
The Summation of All Things in Christ

Studies in Ephesians with a Local Church Emphasis

LESSON XXIV : THE WISE AND SPIRIT FILLED LIFE OF SUBMISSION / THE HAUSTAFEL (5:15-6:9)

Ephesians 5:22-24 — Paul to the WIVES — APPENDIXES

Several of the commentaries I used in these studies had sections dedicated to the different portions of Scripture: wives, husbands, etc. While not wanting to take class time to just read these dedicated sections, I did want to pass them along to those who may be interested.

Clinton Arnold: ‘Responsibilities of Wives’

Wives are called to submit to their husbands (as they do to Christ). The first admonition of the text is directed to the wives and advises them on how to respond to their husbands. This exhortation is important to Paul since he begins the passage with it (5:22a), repeats it (as the outer member of a chiasmic structure; 5:24b), and then summarizes the passage with the same idea in different terms (5:33b). This is also a teaching he gives to other groups of believers on other occasions (Col 3:18; Titus 2:5), as does the apostle Peter (1 Pet 3:1, 5).

Nevertheless, many Christians have found Paul’s teaching on submission difficult and out of sync with the realities of our time. This has resulted in this passage becoming an increasingly marginalized part of the Bible in many churches. In some ways, this is not a surprise. This passage has a long history of abuse by men who have quoted one line of the text as a weapon against their wives to force them to subservience and obedience. This passage also stands in significant conflict with our prevailing culture that has been on a decades long course of leveling any role distinctions between men and women — including in the home.

Yet for those who want to structure their marriages according to the counsel of the Scripture, the teaching of this passage is of paramount importance. It is crucial, however, to interpret Paul’s comments about submission in terms of what this passage actually says in its linguistic and cultural context. At the outset, we can rule out many things that the passage does not say:

- It does not call for “obedience.”
- It does not make the husband the boss and the wife the servant.
- It does not lead to the wife’s loss of her self (or her identity).
- It does not mean that the wife loses her voice and decisions are made unilaterally.
- It does not set the wife up for emotional, verbal, or physical abuse.

As many have observed, the passage begins not in v. 22, but in v. 21 (“submitting to one another in the fear of Christ”). Technically, the passage actually begins with the main imperative verb of 5:18: “be filled with the Spirit ... by submitting to one another in the fear of Christ ... wives [submitting] to your husbands.”

The passage teaches that every member of the body of Christ — male and female alike — is called to mutual submission. This means that we are called to deny ourselves and put the interests of others at a higher priority than our own. This was and is culturally subversive because at the deepest level it calls on leaders to be servants (Mark 10:43-45). Some err at this point, however,

by assuming that this renders meaningless any role distinctions in the household. But this does not mitigate the social structuring that God has created for the family, just as it does not provide a basis for the subversion of government. Children are still called to obey their parents and wives are called to submit to their husbands.

In the context of 5:22-33, Paul clearly maintains a differentiation of roles between husbands and wives in the Christian marriage. Once again, it is important to point out that he does so on the basis of Christology and not as a concession to culture. In this context, “submission” is a term that calls for the proper role response in a socially structured set of relationships. It is a term that implies that there is someone else in a leadership role (i.e., the husband) and elicits from the wife a recognition of that leadership role and a willingness to align herself with the leadership initiatives coming from her husband. It would also imply that she should not tend to subvert that role or undermine it in some fashion. Note especially that Paul has not chosen the word “obey” to characterize the wife’s role. The middle voice form of “submission” implies a voluntary choice on her part to order her life in this arrangement that God has designed.

The basis for Paul’s remarks is rooted in a comparison with the relationship of the church to Christ. This, too, is a structured relationship, and the consideration of how the church responds to Christ’s leadership should motivate and inform how the wife responds to the leadership of her husband.

There are numerous ways to describe what this might look like in application to a Christian marriage, but here are a few ideas:

- to receive her husband’s love, care, and provision
- to provide encouragement, support, and input to her husband’s initiatives to give vision and direction to the family
- to resist the temptation to “take control”
- to resist the impulse to undermine or complain about the leadership her husband provides
- to align her spending habits with the priorities she agreed upon with her husband for the vision and direction of the household

The greatest difficulty in living this out is that neither partner will perfectly exemplify the vision for each of the roles that Paul has prescribed. The woman may find it difficult to respond to the leadership of her husband if he offers little leadership to the family. And insofar as the husband’s perception of his role leads him to abuse his wife or lead the family into sin, his leadership should be resisted.

