

HUSBAND AND WIFE IN THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS, Chapter 5

²¹ Submit yourselves to one another because of your reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord.

²³ A husband is the head of his wife, in the same way that Christ is the head and the Savior of the church, which is his own body. ²⁴ Wives should always put their husbands first, as the church puts Christ first.

²⁵ A husband should love his wife as much as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it. (²⁶ Christ made the church holy by the power of his word, and he made it pure by washing it with water, ²⁷ in order to present the church to himself in all its beauty — pure and faultless, without spot or wrinkle or any other imperfection.) ²⁸ In the same way, a husband should love his wife as much as he loves himself. A man who loves his wife loves himself. (²⁹ None of us ever hate our own bodies. Instead, we feed them, and take care of them, just as Christ does the church; ³⁰ for we are members of his body.)

³¹ Scripture says: For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one. ³² There is a deep secret truth revealed in this scripture, which I understand as applying to Christ and the church.

COMMENTARY

In chapter 5 of the Letter to the Ephesians the author speaks about the relation between husband and wife. According to the author, that relation includes "love" and "submission". Both of these words need to be better understood.

It should be remembered that this chapter, and this letter, are only one part of the New Testament. The letter can't be well understood until it's considered with the rest of the New Testament.

It will help to put the letter in a larger context -- that is, the world of the early Christians when the letter was written (probably sometime between 70 and 90 AD). It was common practice in the pagan world to draw up lists of duties and responsibilities for the people in a household. This included husband, wife, children, and slaves. It was the purpose of the lists to provide good order in a household. It was thought that in a well-ordered household there is one person (the husband) who is the head. Under him is the wife, then the children, then the slaves. This reflects what may be called a "top down" or "authoritarian" structure. It was the responsibility of the head to take care of those under him, because they were considered to be weak and inferior. It was the duty of the others to show respect and submission to the head, in order to help him run the household.

The earliest Christians, the first generation of believers, however, did not show any interest in these lists of duties or in this type of authoritarian structure. They focused their attention upon their union with the Risen Lord. In him, and by the power of his Spirit, they felt drawn into a community of faith, in which they were brothers and sisters to one another. For that reason the earliest Christians rejoiced in their *equality* with one another.¹

In the course of time, the Christians of a later generation felt the need for a different order in the community. This was the time when different offices in the church -- for example, bishop and priest -- began to develop. This was also the time when Christians turned for guidance to the pagan lists of household duties. The letter to the Ephesians reflects this later point of view, and incorporates some items from the pagan lists.

Therefore, in reading the letter to the Ephesians it must be remembered that chapter 5 of the letter reflects only one point of view. It doesn't take the place of the earlier emphasis on equality; it stands alongside it. Both points of view are valid and need to be taken together.

IMAGES OF CHRIST

If we look more closely at Ephesians 5 we notice two "images" of Christ. The first is Christ as head of the body. The second is Christ as "husband" of the Church. These are two separate images, which should be considered separately. They don't mean the same thing and should not be confused.

1) Christ as head of the body.

"A husband is the head of his wife, in the same way that Christ is the head and the Savior of the church, which is his own body." Eph 5, 23.

The image of "head" comes from the pagan lists of duties and responsibilities. As a way to provide order to a household, it may be considered a good structure -- but not the only possible structure. There are other models -- for example, mutual service and cooperation, without domination.

The Christian use of material from the pagan world, which was then inserted into the writings of the New Testament, raises questions of interpretation. In this case and in others² it is not always clear how much comes from the social customs of the time, and how much comes from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

We know that the image of "head" and "body" comes from earlier Christian writings. The letter to the Ephesians takes the image of the body from the letters of St Paul which were written earlier. Paul stresses in his first letter to the Corinthians (chapter 12) that Christ is the "head", while baptized believers form the "body". Christ is the head because he is Lord and Savior, but every member of the body is important. Every part of the body needs every other part. The eye can't be eye without the nose and the mouth, etc. The "head" can't be head without the rest of the body. St Paul recognizes the importance of the head, but also insists on the dignity of every part. Therefore St Paul seems to combine an "authoritarian" approach (the head as the director of the body) with an "egalitarian" approach (the head can't dominate the heart, nor the heart dominate the head, etc.)

Ephesians 5, 23 should probably be understood in this way, as a combination of two models of organization: both "authoritarian" and "egalitarian". It can be said that the husband is the director of the household in the same way that the head is the director of the body. The husband cannot dominate the household, nor can the head dominate the body. The body works together, every part helping the other. The head needs the blood from the heart, the blood needs the oxygen from the lungs, etc. From this point of view, a well-ordered household is the result of the cooperation of all its members. Guidance and direction are needed, but this guidance will most likely be the result of the voluntary cooperation of all the members.

2) Christ as husband of the Church.

Christ is not only "head", but also "husband". Note that "head" and "husband" are not necessarily the same thing. At this point it might be good to think about the use of "images" (or "figures of speech") in the New Testament.

Jesus is famous for using "figures of speech" in his teaching -- for example, his "parables". They always start with some reality which is already known to his audience, and then go on to make a point about God and God's Kingdom. That's why they so frequently start like this: "The Kingdom of God may be compared to..... (a mustard seed, or a woman who has lost some money,) etc.

In the same way, the author of the letter to the Ephesians uses an "image" -- the married love of husband and wife. The author presumes that we know what this means. Then he uses that image to speak about Jesus. *Scripture says: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one." There is a deep secret truth revealed in this scripture, which I understand as applying to Christ and the church.* (Eph 5, 31-32).

