

Ephesians 5:18-6:9

1. Paul advises submission of wives to husbands, but also requires mutual submission, and summarizes his instruction by telling wives to “respect” their husbands (33). If this seems confusingly redundant—why tell the wives to submit after telling everyone to submit?—we can turn to other passages for clarification: In 1 Cor 7:1-5, Paul names husband and wife the owner of each other’s bodies; In 1 Cor 1:10 and Phil 2:2-5, Paul calls all believers (including husbands and wives) to be completely united in thought and purpose, always putting others’ needs above their own; in Mt 20:25-28 Jesus teaches the leader is the slave of all; and Gal 3:28 indicates that our identity before God is independent of whatever role we play in society, church or career. Setting aside for the moment whether Paul’s words are normative across cultures,
 - a) What exactly would a hierarchical-yet-mutually-submissive marriage *look* like, then and now?
 - b) How might Jesus’ eternal submission to the Father, and the Father’s reciprocal elevation of the Son, provide a model for mutual submission-in-hierarchy?
2. Paul tells husbands to love their wives as their own bodies (28; cf. 1 Cor 7:-5), and also says husband and wife are one flesh (31; Gen 2:24). How are these two fleshy verses related in Paul’s argument, and how do they illuminate the theme of hierarchical-yet-mutually-submissive marriage?
3. Paul addresses a community where wives were often much younger and more likely to be illiterate than their husbands. It was a culture where strict hierarchy within the family was seen as a cornerstone of societal stability and a result of biological gender differences¹, and those who contradicted this were viewed with suspicion and hostility. These, along with the high view of women in the Bible, lead some to believe Paul is an egalitarian, careful only to quietly subvert cultural norms to avoid reprisal against the church. Others note that Paul grounds his instruction on the timeless hierarchy between Christ and the church (23-24), suggesting the passage should be read at face value. What do you think, and why?
4. Submission is a necessary part of any organization or society, but in our culture is viewed negatively. Many of us chafe at submission to authorities (as in Rom 13), and the concept people historically being subject to a master or a king is strange and deeply unsettling. Paul’s instructions are for wives and husbands, not men and women, and we have reason to believe won’t apply to the next life (Mt 22:30), yet they trip the same cultural triggers. Who are you called to submit to? Do you struggle with this?

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Fun quote: “Solon directed that the bride should nibble a quince before getting into bed, intimating, presumably, that the delight from lips and speech should be harmonious and pleasant at the outset.” —Plutarch, *Coniugalia Praecepta*
Further fun quote, on sex in the afterlife: “In denying that sexual life, as we now understand it, makes any part of the final beatitude, it is not, of course, necessary to suppose that the distinction of sexes will disappear. What is no longer needed for biological purposes may be expected to survive for splendor. Sexuality is the instrument both of virginity and conjugal virtue; neither men nor women will be asked to throw away weapons they have used victoriously. It is the beaten and the fugitives who throw away their swords. The conquerors sheathe theirs and retain them...” —C. S. Lewis

¹ “The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled” —Aristotle’s *Politics*.

“Wives, be subject to your husbands”: Some Interpretive Considerations

Historical context

- “The section 5:21–6:9 addresses what we call “household codes.” In Paul’s day, many Romans were troubled by the spread of “religions from the East” (e.g., Isis worship, Judaism and Christianity), which they thought would undermine traditional Roman family values. Members of these minority religions often tried to show their support for those values by using a standard form of exhortations developed by philosophers from Aristotle on. These exhortations about how the head of a household should deal with members of his family usually break down into discussions of husband-wife, father-child and master-slave relationships. Paul borrows this form of discussion straight from standard Greco-Roman moral writing. But unlike most ancient writers, Paul undermines the basic premise of these codes: the absolute authority of the male head of the house.” [Keener, IVPBBC]
- “Most ancient writers expected wives to obey their husbands, desiring in them a quiet and meek demeanor; some marriage contracts even stated a requirement for absolute obedience. This requirement made sense especially to Greek thinkers, who could not conceive of wives as equals. Age differences contributed to this disparity: husbands were normally older than their wives, often by over a decade in Greek culture (with men frequently marrying around age thirty and women in their teens, often early teens).” [Keener, IVPBBC]

