

God's blueprint for marriage

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Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body. "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 a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. (Ephesians 5.21 – 33)

Introduction

Today, we are due to witness Mes and Abi entering into the covenant of marriage together. Marriage is not a state that man has made up but it is a wonderful gift which God has given to mankind. It goes right back to the beginning of the world, as today's reading from Genesis makes clear, especially Genesis 2.24.

Since God has instituted marriage, it is he who is in the position to tell us how husbands and wives are to fulfil their rôles. The passage that was read to us just now from Ephesians gives God's "blueprint" for married life. The apostle Paul draws an analogy between the relationship of a husband with his wife and that of Christ and his people, the church. In so doing he gives us profound teaching about Christ and his church, as well as practical instructions for marriage.

The apostle first addresses wives:

1. Wives

The apostle says, "Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord."

Wives are to put their wills and actions under the authority of their husbands. In each situation they are to do what their husbands would want them to do.

Now, I am aware that some may immediately object to this teaching. They may say something like the following: "The Bible is an ancient book, a product of its age. It was written in a primitive age when women were suppressed by men. Things have moved forward today. We cannot expect to be controlled today by outmoded and old-fashioned ideas." Or they may use a more subtle argument such as the following: "Paul commanded submission of women to men as a temporary provision owing to the culture of the time, so as not to offend people. Now that cultural conditions have changed, so that people would not be offended by women having an equal rôle in the marriage, the teaching that the Paul gave no longer applies."

But the instruction Paul gives in Ephesians 5 is not the outmoded idea of an old-fashioned book. It is part of the inspired Word of God. God overruled what the apostle wrote, so that every word was what God wanted to say. Everything that he says is eternally true and relevant.

Nor is the apostle here arguing from the point of view of not upsetting the culture of the day. He is arguing from the nature of man and woman as originally created by God, and also from the nature of the relationship between Christ and his church. These are arguments which are always true and do not depend on cultural conditions.

There are two reasons that the apostle gives:

1) The position of man was created by God.

The apostle says, "For the husband is head of the wife". We are not here by evolution. Man was created by God. And, as the passage from Genesis 2 makes clear, the man was created first, then his wife. Also, the woman was created from the man, not the man from the woman. Moreover, the man's authority

over the woman is shown by the fact that he named her. She did not give him a name, but he, as the first created human being, had the authority to name her. In Scripture the one under authority is always named by the one in authority, not the other way round. In addition, as Genesis 3 tells us, God held Adam responsible for the fall into sin, as the head of the couple. The woman was the first one to have sinned, but it was Adam, as the head of the pair, who was primarily called to account for what has happened.

Genesis teaches us that men and women *are* equally made in the image of God. Men are in no way superior to women. But the husband is given the *rôle* of being the head over his wife.

2) The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church

The second reason that apostle gives derives from the analogy he draws between the relationship of a husband and wife and the relationship of Christ with his church. He says “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour”.

The husband is the “head” or “ruler” over his wife as Christ is the “head” or “ruler” over the church. By the word “church”, the apostle does not mean a physical building which we would call “church”, or a human organisation, such as the “Church of England”. What he means is those people who have been saved by Christ and belong to him, in all places and in all times.

It would be unthinkable for the church to tell Christ what he is to do, or for the church to refuse to submit to Christ. In the same way, it should be unthinkable for a wife not to submit to her husband.

But a woman here might want to say at this point, “I know what you are saying is right, and I would like to follow it. But my husband is a foolish, selfish man. If he were sensible, selfless, a man of integrity and reason, I would happily submit to him, his decisions and judgements. But how can I submit to man like my husband?”

It has to be said in all fairness that some husbands make it extremely difficult for their wives to submit to them. They are foolish, selfish and irresponsible. However, the wife is to submit, not because of the fine qualities or nobility of her husband, nor only if he is wise and considerate. She is to submit

“as to the Lord”. She is to do it out of reverence for Christ. She is to show honour for Christ by submitting to her husband.

Clearly, if a husband were to require his wife to do something which would break the commandments of God, she would not be able to obey her husband in this one matter. But in all other matters she should, even when it is hard, submit to her husband.

This does not mean that a wife will suspend her judgement in matters to do with family life. If there is a decision regarding the family which needs to be made, a good wife will of course privately express her views respectfully to her husband, and voice any concerns she may have about a decision he is considering. But if he insists in going ahead with what he has planned, unless such a course of action would directly break the law of God she should submit to his decision and publicly support him in it, even if privately she has her reservations.

So, Abi, as you start your married life, be determined that from day one you will submit to Mes.

And, to the wives who are here today, I would ask you this question: Are you submitting to your husband? Have you been bossing your husband around? Is there something he has made plain to you that he wants you to do, and you are refusing to do it? Are you making his life miserable until he will do what you demand of him? Every wife knows that there are “control mechanisms” that she can use to get her way with her husband. Be careful you do not use such mechanisms on your husband. If you have not been submissive to your husband, repent and ask God to forgive you. Be reconciled to your husband and learn this new way of relating with him.

