

## ***Ephesians 5.21-33 (with Colossians 3.18 & 1 Peter 3.1-7)***

I write as a pastor-teacher, as anyone ordained in the CofE is called and bound to do, and with a particular focus on marriage. The marriage service in Anglican liturgy seems to have been constructed around Ephesians 5.21-33 (with allusions to Colossians 3.18 and 1 Peter 3.1-7) from BCP in 1662 through ASB of 1980 to CW of 2000. This is apostolic teaching in liturgical form – characteristic of Anglican practice – and goes to the heart of what the Scriptures teach about Christian marriage.

In recent year the focus of the marriage service has changed under pressure in two particular areas. The first is seen in how the Biblical reasons for marriage are ordered and expressed. In BCP they are i) procreation and the Christian nurture of children, ii) holiness and purity in sexual relations – a “remedy against sin and to avoid fornication”, and iii) companionship and support – “mutual society, help and comfort”. ASB gave the same three reasons, but completely reversed the order and put the need for sexual purity in entirely positive, though discreet, terms – “in delight and tenderness to know each other in love”. CW retained the order of ASB and the first call for mutual friendship, while introducing the full and explicit phrase “sexual union” and the importance of “growing to maturity in love”, the “enrichment of society” and the “strengthening of community”. This all reflects our present understanding of the absolute validity and fullness of marriage even when they are or can be no children and that sex in marriage is very much part of God’s good gifts.

The second is focused in the increasingly “controversial” expectation that the wife will promise to “obey her husband” that seems now to loom large in BCP, though in fact it only comes once in the marriage ceremony itself. The liturgical revision that culminated in ASB in 1980 made the promises identical (to “love, comfort, honour and protect”) and the vows either identical (“to love and to cherish”) or somewhat more balanced (for the man – “to love, cherish and worship”, picking up BCP’s “with my body I thee worship” at the giving of the ring, and for the woman – “to love, cherish and obey”). Twenty years later CW makes both the promises (as in ASB) and the vows (“to love and cherish”) identical for the man and the woman, and pushes the alternative to an appendix which offers not the attempted balance of the ASB, but the blunter “love and cherish” for the man and “love, cherish and obey” for the woman.

The first change reflects present culture’s difference and even difficulty in handling the Bible’s blunt realism about sexual sin and the need for self-control, purity and godliness in sexual behaviour if it is to remain within the will and blessing of God. The second changes have more substantially altered the liturgical text and reflects the clear moving on in our culture from any apparent hierarchy or imbalance in the marriage relationship.

For Anglicans liturgy is a key way of enshrining doctrine. And for Anglicans doctrine matters for what we understand to be the foundation, definition and unity of the Church (Canon A5, and the prayer for the church militant in BCP HC). So we do well to attend to our liturgy and its revisions. The framework is not initially popular culture and opinion, but the teaching of prophets and apostles in OT and NT. It is, therefore, good to go back and look at the Scriptures that lie behind this controversial promise and vow.

The thesis of this paper is that the issue is as much what is meant by “submission” as by “head”, and that the place of submission is not only neutral (and not demeaning and outmoded), but honourable, appropriate and beautiful in what it signifies and witnesses. There will be some consideration of *kephale*, but the main focus in the Scriptural texts will be on the word used for being submissive – *hypotassomai*. It is not the word for obey – that is *hypakouo*, which focuses on the right response to the voice or word of the other. *Hypotassomai* is more relational, attitudinal, and ordinal. It is based on the

word *tasso* (verb: to arrange, place or position) that has often an initial military context of rank or order, but is also used (in the negative *ataktos*) of truants being out of order, disorderly or out of line. But it is prefixed with *hypo-* (under) denoting some position with or response to authority. It is well-translated, therefore, by the word *submissive*. Further, it is almost invariably used in the middle voice, as in submit yourself, be submissive, concentrating on the personal and voluntary nature of the response. It is chosen, not imposed. It is a proper and good response, not unnecessary and degrading, to appropriate ordering.

