

Ephesians 5:21-end; 1 Corinthians 7:1-7

Does biblical teaching about husbands and wives shed light on the roles of men and women in the church?

As we engage with these biblical texts on husbands and wives it will be important, as in all cases, to put them into context and to get a clear sense of how they fit within the structure of the Epistle as a whole. Alongside that it will also be important to spend some time looking at how what Paul says fits with other things that he says elsewhere. Inevitably this will be brief but still important, as we endeavour to address this key question of how church order relates to any perceived order within the home.

As we begin with Ephesians 5 it is perhaps worth noting that this well known passage around household codes is set within a specific context. That is, it follows clearly on from and is set against the backdrop of a discussion of Christian unity. The argument flows from 4:4 where Paul says '*There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*' It is this that leads him to look at the purpose of gifts (i.e. not self promotion but the building up of the body - that is the edification of others). From there it is a small step to appropriate Christian living culminating in vs. 32 with '*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*' Chapter 5 begins interestingly with a statement which sums up what has gone before and prepares the ground for what is to come in the household codes: '*Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*' 5:1- 2. This is particularly interesting because it sets the scene for what has consistently been presented as the male calling or 'role' within marriage. Yet we see here that the injunction which Paul gives to love as Christ loved and to give oneself up as a fragrant offering and sacrifice for the other is not exclusively to be understood as having its place within marriage. Neither significantly is it the sole remit of the husband in regard to the wife. Indeed it is clearly here to be the natural outpouring of sibling love within the church, the body of Christ.

This is vitally important as we move to look specifically at our key passage. Paul once again moves to speak about appropriate Christian living and then he gets down to serious outworking of this in the social context. Just as he has led into the section about Christian living by a clear theological exhortation about living according to the pattern set by God in Christ so here he does the same. He exhorts the Ephesians to constantly give voice to the presence of God in their lives by encouraging one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs and giving

Ephesians 5:21-end; 1 Corinthians 7:1-7

Does biblical teaching about husbands and wives shed light on the roles of men and women in the church?

thanks in all things through Jesus Christ to God the Father; the corollary of this being that they submit to one another out reverence for the Christ. Their mutual submission is to be the outworking and the expression of their worship. We miss a significant amount of the import of this passage when we separate it from what has gone before and indeed when, as happened in c.AD 350,¹ we separate vs. 22 from vs 21, inserting a new verb and so distorting the flow of Paul's argument and radical thinking.

It is vital to understand the mutuality of submission in verse 21 as this sets up what is to follow and mirrors what has been set up by Paul in 5:1-2. It is equally vital to understand the motive for the mutuality: that it flows out of worship and thus out of the dynamic of our relationship with God and indeed of the internal self-giving relationship of the Trinity. Verse 21 reads that we are to “*submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*”. Payne describes this as ‘one of the most socially revolutionary and linguistically creative teachings of Paul’.² It is indeed audacious: Paul uses the language of submitting, of ‘placing oneself under’ alongside the reciprocal pronoun ἀλλήλων. Every occurrence of ἀλλήλων in Paul's letters fits its identification in BDAG³ 46 as the ‘reciprocal pronoun’ with English equivalents, “each other, one another, mutually”. A reciprocal pronoun by definition is one “expressing mutual action or relation”⁴. Thus we must understand Paul's intention here as being to direct the Ephesians as he does the Philippians in Phil 2:3ff that they should ‘*in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not to your own interests but to the interests of others*’. It is not good enough nor does it do justice to the careful language which Paul has used for Grudem to suggest that this in some sense is one-directional, with Paul expecting only that ‘*some be subject to others*’⁵ (my italics) rather than all to all. Indeed, to

¹ Payne *Man and Woman, One in Christ* - Zondervan 2009 p.278

² Ibid p.279

³ Bauer, W; F.W. Danker; W. F Arndt, and F.W. Gringrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* 3d ed. Chicago

⁴ Webster's New World dictionary ,1184; quoted in Payne 279

⁵ Grudem: *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than a hundred Disputed Questions* 197

Ephesians 5:21-end; 1 Corinthians 7:1-7

Does biblical teaching about husbands and wives shed light on the roles of men and women in the church?

quote Payne, Grudem is here 'violating the heart of the meaning of the reciprocal pronoun'.⁶

Having established clearly that the context upon which Christian household codes are to be established is that of mutual love echoing the sacrificial love of Christ and also mutual submission flowing from our worship and dynamic relationship with God himself, Paul goes on to apply that within the context to which he was writing. As always when doing careful exegesis it is vital to understand that here we have God's eternal word which is vital, authoritative and living for us now but we also need to have a clear understanding of the context to which Paul was writing. We have established the principles upon which he would be basing what was to come and indeed these principles are worked out in all the Household codes which follow, not only those which apply to husbands and wives. We need now to give some acknowledgement to the context to which Paul was writing and to assess how that differs from our own and whether this has any implications for the practical outworking of what Paul is saying.

