

## THE SUBJECT IS BEING SUBJECT

I suspect that everybody present already knows what they think about marriage, and what a relationship between a man and a woman in love should be like. We may not be able to “come up with” such a relationship, certainly not in any ideal or perfect way. Nevertheless, we are all certain and sure that our opinions about it are dead-on true and right. Just another of life’s little mysteries.

You may think I’m poking fun at you, but I’m not. At least no more so than I am at myself. It is therefore unlikely that I will say anything that will change anybody’s mind today – no matter how erudite, historically accurate, or biblically based. So maybe we should just sing a hymn, call it a day, and come back next week.

On the other hand, the sheer fact that we have strong opinions does not mean that we all hold the same opinions. The real problem is, I don’t want to just sing a hymn and come back next week. However opinionated I may be, the subject still fascinates me. On more than a few occasions I have wondered about God’s intelligence when it comes to marriage. How could God possibly imagine that a man and a woman could get along very well together for any serious length of time? If that is what God intended, she should have thought more carefully about the design. “Why don’t you think before you create?!” From my perspective, this kind of bungling is the best evidence I know for thinking that God may indeed be a female.

Silliness, I admit. On the other hand, it is clear to me, though I have been in many arguments on the subject, that God’s design for humans was always monogamy. Every other pattern is an aberration. All the clearest and highest precepts of Jewish or Christian morality assert that men and women should make love only within the bonds (covenant contract) of marriage. “*A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined unto his wife – and the two shall become one.*” Not three, or six, or ten. What about gay couples? I am not sure whether we have any gay members yet, but in any case, that dimension is not directly addressed in this sermon. I am eager for the day when gay and straight Christians will share honestly with each other about their experiences and struggles to form lifelong monogamous relationships. Why do we not have more marital workshops and couples retreats where half the

participants are gay and half the participants are straight? That will be a good day.

In the meantime, you can tell me all day long that times have changed – and I know that in some ways they have. But I still don't see a lot of happy, fulfilled people – gay *or* straight – in strong and growing love relationships *outside* of marriage and family patterns. And yes, I do know a fair number of very impressive relationships *inside* the bonds of marriage. Personally, I only know three gay couples that fit this pattern. I hope there are thousands by now.

We can all agree that marriage is never perfect. But it is still the best pattern, by far, to be found on our planet. I do know many sad and miserable relationships that exist inside of marriage. I also happen to know that quite a few of these couples never formed a true marriage bond to begin with – that is, not by any of the patterns or definitions that you or I would recognize as a “Christian marriage.” More of that in a bit.

As you would know: Being a Pastor, I was thrown into the arena of marriage counseling at an early age. Sometimes, after listening to two people's stories, I would shake my head and wonder that God would design men and women to be so attracted to each other and yet so different – and then expect them to figure out how to survive in the closest and most intimate relationship ever devised on our planet. Years with children, and years without children; years of bills, relatives, and all kinds of friends and neighbors; years with varying degrees of work, and community responsibilities; years with various kinds of health issues, including mental health issues and spiritual health issues. What kind of intelligent and knowledgeable God would or could expect us to find, honor, and learn to live in the patterns we call “marriage”? And yet, what a wonderful crucible for learning love and growing spiritually.

As an aside, and just musing, I think marriage is full of mystery and surprises. I also think that a good deal of the “wisdom” circulating these days about how to have a good marriage relationship is somewhere between questionable and dead wrong. Of course, it's hard to tell whether that's just me – or maybe just Mariana – or if others have discovered the same disconnects. I love Mariana beyond the telling, but I try never to let her control my life. She has more than enough responsibility already. Why would I want to add such a huge burden? And I am more and more careful not to try to control her life.

I think intimacy is a thing to be valued, but never a thing to be assumed or expected on demand. I think the familiar advice that married couples should do everything and decide everything together has a suspiciously codependent flavor to it. In most cases, it is bound to engender boredom, frustration, and limitations, and turn into a huge waste of time for both parties.

Most things come best when we don't force them. True growth never comes under pressure from each other. Giving advice – and trying to help your mate to improve – is one of the stupidest things you can do in a marriage. The inherent criticism always outweighs the hoped-for benefit by a huge margin. The more I see Mariana as God's child, the deeper in love I get. And while I do remember thinking she was wondrous even in the beginning, I know that to begin with I was much more interested in what she could do for me than I was in who she truly was or what God's plans were for her. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that some other married folk have started out closer to that blunder than any of us like to admit.

