Is There a Head of the House in the Home?
Reflections on Ephesians 5
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Ephesians 5:21-32 (New International Version)
21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.
22. Wives, submit to your husbands as 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.
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, 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, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, 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." 32 This is a profound mystery - but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the husband must respect his wife.

Perhaps the most annoying of all dinnertime phone callers are the salesperson's who ask, "Is the head of the house at home?" My irritation with the question tempts me to make some unrepeatable statements to the caller, but mostly I try to bow out of the unwanted conversation before the lasagna gets cold. Should I be brave (or foolish) enough to continue the conversation, I probably should reply, "Well, it depends upon what you mean by head."

The answer to the title question of this paper is similar: "Yes, there is a head of the house in the home, but probably a different kind of head than you have in mind."

Ephesians 5:15-6:9 is a Haustrafé (a table of household duties) and is the central passage for Pauline teaching on Christian marriage. The passage, along with its reduced parallel in Colossians, is well known by persons of all persuasions on the issue of the relationship between wives and husbands. Often used in wedding ceremonies, these verses are home to the traditionalists and to biblical feminists as well. (Unfortunately, secular writers such as Bullough see only subordination in this passage.)

Hazards exist for us any time we approach a familiar, well-worn passage of Scripture. The mind and heart can wander down familiar ruts and miss the beauty of sauntering down different parts of the pathway. It is the thesis of this paper that we need a fresh look at these verses. While volumes could be written on the deep truths found here, we will limit ourselves to looking fresh at issues of the text, issues of the context, the need for new terminology, and ramifications of the passage.

Textual Issues
Two matters of great importance regarding the matter of submission as taught in Ephesians 5 hinge on textual issues. The history of our English text and of the Greek texts which preceeded can help us understand the problem with paragraphing this passage and with the predicate omission in verse 22.

The Apostle Paul most likely wrote the Ephesian letter on papyrus. This rather fragile material was commonly used in the Mediterranean world, and although some papyrus fragments survive from those ancient centuries, no portions of the autographs of Scripture survive. Hence we can only speculate as to their exact appearance. Later copies eliminated all spaces between words to conserve valuable space. No sentence divisions or paragraphing space was shown.

Paragraphing may or may not have been evident in Paul's original writing on the papyrus. But since those autographs are not extant, modern editors must try to reconstrcut the implicit paragraphy by following the logic of the Apostle's thought. A survey of modern English versions shows that three indicate each verse as a separate paragraph. Of the other nine most commonly used versions, four indicate a new paragraph at verse 22, and five do not. Did Paul see verse 22 as a new thought, or was it a continuation of verse 21 with its directive that all Christians should be submissive to one another?

The second textual issue involves the fact that Paul did not use any form of the word submit (hupotasso) in verse 22. To be consistent he also omitted the verb form in verse 24 when speaking of wives. In each of these two verses the verb form is clearly implied. But its absence in both places is significant. It forces us to link the submission of the wife in verse 22 to the concept of mutual submission in verse 21 (a participial form of hupotasso) and the wife's submission in verse 24 to the submission of the church to Christ.

Supplying the verb forms in these two verses helps the reader follow Paul's argument, but it also interferes with our ability to see the context of the submission which Paul is advocating. In point of fact, three sets of dyads are addressed: husbands-wives; parents-children; masters-slaves. The imperatives to all five of the other members of these dyads are clearly given: husbands v. 28, children 6:1, fathers 6:4, slaves 6:5, masters 6:9. Perhaps we can say that Paul anticipated confusion over the meaning of submission and
pated confusion over the meaning of submission and made these two predicate omissions as a way of forcing us to interpret the submission in context only. Thus the governing verb form in verse 21 is a participle which has an imperative force but which is not easily repeated in verse 22.

Good translations and versions might well choose to indicate a paragraph change between verses 21 and 22, and they might well decide to supply missing verbs in verses 22 and 24. But we must find a way of forcing all exegesis and expositors to deal concretely with the exact forms of the original text. If such considerations are not seriously made, grievous errors of interpretation can result. All too often preachers and writers will pay only lip service to these features of the text and then proceed to interpret submission as they always have. Serious interaction with both the paragraphing issue and the predicate omission will dramatically affect exegesis.

Context

Paul's treatment here of wife and husband is an outflow of 5:18 b. Christianity is not the combination of a radically new gospel and relationships as they have always been. Instead the gospel works its way into the hearts of individuals and their relationships so that both are different. His description of marriage is of Christian marriage empowered by the filling of the Holy Spirit.