Might there be times when a wife should not yield to the leadership of her husband? Steven Tracy enumerates a set of six principles for determining when a wife should resist her husband’s leadership. He suggests a wife may actually need to resist her husband if acceding to him would (1) violate a biblical principle (not just a direct biblical statement), (2) compromise her relationship with Christ, (3) violate her conscience, (4) compromise the care, nurture, and protection of her children, (5) enable (facilitate) her husband’s sin, and (6) subject her to physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Each of the principles Tracy outlines, however, is predicated on a relationship where a husband is wrongly seeking servile obedience from his wife, such as forbidding her from spending time with a friend, demanding a certain kind of cosmetic surgery (such as breast

implants), or an alcoholic husband ordering his wife to go to the liquor store and purchase more alcohol.

Once again, the Ephesian passage does not call on women to obey, but to voluntarily yield to their husband's leadership. Self centered demands by a husband are not leadership, and thus Tracy is correct in urging women not to feel a particular biblical constraint to obey everything a husband commands. Nevertheless, a wife may need to carefully evaluate her own heart and motives if she determines that she needs to resist her husband on an issue. What she determines to be "a violation of her conscience" may be a matter of her own personal preference or even a manifestation of her own self centeredness. [Arnold, 401-403]

General Comments: Women in the Ancient Culture

No one may declare with absolute certainty what the cultural norms were 2000 years ago but it is commonly accepted that the oldest living male in the Roman family had extensive authority over the household (*paterfamilias*, or 'father of the family'). He looked after the family's business affairs and property and could perform religious rites on their behalf. However by NT times most marriages took place *sine manu* (without power transferred from the wife's father to the husband) so that women exercised a greater degree of independence from their husbands. Even within Judaism which held women as inferior to men, both Josephus and Philo stated women should not be mistreated or humiliated. Someone writing in Aristotle's name proposed that the wife was actually superior to the husband in certain activities in the home and that both shared equally in the raising of children, and he gave a long treatise of the proper conduct of both in the relationship. Another writing in Aristotle's name in the second century B.C. mentions that, though the wife is inferior to her husband, she is more equal to her husband than are children to parents or slaves to masters. She is portrayed as a partner much like citizens are fellow partners of the state. [Hoehner, 735] "[W]hat we know about the ancient world would lead us to believe that husbands would have the right to enforce submission if it was not voluntarily offered. It is true that the position of wives was not uniform but varied slightly from area to area and from social class to social class; we know most about wives in the educated and upper classes because our information comes from literature emanating from these classes; it may well be that the patriarchal outlook was more firmly held in the lower and uneducated classes, to which probably most of [Paul's] readers belonged. Their position in Asia Minor was probably as favourable as anywhere else, and in the Greco Roman world generally more favourable than in Judaism; Josephus and Philo were Hellenistic Jews and therefore more likely to be favourable to women than Palestinian Jews." [Best, 532f; see also Hoehner, 728f; Lincoln, 369f]

Clinton Arnold: 'In Depth: The Role of Wives in Roman-Era Ephesus and Western Asia Minor'

As modern interpreters of Ephesians, we can easily read the text in light of our own social structures and, in particular, our own understanding of socially prescribed roles for wives in our own culture. This, of course, can vary significantly depending on one's social context. A two-career couple living in Manhattan will live with a different set of cultural expectations and opportunities than a poor couple trying to make ends meet in rural Mississippi. There was similar diversity in the ancient world that corresponded to one's wealth, social status, and location.

It is also important for us to reassess some of the assumptions about the plight of women that we may bring with us to the text. Many commentators of the past have assumed that women in the Roman world faced a horrible life. Some of the most chauvinistic and harsh attitudes toward women in Greek and Jewish literature are often cited at this juncture in commentaries on Ephesians. The reality is that the plight of women is often overstated, that there was much more diversity in attitudes toward women than is often brought out, that a change was taking place in Roman society in the first century for women's roles, and that the situation for women in Ephesus and Asia Minor was different than elsewhere in the Mediterranean world.

