

GOSPEL MARRIAGE: COUNSEL TO WIVES, PART 1

An Exposition of Ephesians 5.22–33

God has many things to say to us in His Word about marriage. The passage I am about to announce is, perhaps, the quintessential passage in all of Scripture, saying the most important things about it in this gospel age. This is one of the most frequently read biblical texts at Christian weddings, and very appropriately so. “Marriage is honourable in all” (Heb 13.4), and yet it is even more glorious for Christians. That is because we, and only we, can have a “gospel marriage,” that is, is the kind of marriage being described in our text today, Ephesians 5.22–33.

I would like to read the whole passage in a moment, but I will tell you up front that we will use this as a sermon text for several messages. Today we will focus on its counsel to wives. This counsel is found especially in the first three verses, besides the brief exhortation to them in verse 33, but it will be helpful for us to hear these verses as part of the entire passage addressing marriage. This is the word of the Lord.

²² Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. ²⁴ Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so *let* the wives *be* to their own husbands in every thing. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; ²⁶ That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. ²⁹ For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: ³⁰ For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. ³¹ For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. ³² This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. ³³ Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife *see* that she reverence *her* husband.

Amen. Now may the Lord help us by His Spirit to understand, to love, and to embrace in heart and conduct all the perspectives and virtues embodied in this golden text.

The message today is merely introductory. I would like to address the issue of how we should hear this passage, and then its theological and its textual context in Ephesians.

How to Hear this Passage

Jesus’ sage advice for people under God’s Word is, “be careful how you hear” (Luke 8.18). Given the high emotions and heated controversy touched off by this passage, I confess my natural reticence to bring it into the pulpit with me. I like to be liked and agreed with as much as anyone. Taking it up, my inner thought is, “Oh boy, here we go.” But this is part of God’s

Word, and a very important part of it for our lives in this world. Especially as a pastor, I must be able to say with faithful Paul, “I have not shunned to declare to you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20.27). Please don't shoot the messenger!

And I caution you against being like the Pharisees, who “rejected the counsel of God against themselves” (Luke 7.30). Those whose heart is right with God not only accept His counsel, but they love it and strive to think and live according to it, knowing that this is the way of blessedness for them. They embody the spirit of the psalmist who prayed to the Lord, “Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight” (Psa 119.35). They understand well the wisdom of John the apostle when he wrote, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (1 Jn 5.3). The word “grievous” in this context means heavy, oppressive, or burdensome. None of God's commandments are burdensome to those who love Him. But to many women today, even in the churches, the words, “wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands,” are like nails on a chalkboard! They wince when they hear them.

If that is the case with you, then either one of two things must be going on. Either your holy heart is misunderstanding God's holy Word, and you have read into this text all kinds of things it does not mean or require, or failed to appreciate the goodness of it. Then it is these faulty ideas that are grieving you, not God's Word *per se*. Let me explain what I mean. Some wives have wrongly thought this passage requires absolute and unqualified submission to their husbands, and at that point they either reject it altogether like feminists, or else they foolishly attempt to give that kind of wrong-headed submission and become ridiculous caricatures of a genuinely godly Christian wife, perhaps with deep down resentment.

The only other way to account for annoyance with this text is that your unholy heart is rebelling against the truth in it which you understand correctly to some degree. So if you understand the exhortation accurately and you still hate it, then you either need to be born again or to do some serious repenting as a believer who is far from where she should be, spiritually speaking.

No matter what, we all need the Holy Spirit for a proper interpretation of His Word and for a proper disposition toward the divine Speaker behind the text. But I would insist right up front that where devout, godly women have truly understood this passage, it has become a treasure and a joy to them. They actually revel in its holy wisdom as they cheerfully put it into practice in their marriages. They sow the truth and reap a harvest of blessings. If that sounds too good to be true, please don't give up hope that it could become your own experience one day. Never underestimate the Holy Spirit!

