

Practicing Resurrection...Authority and Submission
Ephesians 5:21-6:9
 August 29, 2010
 Michael Carey

Our study of Ephesians brings us to one of the most controversial passages among Christians today. With so many families struggling with conflict, with so many husbands and wives feeling trapped in difficult marriages, we open the scriptures to hear God's voice. Yet when we read Paul's teaching, it's obvious that there are significant culture differences between the 1st and the 21st centuries. We find ourselves caught in a dilemma—either trying to imitate the family patterns of the 1st century, or cherry-picking the parts we like, or worse, dismissing Paul's teaching altogether. There is a better way—first try to understand the ancient context to highlight the difference Jesus made, then determine the eternal principles conveyed by scripture. Then with the Holy Spirit's guidance discern how God's eternal Word applies to 21st century people. Towards that end, let us pray...

First, let's grasp the context of the time when Paul wrote; find page 5 in your bulletin...turn the page sideways and look at the left-hand column: **1st Century Cultural Norm for Jews and Gentiles**. It's fair to summarize the pre-Jesus culture this way: **wives submit to husbands, for your husband owns you...husbands rule over your wives as you see fit**. In regard to children, let's remember that "family" was extended to include children—whatever the age. The Jewish and Greek expectation was that **children (of all ages) obey your father, for Fathers rule children**. This absolute authority applied to adult children; that's why marriages were arranged—fathers decided who their children's married.

In the ancient world, it was common for families to have slaves, because poor families sold their children into slavery to give them better lives. The cultural expectation was **slaves obey masters whatever they ask; masters can do whatever they want**, for they had absolute authority.

The **coming of Jesus Christ** challenged the core of these cultural expectations; they didn't express God's will, they were terrible distortions of God's original intention for human beings. As Paul began his teaching, he expressed God's goal for people in 5:21: **submit to one another out of reverence for Christ**. This is the overarching principle; what follows is Paul's application of the principle to the **households of Ephesus in 60 A.D.** As I read Paul's teaching, listen for the way he encouraged Christian family members to be different from their culture. [Read 5:22-6:9]

Jesus Christ makes all the difference. Members of Christian households fulfill their roles *out of reverence for their Lord Jesus Christ*. So in his letter Paul wrote **wives submit to your husband as if he were Christ**. From our perspective, that sounds oppressive, but in the ancient context that was liberating—through Jesus the husband you submit to now seeks your best. Likewise, Paul told Christian **husbands to love wives like Christ loves the church**. This was revolutionary teaching; to make sure they "got it" Paul digressed wonderfully as to how Christ *gave himself up for the church to make her holy...that husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies*.

At this point Paul quotes the Creation account, *for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh*. This is God's original intent: healthy separation from parents, so that a man and a woman can experience life-long intimacy, their God-given differences becoming mutually complementary, so that their union is an incredible source of joy and strength. Not only does their

marriage bless them, their one-flesh-ness blesses the world with blessed children, and their home becomes a source of blessing for neighbors. Yet because of sin, this blessing happens best when they *submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*.

In verse 33, Paul summarizes his application of this principle for the Ephesians— *each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband*.

We're not going to focus on the authority of parents and employers so much this morning, but it's helpful to see how Paul applied the Lordship of Jesus to the ancient situation. **Children (of all ages) obey your parents**—the same rule as the culture. Here's the difference: *fathers don't exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord*. No longer authoritarian, the Christian father is to be kind, providing guidance and nurture, helping sons and daughters reach their full potential in Jesus.

Regarding the slaves, Paul didn't declare that they were emancipated in Christ. Just as with marriage and parenting, he didn't throw out the existing social order. He wrote *slaves obey masters...as if they were Christ*. And I've summarized his teaching to slave-owners with **Masters treat slaves as if You were Jesus**, because in 6:9 Paul wrote *Masters, treat your slaves in the same way*, by that he means an attitude of *mutual submission out of reverence for Christ*. Suddenly slave-owners and slaves were brothers and sisters in Christ, and as we know, in the long run slavery could not continue.

Now that we have a grasp of Paul's teaching within its historical context, let's try to discern what the Lord is saying to the church now. Jesus didn't return to earth as quickly as the early church expected, so **until Christ returns** our calling is to **demonstrate God's Kingdom on earth**. Let's work backwards, starting with slavery. I think it's safe to summarize **the application of God's Word** in the 21st century this way: **Slavery is not God's original will, so the Church advocates abolition**. We rightly cringe when we remember how white Christians enslaved Africans; we recognize that when some of our spiritual ancestors used Paul's words to rationalize slavery, they were taking scripture out of context. Recognizing God's desire for justice, we could say that the best way to apply the biblical principle of *mutual submission* in the workplace is: **Employees fulfill obligations...Bosses treat fairly**.

