

## **A study of Ephesians 5: 21 ff**

As a lay theologian I'd like to offer exegesis and a hermeneutic interpretation of **Eph. 5: 21-33**, to encourage open discussion, critical analysis and interpretation of a familiar text which is used to support the limiting of women's gifts in the LCMS and the church at large. Coming from a social-psychological perspective as I do, there will be eisegesis as well. I will also address **I Cor. 11:3 - 11, and I Tim 2: 8 – 15** and other passages.

Scripture promotes the concept that as husband and wife we are one flesh or one body. In Paul's address to husbands in Ephesians, he uses an analogy and says to *love your wife as your own body*. When we war or fight with that body, we do damage to **it**. I believe the "it" that stands to be harmed is the *relationship*. The relationship is the **body** of the husband and wife.

Let us examine further the language Paul uses in these verses to wives and husbands. In verse 21, Concordia Self Study Bible uses the word "submit" to **one another** out of reverence to Christ. In v.22 he says "**wives**, submit to your husbands". Some translations in vs. 21 and 22 use the words "be subject to". "To be subject to" communicated to the women of that day. To submit to choices or decisions made **for** you was understandable in the patriarchal society in which they functioned. A father, husband, brother or guardian made decisions, signed documents, and decided who one would marry. They understood a hierarchal system in a society ruled by a king or emperor. One owes the king respect whether you **feel** like it or not. However, Roman society was changing even for women. Most fathers would no longer insist their daughters marry a man to whom they objected. Greek women may still have been more

oppressed. Jewish men and women in urban areas were strongly influenced by the Greco/Roman society. Christianity has been viewed as more egalitarian than the society in which they lived. I suspect that for the Christian women to whom Paul spoke, whether Greek, Roman, or Jew, however, the words would have been a challenge, even at that time, most especially if one's husband was a tyrant. However, Paul chose his words very carefully. He used a word in Greek (*hupotassomai*) that was urging the woman to “be supportive of”, “be responsive to” or “attend to the needs of” their husbands. If he had intended to tell women to “be subject to” as to a ruler he would have used a different Greek word (*peitharcho*).

Having urged the woman to do her part, he immediately instructs the husband in his part. Because society then did not promote the attitude Paul proposed, I suspect the husband felt he was being given just as or maybe even a greater challenge. It was the disciples themselves who told Jesus when he spoke to the Pharisees about God's intent for marriage and divorce that “if this is the way it is, it's better not to marry (Mt. 19). The husband, Paul said, is to treat his wife **in such a way that she will never have reason to blame him for her actions.** He is to be so good, kind, and loving to her that she will also be good, kind and loving – i.e. “without a spot or wrinkle . . . holy and without blemish”. The woman's behavior at that time was always regarded in light of how it impacted a man. Here he is being told that his behavior impacts her.

There is a principle being taught here that is so important for wives and husbands and to the relationship today that we dare not miss it. We do not live in a similar hierarchal system. The more education women have the less likely they are to accept hierarchy in the husband/wife relationship. Most women immediately get lost emotionally in a word which implies being less than with visions of referring to another (the husband) for decisions, yielding to another (the

husband) who believes he is in control and has the power. This is what the word submit means. It has no other definition in English.

If Paul was writing letters to the churches today, I believe he would use other words to get across the concept he was teaching. Starting with v. 21 he might have said, “You are to give the utmost respect to another with whom you are in relationship. Then in v. 22, Wives, your relationship with your husband will be damaged if you do not **respect and esteem him as you would Christ Himself**. This will mean relinquishing your will and wants at times in order to prevent unnecessary arguments and therefore, to protect the relationship. You are not to create a power struggle with your husband. You are one.

Husbands, you are to treat your wife with the **kind of love that makes her rejoice that you are her husband, showing her respect and kindness**. You are to help her be all Christ wants her to be. You are to value her as the gift from God that she is. God created her to be your helper as God is your helper. She is bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh, so you will not hurt her physically or with words. You are one.

I believe Paul would have instructed the 21<sup>st</sup> century husband and wife to have a new mind in Christ just as he did 2000 years ago **but** in a way that fits our cultural understandings. It is the *relationship* Paul is speaking about. It is love, respect and esteem from each to the other that protects and nourishes this relationship as God intended.

Barbara Brunworth Ph.D.  
Garland, Texas  
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