And it is not just wives who misunderstand this passage. Countless are the husbands who have abused this Scripture, turning it into a metaphorical club for beating their wives into submission by quoting it to them again and again whenever their wives show that they have a mind of their own and are not acting like slaves and doormats, giving abject servility to the big household ogre! Let me address the men directly. You cannot possibly make your wife truly

obey this passage from the heart. You should not even try to *force* her into submission. If her heart ever comes into alignment with what is written here in its true sense, it will be by the gracious work of the Spirit of God and not by unholy bullying on your part. In fact, if you act that way toward your wife, you are making it harder for her to see the wisdom of God's counsel here, and even provoking her to sin against it! Frankly, wicked wives are often the consequence of God's judgment upon ungodly husbands.

Notice carefully, my brothers, how the preponderance of subject matter in these verses is, by far, addressed to the husbands, almost three times as many words! With greater authority comes greater responsibility. More depends on you than on her for a gospel marriage. Notice how that verses 22–24 begin with the word, "Wives." That means that she ought especially to listen up here for herself. Obviously, you men are not wives!

The part for your special attention is verses 25–33 which begins with the word, "Husbands." That's obviously directed to you. But one huge problem we have is that sin makes us more interested in other people doing their moral duty than we are in fulfilling it ourselves. When an ungodly husband hears a sermon on this passage, he may be thinking, "I sure hope my wife is paying attention because she really needs this, and I will be reminding her again and again." What's the spiritual alternative? Something like this. A godly husband hears prayerfully, thinking, "Oh Lord, please forgive my sins and help me to be a Christlike husband to my wife, making it easier for her to please you in all things!"

Gospel Marriage in the Light of Biblical Theology

It will help us to see the big picture about gospel marriage. One temptation we face as we try to understand this passage is, to use a fancy phrase, "theological and textual myopia." "Theological" means the teaching about God. "Textual" refers to the biblical setting of these verses. "Myopia" literally means "near-sightedness," and in the figurative sense, it means a "lack of insight." We will lack insight into God's will if, for example, we put verse 22 under the microscope to discover exactly what the Greek word for "submit" means only to learn what the text requires ethically of wives in relation to their husbands. As important as that issue is, I would argue it is not the main thing to learn from this text.

It has taken me decades of pastoral study and ministry to realize, to the degree that I do now, that the whole Bible must be understood, in its entire scope and in its parts, as a revelation of God and His works, especially His redemptive work, centered upon the Lord Jesus Christ. If this is generally true throughout Scripture, it is made very explicit in this passage. In verse 32, Paul expressly states his main subject: "I speak concerning Christ and the church." We might think, "I thought you were speaking about marriage!" Yes, but it is a vehicle to get to his main subject, Christ and His people.

This makes a wonderful insight very clear. *Marriage is for the gospel, not vice versa!* God gave marriage in the first place to teach us about His relationship of love and authority with His chosen people. As Adam and Eve were given to each other in covenantal love, so were they also in a relationship of covenantal love with God, and their marriage was designed to help them

understand that better than they could have without marriage. And since our fall into sin, even more of God's glory in His faithful love is suggested by marriage. The gospel plainly states that the Lord laid down His life for us, and in this way, He recaptures a cheerfully submissive people for His own. What a lesson for us all! Love and commitment triumphs at last!

Too often miserable married people become interested in the biblical teaching on marriage because they want a better marriage, and those who are single pay little attention to it because it seems fairly useless to them. But this is a passage for doxology (the praise of God) more than utility (usefulness to us)! Everyone should burrow into it with a strong desire to understand because this is a revelation of our relationship with God through Christ, whether we are single or married.

This also suggests why bad marriages are so tragic—not mainly because of human suffering. In premarital counseling I have often told the inexperienced young couple in love that they are about to make themselves more vulnerable to be hurt by their future spouse than by anyone else in this world, and countless are the examples of extreme pain suffered in marriage by abuse and betrayal. However, bad marriages are even more tragic because they fail to put on display the glory of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. You see, marriage isn't first of all for us; it's for God. And then, secondly, it is for us as worshippers of Him, with our spiritual interests in view. Only after that is it for us as those who need companionship, children, and help in chastity. Without faith, we put the last things first and ignore the first things altogether.