2. Husbands

Paul then turns his attention to husbands. He says “Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church”.

Just as the church’s submission to Christ is to be the pattern for a wife’s submission to her husband, so the love that Christ has for his church is to be the pattern for a husband’s love for his wife.

“Love” is a very misunderstood word today. For many,

"love" is the same thing as sexual desire. As long as the man desires a woman, he "loves" her. When he stops desiring her, this "love" comes to an end as he drops her and hunts for an alternative object of his "love".

But the love that Paul is speaking of here is the sort of love which Christ has for his church. There are five features of this love that I would like to mention:

1) It is a love which is utterly committed.

How long has Christ loved his church? Since as far back as you can conceive, and before. How long will he love his church? For ever and ever into the future. Can anything separate Christ's people from his love? Absolutely nothing. Christ is absolutely committed in love to his people.

In just the same way, a husband should love his wife with total commitment. She must know that as long as she lives he has eyes for no-one else. She must know that her welfare is more important to him than the welfare of any other person in the world, and always will be. A husband's love must be one of 100% commitment, come what may.

2) It is a love which is unconditional.

How was the church when Christ first loved her? How were you? How was I? We were in a state that was in an utterly repulsive to Christ. A few chapters earlier in this same letter the apostle described the state of believers prior to their conversion. He said,

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath (Ephesians 2.1 - 3).

Before we came to Christ, we were dead in our trespasses and sins; we were following the devil; we were slaves of our sinful passions. We cannot imagine how repulsive and disgusting to a holy God we were in our natural state. Yet in spite of this, Christ determined to love his people.

As for those of us who are now Christians, how has our life been since we were

born again? Again and again we have, in spiritual terms, committed adultery by running after other gods. We have grieved the Holy Spirit by speaking with others in an unloving way. We have had impure thoughts and motives. We have done wrong and dishonourable actions. Yet Christ has not stopped loving us nor will he ever do so.

This is the sort of love that the husband is to have for his wife. He is to love her, not *because* of how she is but *in spite of* how she is.

God has made it very easy for many of us men. He has given us, in many cases, wives who are absolutely wonderful: godly, hard working, patient, kind, cheerful....and irresistibly attractive! But the husband is called to love his wife even if she becomes irritable, unpleasant, lazy, impossible to please, ugly and weak. A man is to love his wife in her old age when she is wrinkled, frail and ill as much as he did on his wedding day when she was young, healthy and beautiful.

3) It is a love which sacrifices itself.

The apostle says, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

What did it mean for Christ to give himself up for the church? He went to the Cross. What happened there? He was treated as the sin of his own church. He bore on his shoulders the wrath of God that was against his people. This entailed unspeakable physical, mental and spiritual suffering.

Why did he do this? What motive drove him to such an extreme action? Was he somehow inadequate or unfulfilled without the church? Not all! He was perfectly and fully satisfied in the love of the Father. The only reason he made this sacrifice was because of his love for the church. He loved his people so much that he was prepared to give his life to save them from everlasting destruction in Hell.

In the same way the husband is called to sacrifice himself and his own interests for the sake of his wife, so that can give her all the love and support which she needs. The sacrifices that a husband may need to make will be minute in comparison with the sacrifice that Christ made for his church, but they are real sacrifices nonetheless. There may be things that a man used to love to do as a single man that he is going to need to sacrifice for the good of his wife once he is

married. It may be his involvement with a football club. It may be his fondness for going to the cinema with his mates. It may be his career. It may be his model railway! It might even be his ministry in the church, which might need to be pared down in order to spend time with his wife and to help with caring for any children who are born. Whatever the sacrifice that is needed, a husband's love should be a sacrificial love which sets his wife's good above his own desires.

4) *It is a love which provides*

Christ provides for all the needs of his church. He gave himself up for her "to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."

Christ has made abundant provision for the needs of the church. He has provided a sacrifice for sin, to make her holy in God's sight. He has given her the Word of God, to teach her about salvation, and show her how to live once saved. This Word is full of promises which give her all she needs to obey God. He has also provided teachers to feed the church with the Word. He has given the Holy Spirit to take this word and to apply it to the hearts of his people. He has provided all that is necessary to bring his bride to perfection.

Paul says, "In *this same way*, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, *just as Christ does the church.*" The husband should provide for the needs of his wife as Christ provides for the needs of his bride, the church.

The husband should provide for the *spiritual needs* of his wife. He should read the Bible with his wife, answer her questions as well as he can, and pray with her.

He should provide for her *emotional needs*. The wife will need to be reassured of his love. She will need a friend to listen to her concerns and to encourage her. A husband should not leave it to his wife's female friends and family to give her support. He should take steps to ensure that he himself is her best friend.

He should provide for her *material needs*. I know that the idea that the man should be the principal breadwinner and that the wife should keep house and

care for any children is considered to be very old-fashioned. But I do think that there is a Scriptural warrant for it in this passage and in other places. The husband should literally feed and care for his wife. It is not that the wife is forbidden to work. But she should not feel that she has to, because her needs, and the needs of the family, are provided for by the husband.

