

## Man & Woman In Christian Perspective

by Werner Neuer

### 5 Man and Woman in Marriage

The divinely intended relationship between the sexes in marriage is described quite briefly in Colossians 3:18 and more fully in Ephesians 5:22-33. We shall concentrate entirely on the text from Ephesians, for it is the most sublime statement in the New Testament about marriage.

<sup>22</sup> Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. <sup>24</sup> As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. <sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, <sup>26</sup> that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, <sup>27</sup> that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. <sup>28</sup> Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as

Christ does the church, <sup>30</sup> because we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup> For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' <sup>32</sup> This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; <sup>33</sup> however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

This text refutes all those commentators who on the basis of 1 Corinthians 7 claim that Paul disparages marriage. Could anything grander be said about matrimony than that it reflects the inner relationship between Christ and the church? At the same time the text makes it clear that the distinction between men and women cannot be reversed, as Christ and the church are and remain quite distinct from each other.

Our passage is characterised by the interweaving of 'is' and 'ought', of gift and obligation. It does not say 'the husband *should be* the head of the wife', but 'the husband *is* the head of the wife as Christ *is* the head of the church' (cf. 1 Cor 11:3). The husband is therefore placed over his wife constitutionally; 'being' head over his wife is just as inseparable from his nature as Christ's headship over the church. <sup>362</sup> Just as one cannot confess Jesus Christ without affirming his lordship, so it is impossible to confess maleness without affirming male headship. When men refuse to accept their particular responsibility to be head of the wife, they are rebelling against the position intended by God and living in contradiction to their nature as males. God has put the husband over his wife in a similar way to that in which he put Christ over the church.

Because a husband is head, there follow clearly differentiated duties for both sexes; from the *gift* of being head there follow for the husband quite distinct obligations. Our text begins with consequences for the wife. 'Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord . . . As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands' (vv. 22, 24). Also, when it comes to the consequences which follow from the husband's position as head, Paul has Christ and the church as the models in his mind's eye: as the

church is totally subject to Christ, so wives are to be subject to their husbands 'in everything'. Without the comparison with Christ, the primacy of the husband 'in everything' could be misunderstood as a licence for every form of male tyranny. The comparison with Christ shows the content, character, and limits of this subjection. Christ's headship is a reign of sacrificial love. So Paul demands: 'Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her . . . Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies' (v. 25-6, 28). In these verses the headship of the husband is marked off as sharply as possible from any male egoism or any subjugation of the wife. Jesus' self-offering on the cross, and his life of perfect love, which included a willingness to serve as a slave (John 13:1-17), set a standard for male headship which cannot be surpassed.

It must therefore be regarded as a calamity that precisely Ephesians 5:22ff. is appealed to time and again to justify the pious assertiveness of Christian husbands; the subjection of wives is emphasised one-sidedly (vv. 22-4), but the demand for sacrificial love by the husband (vv. 25-33) is passed over. The chief emphasis of our text is not the subjection of the wife, but quite clearly the selfless love of the husband. Whereas four verses are devoted to wives (vv. 22-4, 33), nine are directed at husbands (vv. 25-33). Husbands are just as often commanded to love (vv. 25, 28, 33) as wives are told to submit (vv. 22, 24 and implicitly v. 33). Since the command to love disallows any egoism by the men, there is no text less fitted to justify arbitrary male domination than Ephesians 5:22ff.! If a husband is really head after the model of Jesus, then all oppression of wives must cease. Just as Christ as head of the church does not oppress, but is concerned for her best interests ('that she might be holy and without blemish', v. 27), so a husband's headship means he seeks the best for his wife with all his powers. It is a reign of love directed towards the well-being of the wife and the whole family.

The phrase 'in everything' (v. 24) indicates that the husband's headship relates to all areas of life. The man is

called to be head in both the natural and the spiritual realms, that is to be the spiritual leader in marriage and to assume special responsibility for the ordinary affairs of life. Being head always means exercising chief responsibility in all aspects of married and family lifestyle. The husband whose headship is modelled on Christ's relieves his wife of a burden. Just as the church can take comfort from entrusting its leadership to Christ, so can a wife by letting her husband have the final say in all issues relating to the marriage. The husband, on the other hand, is obliged to relieve his wife of the burden of the final decision and responsibility before God.

Of course that does not entail the wife abjectly and passively submitting to her husband's will. Paul took it for granted that the wife's duty to obey ended where her husband was leading her into sin. Submission to the husband assumes submission to God. The injunction to submit to the husband (v. 22) presupposes wives are subject to the Lord ('as to the Lord'), and should conflict arise, without doubt obedience towards God is the decisive consideration.

The wife is not thereby absolved from the duty of thinking critically; she owes this to her husband as his God-appointed helpmeet. She has to watch and help him carry through his headship in a Christlike way. This is expressed in our text when it emphasises the unity between man and wife (vv. 28-32). Accordingly our passage speaks not just of Christ's primacy over the church, and of the husband over the wife, but also of the inner fellowship between Christ and the church, and between husband and wife. As the church is portrayed as the body of Christ (vv. 23, 29-30), so the wife is symbolically compared to her husband's body (vv. 28-9, 31). Paul interprets the 'becoming one flesh' of Genesis 2:24 symbolically, so that the husband is the head and the wife the body of this 'one flesh', just as Christ is the head and the church is his body. Paul thus views marriage as an organism which reflects the inner organic fellowship between Christ and the church. It obligates both partners to endeavour to become one in thought, will, and action. And it excludes

any passive or unthinking submission by a wife to her husband's will.