A bad marriage is comparable to Old Testament sacrifices which did not meet God's standard, as when people offered up animals that were blind, lame, or sick, though strictly forbidden (Mal 1.8). Because such offerings were symbols foreshadowing Jesus Christ, they dishonored Him, typologically implying that He was not perfect. That's one reason why they were so offensive to God! And so when husbands and wives fail to heed the counsel of this passage, we present a warped view of God and Christ and the church to each other, to our children, to our church congregation, and to the world. If we are guilty, then we are responsible for a horrible portrayal of Christ's relationship to His church. We do, in effect, preach a false gospel by our troubled marriages!

Gospel Marriage in the Context of Ephesians

A sound interpretation of this passage is also unlikely if we fail to consider its place in Ephesians. In the first three chapters, Paul has magnificently proclaimed and explained the glorious gospel of God in Christ. Starting with chapter four, Paul begins applying this saving truth in the most practical ways. He wrote about the consequences of the gospel in our lives as Christians. We have spiritual unity in the body of Christ, and we must strive to preserve and promote that unity. We have been made spiritually alive in Christ, and therefore we must no longer live as we did before we became Christians. This new life in Christ is predominantly a life of love, love supremely toward God and unselfish love toward one another.

The immediately preceding paragraph has listed several important prohibitions and exhortations for us together as a church, describing how we must be under the Holy Spirit's

influence and be in the habit of singing gratefully together and submitting to one another in imitation of Christ.

Now we come to a section of 21 verses, from 5.22 to 6.9, that set forth gospel-oriented counsel for the households of church members. The non-Christian culture there in those days had what we could call “household codes,” which amounted to a collection of rules and expectations for members of a household depending on their position in it. For example, Aristotle deals with this in his work called *Politics* where he identifies six social groups in three pairs, exactly as Paul does here in Ephesians (Clinton Arnold, ZECNT, in loc.): wives and husbands (5.22–33), children and parents (6.1–4), and servants and masters (6.5–9). And so the general idea of specific roles and responsibilities for various household members would not have been thought strange by the Ephesian Christians, but Paul’s doctrine along these lines is given by the Holy Spirit, and not the product of mere human wisdom like Aristotle’s. We see in Paul’s teaching that true wisdom and ethics are God-centered, Christ-saturated, and oriented toward our salvation and blessing. Especially toward the end of this Christian household code in Ephesians, Paul emphasizes our universal accountability to God on Judgment Day, even if we have had a place of authority over others in the family and society (6.8, 9).

What can we infer from all of this? First of all, the gospel contained in Holy Scripture is not just for you to be comforted that your sins are forgiven and then to go on your merry way, living however you please. To become a true Christian is to enter the school of Christ, where we learn many things about His will for how we should think and speak and conduct ourselves. It is for the glory of God that the Christian fellowship in the church and in our families should be in the process of a transformation toward thorough-going righteousness in the eyes of God.

Second, living as Christians is ordained by God to be an interpersonal experience, not just a private one for individuals kept to themselves. We have become part of a spiritual family. The main expression of that family is the gathered church, and God’s grace is supposed to spill over into every area of our lives, not least of which is how husbands and wives relate to each other in the home, and parents and children, too, and employers and employees at work.

Third, our spiritual unity and equality in Christ, which Scripture also insists upon (e.g., Gal 3.28, “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”), does not cancel out in the slightest the proper and useful role distinctions that exist in a well-ordered family. While husbands and wives and parents and children are all equally bearing God’s image in our humanity, and while those who believe the gospel are equally beloved and saved in Christ, regardless of age or gender or status as married or single, governors or subjects, still, those authority structures are not inherently evil, but ordained by God and helpful to us. To be specific, each husband is the head of his own wife, parents are over their own children, and masters govern their own servants—according to the clear teaching of this passage and throughout the Scriptures.