*Hypotassomai* is widely used in the NT, both positively in describing or encouraging submissiveness and negatively in rebuking or censuring those who were not appropriately submissive. The uses are instructive:

- towards political authorities (Romans 13.1 & 5, Titus 3.1, 1 Peter 2.13)
- Christ to his parents (Luke 2.51)
- demons to the disciples (Luke 10.17, 20)
- spirits to the prophets (1 Corinthians 14.32)
- women or wives in church (1 Corinthians 14.34)
- the Son to the Father (1 Corinthians 15.28)
- to other devoted Christian workers (1 Corinthians 16.16)
- to one another (Ephesians 5.21)
- wives to husbands (Ephesians 5.22 & 24, Colossians 3.18, Titus 2.5, 1 Peter 3.1 & 5)
- slaves to masters (Titus 2.9, 1 Peter 2.18)
- us as children to our Heavenly Father (Hebrews 12.9)
- young men to older men (1 Peter 5.5 in the setting of all being humble towards one another)
- us to God (James 4.7)
- *negatively* – sinful mind *not* submitting to God's law
  - Israelites *not* submitting to God's righteousness

It is widely commended and it is difficult to avoid the thought that it applicable in many different situations and relationships and is always wholesome and fitting. It is expected as appropriate and is in no way derogatory or inconceivable. It is about a right attitude, relationship and ordering to some instance of authority or responsibility. Students will even today be asked to submit their essays.

In Ephesians 5.21, this submission is to be mutual (cf Romans 12.10, Philippians 2.3-4, 1 Peter 5.5), but is immediately followed by the specific instruction for submission in the wife's response to her husband's sacrificial love and lead. A parallel is in 1 Peter 5.5, where all are commanded to be humble to each other, and then young men are instructed to be submissive to the older men. These are not contradictory Scriptures. They are to be handled at face value and certainly not as somehow "repugnant" to each other (as Article XX cautions us). They do teach that life is full of a variety of orders and relationships where there is both responsible and God-ordained authority and appropriate and necessary or honourable acceptance and submissiveness.

Sadly, there has been much ignorance, abuse or neglect of authority and responsibility, not least among husbands, for which deep and long repentance is very necessary. But equally, there is much bridling against a proper respect for and due acceptance of lawful and godly authority, very especially in our

more recent culture. Some attitudes and positions have become entrenched in recent times and the call for mutual humility and submission is very relevant. However, *abusus non tollit usum*, and there remains the need for clear and gracious teaching of the truths of God's Word. [Incidentally, I hope that Reform's choice of the word 'inappropriate' to describe women in positions of headship over men as incumbents or Bishops, as we understand the Scriptures, is both careful, judicious and charitable – it could have been (and is often simply quoted as) much stronger words like 'wrong' or 'sinful'.]

One way of handling this focus on and controversy about submission for women in marriage is to suggest that Paul simply got it wrong. He was at best angular, and at worst misogynist and culturally incurably patriarchal. If not wrong, then either misunderstanding himself or misunderstood by others for universalising a local and particular instruction. However, Paul uses the word in a great range of situations and it is also the language and teaching of another apostle Peter. If they were 'wrong', then a very considerable re-addressing of most of the applications of this word is necessary, not simply in this one culturally sensitive area. Paul, in particular, still has to fight for his apostolic authority, as he had to with the Corinthians, to avoid his teaching being side-lined or re-interpreted in such a way that this word's actual and normal meaning dies the death of a thousand qualifications.

