

**“Walking in Marriage”**  
**A Sermon Greg’s Wife Permitted Him to Preach**  
**about ‘Wives Submit to Your Husbands’**

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Tenth in a series on Ephesians

Ephesians 5.18b, 21-33

March 16, 2014

*Belonging to Jesus and living his resurrection life is glorious! Astonished at the wonders of what God is doing, we celebrate! Where do we do this, though? In ordinary places. If following Jesus means anything, it must mean something to how we are in our kitchens, living room, and bedrooms, with those closest to us. Let’s hear then, this reading from the Word of God.*

Be filled with the Spirit like this . . . be subject to each other, out of reverence for the Messiah; wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as the Messiah is the head of the church his body, and is himself its Saviour. Just as the church is subject to the Messiah, so also wives should be subject in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, you must love your wives, just as the Messiah loved the church, and gave himself up for it, so that he might make it pure, cleansing it by washing it with water, through the word. He did this so that he could present the church to himself in brilliant splendour, without spot or blemish or any such thing, so that it would be holy and without blame. That’s how husbands should love their wives, just as they love their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. Of course! No one ever hates his own flesh. He feeds it and cares for it, just as the Messiah does the church, because we are parts of his body.

It says in Scripture, "That’s why a man leaves his father and mother and holds fast to his wife, and the two become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to the Messiah and the church. Anyway, each of you must love your wife as you love yourself, and the wife must see that she has reverence for her husband.

Ephesians 5.18b, 21-33

I’m offering this teaching about “wives submit to your husbands,” with my wife’s permission.

Paul is right to take the great news of love, freedom and reconciliation in Jesus, and connect that with our day-to-day relationships. Jesus has to make a difference for those among us who are married.

I just don’t like what Paul says.

Husbands ruling wives! That's a long, ugly story. It's a story about wives being diminished, kept from the fullness of who God makes them to be. The story diminishes husbands too. We are not meant to be patriarchs.

It's tempting to dismiss Paul here. It sounds like he is telling that same bad story. But let's dig around, and see what might turn up. It is not as if we have marriage all figured out either! Could we learn something here?

## II

For starters, let's realize Paul was not writing in the first century with us in mind. He was thinking of people like Zosas and Nostimos. They were husband and wife, and farmers. We know of them from their grave marker.<sup>1</sup> They lived in Meletis, about three days' walk from Ephesus. Paul visited there.<sup>2</sup>

Imagine their household like a pyramid. Zosas the husband is at the top. He owns the property.<sup>3</sup> He has authority over everyone else: his wife, their children, free persons who work for him, and his slaves.<sup>4</sup>

Nostimos, his wife, is important and valued. But she is always subject to Zosas.<sup>5</sup> Everyone is subject to him. He is the family-father.<sup>6</sup>

That's how it worked in Paul's day. Everyone "knew" women are inferior creatures. They are often impure.<sup>7</sup> Uncontrolled, they are dangerous, ruled by their emotions. Everything works best when everyone is in their place. About that, Mr. and Mrs. Zosas would have agreed.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.flickr.com/photos/7945858@N08/8237294603/in/photolist-dxUhGK-dxZLX3-dxUioP-dxUhtZ-dxZLwY-dxZLjS](http://www.flickr.com/photos/7945858@N08/8237294603/in/photolist-dxUhGK-dxZLX3-dxUioP-dxUhtZ-dxZLwY-dxZLjS). They lived in the century following Paul, so they never met.

<sup>2</sup> According to Google Maps, Melitus is 80 km walking distance from Ephesus, which would take about 16 hours. For Paul's time in Melitus, see Acts 20.15-38. Note that there he meets with elders from the Christian congregation(s) in Ephesus!

<sup>3</sup> To say that wives were regarded as the husband's property is an oversimplification. *pace* Michael J. Gorman, Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 524. She often maintained some control over her property, and continued to be under the protection of her own father. See Lynn H. Cohick, Women in the World of the Earliest Christians (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2009), chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, Ephesians (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2002), 275.

<sup>5</sup> Within the household, the family-father's wife had significant responsibilities for hospitality, household management and teaching, all of which were highly esteemed. She also had authority over other women in the household, including female slaves and her daughters-in-law. See Cohick, 69.