It is important to be aware that the usual household codes of Paul's time were very different from the one which Paul wrote. This was because they assumed a marriage of dominance and total inequality with an older man married to a subordinate much younger wife who was often in place primarily for breeding. The secular codes were concerned with how the patriarch might control his wife, his children and his slaves⁷. This is a long way from what we have here in Ephesians. Here the wife submits (places herself under) her husband as a direct corollary⁸ of the mutual submission required of all Christians and therefore like that response it is primarily out of reverence for Christ and an expression of her worship rather than an outworking of an hierarchy of relationship between the man and the woman. Indeed there is no language of hierarchy or authority here at all.

It has often been contended that verse 23 is the key verse around which this passage hangs and that here one can find the language which justifies a theology

⁶ Payne ibid 280

⁷ Timothy G.Gombis 'A radically New Humanity: the function of the Huastafel in Ephesians' JETS 48 (2005); 325 [quoted in Payne p.271]

⁸ The sentence construction here makes it clear that this is the case, the second part of the sentence which we have as our verse 22 has no separate verb and so has to refer back to verse 21 for the verb and therefore for context.

Ephesians 5:21-end; 1 Corinthians 7:1-7

Does biblical teaching about husbands and wives shed light on the roles of men and women in the church?

of 'headship' within marriage - that is an understanding that the relationship between husband and wife is delineated around different roles because the husband is called to image Christ's authoritative headship to the wife. It is hard to find the language of authority in this passage unless one imports it in by making 'head' mean leader/one in authority. Verse 23 is interesting in that it actually defines head for us, thus giving us a very clear steer about how Paul wants us to understand what he is doing in this passage. Verse 23 literally reads:

ὅτι ἀνὴρ ἐστὶν κεφαλὴ τῆς γυναικὸς ὡς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς κεφαλὴ τῆς ἐκκλησίας, αὐτὸς σωτὴρ τοῦ σώματος·

For the husband is the head of the wife, and Christ also is the head of the assembly, being himself the saviour of the body.

Here Paul is using an emphatic apposition - that is he is "placing a word or expression beside another so that the second explains and has the same grammatical construction as the first"⁹ In other words here the meaning of Christ being head of the church is explained by the parallel clause describing him as saviour of the body. This is significant on several counts. Firstly it clarifies the meaning of head, linking it once more to the language and metaphor of the body - when Paul uses the language of 'head', body-language/metaphor is never far behind, which for Paul inevitably implies mutuality (c.f. 1Cor 12) and he usually expects us to make the connection and to see the picture. Here Paul unpacks the image carefully when he spells out what it means to care for your own body "*In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, people have never hated their own bodies, but they feed and care for them, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body*" (5:28-30) This was pretty radical teaching within its first century context. Secondly it clarifies how Paul is using head in this context: he is using it to speak of the saving work of Christ, doubtless referring back to Eph 5:1-2 and clearly taking us forwards to the rest of his injunctions to husbands. If this is so then we need to be clear that it is a position of grace, of self-giving love and of self-emptying and there is nothing here that speaks of authority and governance.

It is surely interesting that this is a passage where there is such clarity of command and yet which has been so misunderstood, primarily because it has been taken out of context. It would seem to me that the key question is why do we fail to apply

⁹ Webster's New world Dictionary, s.v. "apposition"

Ephesians 5:21-end; 1 Corinthians 7:1-7

Does biblical teaching about husbands and wives shed light on the roles of men and women in the church?

both these injunctions¹⁰ equally and also why did Paul apply them specifically? To the former there are a variety of answers - perhaps we do not want to have to learn to live in this more challenging way, it is frankly easier to have clear lines of command, particularly if you are at the helm, and yet Paul's vision for the Christian community did not function quite like that. Perhaps also we do not yet understand what drives us and makes us respond as we do. Perhaps we have not yet grasped the freedom we have as children of God.

The second question is interesting: why did Paul apply these key injunctions specifically to the sexes? Well I think there are probably at least 2 reasons for this; firstly there was a need for those particular injunctions within the context to which he was writing - women needed to know how to live in *free* submission within the context of often very difficult marriages; they needed to understand that their submission was not subjugation but freely given worship to Christ. Within the same context of patriarchal dominance the husbands needed to learn at a deep level of their calling to lay down their lives for their wives, of the call to love sacrificially to enable the other to become what God created them to be - to emulate their saviour rather than their emperor in their marriages.

