

Christ and the Church: A Model for Spouses

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Introduction

At the dawn of the 21st century of the Christian Era, the role of women in the developed world is more prominent than ever before. Both in the workplace and in family life, women are claiming equal rights and equal roles.¹ Some Christian denominations² have accepted women's absolute equality as a necessary development of Christ's teaching, and can cite verses such as Gal 3:28 to support their stance: there, Paul asserts that differences of gender as well as religious background and social class are not obstacles to our "one-ness" in Christ Jesus. Against this position, the Catholic and Orthodox churches maintain a tradition that only men can be ordained to the priesthood;³ and many Evangelical groups restrict women's roles in the family and in their ecclesial structures on the basis of numerous passages from the New Testament.⁴

So controversial are these passages, that the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference recently suggested they were better omitted from the cycle of Sunday Mass readings, lest they be misinterpreted by misogynists in their congregations.⁵

¹ Within our contemporary Church, John Paul II agrees with Paul VI's observation that "women are meant to form part of the living and working structure of Christianity in so prominent a manner that perhaps not all their potentialities have yet been made clear" - *Mulieris Dignitatem* 1.

² For example, the Salvation Army has had two women "Generals" (the most senior rank, head of the denomination worldwide) in recent years.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1577.

⁴ J. L. Sheler, "Editing Peter and Paul".

⁵ J. L. Sheler, *op. cit.*

But these verses are inescapably part of the inspired and canonical Scriptures, and must be set alongside the more affirming texts on women in order to find the full Christian message. For this reason it is important to give a contemporary exegesis of each difficult pericope, and here we will consider Eph 5:21-32, given for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B: a teaching on how wives should submit to their husbands, as the Church should to Christ, and how Christ and husbands should love their spouses in return.

Context

The authorship and intended readership of the "Letter to the Ephesians" are both disputed, even though the text claims to be the work of Paul. Best⁶ suggests that it is probably a circular letter rather than a missive to one particular church, and is the work of a Jewish writer based in Asia Minor, who is following the tradition of Paul. Adopting the practice of Best,⁷ we shall henceforth denote the author of Ephesians by "AE".

The later part of the letter introduces the idea of the Christian community as the "body of Christ" (4:15-16) and gives rules for proper sexual conduct and other moral behaviour (4:17-5:18a). This culminates by contrasting the worship and thanksgiving of the Christian community to the drunken debauchery of the pagans (5:18b-20). So follows the passage which we will consider below, which in turn is followed by teachings on the proper relations between parents and children, and slaves and masters (6:1-9). The letter concludes with the famous "armour of God" passage (6:10-17) and final greetings.

The teachings on proper relations for wives, children and slaves together form a unit known as a *Haustafel*, or household code.⁸ Similar material is found in Pauline and Petrine epistles. The letter to the Colossians is similar to Ephesians in many ways and contains a near-identical *Haustafel* in 3:18-22; most exegetes⁹ presume that Ephesians depends on Colossians in some unsolved way.

⁶ E. Best, *Ephesians*, New Testament Guide (hereafter NTG), 11-35 (Chapter 2).

⁷ E. Best, *Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary (hereafter ICC), pp. xiii-xv.

⁸ NTG 32, 53f.; C. L. Mitton, *Ephesians*, New Century Bible Commentary (hereafter NCBC), 194; R. Schnakenberg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: A Commentary*, 241.

⁹ Schnakenberg, *ibid.*, 30-33; NTG 22-25.

Exegesis

Ephesians 5:21-32 contains two major ideas: teaching on the relationship between Christ and His Church, and on the relationships between husbands and wives. Since the Christ-Church relationship is presented as a model for married relations, we shall examine the two themes separately. The pericope appointed for the lectionary omits verse 33, which reiterates the teaching given in the previous verses, but includes 21, a verse which seems to instruct all Christians regardless of rank to submit to one another. Mitton¹⁰ discusses the equality of this "mutual submission" against the asymmetrical rules given later in the epistle, but we will not pursue that verse here.

Christ and His Church

The primary idea for AE's teaching is found in vv. 31-32, which quotes from Genesis 2:24 the teaching that husband and wife "become one flesh" and claims that this is a profound mystery which applies to Christ and the Church. Previous verses apply this in specific ways: Christ is the head of his body, the Church, and also its Saviour (23); He gave himself up for her, thus purifying her to be presented to Him unstained (25b-27); He loves the Church because it is part of His body (29b-30).