But enough. As I said, just musing. Nevertheless, for me it brings this morning's passage into a different perspective. It is not easy to line out a pattern for Christian love and marriage. Yet that is the very thing Paul is trying to do. And he is not married – that is, he has no personal experience. If you *really* want Paul's advice, you will never get married in the first place. Great! The best "marriage counselor" in the New Testament does not believe in marriage. (I Corinthians 7:8) That's not true, of course. Paul believed in marriage, but he thought life in this realm was coming to an end very soon. Under the circumstances, he thought it was wiser for us to wait for the next realm. Considering all the shipwrecked marriages all around us, maybe he was right despite his wrong timing.

Getting to our passage, I think it is important to remember verse 21. It is one of the great transition statements. It closes out the previous passage and refers to relationships in the church. It begins the following passage about marriage and introduces the primary principle. "*Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" "In reverence for Christ," Paul says – in awareness that the Holy Spirit has rights and authority over each of our lives – we pay attention to each other, we listen to each other, we value each other ... and far more than is normal or practiced in the outer world.

We have all hopefully noticed that Paul is not using this concept of “being subject to one another” for the marriage relationship alone. He knows it is appropriate in marriage. But he sees all of us in a marriage relationship with the Lamb. The church is the bride of Christ. This passage is written in that light, and ends in that awareness. It matters that this passage sees a marriage of two individuals as a lesser marriage within a greater marriage. “Lesser” here does not imply unimportant or insignificant. It is perhaps of equal significance, but still a smaller segment of the larger reality. In truth, until fairly recent times, “church” was seen and understood to be made up of a gathering of families. All were married to Christ, but within that community some were also married to each other.

Now, I wish I could tell you that “being subject” really meant “do not be objects to one another.” You must be personal, care personally, be the true individual you were designed and created to be – and always be consciously seeking greater awareness of the true subjects all around you. That would be fun to ponder and preach about. But that is not the derivation of this phrase. “Be subject” means “to submit” – be submissive to one another. Even so, it does not mean “to grovel.” It does not mean “be abject.” *“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.”* And clearly this is directed to both men and women.

To be subject to the true and rightful King is something we long for beyond the telling. A world without authority and without purpose is a terrible prospect. To be subject to a bad ruler is horrible also. Still, it is impossible to fathom The Third Reich without realizing that people were eager and longing to be subject to any ruler they thought could give them a future and a hope. Somewhere somebody is always learning that lesson over again. Are we about to relearn it again here?

It is no improvement to be our own authority: to know no truth higher than our own; to have no purpose or identity higher than what we can pretend or make up by ourselves. The world is terribly empty and terribly meaningless if we can find no authentic way to be subject to One who is greater than we are. The only true leadership on earth comes from knowing who we follow. Throughout all human history, our best leaders have always been the best followers. Jesus was the best follower the world has ever seen.

Nevertheless, we have much prejudice against the concept of “being subject.” That’s surprising, since it is our only hope of finding a good or meaningful life. It is also our only hope of finding a good or meaningful marriage. So now I think we may want to hear verse 21 as addressed not only to the church, but also as Paul’s opening comment regarding marriage. “*Be subject to one another*” is for both husband and wife. And it announces the theme of all that is to follow. “*Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord*” comes after both husband and wife have been instructed to be subject to one another. I’m not just trying to “soften the blow” for people who want to read into this passage a prejudice against women. Unless you bring this prejudice with you, you will not find it in this passage.

Some women have been abused, and they are understandably angry about the men they chose to be in their lives. Some men are not very happy about the women they chose to submit to either. But getting angry at Paul won’t help. And misunderstanding this passage on purpose is an exercise in futility.