We begin our discussion by observing that one of the major differences between then and now is the absence of a middle class in the ancient world. Roman-era Ephesus would have had a rather small wealthy class of high status. This would have included a few Romans of the Equestrian order (the "Asiarchs" of Acts 19:31 could have been part of this urban elite), some from Decurion order (municipal rulers, local wealthy landowners, and merchants), and free people, who were small landowners, craftsmen, and shop owners. The combined numbers of this social elite would probably have amounted to no more than 10 to 20 percent of the population. The rest of the population would have consisted of the poor and the slaves. The number of slaves in a city like Ephesus could have approached as high as a third of the population. This means that the vast majority of the people were poor or peasant laborers. Some of these (perhaps many) lived in a dependent relationship with wealthier clients.

The culturally prescribed role expectations for wives varied somewhat, depending on one's social class. Those women who were privileged to be part of the wealthier elite classes found more freedom and opportunity than women who were peasants or slaves. This was especially true in the Roman era and particularly in western Asia Minor. Three important cultural factors must be discussed as we consider the role of wives during this time and in this location.

(1) *The Roman man as possessing patria potestas*. Throughout the Hellenistic and Roman eras, the husband/father had legal and social power over his wife, children, and slaves. The Romans referred to this legal authority as the *patria potestas*; that is, he possessed legal authority (*in potestate*) as the head of the household (*paterfamilias*). Traditionally, the male head of the household received the dowry from the wife's parents when they married, controlled the finances, made all of the key decisions affecting his wife and his household, and had ruling authority over all matters.

In his volume entitled *Advice to Bride and Groom*, the first century writer Plutarch explains his understanding of the nature of the husband's authority and control in the home:

So is it with women also; if they subordinate themselves to their husbands, they are commended, but if they want to have control, they cut a sorrier figure than the subjects of their control. And control ought to be exercised by a man over the woman, not as the owner has control of a piece of property, but, as the soul controls the body, by entering into her feelings and being knit to her through goodwill. (Plutarch, *Conj. Praec.* 142E)

The husband wielded great control over his wife and every member of the household, but it goes beyond the evidence to characterize this as typically insensitive and tyrannical.

(2) *The new Roman women*. In recent years, historians of classical antiquity have called attention to a change that was taking place in the Roman empire as early as the mid first century BC. Bruce Winter has described this well in an important book entitled *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*. He surveys the ancient literary, epigraphic, and statuary evidence pointing to a "new type" of woman

emerging in Roman circles, who was breaking cultural mores by exhibiting far greater freedom, displaying independence from the rule of her husband, and asserting herself in Roman society. In documenting this change, the Roman historian Michael Grant summarized the evidence by noting that “the Roman women of the late Republic possessed a freedom and independence almost unparalleled until the present century.”

Wealthy women of high social standing had begun to enter public life in new ways. They were seeking education (including the fields of politics and law), obtaining jobs in the workplace, and even attaining important positions in city government. Winter has documented well how some of these women even discarded their veils (a traditional Roman symbol of the husband’s authority over his wife) and began carrying on illicit relationships with both single and married men. These women often dressed immodestly, wore lavish jewelry, overused cosmetics, and used contraceptives (and, if not successful, aborted the unwanted child). This was by no means an isolated phenomenon in the empire. Many wealthy women were caught up in this new, trendy lifestyle. The famous Stoic philosopher Seneca wrote a letter to his mother during her exile from Rome (AD 41-49) in which he expressed deep appreciation that she had not taken up this new lifestyle:

Unlike the great majority of women you never succumbed to immorality, the worst evil of our time; jewels and pearls have not moved you; you never thought of wealth as the greatest gift to the human race ... you have not crushed the hope of children that were being nurtured in your body; you have not defiled your face with paints and cosmetics; never have you fancied the kind of dress that exposed no greater nakedness by being removed. (Seneca, *Helv.*, 16:3-4)

Because of these new freedoms being exercised by Roman women, Caesar Augustus enacted a new set of marriage laws (the *lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* and the *lex Julia de adulteriis coercendis*) intending to curb the promiscuity of the Roman women, to strengthen the traditional family unit, and to provide incentives to married women to have children.

