father, then her husband or possibly a male guardian. Her father arranged her marriage in her early teens, and from then on she was virtually 'owned' by her husband. Except in the case of an older wealthy widow, a woman could not support herself. To leave one's husband left a woman bereft of home and food and made her extremely vulnerable. In this world the man had all the power. A man worthy of respect was one who ruled over his wife, children and slaves firmly and strongly, ideally with fairness. It was to people who assumed this understanding of the man-woman relationship that Paul wrote about marriage in his epistle to the Ephesians.

When Paul's letter was read for the first time the men present would have felt their whole taken-for-granted understanding of marriage was being called into question. They heard the apostle exhorting men to love their wife and to give themselves for her even to the point of self-sacrifice. The Greek word Paul uses here to speak of the love required is *agape*. It speaks of self-giving loving service – being loving. No one, except Christ himself had ever suggested such a thing. This was a revolutionary and novel view of the man's role in marriage. In contrast, when we hear these words of Paul read today most of us feel our whole taken-for-granted understanding of marriage is being called into question. Our attention is caught by Paul's statement, 'the husband is the head of the wife.' Hearing this and nothing else in the whole passage we conclude either that men should again assert their 'headship' over their wife, or more commonly, Paul is a man of his age who has got it all wrong. So we often hear people saying Paul was a 'misogynist'.

Ephesians 5:15 begins a section where Paul outlines what it means to be a Christian walking in the light.

Q. 1. *List the very practical advice Paul gives in verses 15-18. What piece of advice catches your attention?*

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When Paul exhorts his readers to be filled with the Spirit, he speaks of an ongoing infilling, not a once-for-all event. In verse 19 he links this growing experience of the Spirit with communal, interactive worship.

Q. 2. Do you find communal worship the place where the Spirit seems most real/active in our life? How could we make our Sunday worship more Spirit-filled? Do vv 19-20 give a picture of your regular worship?

Although most modern translations make verse 21 the beginning of a new section dealing with marriage Paul did not do this. Verses 21-33 on marriage actually follows on from what Paul says in 5:15ff. For Paul a transformed marriage should be part of walking in the light and being continually filled with the Spirit.

Verse 21. 'Be subordinate to one another.' These words sum up the distinctly Christian understanding of inter personal relationships. They say in other words what Jesus made central to the ethic he gave his disciples, "Love one another." Again the Greek is agape. We are to be loving and this kind of love always puts others first.

Q. 3. How can we in actual practice subordinate ourselves to others? Is this something very difficult to do? Does this go against the grain of how our hierarchical society and workplace is organised?

Now Paul takes marriage as his first example of such self-subordination done in the power of the Spirit. After this he will take children to parents and slaves to masters as other examples where subordination is a virtue (Eph. 6:1-9).

Paul begins by addressing wives in just three short verses (verses 22-24). What he says to them was what was expected. Be subject to your husband because he is your head/master/boss just as Christ is head/master/boss of the church, his body. No one in the first century on hearing these words would have raised an eyebrow. Paul was enunciating the taken-for-granted understanding of marriage.

Q. 4. Most of the many sermons I have heard on Eph. 5:21-33 given by male ministers spend most time on these three verses. Why do you think this might be so?

Next in verses 25-33 Paul addresses husbands. He has the most to say to them. This section comprises eight verses.

Q. 5. List the things Paul demands of Christian husbands in verses 25, 28, 33.

Q. 6. Give some examples of a man putting into practice agape-love for his wife.

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In verse 31, quoting Genesis 2:24, Paul makes the reality and the goal of marriage the unity of the husband and the wife.

- Q. 7. *If the oneness Paul speaks about is more than the physical, how do two separate people become one in marriage? What does this mean in practice? In our world of wanting instant gratification, how can we encourage one another to work at a marriage rather than expecting instant oneness?*
- Q. 8. *Can oneness of body, mind and spirit be known in a marriage if the relationship is unequal, the man making all the important decisions?*
- Q. 9. *In summing up in verse 33 Paul says, a man should love his wife and a woman should respect her husband. In a popular American book on marriage this brief concluding comment is turned into a basic rule for a happy marriage: wives need love most of all and husbands need respect most of all. What do you think of this idea? Do women not want respect from their husbands and husbands the love of their wives?*
- Q. 10. *In Eph. 5:25-33 Paul is subtly subverting the prevailing cultural understanding of marriage, replacing it with a distinctly Christian understanding of marriage. Why then did he first of all tell women to accept things as they were?*
- Q. 11. *In the past, and sometimes today we hear Christian people saying, 'the man is the head of the home.' Paul actually never says this. Indeed, in 1 Tim. 5:14 Paul tells women to marry and manage (rule) their homes well. What do you think of the traditional idea that the man is the head of the home? Is this the case today? Does a smooth functioning home need a head/boss just like a smooth functioning business or school or church?*

A Comment on Male 'Headship.'

In some church circles you might almost think that male 'headship' stands right at the heart of the Christian faith. One lady told me that at least once a month in her church this matter is raised in the sermon. Her story is not exceptional.

In the Bible the word 'headship' does not appear. Moreover, Jesus never once suggested that men were 'head-over' women, or the head in marriage and he said much in opposition to this idea.

Just twice Paul speaks of the man as 'the head' (Greek kephale) of the woman. First, in 1 Cor. 11:3ff, he says that the man is the head/kephale of the woman to introduce his rule that women should cover their literal heads and men leave their literal heads uncovered when they alike lead the church in prayer and prophecy. The clue to what Paul means when he says the man is the metaphorical head of woman is found in verse 8 where Paul speaks of Eve coming 'from' Adam's side (Gen. 2:21-23). In Greek and English a common metaphorical meaning of the word 'head' is source,

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beginning. So we speak of the source or beginning of a river as its 'head.' In this passage Paul is not saying men are 'head over women'. He endorses them leading in worship. His point is that unlike the man who is made from the dust, woman is made 'from' the man. She is made of the same 'stuff' as he is and is thus his 'partner' who can lead in church alongside him.

In the second instance where Paul uses the word 'head' of the man-woman relationship in Eph. 5:23 the context shows it carries the sense boss/master, another common metaphorical meaning of the word 'head', again both in Greek and English. Paul's argument is that just as Christ as the ascended and reigning Lord is 'head over' the church, so the husband is 'head over' his wife. However, Paul then goes on to subvert the idea that in marriage the husband's leadership means being the boss. In contrast, he argues the husband's role is to 'lead' by serving his wife even to the point of giving his life for her. Instead of depicting the husband as the master over his wife, he depicts him as the servant to his wife. His model of leadership is the incarnate Christ who lays aside his divine prerogatives, taking the form of a servant for our salvation (Phil. 2:4-8). Nowhere in Eph. 5 does Paul say anything at all about who makes the major decisions in the home or who has the casting vote. These questions are excluded by what Paul actually says. It is not the role of servants to make decisions. Their role is to serve.

If you have time you might discuss the next two questions.

Q. 12. Today, a number of contemporary responses to Paul's assertion that the man is the head of his wife are made. Which of the following would you endorse and why? Discuss the answers given.

- Paul meant what he said. The man is 'head over' his wife. He should make all the important decisions.
- Yes, Paul said the man is the head of his wife but then he turned what he said on its head, making the husband the servant of his wife. Male 'headship' demands sacrificial loving service by the husband for his wife, nothing else.
- Paul speaks helpfully to a patriarchal context where men ruled the home but in our age and culture all ideas of the man being the 'head over his wife must be rejected.

Q. 13. What have you learned from this passage? A number of people in the group may like to respond to this question.

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