Paul is from a former time, and he still thinks a husband has responsibilities – insofar as he is able – to provide protection, security, food, shelter, clothing, affection, and consideration for his wife, and for their children if they have any. If Paul has any Jewish traditions left in him, he also thinks the wife has responsibilities for the marriage – for keeping the home, preparing food, sewing, shopping, bearing and caring for the children. Both have responsibilities for how the children are raised, and for what standards govern the life of the family. It is not a pattern of sharing everything, like we usually hear about today. It is more a “division of labor.” Both parties still need respect, support, caring, affection from each other. If we don’t want a mate to have any authority in our life, why are we getting married? If we want to make sure that no mate will have any influence or impact on our choices, on our “freedom,” on our rights or privileges – why are we getting married?

Many have pointed out that, upon a closer look at “*wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord*” followed by “*husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,*” this is not a treatise on sexist politics. If we switch “husband” and “wife” in the two statements, would we corrupt anything Paul is trying to say? Is he merely expanding the concept of the marriage relationship as he moves on deeper into what he is trying to say about marriage?

How could I possibly imagine such a thing? Well, I imagine it because I know some of Paul's other comments on the subject. *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* (Galatians 3:28) For some, this sounds vague and "theological," I guess, so they wonder if Paul means it in terms of relationships between men and women. Then let's go to another passage, less well known for some reason, but unmistakably referring to Paul's ideas about the married relationship: *"The husband must give the wife what is due to her, and equally the wife must give the husband his due."* Paul is trying to be delicate, perhaps, but the next sentence makes his meaning pretty hard to miss: *"The wife cannot claim her body as her own; it belongs to her husband."* Of course, I am singing "Hallelujah!" But is this sexist inequality? Next sentence, still from Paul: *"Equally, the husband cannot claim his body as his own; it belongs to his wife."* (I Corinthians 7:3-4)

If I think about it, that deserves an even bigger "Hallelujah!" A lot of people could save a lot of money on marriage counseling, and get a lot more wisdom and progress in the bargain, if they would pray and meditate on this passage from First Corinthians together. Some people are still claiming that Paul was a sexist jerk, but they pay little attention to what he actually said, and even less to what he really meant.

In any case, the surprise, at least for some of us, is Christ. In Paul's view, Christ is at the center of the marriage relationship. Do I love my wife more than Jesus does? You may think that is a weird question, but, at least for me, it is important that I come to terms with it. Does Mariana love me more than Jesus does? Are any of us ever truly rivals for love when it comes to Christ? Where does love really come from? Is He not the very source of true love? With more humility than some of us have, Paul ends up admitting that however much we may understand or appreciate marriage, it still leads into mystery beyond our comprehension.

Much of the confusion about the meaning and principles of marriage is built in to the unquestioned assumptions and premises that most marriages begin with. It is rare indeed for the man and the woman to have the same picture about what the marriage is supposed to be like, or the same notions about what it is for or about. Somehow, few couples bother to talk about such things before they have already decided to get married. And is there a difference between marriage on the W-W level (way of the world) and marriage on the W-S level (Way of the Spirit)?

What percentage of the marriages being formed this year, for instance, are so-called “Christian marriages”? That is, marriages based on allegiance and love for Jesus, not just on attraction, hopes, or desires involving each other?

A woman comes to me after five years of marital chaos. She is beside herself. She married on the W-S level, took the vows for life, cannot imagine divorce as anything but a sin – a faithless failure. After talking with her a number of times, it becomes obvious to me that her husband married on the W-W level. He has no idea, never mind any intention, of relating to his wife the way he thinks the Holy Spirit wants him to. “What Holy Spirit? This is my marriage, my wife, and I want my needs met when and how I say.” Does he put it that blatantly? Yes. Does he know or care who his wife really is, what her true identity or vocatio or destiny really is? It has never crossed his mind in any serious way that she is anything more than what he fell in love with. And what he fell in love with was an idealized projection of a female who would fill all his needs, whims, and fantasies. He is now irate because she is not measuring up to what a wife should be – meaning, to what he wanted from her. The picture is complicated, as in most cases, because his wife started out really wanting to fill all his needs. Idolatry always cuts both ways. To be sure (if I need to mention it), sometimes it’s the woman who marries on the W-W level and the man who marries on the W-S level.