Of course, since the “new Roman women” were wealthy, they constituted a small percentage of the women in society. But Michael Grant has noted that some of this newfound power and freedom “percolated down the social scale” not only in Rome, but elsewhere in the empire. Winter has called attention to the fact that the lifestyles of the new Roman women were portrayed in comedy in the theater. He notes, “Theatre going was common among all classes in Rome and through New Comedy had a moulding influence on social mores.” Furthermore, even the statuary of the married women of the imperial family would have had a powerful impact on many other women by providing examples of how they should wear their hair, how they should dress, and how they can now behave.” The Roman writer Juvenal asks, “What woman will not follow when an empress leads the way.” (Juvenal, *Satires*, 6.617)

(3) *Prominent women in the cities of western Asia Minor.* One can easily see the impact of this trend on the political, religious, and social fabric of the cities of western Asia Minor. In an important monograph, Paul Trebilco has summarized the inscriptional evidence attesting to the role of women in civic positions in western Asia Minor. These documents show that women served in a variety of important civic positions. Perhaps most significant is the fact that there are many inscriptions attesting to women holding the highest civic office in some of the cities of Asia Minor. We now know of twenty eight different women who served in the office of *prytanis* in eight cities in Asia Minor ranging from the first century AD to the third. This office was similar to a

mayor of a city, and the officeholder presided over the town council. Some cities called their chief magistrate a “crown bearer.” The inscriptions point to thirty seven women who held this office in seventeen cities in Asia Minor throughout the Roman era.

Another significant office that women held in Asia Minor was the position of *gymnasiarch*. The “gymnasium” was the center for education in a Greek city as well as being a facility for exercise and athletic events. The *gymnasiarch* was a state official who ran the gymnasium and supervised all aspects of the educational process. Inscriptions dating from the first to the third centuries attest to forty eight women who served as *gymnasiarchs* in twenty three cities of Asia Minor and the coastal islands. This suggests not only that many women had access to education, but also that in many places they were leading the educational system.

In addition to these offices, there is inscriptional evidence of women holding other prominent civic offices (such as *dekaprotos*, *demiourgos*, *panegyriarch*, *hipparchos*) and presiding over athletic contests and games. There is even one example of a woman who served as an Asiarch, the foremost title in Roman Asia (see Acts 19:31).

In spite of the fact that women were participating broadly in prominent positions of leadership throughout western Asia Minor, one must still recognize the overwhelming male leadership in the culture. There was still a far greater proportion of men in civic leadership than women. But it is important to see that women were involved in public positions of leadership at all levels.

(4) *The impact of the goddess cults on the role of women in western Asia Minor.* There is more evidence for women participating in civic life in western Asia Minor than anywhere else in the empire. This not only may be due to the broader cultural trend of the new Roman women, but may in part be attributed to the religious traditions and practices of Asia Minor.

There were many goddess cults in Ephesus and western Asia Minor; in most of these cults, women held significant positions of leadership. In her volume *Portrait of a Priestess*, Joan Breton Connelly observes that “it is from the great sanctuaries of Asia Minor that we have our earliest and most abundant evidence for the commemoration of Hellenistic priestesses with portrait statues.... Images of priestesses were erected in sanctuaries all across Asia Minor.”

One of the more popular goddesses of Ephesus was Isis. Archaeologists have discovered the foundation of her temple in the middle of the State Agora in the city. Although many of the official Greek cults were closed to women, this was certainly not the case with the cult of Isis. In an important monograph entitled *The Cult of Isis among Women in the Graeco Roman World*, Sharon Kelly Heyob suggested that the Isis cult was an important advocate for freedom and opportunity for women. This is well illustrated in an ascription of praise (an aretology) to Isis in which she is lauded for giving women power equal to that of men (*P. Oxy.* 1380.214-16). While the Isis cult generated many female devotees and female cult societies, women actually started becoming priestesses of the cult during the Roman imperial period.

Of course, the most important deity of the city of Ephesus was a female goddess — Artemis Ephesia. She was extolled by her worshipers as “queen”, “lord”, “master”, “ruler”, “savior”, “chief priestess”, and “mother of the gods”. Her far reaching powers helped her to tend to the needs of her devotees, especially women. She is said to be the one who controls the destiny of women and is the ultimate source of fertility of women — all life proceeds from her. Women were given the opportunity to serve Artemis as priestesses. In fact, three classes of priestesses have been discerned: the *melllerai*, the *hierai*, and the *parierai*.