There is a way, however, to redeem this word and concept, and that is to explain it as it is taught in the passage as a whole – what every pastor-teacher presumably attempts to do with Ephesians 5 in marriage preparation. If I may be personal for a moment, as I try and hold the Scriptures in one hand and engage with the culture with the other, my opening gambit when explaining the 'traditional' vows is to suggest that we start with the controversial vow .... the man's! The apostle climaxes by stating that marriage is supremely a sign about the relationship of Christ and his Bride the Church (v.32) and that human marriage between a man and a woman images that in and to the world, not the other way about. He teaches, therefore, that the man is to image Christ – he is to honour and love his wife as Christ did the Church. His model, inspiration and calling in marriage is Christ. In the ASB liturgy, he vows to "love, cherish and worship" her – to give her her true worth. Worship is a word in English that is normally or popularly used of a person's proper relationship and response to God. Our proper relation to God is not to lord it over him, but to give ourselves in adoration, devotion and service to him. So husbands are to give themselves in love and sacrificial devotion and service to their wives that they might fulfil their calling and glory of purity and beauty as women and children of God. It is Christ's example that is held out as the definition and inspiration of love.

Christ is indeed equal with God and head of his Church, but he gave himself up for her that she might reach and receive perfection as his Bride. Philippians 2 indicates that this is precisely why the Father so honours the Son for his submission to the Father's will and to the saving and sanctifying of his people. A husband can have no higher calling than to reflect the love of Christ and somehow model him not just to his wife, but to the world. This is something of where the twist of v.32 takes us – marriage between a man and a woman is a reflection, an illustration, an imaging of Christ and the Church, of God's love given in grace and human love given in response.

Many a bride-to-be may well look amazed if and when she sees her husband-to-be understand something of this calling and agree that he will promise, with God's help, to love like Christ. The man may equally begin to grasp that it is only "in God's presence", "according to God's law", "within God's love" and seeking God's grace and blessing that he can hope to fulfil such a vow. This is no human love, it is God's love reflected in and through an ordinary bloke, and for that he needs the Spirit of Christ.

In this way too the woman may understand the man's vow. It is not simply that he is seeking to take the initiative and 'go first' in declaring his intention to love as Christ. He is making a vast promise and making a very special gift. They are massively affirming, honouring and ennobling to the woman. In that light, maybe she begins to understand two things. First, that, if he loves and leads like Christ, then that is a love and lead that she can utterly trust, that she can go with and follow, and – in the language of the Bible – to which she will gladly and willingly submit. She will never be taken for granted or exploited or demeaned. She will have the greatest gift towards her own perfection and fulfilment in God's purposes. And second, she will realise that she is called to model the Church's glad and willing response to Christ's love – a response of devotion and submissive honouring, support and service. She is modelling the Church as the Bride of Christ to the world and the Church's submission to Christ as Lord in a way that is deeply personal. This is not about hierarchy or power. It is about salvation and modelling the union between Christ and His Church out of which salvation is possible. The highest language of God and his people throughout the Scriptures is the language of marital relationship. It is not metaphor, it is analogy. God is not *like* a husband to his people, he *is* their husband and the Covenant language of intimate union and steadfast loyalty is intrinsic. Christ is not *like* a Bridegroom, he *is* the Bridegroom and the Scriptures climax with the marriage feast to his Bride the Church perfect and complete at last.

Ephesians 5.32 proclaims this to be a 'mystery', that is a secret 'hidden for ages past' (in Genesis?), but now in Christ revealed and proclaimed. Human marriage is for all humankind – a creation ordinance – not just for individual men and women, but to be a window into and a mirror of the love of God in Christ in and to the world. This is caught well by the main thrust of Simon Vibert's book *The Diamond Marriage*. Christian marriage is best understood, not simply as the familiar triangle of the man and woman and God, but with a fourth angle (making it a diamond). It mirrors the apex up to God and points out to the world.

The marriage relationship and its proper ordering speaks about God and salvation. Marriage is how God has chosen to image himself and his union with his people in humanity, and the Church, his family or household (*oikos*), is the fore-taste of the new humanity, where nature is not reversed, but being restored. The Lord rules, but it is in the grace and suffering service of Christ. The Church submits, but in glad devotion and the fulfilment of service.

