



A People who Display the Gospel

Ephesians 5:21-33

From the very beginning to the very end, marriage features prominently in the Bible (Genesis 2:24, Isaiah 62:5, Ezekiel 16:32, Matthew 9:15, Revelation 21:2) and Ephesians 5:32 connects earthy marriages to the heavenly one. So marriage today serves as a symbol of the story we're in, a signpost to where God's people are going, a dance which can show the world the love of God that is on offer to everyone.

Ephesians 5:21-33 explains this in more detail and is a controversial passage needing careful reading and explanation.

1. Our understanding of marriage

Christ and the Church's relationship is not the only way we have been given to understand marriage. We also have to consider...

- Christian marriage is between two people who both acknowledge that they are sinners in need of God's grace (so there's no scope here for thinking that the husband is given the role of displaying how Jesus treats the church because men are perfect and women are not.)
- In *1 Corinthians 7:4* Paul says that a husband's body does not belong to him but to his wife, and a wife's body does not belong to her but to him – they are both owned by the other.
- Marriage is also the context for conceiving and raising children, but this will not be happening in the eternal marriage of Christ and the Church.

2. Definition of submission

We define submission as the voluntary yielding of authority to another, surrendering our preferences to someone else. (All Christians are called to do this to each other, Ephesians 5:21.) It has almost entirely negative connotations in our culture – understandably in many ways – but the Bible shows us that when it is done rightly, it is Christlike (Luke 22:42, Philippians 2:5-11). This

means that both men and women have the privilege of illustrating Christ: men in their sacrificial leadership, women in their sacrificial submission. Jesus' submission to the Father's will is celebrated:

- He was not forced into submitting to the Father, He delighted to do so.
- He did not give up His intelligence by submitting but used it fully to do so perfectly.
- He was glorified because of this.

Paul is very clear that a husband who wants to lead his wife into sin is not to be followed. The good marriages in the Bible show us that it is meant to be a dynamic partnership between two equals.

What is said about how a husband and wife relate to each other is not how men and women are to relate to each other in general. The metaphor used in the New Testament to describe how Christian men and women who aren't married to each other should relate is that of brothers and sisters, all of us under the loving authority of our heavenly Father. Hannah Anderson and Wendy Alsop: *"A wife submits to her husband not because he is a 'man' but because he is her husband and has committed himself to certain vows and duties in the context of their marriage."*

3. The good design of gender differences.

(See preach called "What is gender?" for more detail on this and links to explore it further.)

The Bible starts with a creation story full of pairs which fit each other and relate to each other in harmony: Heaven and Earth, day and night, land and sea, plants and creatures. These pairings conclude and peak with man and woman. Humans are unlike anything else in all creation, we alone are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) - both man and woman carry the dignity of being made in God's likeness, both are full of divine potential which should be encouraged to flourish in every area of life. There are also differences between us. Timothy Keller: *"we are equal but not equivalent."* The Bible asserts that men and women have exactly the same worth, but it does not say that they are exactly the same. Because we have rebelled against God, because we are divided from Him and from each other, the differences between men and women have often been exploited or abused. But the differences between men and women, such as they are, are meant to be brought together in harmony, they are meant to complement each other. This is God's design from the beginning so that when a man and a woman are joined together in marriage, two becoming one flesh, they form this picture of Christ and the Church.

Explaining with dance

Dancing doesn't appear in the text but it can be a helpful way of explaining the words which are there, which all involve movement towards the other and only work in relation to the other. Neither the husband nor the wife is static, with the other orbiting around them and doing whatever they want, but both move in relation to the other. Both the man and woman fully involved, working together in harmony, but not doing the same thing.

He leads, and she responds to his leading. We tend to think of leading as an active thing, and following as a passive thing, but this shouldn't ever be the case: a dance in which one partner drags the other around won't get much admiration. Christ's loving call calls the Church to action with Him, so neither bullying nor passivity have any place in a Christian marriage. The man's initiating movement is to be received and responded to by the woman so that they move together. He's not trying to dominate her, and she's not trying to compete with him. Neither are independent of each other: he is always taking account of her, she is not trying to do her own thing but to be joined with him. She is a willing partner and accomplice in all that they have done together (1 Corinthians 15:10).