With much discernment about our own culture and the biblical teaching on this, one scholar explains:

The idea of subordination to authority in general, as well as in the family, is out of favor in a world which prizes permissiveness and freedom. Christians are often affected by these attitudes. Subordination smacks of exploitation and oppression that are deeply resented. But authority is not synonymous with tyranny, and the submission to which the apostle refers does not imply inferiority. Wives and husbands (as well as children and parents, servants and masters) have different God-appointed roles, but all have equal dignity because they have been made in the divine image and in Christ have put on the new person who is created to be like God. Having described the single new humanity which God is creating in his Son, with its focus on the oneness in Christ of all, especially Jew and Gentile, the apostle does not now [in this household table] destroy his own thesis by erecting new barriers of sex, age and rank in God's new society in which they have been abolished. That the verb "submit, be subordinate" can be used of Christ's submission to the authority of the Father shows that it can denote a functional subordination without implying inferiority, or less honor and glory (Peter O'Brien, PNTC, on Eph 5.22).

I sincerely hope that this introduction to gospel marriage, specifically, God's counsel to wives in Ephesians 5.22-24, has eased any anxieties you may feel about this and whetted your appetite to hear more, with a deep, spiritual hunger for the truth that glorifies God, saves sinners, and leads us more and more into His blessing upon our lives. The next time we come to the passage, we will dig into the specifics and try to recover what it really does say to us, while clearing away misconceptions. Amen.

GOSPEL MARRIAGE: COUNSEL TO WIVES, PART 2

An Exposition of Ephesians 5.22–33

We have begun a sermon series entitled, “Gospel Marriage.” Its first two parts have the subtitle, “Counsel to Wives,” to be followed later by, “Counsel to Husbands.” Today we resume and conclude the counsel to wives, part 2.

I strongly urge you to try to remember part one if you heard it, or to wait until you do become familiar with part one while you are forming an assessment of part two. Part one last week was entirely introductory for our exposition today of Ephesians 5.22–24. I’m sorry but we just don’t have time to review last week’s message now. We need to proceed to part two, which itself has two main parts: an exposition of Ephesians 4.22–24 and a defense of its counsel. Now please hear the word of the Lord.

²² Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. ²⁴ Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so *let* the wives *be* to their own husbands in every thing.

Amen.

Exposition

The task of an expositor is to bring to light what is already and really right there in the text along with responsible explanation of its meaning. We call this observation and interpretation. Let’s plunge into these three verses, then, with these two goals.

Verses 22, 23, and 24 are conceptually-distinct in this way. First, we have exhortation, then explanation, and finally, exemplification. We start with exhortation in verse 22.

Exhortation (v. 22)

Verse 22 says, “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.” Wives means married women, of course. Pass over the verb “submit” for a minute, except to notice that it is directive. It is telling wives to do something in their relationship with “their own husbands,” that is, each wife with her own husband in particular. She is not urged here to do this thing in her relationship with all men generally. The text is very specific, not only here but also in verse 24, “their own husbands,” and in verse 33, “her husband.” I have noticed this specificity in the parallel passage of Colossians 3.18, which says, “wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands.” Some people have the notion that all women are supposed to be submissive to all men, but that is not justified by this biblical text nor by any other. Each wife is called to submit herself to her own husband, and not to all men generally. More evidence of this is found in Titus 2.5 which says Christian wives should be “obedient to their own husbands,” or, perhaps better translated, “being in subjection to their own husbands” (ASV), since it is the same basic Greek word as here in Ephesians 5.22.

The last phrase is also very important. A wife is called to submit to her own husband “as unto the Lord.” Colossians 3.18 is similar in this respect also, because it has the phrase, “as it is fit [or *fitting*, ESV] in the Lord.” This is not just general moral counsel for all wives in the world, but special counsel for wives in the church who are spiritual sisters in Christ. These are women with a special relationship to Jesus Christ. He is the Lord they have owned by their open confession of faith and baptism as His disciples. Especially in the light of her relationship to Christ, she is called to do this thing. She does it as an act of worship to Christ who requires it of her. He requires it of her right here in this very passage, since Paul speaks as an apostle with the very same authority of Christ the Lord. At the very least, this is what “as unto the Lord” means. It comes on the heels of the exhortation for church members to be “submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God” (v. 21). And the phrase, “as it is fit in the Lord” in Colossians 3.18 means that, given their identity as those who are “in the Lord,” Paul’s shorthand label for those who are saved, that is, in a saving union with Christ, this is particularly the appropriate and morally right thing for them to do.