This licence to criticise, which a wife owes her husband as his companion, does not of course free her from the duty to submit 'in everything' (v. 24). Our text gives no more scope for egoistical self-assertion by the wife than it does for egoistical arbitrariness by the husband. The wife is not placed alongside her husband as a second head in order to be always correcting his decisions, but is a partner subordinate to him, to whom he owes his entire love. The wife's role as helpmeet, mentioned in Genesis 2:18, is seen in the light of Ephesians 5:22ff. to be that of helping her husband to be head in the way Christ is. A wife who does not recognise that her husband is head rejects her task of being his helpmeet and rebels against the divinely intended position of the sexes.

The wife's duty to submit to her husband cannot be relativised by an appeal to verse 21, just before our passage, where church members (not marriage partners!) are exhorted to 'be subject to one another'. For the Greek phraseology does not necessarily mean a strictly mutual submission, but can also describe the appropriate respect for order that should characterise behaviour.<sup>363</sup> That the latter is meant is shown unmistakably by the injunctions which follow verse 21 in 5:22-6:9, in which there is 'no example of mutual submission',<sup>364</sup> only of unidirectional submission (Christ - Church, Husband - Wife, Parents - Children, Master - Slave). Ephesians 5:21 could therefore be paraphrased: 'Be subject to each other within the appropriate framework - wives to husbands, children to parents, slaves to masters, not indiscriminately all submitting to each other, but one submitting to the other, that is the lower to the higher.'<sup>365</sup>

But how is unidirectional submission of the wife to the husband to be understood? We have several times insisted that we are not dealing with an uncritical slavish submission. It is rather a conscious and free submission which arises from 'insight into a saving structure'.<sup>366</sup> The Greek word *hypotassesthai*, 'be subject', covers 'a complete range of meanings from submitting to an authority to a fully conscious putting

oneself at the disposal of another'.<sup>367</sup> According to Paul the demand that a wife should be subject is based on the fact that the divinely intended relationship between men and women can be realised on in this way. This relationship corresponds to the nature of both the sexes and also serves the welfare of both. Opposition to the man being head destroys, says Paul, the basis of maleness and femaleness, as being head is inseparable from the man's being and nature (cf. 1 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:23). How little submission has to do with lack of honour is apparent in 1 Corinthians 11:3, where the submission of the woman is compared to Christ's submission to the Father. The submission expected of the woman in Ephesians 5:22 is a submission in love to the loving leadership of the husband, whose headship means he lovingly takes on all responsibility. The marriage relationship of Ephesians 5:22ff. is therefore of mutual love, which obliges the man to lead in love and the wife to follow in love.<sup>368</sup> It rests on the insight that the harmony God intends in marriage can be realised 'only where one takes the lead, and the other is prepared to follow. Without submission there can never be harmony.'<sup>369</sup>

Paul wanted to make clear in Ephesians 5:22ff. how following Christ is realised in marriage. When a Christian husband maintains headship, he is, according to Paul, following Christ in the strictest sense of the word, for when he makes real his headship by selfless love of his wife, he reflects the behaviour of Jesus Christ towards his church. For a husband, following Christ and being head cannot be separated: if one is infringed, so is the other. The Christian wife, on the other hand, is called to reflect in a special way the receptive submissive outlook of the church. According to 1 Corinthians 11:3 she then reflects the attitude of Christ to the Father. So for women too, following Christ and accepting the order set out in Ephesians 5:22ff. are inseparably linked. A wife who opposes her husband being head denies her femaleness and rebels against Christ. Ephesians 5 does not contain temporally conditioned patriarchal concepts in Christian dress, as many modern expositors maintain, but eternal truths which affect the fundamentals of Christian

existence and cannot be set aside without damaging the foundations of the church (cf. Chapter 10).

When we compare Paul's views on marriage with his remarks about the place of the sexes within the church, we see that both are based on the same principle: the man is head of the woman and is therefore called in church life and in marriage to the task of leadership. For Paul headship in marriage and in church life are inseparable. Experience as head in marriage is according to him an indispensable prerequisite for every church leader. In 1 Timothy 3:4 he makes it a condition of leadership in the church that the candidate 'must manage his own household well'. This criterion is illuminating. For whoever is not in the position to lead a marriage or run a family will not be able to lead a church according to God's purpose.

Ephesians 5:22ff. shows that the headship of the husband is not just to be understood as a creation ordinance (as in Gen 1-3), but also as an *ordinance for the life of the redeemed church*, whose inner criterion of absolute love has been realised in the self-sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Finally, 1 Corinthians 11:3 anchors the headship of the man right in the trinitarian being of God, where there is both super- and subordination among the divine persons.

It is worth noting that in all the texts discussed Paul attempts to demonstrate his position with weighty theological arguments and not pragmatically. For Paul, opposition to the relationship between the sexes which he defends is tantamount to opposing God's creation and indeed indirectly to opposing God's trinitarian nature. To be sure, his appeal to creation shows that man's primacy over woman is conditioned by creation and is therefore valid for all, both inside and outside the church. When he models marriage on Christ's relationship to the church (Eph 5:22ff.), he makes it apparent that only Christians are really in the position to realise, however imperfectly, the divinely intended pattern of relationships between the sexes. Of course non-Christian husbands can to a degree exercise their task as head. However, in the light of Ephesians 5 it must be said that a husband who is

not consecrated to Christ cannot be true to his headship. Oppression of the wife or a complete upset of the creation ordinance by a setting aside or a reversal of subordination are the unavoidable consequences if man and wife are not disciples of Christ.