To imply, therefore, that the husband is not, or is not to be, the head of the marriage, and that the wife is demeaned if she is called to submit and support him in a right ordering to him and partnership with him, or that their 'roles' do not matter or somehow can be interchangeable, is to miss the point and calling of marriage and what it signifies. Whether or not marriage is seen as having a parallel with or relation to roles within the Church community and in particular its ministry and leadership, this teaching about marriage would caution against doing anything in the Church that would confuse or unsettle the significance of marriage by reinterpreting and disordering the relationship of husbands and wives. There are those who would see especially in the Pastoral epistles fairly clear parallels between marriage in the human family and ministry in the household of God. If the God-given ordering of marriage is good and honourable for husband and wife together to be a sign and witness of God's love and salvation and should not be inverted or made interchangeable, then it is possible for the present and historic ordering of overseers and presbyters as men with women in real partnership of ministry also to be good and honourable for ministry in God's world.

There is, of course, much falling short and frank sinfulness in many a man's make-up and relationship with and towards his wife, which needs great and lasting repentance. Perhaps we do not have enough of a handle on what it really looks like for a man to love his wife as Christ loved the Church, and, therefore, equally we may find it hard to envisage how a wife might be appropriately and honourably submissive without being demeaned as second-class, inferior, or simply lesser. If submissiveness (as conveyed by the word *hypotassomai*) is in itself not good and cannot be right, then we must recast it in all circumstances where it is held up as right and good – our relation to government, slaves to their masters, young men to their elders, us to Christ, and Christ to God.

Christ is Lord and Head of his Church and his Bride gladly submits to him, because supremely it is a Lordship of loving service and ultimate sacrifice. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ saw that (as Philippians 2.5-11 teaches) and for that reason raised and honoured Jesus as Lord, calling all to submit to him. The Church as his Bride gives Jesus honour and pre-eminence as Lord, but it is also a relationship of love and mutual devotion. This is signified in human marriage and its ordering is ordained of God in witness to his revelation and salvation.

The creation of women as presbyters (focused especially in Anglican polity when they become incumbents) began to invert this order, particularly in marriage, and the potential creation of women as Bishops will complete the process. At best such a re-ordering will be confusing, and at worst it will mislead and undermine. In his creation of humanity as male and female coming together in the order and high calling of marriage and in a right partnership of ministry in the foretaste of the new creation in the community of the redeemed and the household of faith, God has invested much of himself in witness to his covenant and salvation sealed in the blood of Christ. To invert or redefine the ordering of the human family or the divine household is to confuse and threaten a key revelation of God's love and grace in the world.

There is a consistency of ordering with God, in himself in the Trinity, and in his purposes in the world for humanity in marriage and ministry. It has got little to do with individual rights or desires and everything to do with God's honour and will and witness in the world. Female incumbents and Bishops, who in the exercise of ministry will be modelling Christ's authority and discipline, albeit in Christ-like servanthood, to their husbands, will invert God's ordering and calling for men and women in the world. And if, as many believe, the expectations and responsibilities of husbands are paralleled in those of presbyters/overseers (eg see 1 Timothy 3.4-5) in the Church family, then God's order and purposes will be obscured there too.

This overall position and understanding of God's order in the Trinity, in the family/marriage and in the Church/ministry is rooted in Ephesians 5 and its exposition of Genesis and fulfilment in Revelation. It is one of the key foundations for those who understand that the roles of presbyter/Bishop, as of husband, are appropriately filled and fulfilled only by men. Women are not lesser in any way for having roles of partnership and support. It is one of the challenges to those of this conviction to find or create posts and ministries for women that truly fulfil and dignify this partnership in ministry. This was until very recently the position of all evangelicals (eg as lucidly enunciated by John Stott in his *Issues facing Christians today*). It needs re-expounding and re-expressing in the light of contemporary culture's pressures.

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