Let me make a very practical application here. Ladies, if you’re married, don’t apply this text in your relationship with your husband for his sake, but for the Lord’s. Let your love and loyalty ultimately terminate on Him who loved you and gave Himself for you on the cross! This is good counsel for the ultimate motive behind every righteous thing we do, but it may be especially helpful to remember with this because some husbands make it more difficult for their wives to do this than others. Maybe you’ve got one of those. Well, then, don’t do it for him. Do it for Jesus Christ.

This phrase, “as unto the Lord,” also suggests the *manner* of your submission. Now as soon as I say that, I must insist on qualifying it. Your husband is not Christ, and therefore you cannot submit to him *exactly* as you do to Christ. But in some ways there should be a similarity. Submitting yourself to your husband should be done by faith, and willingly, cheerfully, humbly, and consistently.

This godly exhortation in Ephesians 5.22 and these praiseworthy traits associated with it are a very high standard. You should not be discouraged if you realize you have not yet attained to perfection. Any wives who think they are near perfect are deluded, and this standard is set before you as direction toward a goal. In a Christian woman who is spiritually healthy, and in a good Christian marriage, there is always room for growth, always a biblical basis of hope for progress in piety and good works, and always the comfort of God’s gentle, patient mercy for us who are still very sinful and do not measure up to the righteousness of His beloved Son and our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He loves you by grace just as you are, perhaps not yet very submissive to your own husband, and the Lord’s gracious love is still at work in you, transforming you from the inside out.

Now we come to the crux of the verse which is the verb, “submit yourselves.” The English word is significant and means, literally, “to put under,” and figuratively, “to yield oneself to the authority or will of another” (MWCD). The proper sense here of the Greek word is “to be submissive,” and it is in a grammatical form (middle voice) that justifies the translation, “submit

yourselves.” This is something that only a wife herself can do, voluntarily, intelligently and willingly adopting a particular perspective, attitude, and calling for this aspect of her life.

A very reliable Greek dictionary says it means, in this context, to “subject oneself, be subjected or subordinated, obey,” and further explains that it is used “of submission involving recognition of an ordered structure, [sometimes mentioning] the entity to whom/which appropriate respect is shown” (BDAG). The basic idea is “voluntary subordination” (Little Kittel). It involves recognizing that the husband has been given a position of authority over his wife, and then to adopt the disposition and conduct which is proper for one consciously under his authority.

Now this phrase, “submit yourselves,” is not the same thing as saying, “obey.” To order wives to obey their husbands would be more crass, even while such a command is entirely proper for minor children in the household. Ephesians 6:1 says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” There the emphasis is upon conduct; with a wife, it is more upon her inner attitude toward her husband. Ephesians 5:33 reinforces this when it charges the wife to “reverence” or “respect” her husband—that is, to recognize his position over her as her husband. And yet when a godly wife does submit herself in the sense of Ephesians 5.22, obeying her husband in general is not an unexpected response. The apostle Peter exalted Abraham’s wife as an example for all Christian wives who ought to be “in subjection to their own husbands: even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement” (1 Pet 3.5, 6). I have checked the translation carefully, and the word “obeyed” is the best translation in English of the Greek original. The term “lord” is a title of respect to one’s husband; a modern equivalent would be “sir.” The title is not the main thing required here; the respect is.

Now I know these biblical texts, and my explanation of them, which you must judge for yourself, are highly offensive to modern sensibilities. That is because, as far as they clash with Scripture, modern sensibilities are wrong and need to change. Receiving this counsel to wives in Ephesians 5 is one of the ways that Christian wives today can be strikingly countercultural, especially in 21st century America.