To illustrate the differences which the Holy Spirit can make in our lives, the Apostle chooses three very basic human relationships. The three sets of dyads have some common characteristics and some distinctions. His use of these three interpersonal situations is not to suggest that they are all the same; they are not. But it is to show how Spirit-filled living can transform them into genuine Christian relationships.

The one dyad which does not directly match current life in most of the West is the slave-master duo. While most interpreters extrapolate from the slave-master figure to an employee-employer figure, it is important to realize that the Apostle did not choose to be so general. He focused on one particular type of vocational relationship which, however, can inform all of our work relationships.

In each of these three sections, the Apostle first addresses the less powerful person in the dyad: wives, children, slaves. Here we catch a glimpse of what the Gospel offers burdened and oppressed peoples: hope and the possibility of transformation. Paul boldly claims that when the Gospel enters into these relationships and when the Spirit is allowed to empower us, marriage can be loving, parenting can be nurturing, and even slavery can be tolerable.

A second common theme is that of mutual submission in each of these three settings. In marriage it takes on the flavor of submission as to the Lord combined with self-sacrificing love; in parenting it looks like obedience and nurture; and in the slavery relationship it manifests itself in a degree of collegial-
Instead they form a unique interweaving of concepts. The reader can end up puzzled, as the Apostle realizes when he adds words of clarification to help us know the direction of his thought (v. 32).

The emphasis in this section on the husband is not that he be empowered to exercise more of his prerogatives. Nor is the emphasis designed to create more distance between husband and wife. Instead the husband is challenged to devote energy, time, and motivation in seeking the best for his wife just as Christ does for the church. Yes, there is a head of the home in the passage; but headship is unmistakably defined as self-sacrificing love. It can be no more, and it must be no less.

This great Ephesian passage of Christology bears striking resemblance to the Philippians 2 passage. Christ’s emptying of Himself was His voluntary surrender of prerogative. In Ephesians the example of Christ is again one who sets aside all interest in self and devotes all to the other. So for the husband, self-sacrificing love (headship) involves a surrender of power and meeting the wife at the point of mutual submission. Again, mutual submission as seen in Christian marriage seems best understood as the empowerment of the wife as she yields herself to husband and the voluntary surrender of self-interest on the part of the husband.

Terminology

We are in fresh need of new terminology for these processes. Both “head” and “submit” are perfectly good translations for the Greek terms found in Ephesians 5-6, but they suffer from the connotations which our present culture imposes upon them. For example, “head” takes on far more connotations of authority than any careful exegesis of these chapters can sustain.

Definition 25 in Oxford’s Unabridged Dictionary reads: “A person to whom others are subordinate; a chief, captain, commander, ruler, leader, principal person, head man.” None of these fit with Christ’s headship as explained in chapter 5. (Note that some versions incorrectly use the word “subordinate” for “submit”.) Men who insist on the appellation “head” in its sense of authoritative domination should remember that the word can also mean the mature part of a boil or abscess from which trouble can flow imminently! I would far more wish to be known as a self-sacrificing lover.

Likewise “submit” can carry a variety of overtones in English. Most dictionaries describe three intensities of meaning to the English word “submit”: (1) a total surrender to authority, (2) a yielding to another, or (3) a presentation as in “I would like to submit...” (These three are listed in descending order.) If we opt for the most intense meaning (1), we are likely to miss totally the sense of Pauline thought here. How can emphasis (1) make any sense in verse 21, the only place where hupotasso is explicitly used of the wife? A far better term or phrase might be “an attitude of yieldedness.”

A final terminology change relates to verse 21. “Mutual submission” continues to be a powerful phrase which takes all our strength to understand. But we have come to see in that phrase hints of “equality” which may be counterproductive. The term “equality” can be justifiably used for a variety of Christian themes, but for some people the term is too strident and indicative of sameness. Equality can exist without implying sameness, and it can refer to complex entities. But perhaps a better word for the result of the spiritual dynamics of verse 21 would be “equivalence.” Borreson suggests that equivalence with regard to the spiritual relationship between the sexes is a strong and good word in the tradition of Augustine and Aquinas. The hyphenated form of the word tends to highlight the net balance which appears to be present in verse 21.

Other individuals will argue that different terms than the ones suggested here would be better. What matters more than an individual word is that we be willing to take fresh approaches in explaining the truths of this passage lest it be tragically shaped by connotations which do not faithfully represent the text.

Ramifications

We have time and space in this paper to deal with only two ramifications. First, the question is frequently asked, “Who, then, is the final authority in the home?” Mutuality is rightly seen as incongruous with unilateral decision-making, and many questioners will assume that you have inadvertently ignored the most basic requirement for any marriage: that there be an ultimate stalemate-breaker who can resolve deadlocks and impasses. (Most persons interested in this issue are curiously males who have vested interests in the matter!)