<sup>6</sup> The Latin term was *pater familias*, the "father of the family." He was the lynchpin of the whole system.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Wright, Paul for Everyone: The Prison Epistles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 66f.

I'm sure Zosas loves Nostimos, and she loves him. He might even respect her. Still, he has rights over her, and she has obligations to him. He is in charge. This family-father system is about protecting the honour, power, and control of men like Zosas.<sup>8</sup>

When Paul talks about what the new life in Jesus has to do with husbands and wives, this family-father system is all he knows. All anyone knows. So as we hear what Paul writes, imagine how it will make a difference in Nostimos and Zosas' marriage.

### III

Paul speaks to Nostimos, the wife, first. That's interesting.<sup>9</sup> He writes, "*wives, be subject to your husband.*"

Well, not exactly. He writes, ". . . *wives to your husbands.*" No verb. No "be subject." Because this is the end of a sentence. The verb comes earlier:

. . . *be subject to each other, out of reverence for the Messiah . . .*

Then,

. . . *wives to your own husbands, as to the Lord.*<sup>10</sup>

Many Bible versions cut this sentence in half, often with a new section heading. We end up reading the word to wives on its own. That's not what Paul wrote. The word to wives has to be read with Paul's word to all of us who belong to Jesus: *be subject to one another.*

This is part of an even longer sentence – Paul loves long sentences. It begins:

*Be filled with the Spirit like this . . .*

He then lists some things we do when the Holy Spirit is moving us. The last is this command to place ourselves under each other.

When the Spirit is moving in us, we serve others. We willingly put ourselves under each other.<sup>11</sup> In that culture, this was radical.<sup>12</sup> In ours too! We look down on servants. We honour leaders, reward dominating power, and give bosses the headlines and the big bonuses.

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<sup>8</sup> Timothy G. Gombis, The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 176.

<sup>9</sup> Yoder Neufeld, 257.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 243, 255

<sup>11</sup> "Be subject" is a translation of *hupotassō*, which in the middle form used here literally means "to place oneself under the other." In other words, it is an action of the person who is subjecting themselves, not something enforced upon them. Ibid, 243.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

To be truly human, though, to be filled by the Spirit, to belong to Jesus, is to serve. “*Wives, be subject to your husbands*” was not remarkable. It’s what everyone expected, what Nostimos herself expected. But “*be subject to each other*”? All of us: women and men, married and single, wives and husbands, Nostimos and Zosas. Yes, this is for Zosas the husband, as much as it is for Nostimos.<sup>13</sup> That’s shocking!

#### IV

Let’s continue. What do we make of what Paul says next? “*The husband is the head of the wife just as the Messiah is the head of the church. . . .*”

“Head” is a metaphor. We’re using the human body to talk about something else. Head can mean the top. Head can mean a source, like the head of a river. Head can mean first, like the head of the class.<sup>14</sup> Head can mean authority, like a head of government.<sup>15</sup>

Paul compares the husband, as head of the wife, with Jesus as head of the church. Earlier, in this letter, he celebrated Jesus as the head over the entire cosmos. That sounds like authority. Jesus is the head of the church. Again, authority.<sup>16</sup>

Paul has already imagined how many things will be radically different because of Jesus. However, it doesn’t seem he has imagined the hierarchy between husbands and wives changing. Yet he starts in that direction.

If the husband should be like Jesus, then “headness” starts to feel very different.<sup>17</sup> What does Jesus do as head of the church? He gives his life for us.<sup>18</sup> He exercises his lordship for our sake. He liberates and lifts up those who are captive and held down. Tom Yoder

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<sup>13</sup> To claim that in singling out wives, Paul is saying that he is calling them to serve and not their husbands misses the point of 5:21. Would we say that Paul’s command to husbands to love their wives in verse 25 means that wives are exempt from loving their husbands? Probably not.

<sup>14</sup> Yoder Neufeld, 347. Interestingly, “head” (*kephalē*) did not seem to be associated with intelligence. The ancient believed that resided in the heart, and the emotions originated from the belly. No one understood what the brain was for; Aristotle believed it was a sort of refrigerator to cool the body. Carl Zimmer, “Secrets of the Brain,” *National Geographic* volume 255.2 (February 2014), 38.

<sup>15</sup> However, in Greek *archon* is the more natural word for someone in authority, so the use of *kephalē* here does not by itself mean Paul intended to evoke notions of authority. However, his linking of a husband’s headship to Jesus’s does suggest that meaning is at least some of what Paul has in mind. See Yoder Neufeld, 347.