Explanation (v. 23)

That we have not misunderstood Paul’s meaning here is clear from his explanation in the next verse, verse 23, “for the husband is the head of the wife,” where “head” means leader, a person who is in charge (*Logos Bible Sense Lexicon*). This reflects the entire biblical witness to divine order within the family. This does not imply that men are better than women, or that every husband necessarily has better leadership qualities than his wife. I think that the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian John Eadie explains this nicely.

She may be in many things man’s superior—in sympathy, in delicacy of sentiment, warmth of devotion, in moral heroism, and in power and patience of self-denial. Still the obedience inculcated by the apostle sits gracefully upon her,

and is in harmony with all that is fair and feminine in her position and temperament (in loc.).

And I would add that some wives are smarter than their husbands, have more education, are better managers, make more money, and many are much more spiritually-minded. Some are even physically stronger than their husbands. She may be a much better person than he is, but the biblical counsel here is unqualified by these considerations; they are the same for these gifted women as for all other wives.

Further reinforcing each husband's authority over his wife, delegated to him by God, Paul continues his analogy with the phrase, "even as Christ is the head of the church." If language means anything, we can take from this that a husband's position over his wife is, in some way, comparable to Christ's over His church.

As much as I would love to elaborate further on this point, there is so much more to say that I must press on.

Exemplification (v. 24)

After the exhortation in verse 22 and the explanation in verse 23, Paul states the exemplification of his doctrine about the wives' position and perspective in verse 24. "Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so *let* the wives *be* to their own husbands in every thing."

This verse doesn't add much that is new to the previous two. The Lord Jesus Christ has already been mentioned three times. The same Greek root word for submit is repeated again here. The parallel of the wife/husband and church/Christ relationship is hinted at in verse 22, made explicit in verse 23, and reiterated in this verse 24.

But two things are new. First is the word "therefore." This gathers the thoughts of verses 22 and 23 and states them as a memorable principle drawn from them, the substance of which is that the wives must look to "the church" in its subjection to Christ as the example for their own subjection, each to her own husband. This calls for much meditation and application. For example, as the Puritan Thomas Manton commented on this verse, "If you consent to marry to Christ, you must reckon upon it, that you are no longer your own to dispose of, and therefore henceforth you must no more live to yourselves" (*Works IX.395*). And so if you are married, you must not even try to live as if you were still single, but conduct yourself as one with a husband over her in the Lord. Of course there are special cases where this is not the best advice, but I speak generally. If you prefer to live as a single person, stay single. With approval of this idea, Paul wrote, "he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please *his* wife" (1 Cor 7.33). And the wife ought to care how she can please her husband. This is how the true church distinguishes itself from the world—she strives to please her Lord and spiritual Husband, the Lord Jesus Christ—and she is set forth here as an example for each wife, particularly in submitting herself to her own husband, and trying to please him.

The second new thing in verse 24 is the phrase, "in every thing." This probably chafes upon the feelings of many wives, but in a good marriage where love prevails, a wife recognizes

that he is her husband in all respects, and she would not consider anything of hers to be completely off limits to him. She doesn't say, "well, in this area of my life I am going to think and live as if I were single, without any regard to what my husband might think or want about it." Now a good husband does not abuse this authority of his and micromanage his wife in an oppressive way, of course, but I am now speaking about her attitude toward him. Even Christ lets His beloved ones in the church make personal choices about many things in our lives according to our own whims and preferences, when nothing moral is involved. Husbands, take note of Him! Pastors are warned against "domineering over those in [their] charge" (1 Pet 5.3), that is, over church members, and, likewise, you husbands have no right whatsoever to domineer over your wives. Ironically, the better example you are to her, and the more faithfully you love and serve her best interests, the more likely it is that she will be able, with God's help, to bring herself into a godly submission to you as she should.

Defense

In the brief time remaining for this sermon, I would like to speak a few words in defense of the biblical doctrine as I have presented it to you. I regret that I have to be so concise now, and I welcome discussion of this subject with all of you later. I would love to hear your thoughts and address any concerns you may have, either about things I have said, or, as a true pastor for you, about issues troubling you in your marriage.

The biblical doctrine here is unjustly considered offensive to many because they do not accept its biblical foundations and qualifications.