Exegesis

- “**Be subject to**” (*hypotassō*; v. 21, 22, 24) means to be subject to or subordinate to, to obey. Other examples are young men to old (1 Pet 3:1); Christians to their leaders (1 Cor 16:16); Christians to secular authorities (1 Pet 2:13+; Rom 13:5); and, as here, wives to husbands (Tit 2:5, 1 Cor 14:34). In Tit 2:5 and Pet 3:1 and 1 Pet 2:13+ the motivation is related to witnessing to unbelievers.
- “**To one another**” (*allelōn*; v. 21): This word is a favorite of Paul’s for describing Christian community. It carries the sense of **mutuality**, indicating A to B and B to A, not A to B, B to C, etc. Examples of things to do with one another include love, speak truth to, bear the loads of, don’t grumble against, have equal concern for, confess to, be at peace with etc.
- “**Head**” (*kephalē*, v. 23) is the person to whom one is subordinate. It is used figuratively of the Messiah (Mt 21:42); husbands (1 Cor 11:3); Jesus (1:22, 4:15, 5:23, Col 1:18, 2:10, 2:19).
- This passage is led by vv. 18-21, which are a single sentence, and which present examples of what it means to be filled with the Spirit (both how to achieve it and what it leads to). Paul’s final characterization in 18-21 is mutual submission within the church, and he follows it with three examples.
- Recall that “**mystery**” (*mystērion*; v. 32) is typically better translated “secret”.

Other interpretive considerations

- The focus of the letter is primarily on unity, against which we can infer a major threat was Jewish-Gentile friction
- Typically Paul spends more time on the things which his readers are getting wrong
- Paul elsewhere adopts the “stay in place” principle, in which believers are instructed how to live as Christ in their current context, with escaping that context being secondary

Leader's Intro:

- This is the sort of hot-button issue on which people tend not to change their minds. So why study this passage? Because on issues like this, where culture collides (or appears to) with Scripture, we are most likely to be fooled. Because we to understand the flow of the letter we'd best understand how this passage fits in. And because too often we are less informed about passages than these than we think we are.
- That this is a challenging topic is attested to by the experts arrayed on either side—people like DA Carson on one side and Craig Keener on the other. Unlike the homosexuality debate, both sides have worthwhile observations to make. Below are some exegetical points raised for each reading of the passage:
 - Hierarchical reading
 - When Paul doesn't explicitly say he's accommodating culture, we should be careful to infer he is
 - Regarding mutual submission:
 - "Submit" is never used elsewhere in the NT in a reciprocal way
 - "to one another" does not require a mutuality. E.g. in Revelation we read of a slaughter in which people kill "one another"—and that doesn't mean A kills B and B kills A
 - While we are happy to apply the mutual submission to husbands and wives, we are never tempted to do so with parents and children or slaves and master
 - Whereas it is argued that *kephale* (head) can mean "source" (without a reference to authority) that argument doesn't really hold water
 - The traditional reading follows the pattern found throughout Scripture in which God's relationship to man parallels marriage
 - In many passages husband and wife are told to love one another but the husband is never told to be subject to the wife, only the other way around
 - This reverses the curse, wherein the man rules with an iron hand and the woman tries to dominate him in turn
 - Egalitarian reading
 - Whatever you do with slaves and masters, you'd better do with this one (but note that what Paul says about slaves and master is normative!)
 - The marriage metaphor for Christ and church may be found throughout Scripture, but so is slavery to Christ—but that doesn't mean we approve of slavery
 - If Paul had tried to overturn the marital hierarchy the church would have been labeled as hostile by the Romans, just as if he'd called out slavery as wrong
- There are two other exegetical issues to bear in mind:
 - First, this section properly begins in 5:18, since all the mutual submission flows out from the command not be drunk but filled with the Spirit.
 - Second, we need to remember the major thrusts of the book, including freedom from "authorities"; fulfillment in Christ; unity of the Body. Whatever we read here must follow also from 5:1, where we are told to live in love and give ourselves up the way Christ did.