Some men and women really can wake up. A marriage that starts out in such confusion, or maybe entirely on the W-W level, is not necessarily all over. People do still get converted from time to time. But if, in time, it becomes obvious that, for example, the man is too locked in to his own opinions and desires to even consider that maybe both he and his wife need to find an allegiance higher than anything they owe to each other, then this marriage *needs* to be over. From a Christian perspective, this never was a real marriage. This man never intended to marry under Christ, or to allow Christ to have anything to do with this relationship. If that’s the case, how can Christian principles or teachings apply to whatever it is we might want to call this relationship?

Still, everybody knows that Jesus strictly forbade all divorce. Did He really? Even the Catholic Church has long maintained that some marriages were never true marriages in the first place, and there are formal ways to have such marriages annulled. But in the popular mind, it usually comes down to a matter of sexual union never being consummated. What about spiritual union never taking place? Do we still

really believe that the physical is more important than the spiritual? If there is no allegiance to Christ, it is not a marriage by any Christian definition or understanding.

Jesus said more than one thing about marriage. Why do so many people pay attention to only one of His teachings? *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”* (Luke 14:26) Controversial, but for the moment let’s say that this use of the word “hate” does not mean dislike, but insists that this person’s rights or authority will be disregarded in favor of a higher allegiance and authority. We will turn away from all these important relationships – *if the choice is forced* – in order to honor and obey the primary relationship with Jesus.

Or again: *“Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”* (Luke 18:29) Clearly Jesus knows that there are times when we must desert and forsake some relationships in order to be *His* faithful followers. Why are these passages rarely quoted when we are talking about divorce? Sometimes people have to divorce in order to stay faithful to Jesus! That is, there are times when we cannot stay in a human relationship that forbids or makes it impossible for us to stay faithful or obedient to our Lord. That is just as “biblical” as the more familiar teaching. Yet I have run into many people who have felt guilty for years because they were faithful enough to get divorced when the Spirit demanded and required it.

Naturally, most Christian institutions consider such things too dangerous to mention. If we soften “the Law,” people will flock to the opening; there might be wholesale divorce. Oh dear, you mean there isn’t already? Most people do not want to lose their relationships. Lots of people hang onto their relationships far longer than they should. Why aren’t we paying more attention to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and less attention to human rules and expectations? Somebody should start a religion based on the Gospel, don’t you think? What a concept!

Of course, it is dangerous to weaken the Law. The intention of the Law is always good – in principle. But it is also dangerous to consign people to a wasteland of faithless and futile bondage to parents, mates, or any other relationships which have no intention whatsoever of honoring,

following, or obeying Jesus. Beyond this, I am suggesting that trying to deal with this passage about marriage in the fifth chapter of Ephesians is impossible nonsense— unless we are talking about a true Christian marriage: two people who have come together in a covenant bond that acknowledges that their love has come from Christ, who have both sworn allegiance primarily to Christ, and who have claimed love for each other within this larger reality. That is, both of them want to be in and on the Christian Path and WAY, and both of them want the other to come into their true identity and purpose under Christ – and they want this Way of the Spirit far more than they want to be pleased or adored by each other. Of course, they also want to be pleased and adored by each other, but if that happens apart from or aside from the primary purpose of a Christian marriage, it is an empty form. It will soon begin to backfire and disintegrate. The purpose of a Christian marriage is to love, honor, and serve Jesus the Christ. It is not to serve, honor, or please the mate. I think Jesus often directs us to serve, honor, and please our mates, but it is a very different matter when He is the one asking it of us.

From my perspective, there are few areas in life where the W-W and the W-S get so intertwined as they do in marriage. Survival is important in marriage. Putting food on the table and putting clothes on the children are really important in marriage. A Christian man who does not do everything in his power to be a good provider and protector for his wife and family is not really a Christian or a man – in my opinion. Something about the “love” has not kicked in yet. Still, being a good provider is not the most important task of a Christian man. Talk about complex. Talk about the TENSION! If we live “in, but not of, the world,” it is always a fascinating yet essential dilemma, and it is surrounded by guidance and promises – for *every* married Christian, man or woman.

In that light, I love this passage in Ephesians more and more. *“The husband must love his wife as his very self, and the wife must show reverence for her husband.”* Does that stop our thinking, or does it open it up? Most of all I appreciate Paul’s candor when he runs out of explanations and advice: *“There is hidden here a great truth [a great mystery (NRSV)] which I take to refer to Christ and to the church. But it applies also to each one of you.”*