Divinely-ordained Marriage

For example, many reject divinely-ordained marriage, that is, one man in covenantal bonds of love with one woman, "till' death do us part." Some see it as a manmade institution for men to dominate women. Prevalent divorce and remarriage haven't helped. Some people may not openly reject marriage philosophically but they do so in a practical way, as cohabitation and births outside marriage are increasing at an alarming rate. So-called "gay marriage," an oxymoron, really, is further eroding respect for biblical marriage ethics. These enemies of biblical marriage have repenting to do on a much deeper level before they could ever appreciate Paul's doctrine in Ephesians 5!

Divinely-ordained Rank

For those who accept the authority of Holy Scripture, we can readily see that God did ordain marriage, as well as "husband" and "wife" as official positions in a marriage, with the husband as the head of his wife. All of this is deeply theological and rooted in the original creation of Adam and Eve—and the biblical testimony about these things is permanent and not subject to challenges from ever-changing times and human cultures. The Holy Spirit prompted Paul to write, "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman *is* the man; and the head of Christ *is* God" (1 Cor 11.3). And again, addressing a point of church order, he wrote, "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over

the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression” (1 Tim 2.12–14).

So Paul’s exhortation that a wife should submit herself to her own husband in every thing is completely consistent with the whole biblical doctrine on marriage.

Churchly Context

Also, Paul was writing here to Christian wives in the context of a local church. They would have had—or should have had—the support of their “faith community,” brothers and sisters in the Lord who would know them and their spouses. When problems arise in a particular marriage, the fellowship of saints in the church is intended by God to help address them, especially when they are more severe.

Without this churchly context, this counsel to wives in Ephesians 5 appears foolish to many, even dangerous. But I would argue that the main problem of miserable married people isolated from a good church is their isolation, not their bad marriage. If only they all would trust in the Lord, openly confess their faith in Him, be baptized, and become vital church members in good fellowship with others, under wise pastoral leadership and counsel, their marital problems would, in general, tend to subside, compared to their life of greater vulnerability outside the church. The proof of this is found in countless examples of good marriages that started out badly, and which have, through evangelism and discipleship and fellowship within the church, been transformed by the grace of Christ our Savior! Kathy and I have been married 35 years now, and the church has greatly helped us to be better spouses to each other.

Not Absolute Submission to a Creaturely, Sinful Husband

Neither Scripture nor I are advocating absolute submission to a creaturely, sinful husband. The Protestant Reformer Wolfgang Musculus wrote centuries ago on this passage,

Paul does not force wives into an unjust, dangerous, harmful and ungodly obedience but into one that is convenient and necessary for any lawful marriage. No woman is expected to obey a man who orders her to do things that are ungodly, harmful and unjust, because that sort of obedience is not of God but more like obedience to the will of Satan. Therefore when he says “in all things” Paul does not mean things that are not lawful, honest, useful and possible, that can rightly be determined by the husband as the head and savior of his wife. When it happens that the will of the man falls away from the will of God, then he ought to accept the will of his wife, and it becomes better for the man to listen to her and do what she wants than for her to listen to him. We see this in the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 21, where Abraham is commanded by divine revelation to do what his wife Sarah had told him, because what she said was according to the will of God, whereas his will was rather different from that.

Musculus sounds rather modern, doesn’t he? But he was just being biblical.

For a Woman’s Well-being

Paul's counsel is actually for a married woman's well-being, just as the church's submission to Christ is for her well-being. This is suggested by the phrase at the end of verse 23 about Christ: "he is the saviour of the body." The church is saved in her submission to Christ. It is by submitting to Him that she receives the most benefit from Him. And, as John Calvin explained,

As Christ presides over his church for her salvation, so there is nothing more useful to the wife than to submit to her husband. To refuse that submission is to court destruction (in loc.).