This is the usual procedure: a human example (married love) is used to speak about God (Jesus and the Church.) But then the author of Ephesians takes another step: using the example of Christ and the Church, the author returns to the human example, and applies the love between Christ and the Church to the love between husband and wife. *Wives should always put their husbands first, as the church puts Christ first. A husband should love his wife as much as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it.* (Eph 5, 24-25)

In using the image of husband and wife, the author of Ephesians is really making two points.

1) If we understand married love, then we can form at least a little idea about the love which unites Christ to the church. In the social customs of the time, brides were specially prepared for the wedding. The bridesmaids washed the bride's body with water and perfume, then dressed her in a gown and covered her with jewels. But in the letter to the Ephesians it is Christ himself who prepares the bride, so great is his love for her: *Christ made the church holy by the power of his word, and he made it pure by washing it with the water of baptism, in order to present the church to himself in all its beauty — pure and faultless, without spot or wrinkle or any other imperfection.* (Eph 5, 26-27.)

Although the human reality (married love) is always imperfect, the divine reality (the love of Christ for the Church (all baptized believers) is perfect. The love of Christ for the Church is permanent, indissoluble.

2) And then in turn, if we really understand the love of Christ for the Church, we can better understand the ideal of human marriage. Husbands and wives must love one another just as much as Christ loves the Church, and gives his life for the Church. This, however, is not an image of domination and subjection. This is an image of a husband who serves his wife, and gives his life for her. Christ performs an act of love for his bride, the Church -- he washes her in Baptism so that the Church may shine in all its beauty.

THE SUBJECTION OF WIVES

In view of all this, what does it mean to say: *Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord.* (Eph 5, 24)?

The early Christians did not completely accept the pagan lists of household duties. In those pagan lists it was indeed true that the wife must be subject to the husband in all things -- because he was the "head" of the household, and she was considered to be weak and inferior. The early Christians, however, modified this point of view. Even though Ephesians 5 speaks about the subjection of the wife to the husband, in other parts of the New Testament, Christians knew that they were all equal (Gal 3, 28). They were told to love one another, and to show that love by serving one another.³ This was the ideal for all Christians, including husbands and wives.

And the early Christians remembered the example of Christ. Even though he was the "head", he was never a tyrant. He did not treat the disciples as "subjects", but as friends⁴ with whom he shared everything. They remembered how he rebuked James and John when they sought the best seats, and that he said to them: *If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of the rest.*⁵ And they remembered that at the Last Supper Jesus washed his disciples' feet, and said: *I have set the example, and you should do for each other exactly what I have done for you.* (John 13, 15)

It is in the context of the example of Jesus that Ephesians 5, 24 must be understood. A wife is "subject" to her husband because she gives her whole life to him and for him -- just as Christ gave his life for the Church.

A contemporary Catholic author has written: *A spouse who insists upon getting his/her own way always, who dominates his/her partner, who never dreams of giving way, will never become one person with anyone. In a Christian marriage love does not insist on its own way, but seeks an empathy with and compassion for the needs, feelings, and desires of the other spouse. It seeks also a mutual giving way to those needs, feelings, and desires, when the occasion demands, for the sake of, and in response to, love.*

NOTES

1. Christian equality

²⁶ *All of you are God's children because of your faith in Christ Jesus.* ²⁷ *And when you were baptized, you put on Christ in the same way you put on new clothes.* ²⁸ *Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other. So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus.* Galatians 3, 26-28.

¹² *For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.* ¹³ *For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.* 1 Corinthians 12, 12-13.

⁹ *You have given up your old way of life with its habits.* ¹⁰ *Each of you is now a new person.* ¹¹ *As a result, there is no longer any distinction between Gentiles and Jews, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarians, savages, slaves, and free, but Christ is all, Christ is in all.* Colossians 3, 9-11

2. Social customs

Read 1 Corinthians 11, 2-15. The requirement for women to cover their head in church may reflect a social custom of the time more than a command of the Holy Spirit and a requirement of Christian faith.

3. Love for others

¹³ *As for you, my friends, you were called to be free. But do not let this freedom become an excuse for letting your physical desires control you. Instead, let love make you serve one another.* ¹⁴ *For the whole Law is summed up in one commandment: Love your neighbor as you love yourself.* Galatians 5, 13-14

² *My friends, make me completely happy by having the same thoughts, sharing the same love, and being one in soul and mind.* ³ *Don't do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast, but be humble toward one another, always considering others better than yourselves.* ⁴ *And look out for one another's interests, not just for your own.* Philippians 2, 2-4

4. Friends of Jesus

¹² *My commandment is this: love one another, just as I love you.* ¹³ *The greatest love you can have for your friends is to give your life for them.* ¹⁴ *And you are my friends if you do what I command you.* ¹⁵ *I do not call you servants any longer, because servants do not know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because I have told you everything I heard from my Father.* John 15, 12-15.

5. Serving others

²⁵ *Jesus said: You know that rulers like to order their people around. And their great leaders have full power over everyone they rule.* ²⁶ *But don't act like them. If you want to be great, you must be the servant of all the others.* ²⁷ *And if you want to be first, you must be the slave of the rest.* ²⁸ *The Son of Man did not come to be a slave master, but a slave who will give his life to rescue many people.* Matthew 20, 25-28