<sup>16</sup> Ephesians 1.21-22 and 4.15; see Yoder Neufeld, 247.

<sup>17</sup> “In my view, *head* does contain overtones of superiority and authority. The context in which the writer of Ephesians was writing was indeed one in which patriarchy was taken as a given. It is thus all the more important to ask what kind of a *head* Christ is and what effect such headship might have on entrenched structures of unequal power and authority.” Yoder Neufeld, 350.

<sup>18</sup> Ephesians 2.11-22.

Neufeld says it like this:

*Jesus's "headship fundamentally undermines privilege and status. Yes, Christ is the cosmic emperor, the head of the universe. But when we look closely, the emperor's new clothes are those of a slave."*<sup>19</sup>

Jesus the Head humbled himself, became a servant, became nothing, even to death on a cross.<sup>20</sup>

Let's agree, for a moment, that Zosas is Nostimos' head. What sort of head should he be? What does Jesus-shaped headship look like? It means blessing her. Liberating and lifting her up. Serving her needs before his. Giving his life for her.

## V

Loving her, with love shaped by Jesus.

Paul spends more time telling husbands what their obligations are toward their wives, than he spends on their rights, status or power.<sup>21</sup> He tells husbands to love their wives as their own bodies. He remembers for us Genesis 2, about how marriage makes two into one flesh. The feeling here is not domination or control, but intimacy and unity.

Husbands are to be like our Lord Jesus. Which means not lording over, but loving. Not ruling, but serving. Zosas' role model for being a husband is not a bossy or bullying patriarch. We've had enough of those, in ancient times and today! His role model is Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

## VI

Let me end where I started. Paul does not say what I wish he had said. He does not go as far as we need to go, for our marriages to be shaped by our new life in Jesus.

But he starts. He sets us in a direction.

What difference would his instructions make in a marriage like Zosas and Nostimos's? He says things to her, which might change how she sees her service of her husband. But the

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<sup>19</sup> Yoder Neufeld, 350.

<sup>20</sup> Philippians 2.5-11.

<sup>21</sup> "Where typical Greco-Roman household codes required nothing of the head of household regarding fair treatment of subordinates, . . . Paul encouraged men to be kind to their slaves, to be gentle with their children, and, shockingly, to love their wives as they love themselves." Rachel Held Evans, "Submission in Context: Christ and the Greco-Roman Household Codes." Blog post for June 5, 2012.

<http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/mutuality-household-codes>.

<sup>22</sup> Wright, 66.

greater challenge will be to Zosias. He will have to learn, with all of us, to be subject to others, including his wife! He will have to learn to love like Jesus loves. His understanding of himself as “head of the household” will be decisively changed if he makes Jesus his model for what a head is. Again, Tom Yoder Neufeld puts it right: *“To imitate [Christ’s] headship may turn out to be truly fearsome, but for husbands, not wives!”*<sup>23</sup>

Next week, I want to come back to this passage. Mixed in here, Paul says important things about Jesus and his relationship with us, his community. I’ll focus on those.

Rachel Held Evans is a Christian writer and blogger, who has thought a lot about Paul, women, and the contemporary church. Let me finish with her words.

*With Christ, hierarchal relationships are exposed for the sham that they are, as the last are made first, the first are made last, the poor are blessed, the meek inherit the earth, and the God of the universe takes the form of a slave. . . .*

*If wives submit to their husbands as the Church submits to Christ (Ephesians 5:24), and if husbands love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25), and if both husbands and wives submit one to another (Ephesians 5:21)—who’s really “in charge” here?*

*No one.*

*Such a relationship could only be characterized by humility and respect, with both partners imitating Christ, who time and again voluntarily placed himself in a position of submission.*

*Women should not have to pry equality from the grip of Christian men. For [men] who follow Jesus, authority should be surrendered—and shared—willingly, with the humility and love of Jesus...or else we miss the once radical teaching that slaves and masters, parents and children, husbands and wives, rich and poor, healthy and sick, should “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”*<sup>24</sup>

Let’s continue in these directions Paul started us in, following Jesus, filled with the Spirit, to the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>23</sup> Yoder Neufeld, 261.

<sup>24</sup> From the blog post cited above.