Throughout Ephesians, references to the Church (ἐκκλησία) are to the universal church, not to a particular community.¹¹ Since the Greek word is of feminine gender, a "female" image of the Church works naturally. In most of the passage the motif is of the Church as "wife" of Christ, in an established relationship; but vv. 26-27 imply a "bride" motif since they refer to Christ presenting the Church to himself.¹²

The clear meaning of the Genesis 2:24 text is to assert the importance of the bond between spouses, setting it higher than the duty to honour one's parents (the husband leaves his parents to get married). AE does not deny this primary meaning,¹³ but uses it here to illuminate the relation between Christ and the Church. Thus the whole pericope is full of

¹⁰ NCBC 195; see also Schnakenberg, *ibid.*, 242f..

¹¹ This interpretation is needed to avoid endorsing polygamy! ICC 534.

¹² ICC 531.

¹³ NCBC 208.

references to ways in which Christ loves the Church in a self-sacrificing way, and she submits to His lordship. This in turn will be the template for Christian marriage.

The clause that Christ is the Saviour of the Church (v. 23) sits uneasily in the flow of the argument. Mitton¹⁴ suggests that the motif of the Church's obedience to Christ falls short of the whole truth about Christ's vivifying relationship with her. This theme is echoed in the use of the past tense¹⁵ where AE reminds us that "Christ loved the Church" (v. 25) in a clear reference to the Crucifixion, itself a consequence of Christ's voluntary actions. The title Saviour, used here, is in fact not used as a noun in the undisputed Pauline letters.

Mitton¹⁶ notes that the passage (indeed, the whole epistle) does not seem to be concerned with setting out the Church's mission to make salvation available to all nations; its emphasis on "Christ and the Church" is quite inward looking. But he suggests that it is important to maintain the health of the Church on earth precisely because she is the instrument of this salvation.

Verses 26 and 27 form an excursus on the theology of baptism,¹⁷ which is not directly related to spousal relationships. We saw earlier that these two verses use a Church-as-bride imagery (only found elsewhere in the NT in Revelation). A homily based on the whole pericope would do well to emphasise either the Christ-Church relationship and bring in this baptismal teaching, or else to focus on the husband-wife relationship in the light of Christ, ignoring this excursus. The conclusion of this essay will follow the latter approach.

Husbands and Wives

Interspersed with his teaching on Christ and the Church, AE gives norms for the relationship between spouses. Wives are asked to regard their husband as their head in the same way that Christ is head of the Church, and submit accordingly (vv. 22-24). Husbands, in turn, are instructed to love their wives in the way they love their own bodies (28) and to practice the same self-sacrificing love displayed by Christ (25).

¹⁴ NCBC 199.

¹⁵ NCBC 201.

¹⁶ NCBC 201*f.*.

¹⁷ For commentary see, *e.g.*, Schnakenberg, *ibid.*, 249-251.

Mitton¹⁸ presumes AE knew the Pauline corpus and observes that Paul had difficulty reconciling the subordination of women in the Jewish tradition to ideas of Christian equality.¹⁹ While it would have been expedient for Christian women not to flaunt their freedom, so bringing the Church into disrepute, both Paul and AE seem to have something stronger than mere expediency in mind: a sense that "obedience was the proper attitude of the wife towards her husband".²⁰

Wives are instructed to "be subject (τοῖς ἰδίοις) to your husbands, as to (ὡς τῷ) the Lord". In Chapter 6, Best²¹ notes, slaves and children are only asked to *obey* (υπακούετε), which is a less strong term. Here, the wives' submission takes on a religious significance: the injunction can be interpreted that they submit "as if to" the Lord; or reading ὡς τῷ as "because of", then it is the Lord's will that they submit to their husbands. Mitton²² prefers the reading in Col 3:18, that it is fitting for those who acknowledge Christ as Lord to practice this submission, opining that AE's wording is "assigning a degree of wisdom and authority to the Christian husband beyond anything that is reasonable". The true meaning²³ must be taken in the light of verse 21, calling for mutual submission "out of reverence for Christ".

Husbands are commanded (v. 25) to *love* (ἀγαπᾷ) their wives, using the Greek word not for erotic love but for Christian fellowship. In agape-love, says Mitton,²⁴ the lover must strive to understand the needs and interests of the other, and subordinate his own pleasure and advantage for her sake. It is possible, but unlikely,²⁵ that AE meant to argue that the wife is to be regarded literally as part of the husband's body in v. 28; more likely, this passage urges husbands to treat wives with the same respect as their own flesh, even implying that the husband's well-being will be improved when he treats his wife well. This adds a pragmatic motive to unselfish agape!

¹⁸ NCBC 197.