The issue turns out to be moot. Mutual submission, rightly understood and practiced, does not entail stalemates or deadlocks. Secondly, a two-person relationship is not a motley collection of persons who have no skill in consensus. It is an intimate relationship which should be characterized by bilateral decisions in the spirit of verse 21. Thirdly, the very fact that the Apostle did not address this question in his most central passage on marriage suggests that marital decision deadlocks may be more of an indication of a poor marriage than most are willing to admit.

The other ramification has to do with domestic violence. A misuse of “head” and “submit” by violent persons, whether Christian or non-Christian, is a profound travesty. No statement could ever be a greater defamation of this passage than “I had to beat her because she would not submit.”

A local intervention ministry for domestic violence reports that 2,700 documented batterers have come to the agency in the last five years. We are told that domestic violence occurs in over 25% of all homes. The F.B.I. reports that over two million
homes. The F.B.I. reports that over two million women are beaten and abused by their husbands every year. Not all of these violent homes are non-Christian! For all their talk about 'mutual submission' or 'equality in submission,' some evangelical Christians practise something quite different.12

The history of domestic violence is a sad one. Pellauer tells us that the origin of the phrase "rule of thumb" comes out of English common law and its judicial precedent "that a husband might beat his wife provided that the rod used was no thicker than his thumb."13 Strauss, Gelles, and Steinmetz encouragingly report that religious affiliation does seem negatively correlated with the incidence of domestic violence.14 Nonetheless Martin reports that some husbands will use any perceived threat to their "headship" as a justification for violence.15 Petersen says: A rigid perspective on the subject of submission also contributes to a . . . syndrome called 'learned helplessness' in which a battered woman accepts the violence done to her as part of the course of her life, believes she has no options available, and falls into numb passiveness.16

Whenever we deal with the Ephesians 5-6 passage, we have an obligation to combat even the slightest possibility that someone in our hearing could misconstrue this beautiful section of Scripture. As noted by Webb: Some conservative churches still hold to beliefs about battering that border on superstition, vaguely derived from Scripture: if she were truly submissive her husband would not respond to her violently; Jesus is using her example of patience and forgiveness to bring her husband to Christ, her husband's violence is testing sent by God's Spirit to uphold her faith.17

Silence on our part about this problem will only allow the condition to continue.18 We must speak out.

Footnotes

2. The grammatical reason for the omission of the verb in verse 22 involves Paul's use of anakolouthon, which is common for Paul to begin a sentence with a finite verb (as he does in 5:18b) and then "to forget the original construction and substitute another for it in resumption." T. Blass and A. Debrunner, A Greek grammar of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature: A Translation and Revision of the Ninth-Tenth German edition incorporating supplementary notes of A. Debrunner by Robert W. Funk. Chicago: University to Chicago Press, 1961. p. 244
3. Namely, the predicate ellipses.
6. Ibid., p. 45.

PROPOSED STUDY PROGRAM IN TURKEY WILL EMPHASIZE THE APOSTLE PAUL AND THE WOMEN OF ASIA MINOR

Asbury Theological Seminary announces a summer study program that will concentrate on the Apostle Paul and the women of Asia Minor. The program will be directed by Joan Lyon Adjunct Professor of Women, Church, and Society at Asbury Seminary, and Dr. Catherine Kroeger, a former chaplain and lecturer in religion at Hamilton College.

The projected tour will leave New York the end of May and spend approximately two weeks in Turkey, with visits to many biblical sites and locations connected with the activities of early Christian women. The group will inspect Mirmiark, the teaching center of St. Thecla, legendary travelling companion and missionary associate of the Apostle Paul.

Other women leaders to be studied include Priscilla, Drusiana, Macrina, Olympias, and Pulcheria. The investigation will utilise historical and literary texts, archaeological data, and on-site inspections. Art historic material will receive special attention. The experience will afford opportunities for worship and thanksgiving at locations where these women carried on their ministry.

A second major emphasis will be the activities of the Apostle Paul and his encounters with women as they are described in the Book of Acts. His difficult mandate in 1 Tim 2:9-15 will be scrutinized within the social, cultural, and religious environment of western Asia Minor, particularly of the area around Ephesus. In view of the lexical and grammatical peculiarities of the passage, an alternative interpretation will be offered in the context of its setting.

Persons desiring to earn three graduate credits by their participation in the study program may write to Dr. Robert Mulholland, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky, 40390 (telephone 606-838-3581, ext. 246). Tuition is $160.00 per credit hour. The cost