Augustine (fourth century) has a very interesting paragraph¹ in his famous work *Confessions* about his Christian mother Monica and his pagan father Patricius (IX.9.19). I will just relate the part that is relevant here. Patricius started out as a very bad husband to her. He was unfaithful to his wife and had a volatile temper, but Monica submitted herself to him respectfully and consistently. By her soft answers she turned away his wrath (Prov 15.1), and by her quiet, godly example, she eventually won him to Christ (1 Pet 3.1). She was friends with other women whose husbands beat them, but Augustine testifies that his wise mother, by her meek, submissive spirit, made the best of a bad situation and was never physically abused by her husband, nor had even suffered strife in their marriage. If you go look up this quotation, please remember the cultural circumstances in which it was written, and of the events it relates. There are some things that would and should be different today than they were back then.

Dealing with an Abusive Husband

Now nothing in Scripture or this sermon should be taken as minimizing wife abuse, or suggesting that women who are abused should just accept it as their lot in life. Far from it! No man has a right to mistreat his wife in any way. Many wives, even in churches, suffer quietly all kinds of abuse—verbal, psychological, and physical. I would sternly rebuke any abusive

¹ Thus modestly and soberly brought up, she [Monica] was made subject to her parents by thee, rather more than by her parents to thee. She arrived at a marriageable age, and she was given to a husband whom she served as her lord. And she busied herself to gain him to thee, preaching thee to him by her behavior, in which thou madest her fair and reverently amiable, and admirable to her husband. For she endured with patience his infidelity and never had any dissension with her husband on this account. For she waited for thy mercy upon him until, by believing in thee, he might become chaste. Moreover, even though he was earnest in friendship, he was also violent in anger; but she had learned that an angry husband should not be resisted, either in deed or in word. But as soon as he had grown calm and was tranquil, and she saw a fitting moment, she would give him a reason for her conduct, if he had been excited unreasonably. As a result, while many matrons whose husbands were more gentle than hers bore the marks of blows on their disfigured faces, and would in private talk blame the behavior of their husbands, she would blame their tongues, admonishing them seriously--though in a jesting manner--that from the hour they heard what are called the matrimonial tablets read to them, they should think of them as instruments by which they were made servants. So, always being mindful of their condition, they ought not to set themselves up in opposition to their lords. And, knowing what a furious, bad-tempered husband she endured, they marveled that it had never been rumored, nor was there any mark to show, that Patricius had ever beaten his wife, or that there had been any domestic strife between them, even for a day. And when they asked her confidentially the reason for this, she taught them the rule I have mentioned. Those who observed it confirmed the wisdom of it and rejoiced; those who did not observe it were bullied and vexed (Outler's translation).

husbands among us, and I also urge suffering wives to seek help from outside your family. That begins by telling someone in a position to do something about the problems. Even though your husband probably doesn't want you to do this and would consider it insubordinate, it would not be wrong or a betrayal of your husband. Rather, it is completely justified on biblical principle and may even become, with God's blessing, a redemptive act on your part, to save your marriage.

Let me speak frankly. I urge any wives in this church to let me know of any abuse you are suffering so I can help you and your husband, if he will let me. I've done this many times before with other couples. And as needed, we can enlist the help of others, also. Don't be afraid of your husband or of the consequences when you do what is right before the Lord! Don't be obsequious or too passive, enabling him to continue the abuse. As a church, we are committed to support you however we can, and we are also committed to biblical church discipline for abusive husbands. We will not let men who practice wife-abuse continue as members of this church! I believe we also stand together in seeking legal justice where crimes have been committed. One of the wonderful things about our God and Savior Jesus Christ is that He is compassionate toward the weak who suffer abuse and oppression by those in positions of power and authority over them. We love Him for it and must be like Him!

Concluding Prayer

Please join me in a concluding prayer.

Our Father in heaven, thank You for speaking so plainly and practically about how Christian wives should think about their relationship with their husbands. Thank you for saving people and making true Christians submissive to Christ as an example of how wives should be in a well-ordered Christian family. Please give us all the grace we need to love these truths and to change for the better with their guidance. Thank you for the godly wives who are members of this church, and for the godly husbands, too. Please rescue those families in serious trouble, and deliver those who are weak and abused from their abusers. Let us have all the compassion and courage we need to stand against all evil and to help your beloved ones to know Your greatest blessing, even in this life. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.