¹⁹ For equality, see Gal 3:28, I Cor 7:1-7; 11:11-12; for submission (silence in church, covering of the head) see I Cor 11:2-10, 13-16.

²⁰ NCBC 198.

²¹ ICC 533.

²² NCBC 199.

²³ As set out radically, for instance, by Pope John Paul II in *The Theology of the Body*. Pages 304-354 give his catechesis based on the passage we are expounding.

²⁴ NCBC 200; Schnakenberg, *ibid.*, 248f..

²⁵ NCBC 204; Schnakenberg, *ibid.*, 252f..

Best²⁶ suggests that AE is writing codes for a community of Christian households, since his strong use of the Christ/Church-Husband/Wife analogy would not be applicable to households of mixed religion; but other NT sources²⁷ show that mixed households did exist. He also²⁸ notes that the text addresses wives directly, and takes this as a sign of the status of women as full members of the Christian community, against Graeco-Roman sources which invite husbands to "instruct their wives" in their duties.

If AE is deriving his teaching from the Pauline corpus, he breaks with Paul in developing the parallels of Christ/Church - Husband/Wife.²⁹ Paul's view was more hierarchical: God-Christ-Man-Woman (I Cor 11:3). AE prefers to base his rules for marriage on drawing an analogy from Genesis.

Best³⁰ observes that the rules laid down in the *Haustafeln* were absolute forms (like the Decalogue) with no contingent clauses: how would they have been applied in the case of a battered wife, or if a pagan husband instructed his Christian wife to worship his gods? These speculative questions cannot be answered by the canonical text.

A Contemporary Application

Ephesians sets out two hopelessly idealistic demands. First of all, a wife should always submit to her husband. Secondly, the husband should love the wife so profoundly that he would die for her, and always put her well-being before his own. The demands on the spouses are not identical - but are similar in terms of the depth of commitment they demand.

Social questions of equal rights are always vexed by ambiguity over what equality actually requires: treating people identically, or according to their unique characteristics? Women are not simply men with an altered physiology; rather, psychological investigations have shown that men and women have (on average) different dominant modes of relating to other people. Specifically, men are found to be concerned about preserving their

²⁶ ICC 525.

²⁷ I Cor 7:16; I Pet 3:1-2.

²⁸ ICC 522.

²⁹ NCBC 199.

³⁰ ICC 524.

independence and asserting their status with respect to another, while women focus more on the degree of intimacy they have established.³¹

Psycho-linguist Deborah Tannen³² suggests, based on this, that the key to happy relationships between husbands and wives (indeed, all men and women), is for him to actively communicate his feelings and be aware of her need for intimacy, while she respects his need to assert a degree of independence and status in their relationship. In so doing, both partners take an equal step of accommodating to the other's style, but the two styles are not identical.

Mitton³³ refers to (but does not explicitly cite) psychological findings suggesting that wives are often happier letting husbands make the decisions, and the children of wife-dominated marriages have less emotional stability. Neither this, nor Tannen's conclusions, amount to a moral norm: they give pointers to what might usually work, but do not rule out individual counter-examples. If AE is proposing an apodictic norm for Christians, however, it must govern even those relationships where the psychology of the particular individuals suggests the relationship should be dominated by the wife.

Catholic teaching on revelation clearly states³⁴ that we must first understand what the human authors of Scripture intended to write, and that this is the starting point for our interpretation of inspired Scripture. It seems clear that where AE's letter reaches its intended audience, *viz.* a Christian couple striving to live their marriage according to God's revelation, it lays down an apodictic law. There is one very concrete and counter-cultural conclusion: if a Christian husband and wife, after a tender and loving discussion, cannot reach agreement on an issue, she should submit to him.³⁵ It is far less clear whether this applies to a wife whose husband is not Christian, or who is not sincerely trying to live out his faith and love her in a Christlike way.

³¹ D. Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand*, Chapter 1 (pp. 23-48).

³² Tannen, *ibid.*, 122.

³³ NCBC 198.

³⁴ *Dei Verbum*, 12.

³⁵ With the usual moral caveat that this does not apply to an intrinsically evil order.

Conclusion

It could readily be argued that, predating empirical psychology by centuries, Scripture has diagnosed both the problem and the solution for married relationships. In the very beginning, Genesis portrays man and woman as complementary, he condemned to assert his status and she to long for intimacy. The shrewd author of Ephesians counsels the remedy: he must love her as an equal, and she must submit to him. This mystery fits the Christ-Church relationship too, for while we submit to our Lord as befits mere creatures, He treats the Church with the dignity of a divine partner!

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