Concerning children, the consensus of interpretation now seems to be **young children obey parents...older children care for parents...parents teach the Lordship of Christ while accepting differences**. The principle of mutual submission is expressed in the care parents and children give each other. Yet we live in a culture where grown children choose who they marry and what they believe. Rather than try to turn back the clock, we share Jesus with gentleness.

So, in parenting and business, there's a general consensus about how to apply God's eternal Word to the issue of authority. When we come to marriage, it's a whole other story! Some folks attempt to apply Paul's words on marriage in a literal fashion, which is inconsistent if they don't take his words on parenting and slavery literally. Or they twist Paul's words to allow wives to manipulate. In the movie, "My Big, Fat, Greek Wedding," the matriarch declares, "Yes, the man is the head of the house...but the woman is the neck; and the neck can turn the head *any way it wants!*"

So how can Christians fulfill the biblical principles in a culture so different from the ancient world, where woman are educated, work both in and out of the home, and often give leadership? Here's my effort to be faithful to the mandate to *submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*, while also recognizing

differences between men and women: **Mutual submission fulfilled in partnership as husbands and wives discern their unique roles.** For some couples, the form of their mutual submission is traditional; the husband is the leader who considers his wife's perspective as he makes significant decisions. Their partnership is hierarchical. For other couples, the fullest expression of love is an equal partnership, their commitment to mutual submission means they trust that through the Lordship of Christ they can make big decisions together, even if it takes longer. Probably most marriages fall somewhere between these two views.

Though I'm a very strong personality, God put me in an equal partnership marriage. I fell in love with Lynn, not only because I found her attractive and spiritual, with a heart for hurting people, I also fell in love with her because she is assertive. In her, I met my match! Though this partnership has stretched us, we have grown as the Lord has taught us to submit to each other. It didn't seem right for me to talk about it without her...I'm so grateful that she's willing to give a witness with me.

LBC: So let me tell you what's it's like to be married to Michael...

MTC interrupts: Whoa, I don't think there's time for all that! Let's focus on the ways that we've submitted to each other...like when I wanted to buy a boat; you didn't agree, and I waited 18 months to get the first one. Actually the wait made for a much better decision.

LBC: Yes but 4 years later you wanted a bigger boat; I never did fully agree with spending so much money on it; but after seeing the joy and respite that off-shore fishing brings to your life, I yielded.

MTC: and I am forever in your debt! Tell you what...maybe a better approach is for us to name a few areas we're each aware of the other one submitting.

LBC: Yes...when I sensed God's call to lead Brevard Neighborhood Development Coalition, you supported me and continued to support me even though you've had to make sacrifices in terms of our schedules, and do more of the housework. At times my work is a roller-coaster, very draining, and you've worked very hard at being a patient listener.

MTC: Thank you. It's given me great joy to see you find joy in your calling at BNDC. As Hoyt said this week, "submission to one another happens when it becomes my joy to see joy in my wife, which is a gift from God. But I've had to work at the listening because I would come home drained from my work, and I wasn't a good listener. Too many times I cut you off. Instead of swallowing your hurt, you confronted me. Sometimes I lost my temper. Mutual submission in reverence for Christ meant that we pursued marriage counseling in order to improve our communication.

LBC: Yes, and it's been so helpful. You've learned more self control, and I've strived to set better time boundaries and respect your desire to have a more orderly family life.

MTC: And because of your assertiveness I think I've become a gentler father, and a little kinder of a leader here at Trinity. I praise God for you! Thank you for sharing, perhaps our witness will encourage couples to take their own steps to *submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*.

Let's wrap up by looking a chart that shows the difference Jesus can make in marriage. On the top right corner of your note page you see listed four biblical words for love; the New Testament was first written in Greek.

Eros is romantic, sexual love; *phileos* is friendship love; *sterge* is love within family—family loyalty. And *agape* is sacrificial love— the word that describes God’s love for us.

In the ancient pagan world, husbands and wives were to have *eros* and *sterge*, but didn’t expect *phileos*, there wasn’t emotional intimacy. As we’ve seen, Jesus Christ brought the goal of *agape* into the marriage.

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians shows that Christian marriages in his time not only sought *eros* and *sterge*, but also to be permeated with *agape*. This didn’t usually result in *phileos*, the desire for friendship in marriage came later.

Secular marriages today expect *eros* and *phileos*, but few of them put a high value on “family loyalty” or “sacrificial love.” That’s why divorce becomes an option if the marriage doesn’t meet each ones emotional or romantic needs. So I’ve put question marks by *sterge* and *agape*. There are secular marriages that value these two, but without receiving a flow of God’s love, love and loyalty can just run dry.

Christian marriage is the best way to experience all four kinds of love. Our union with Christ grows us into more mature husbands and wives who love sacrificially, honor commitments, relish friendship, and enjoy wonderful eroticism. If any of those qualities are lacking for you, submit your ego to the Lordship of Christ and you will honor God by asserting your desire for a great marriage.