Also prominent in Ephesus and Asia Minor was the female deity known as ‘the Great Mother’, or Cybele. References to priestesses serving in the sanctuaries of the goddess appear often in the literature. One of the most notable features of her cult that had some degree of impact on the social order and male-female relationships was the fact that she was served by castrated and effeminate male servants called the *Galli*. Roller notes, “The Galli not only castrated themselves but emphasized their artificial femininity through feminine dress and manners, so their high pitched voices, long wild hair, and garish costume made them instantly recognizable.”

The origin of this group grew out of the mythology of the cult recounted in many ancient sources. In the myth (as recounted by Ovid, Pausanias, and Arnobius), the goddess falls madly in love with a handsome young man named Attis. Because Attis is unfaithful to the goddess, Cybele drives him mad and he castrates himself under a tree with a sharp rock. Because of this event, the male priests of the cult were required to undergo a rite of self castration. Roller comments on one of the societal implications of this cult: “The Magna Mater was ... a seducer and destroyer of men. As a goddess surrounded by effeminate *castrati*, she came to represent the male’s uncertainty and ambivalence about, even fear of, his own sexuality.” For some women, the Galli had an irresistible charm and were their choice for an extramarital relationship because they were sterile and safe.

Still other forms of goddess worship in Ephesus and western Asia Minor could be mentioned (such as the Demeter and Kore, Aphrodite, Hekate, and others), where women served as priestesses and in other forms of leadership and service. Asia Minor, in fact, appears unique in the ancient world for the predominance of various forms of goddess worship. These cults not only fit well with the deeper cultural trends of the new Roman women, but themselves served as symbols of freedom from the constraints placed on women in traditional Graeco Roman society.

Both of these societal factors began to have their impact on Jewish understandings of women’s roles in the local synagogues. By the second century AD, some synagogues in Asia Minor were placing women in positions of leadership, including some who functioned as the “ruler of the synagogue.” This surprising phenomenon, reflecting a radical shift from the tradition of the rabbis, is attested in a handful of inscriptions from Asia Minor.

Implications for the Ephesian household code. Ephesians was thus written to a place and at a time where traditional Greek and Roman roles for women and wives were in a dynamic flux. It is no longer accurate to portray the social cultural environment as oppressive for women, denying them opportunities for leadership in religious and civic institutions, and extending to them no places of involvement outside of the domestic sphere. Of course, these opportunities would not have been available to most of the peasant and slave populations. But the same opportunities would have been closed to peasant and slave men as well since their primary focus was on survival.

Few interpreters of Ephesians have sought to make a case that Paul’s instructions to husbands and wives in Eph 5:21-33 should be interpreted as reflective of any particular situation that Paul was aware of in the churches of western Asia Minor. Markus Barth has been a notable exception, arguing that Paul’s comments in this passage are written with the intention of obviating a women’s emancipation trend of the time. Although it is perhaps overstating the evidence to speak of a women’s emancipation trend, there were many changes in the air, and it is fair to ask whether Paul may have addressed these in his instructions to men and women. There are a few observations we can make:

(1) There was a variety of ungodly cultural pressures that husbands and wives would have felt in

the environment of western Asia Minor. These would have ranged from the traditional roles of the heavy handed dominance asserted by the *paterfamilias* and the unquestioning obedience of the wife to the societal trends seen in the new Roman women, who exhibited a defiance of their husbands and the traditional roles.

(2) There is no doubt that women in western Asia Minor were finding more opportunities in the civic and religious life of the communities. Some were finding a new degree of freedom from the restraint, control, and dominance of men in society, politics, religion, and the household.

(3) There were also some fairly radical trends in gender identity, where some men were repudiating their masculinity, appropriating a feminine identity, serving a female goddess, and engaging in sexual relations with both men and women.

(4) In light of this diversity of trends in society, Paul writes to many Christians in Ephesus and western Asia Minor to give biblical and christological perspective on what it means to live as husband and wife. His readers come from all segments of society — they are slaves, peasants, and probably many from the urban elite. Some will have held to the traditional Greek and Roman understanding of roles, but others would probably be living the lifestyle of the new Roman women. It would not at all be surprising to find that there were some women who became Christians who once served as priestesses in the local goddess cults.

(5) Paul's remarks to husbands and wives are counter to every cultural pattern represented in that society. His vision for marriage is not a concession to any cultural pattern, but substantially challenges them all. His plan is rooted in the creation design and profoundly informed by the relationship that Christ has with his church. [Arnold, 372-379]