5) A love that joins itself to the wife.

The apostle then speaks of the most amazing thing: Christ's love for the church means that he has united himself with her. The apostle quotes from the text in Genesis which is the foundation for marriage – "For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" – and says that this applies to Christ and the church.

How amazing! The exalted Lord Jesus Christ is prepared to humble himself and unite himself with his lowly creation. Yet that is the teaching of Scripture. As his church, we who are believers are joined to Christ. We are united with him in his death, in his resurrection, in his exaltation. We will be joined to him in his glorification. When he comes again we shall be perfectly united with him for ever, enjoying his love to the full.

In the same way, a man is to join himself completely with his wife. He is to leave his parents, and unite himself to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. There are three stages to this union:

Firstly, the man *leaves* his father and mother. His relationship with his parents changes, as do his relationships with all other relatives and friends. He is now joined to his wife. All other relationships take second place.

Secondly he *unites* with his wife. The word means literally to be "stuck" to her, or "glued" to her. This speaks of the covenant of marriage that that the man makes with his wife. But it speaks not just about the covenant as a one off event. It speaks about the way in which a man is to join himself mentally and emotionally with his wife. He is to become "bonded" with her. The husband needs to share what is going on inside his head and his heart with his wife, and to encourage his wife to share what is going on inside her. Some men need to learn the skill of how to do this. Some are "closed books" and rarely share their deepest thoughts with anyone, even their wives. They need to learn how to share their thoughts with their wives.

In this regard, it is vital to sort out disagreements. Watch out, husband, if your wife “goes quiet” on you! Find out what is troubling her. Almost certainly, it will be something you have done! Whatever you might have done or said, whether there has been genuine wrong on your side or misunderstanding on hers, identify and resolve the issue. Do not let it go unnoticed or unheeded. At the same time, if you are upset about something, talk about it in a loving and gentle way with your wife. Do not just sweep it under the carpet. Disagreements have the potential to ruin a marriage, but they also have the potential, if handled properly, to greatly strengthen it, because they can lead to a much closer understanding of one another.

The third stage that this verse speaks about is becoming “one flesh”. This is undoubtedly talking about the sexual union between a husband and his wife. When a man joins with his wife in sexual union, in a mysterious way they become “one flesh”. There is nothing wrong with sex within marriage. It was created by God, before the fall into sin. It joins a man physically to his wife, and seals the bond of the marriage covenant and their mental and emotional bonding together. God intended that sex should only take place between one man and one woman who are in the covenant of marriage. This is why you should NEVER have any sexual relationship with someone to whom you are not married, nor fantasise about doing so.

The husband should join himself to his wife sexually. He should not allow himself to be so preoccupied with work or other concerns that he loses interest in his wife. He certainly must not allow his eye to wander to any other woman. He must direct all his sexual desire towards his own wife.

There is a close link between a man uniting himself emotionally with his wife, and successfully joining himself physically with his wife. I am told that whereas a man can be sexually aroused by the mere sight of his wife, a woman needs to know that she has a strong relationship with her husband before she can relax and enter fully into a sexual relationship with him. Sometimes a man does not maintain a good personal relationship with his wife, and then is surprised when she is not interested in sex. Such a man needs to learn to relate with his wife in a close and intimate way, to resolve any outstanding disagreements, and behave in a loving, considerate, and faithful manner. Out of such a relationship a strong physical union is likely to flow.

So, we have seen that husbands are to love their wives with the love that Christ

has for the church, a love that is committed, that is unconditional, that is sacrificial, that provides, and that unites itself with the wife.

So, Mes, be determined that from this day forward, come what may, you will love Abi with the love of Christ.

And let me address the husbands who are here today. Are you loving your wife? Are you committed to her? Is your love unconditional, or does it depend on her living up to a certain standard, or maintaining a certain level of physical attraction to you? Are you sacrificing your interests for those of your wife? Are you providing for the needs of your wife? Are you joining yourself to your wife, emotionally, mentally and physically?

It may be that a man would say to me, "I know I ought to love my wife, but I can't. I find her such a pain in the neck. She is always badgering me and making my life miserable. I can hardly stand to live under the same roof as her." Remember, you are to love her not *because* of how she is but *in spite of* how she is. Think of the amazing love that Christ has had for you. Think how repulsive you are to Christ in your natural state. Go to him. Confess the sin of your lack of love to him. Ask him for forgiveness. Apologise to your wife for times when you have been unloving to her. Be filled with the Holy Spirit. Meditate on Christ's love for you. Seek to imitate his love as you relate with your wife.

Lastly, a word to everyone, whether married or single. Do you know the love of Christ? Are you part of his church? Are you saved from your sins, redeemed by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross?

You can be part of the bride of Christ. Jesus is, as it were, proposing to you. He is calling you to come to him. He longs to shower you with his love, to wash your sins away and to give you eternal life. Come to him so that you might be forgiven of your sins and know his love, the perfect eternal love of the greatest of bridegrooms.

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