



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

“Could you please explain all the implications in the passage of scripture Eph.5:22-33. I am a sister in the Church and I must confess that I am a little bewildered by the teaching I hear regarding the marital status.”

I can well understand the frustrations experienced by many of our sisters in the Church. All the teaching in local communities of Christians in open assembly is given by men, and unless they are truly altruistic their teaching may be influenced by their own relationships with wives or friends. It is not the slightest use being starry-eyed about the matter; if a husband has a wife who tends to be dominant then he perhaps adopts a more authoritarian stance than he would otherwise do. Conversely, if the wife is docile and pliant then the husband's expectations of her might exceed what is proper in a Christian marriage. The mistake we sometimes make is in not realising that the text of the Bible is referring to real people, each with hopes, fears, longings, and aspirations of their own; for the husband to say, “you, wife, must submit yourself to me in all things, irrespective of circumstances, because the text of the Bible says you must”, may be textually correct so far as the words go, but may need some

modification because of what the words portend. The text of the Bible is only true relative to the context in which it is found; the interpretation of the text may be much influenced by our relationships with other people – husband, wife, or anyone else – at any point in time. The sister who has sent this question is quite right in asking for an explanation of vv 22-33 of Eph.5 rather than just asking what verse 22 means.

Early Days of Christianity

In the early Church Christian women enjoyed a freedom and independence in marked contrast to the suppression and subjection of females in other parts of the East. This fact owes much to the general attitude of Jesus to women and the trend of Christian teaching. In the Jewish Church women were held to be inferior to men and they sat apart in the synagogue. In other places of worship the distinction seems not to have been so finely drawn. Acts 16 records that the women resorted to the river side where prayer was wont to be made, and there Paul and the others spoke with them. Lydia was one who heard Paul speak there. (See Acts 16: 13-15).

We must never forget that Christianity is a religion which makes its appeal to the individual soul, both male and female; the value of this is esteemed higher than anything else in the world and tends to break down minor barriers of distinction. Thus we find that Jesus appeals equally to women as to men. He chose to talk, to the amazement of His disciples, to an outcast Samaritan woman, and discussed with her some of the most fundamental religious themes (John 4:7ff). He loved Martha and Mary of Bethany (John 11:5). Women brought their children to be blessed of Him (Luke 18:15). Women followed Him on His last journey to Jerusalem and to the place of execution (Luke 23: 27,49). They performed the last rites and were first at the tomb on the resurrection morning. In the early Church important parts were played by such women as Tabitha of Joppa (Acts 9:36); Lydia of Philippi (Acts 16:14,16); and Priscilla (Acts 18:26). The statement by Paul in Gal. 3:27,28 would undoubtedly have guided the early Church in its attitude to women as distinct from the early days of Judaism, **“For as many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus”**. At the same time we must not lose sight of the fact that it was Paul himself, while holding the dignity of womanhood, who taught that the wife must be in subjection to her husband (Eph. 5:22,23). We must now turn our attention to Eph. 5.

The Noble Picture

The passage of scripture mentioned in the question presents to us the noblest picture of marriage ever drawn. If all that anyone gets out of this passage is that women must be subject to men then that person, in my opinion, is guilty of the most gross misinterpretation of the text.

We cannot do justice to vv 22-33 without first considering v21. The A.V. makes it appear that v 21 is tied to the same thoughts as expressed from v 18, but v 21 would be better understood as starting a new paragraph. The participle is like an imperative. The R.S.V. reads, **“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ”**; in N.I.V. reads, **“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ”**; the Jerusalem Bible reads, **“Give way to one another in obedience to Christ”**; J.B. Phillips says, **“And ‘fit in with’ each other, because of your common reverence for Christ”**. All of these scriptures are emphasising the mutuality of subjection. Christ is subject to the Will of the Father; the Church is subject to Christ; husbands and wives are mutually subject to each other and to Christ; they have certain obligations to each other which they cannot lay aside. It is true, of course, that in the hierarchical structure of creation that ‘man is the head of the woman’ and consequently the wife would not seek to displease her husband, but the mutuality of subjection which Paul indicates means that the husband would

not abuse the sanctity of marriage by an authoritarian attitude towards his wife because by so doing he would displease 'his head' which is Christ. The words in the text mean quite literally that husband and wife must 'fit in' with each other.

The marriage relationship is a profound one and should not be taken lightly. The wife, by her attitude and disposition should help not hinder her husband; the intention of God in creation was, and is, that she should be 'a help suitable for the man'. The properties of a good wife are extolled in Proverbs 31: 10ff. Solomon rounds off that praise by saying, "**Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates**".

The Christian husband should not be looking to exploit the good Christian wife. I like the words of J. B. Phillips when he says, "**So men ought to give their wives the love they naturally have for their own bodies. The love a man gives his wife is the extending of his love for himself to enfold her. Nobody ever hated his own body; he feeds it and looks after it**". The great mystery is that Christ has become one with His Church; the extension of that mystery is the consummation in marriage when the two become one flesh. Do we need reminding of the rudderless, meandering life of a husband when he lost his good, Christian wife? Our Christian wives are precious to us, and we should tell them so ere it is too late.

The Personal Viewpoint

The sanctity of marriage forbids the husband from treating his wife as if she were simply one of his 'chattels'. I do not believe I am saying anything wrong when I say that the head on the shoulders of a good, Christian wife is many times more wise and understanding than that of her so-called 'superior' husband. On many occasions he makes demands, while she makes sacrifices; the arrogant way in which those demands are sometimes made illustrates quite vividly the insensitivity of the one making the demands. Let us look at some practical examples in which the husband might fail.

Take perception, for example. There are occasions when the wife may be feeling 'below par', but does the demanding husband notice that? Oh dear, no. He goes on in his own sweet way, "Why is the meal not on the table; what are these children doing out of bed; what have you been doing all day"? Not the best way, perhaps, to invite a sweet response. We husbands should try to put ourselves in the place of our wives; its called empathy, I believe.

Then what about the conjugal rights of husband and wife as regards their sexual relationship? The husband is usually most motivated in this area, and demands his conjugal rights irrespective of how the wife may be feeling either mentally or physically. Is the husband then looking after his wife as if she were his own flesh?

The vexed area of dress frequently raises its head. It seems to me that if husbands want to insist on what their wives wear then they should go out and buy their clothes for them. It is said that it is unbecoming for a woman to wear slacks, but I have never heard this said about our Scottish brothers who wear kilts. In my humble opinion it is **more becoming** to wear slacks in some situations than it is to wear skirts or frocks.

One could go on multiplying these examples – in many cases involving trivia – but doesn't common sense dictate to us that husband and wife should 'fit in' with each other in order to make the relationship the noble and elevated experience which the Bible teaches it ought to be? To quote J.B. Phillips once again, "**In practice what I have said amounts to this: let every one of you who is a husband love his wife as he loves himself, and let every wife respect her husband**".

(All questions, please, to Alf Marsden, 20 Costessy Way,
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