When one places alongside this radical passage Paul's writing in 1 Corinthians 7 about marriage one finds that we have a very remarkable, counter-cultural model for Christian marriage. 1 Corinthians 7 is a passage which is rarely quoted when discussions are held around the whole question of Christian marriage and how we are to understand it and yet here Paul lays out in a book where he deals most clearly with his understanding of church order how he expects marriages to function. What is most striking about this passage is the total symmetry of the relationship as laid out by Paul, for each injunction to one partner there is an equal and parallel injunction to the other, there is nothing like it in ancient literature¹¹ - this is really counter-cultural stuff, indeed in the light of such passages as Galatians 3:28 one might say this is really new creation stuff. There is not space here to rehearse all the important elements in this passage but I will draw out one or two which are important for our purposes. In the culture of the time women were regarded as the property of the men and yet in verse 2 Paul states clearly that '*because of sexual immoralities, let each man have his own*

¹⁰ i.e. the injunctions to submit mutually as well as specifically (5:21-2) and to love mutually as well as specifically (5:1-2 and 5:25)

¹¹ Marion L. Soards, 1 Corinthians (NIBCNT; PEABODY, Mass., Hendrickson, 1999) p.139

Ephesians 5:21-end; 1 Corinthians 7:1-7

Does biblical teaching about husbands and wives shed light on the roles of men and women in the church?

wife, and let each woman have her own husband'. It may be hard for us to comprehend just how radical this is but it really is very significant for Paul to be talking of a woman 'having her own husband'. Similarly within our culture it is totally unremarkable for a husband to be expected to fulfil his marital duty (vs.3) and yet at that time the onus was on the wife and the husband was seen to be a free agent. Paul changes this entirely, making it clear that there is a mutual sexual responsibility which is inevitably, within the context of the biblical understanding of the sexual act, a much deeper mutuality. This is spelled out in the next injunction which must have been shocking to its first readers and, if we really engage with it must jolt us and make us engage with Paul and his understanding of gender relationships. In v 4 Paul writes that "*The wife doesn't have authority over her own body, but the husband. Likewise also the husband doesn't have authority over his own body, but the wife*". It is possible of course to understand this as referring simply to the physical act and to the physical demands of marriage but that would be to do Paul and the biblical tradition a disservice. Paul never thinks of us in purely physical terms. It would be very strange and out of character for him to write about the about the human sexual encounter as if it were somehow divorced from all other human relating. In the same way when the rest of scripture speaks of man and woman becoming 'one flesh' it is not speaking solely about the sexual act, it is referring to something much deeper of which that speaks. There is definitely a spiritual and emotional level to it. Therefore when Paul writes that the husband has authority over his wife's body, and the wife has authority over her husband's he is saying something very radical. Interestingly he here uses the common word for authority in scripture ἐξουσιάζω exousiazó as opposed to that used in 1 Timothy 2:11-14. As Hays writes: "*this must have struck the many first-century hearers as extraordinary....The marriage partners are neither placed in a hierarchical relation to with one over the other nor set apart as autonomous units each doing what he or she pleases. Instead, the relationship of marriage is one of mutual submission, each partner having authority over the other*"¹²

There is much more that could be drawn out from this passage, not least that a woman's spiritual status and her status within the church is not determined by her marital status (see vs 34), which the line of argument linking marital order and church order is in danger of concluding. However I want to conclude this very brief look at 1 Corinthians 7 by looking at 7:14 "*For the unbelieving husband is*

¹² Hays *First Corinthians*, p116

Ephesians 5:21-end; 1 Corinthians 7:1-7

Does biblical teaching about husbands and wives shed light on the roles of men and women in the church?

sanctified in the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified in the husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.” The assertion is often made that spiritual leadership - ‘headship’ within a marriage must be provided by the husband. I would contend that here Paul overturns this understanding - it is clear that spiritual leadership can be provided by either partner, indeed the wife’s leadership is such that she might ‘save’ v.16 her husband, as indeed the husband might save the wife. Paul does not at any point pass judgment and say that there is a problem, that one is less satisfactory, except in so far as it is better to have both partners working together mutually serving and leading in the faith.

This is a remarkable vision - one which we ignore at our peril and which lays the foundation for what follows in 1 Cor 11 -14 where we see women taking a full part in the gifts which the Spirit gives to the church.