

Husbands and Wives: Submit to One Another?

By: Teresa Beck

I listen to the local Christian radio station when I'm in my car, which is far more time than I'd like to spend there. Nonetheless, I get to hear uplifting, beautiful music, powerful preaching, and expert teaching of the Word of God. This past week, I was listening to a two-part sermon on a very reputable radio program, and I heard the four millionth otherwise great preacher talking nonsense concerning the marriage relationship. This preacher, and it seems to me, too many preachers, in order to appease and tickle the ears of the women in their churches, applied Ephesians 5:21 to the marriage relationship. I would like them to stop doing this.

Ephesians 5:21 – “Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.”

Preachers have the heavy responsibility of taking God's Word to the people: their accountability and responsibility to God and to His people is grave. The Apostle Paul instructed Timothy to “*study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth (2Timothy 2:15),*” and to “*preach the Word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine (2Timothy 4:2).*” Peter says, “*No prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation (2Peter 1:20).*” All of this instruction on building up the body of Christ and more are contained in the scripture, yet more preachers all the time are defying these instructions when they apply Ephesians 5:21 to the marriage.

Why am I so concerned with this one verse of scripture? I'm so concerned because this verse, when applied to marriage, skews the Christian's view of Christ and the church. Where, in Scripture or in history, has God submitted to Man? NOWHERE. When has Christ submitted to His church? NEVER. Here is the extended, complex sentence that ends in Ephesians 5:21:

Ephesians 5:18-21 – “And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.”

Notice the plural pronoun “yourselves.” Now, go back through Ephesians 4:1-5:21. Notice the entire passage is explaining the positions, functions, and relationships among a body of believers consisting of both men and women. Notice that 4:15-16 define Christ as the head of this body, which consists of every believer working together in harmony “*unto the edifying of itself in love.*” Further, in 5:21, this body is instructed to, under the Head, submit to one another. The analogy presented is this:

Head:Body::Christ:Church

This is read, “head is to body as Christ is to church,” meaning that the relationship between the head and the body is the same as the relationship between Christ and the church. When your brain tells your body to walk, it walks. When your brain tells your body to breathe, it breathes. When your brain tells your body to turn, it turns. Your body does not rebel against your brain unless you have a defect; rather, it submits to your brain's commands. Likewise, all of the parts of your body work together in unison. If you are eating a meal, your right hand does not act against your arm when your brain tells it to pick up your food. Your mouth doesn't refuse to open when your hand raises your food to it. Your esophageal muscles do not refuse to swallow; your stomach doesn't refuse to digest. All parts of your body work together in submission to each other under the headship of your brain just as all members of the body of Christ are to work together in submission to one another under the headship of Christ:

Head:Body::Christ:Church

Ephesians 5:22-33 presents an entirely different analogy than the one presented in Ephesians 4:1-5:21:

Husband:Wife::Christ:Church

*Ephesians 5:22-33 – “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. **Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.** Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: for we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. **This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.** Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.”*

There can be no misinterpretation, for this passage is made poignantly clear in verse 32: “*This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.*” Therefore, I take issue with those who would mix these analogies by preaching that husbands and wives are to submit to one another. They are causing the women whose ears they are tickling and the men whose headship they’re minimizing to fail in fulfilling their roles in marriage. They are painting a picture of God Almighty as one who submits to Man. They are elevating the church to an equal standing with Christ. They are undermining the very foundation of marriage found in Genesis 2:9, when God created for Adam a “*help meet for him.*” They are robbing the people of God of the joy of full submission to Christ through full submission to His Word that they are distorting. Nowhere in the Bible does God submit to Man, but throughout the Bible, Man is exhorted to submit to God, just as in this passage, wives are exhorted to submit to their husbands. Nowhere in the Bible are husbands commanded to submit to their wives. On the contrary, a wife’s joy in marriage is full only when she submits herself to the authority of God by submitting herself to her husband. In the same way, a husband’s joy in marriage is full only when he submits himself to the authority of God by accepting and exercising his position of headship as described by God in His Word. Remember the analogies:

Head:Body::Christ:Church

Husband:Wife::Christ:Church

I would challenge all husbands and wives to study the truth of these scriptures and to reject contrary teaching; and I challenge preachers to speak these truths in love so that the body of Christ can be in a right relationship with Him and with each other.