Self-sacrifice

Ephesians 5:25 is probably the most important phrase a husband should have in his head as he considers how he relates to his wife. The model Jesus has given husbands, the role they're playing, is death to self that gives life to the other (John 13:13-15, Matthew 20:25-28).

And the church also learns to make sacrifices (Romans 12:1). A wife demonstrates the Church's response to Jesus with how she responds to her husband, giving herself wholly to Him, even exchanging her name for His. We've already seen that this is not a passive, unthinking, secondary role: it requires consideration, skill, grace. Just as overbearing is a sin in husbands, undermining is a temptation wives must resist.

Self-sacrifice is difficult for anyone infected with pride – which is all of us. It's even more challenging in a culture like the West's which prizes freedom, autonomy, and personal fulfilment. Christ and His Church are not in competition, they give up everything for each other.

This Wednesday is Valentine's Day, and it's also the first day of Lent. The most romantic day of the year is also the start of the journey to Easter. What does it tell us about life, what does it tell us about God, that marriage would be the picture that tells the story we're all in? It tells us that we aren't random flickers in a cold, impersonal universe, that there is a relational heart beating at the centre of all things, that we can be loved.

Questions:

- What did you think of the "This is about that" (<https://vimeo.com/213720278>) video?
- What does it tell us about God that He chose marriage for the purpose of demonstrating the relationship between Christ and His Church?
- How can we celebrate gender differences in a culture that increasingly reacts strongly against this idea?
- How is it more than lip-service to say to those who aren't married that the marriages around them are a sign of God's love for them?
- What is it about us that makes living self-sacrificially and in unity so difficult?

- How can you encourage married couples in this great task and hold marriage in honour, as Hebrews 13:4 commands (whether you are married or not)?
- What characteristics should someone be looking for if they're wanting to get married, and what characteristics do they need to be developing in themselves?

Resources list:

- Our own document, "*Defining Leadership at King's Church*" (<https://www.dropbox.com/s/6w0emzk99l5fbu4/Defining%20Leadership%20at%20King%27s.pdf?dl=0>), includes an outline of a biblical theology of gender and marriage
- "*The Eternal Subordination of the Son (and Women)*," Hannah Anderson & Wendy Alsup
- "*Pulling Together: Marriage, Ministry, and Calling*" (<http://www.sometimesalight.com/1/post/2015/05/pulling-together-marriage-ministry-and-calling.html>), Hannah Anderson
- *You and Me Forever*, Francis & Lisa Chan, 2014, Claire Love
- *The Five Love Languages*, Gary Chapman, 2004, Zondervan
- Love Languages Personal Profile (https://s3.amazonaws.com/moody-profiles/uploads/profile/attachment/5/5LLPersonalProfile_COUPLES__1_.pdf)
- *For Women Only* and *For Men Only*, Shaunti and Jeff Feldhahn, 2013, Multnomah
- *The Meaning of Marriage*, Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, 2011, Hodder & Stoughton
- "*Women, Stop Submitting to Men*" (<https://www.russellmoore.com/2011/12/05/women-stop-submitting-to-men/>), Russell Moore
- *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, Ray Ortlund, 2016, Crossway
- "*How to Depict the Beauty of Complementarity*" (<https://vimeo.com/180432267>), Jackie Hill Perry, Sam Allberry, and Rosaria Butterfield
- "*A New Icon of Marriage*" (<https://alastairadversaria.com/2014/07/23/a-new-icon-of-marriage/>), Alastair Roberts
- "*Natural Complementarians: Men, Women, and The Way Things Are*", Alastair Roberts
- "Masters of Love" (https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/06/happily-ever-after/372573/?single_page=true), Emily Esfahani Smith
- "*A Theology of Femaleness*" (<https://vimeo.com/122319773>), Andrew Wilson
- "*A Theology of Maleness*" (<https://vimeo.com/113589260>), Andrew Wilson
- "*This Is About That*" (<https://vimeo.com/213720278>), Andrew Wilson
- "*The Bible's Big Picture of the Complementarity of Man and Woman*" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsB-JDsOTwE>), Professor N.T. Wright



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