

Christian Marriage and Family

Edited Class Notes by Coty and Beth Pinckney
Cameroon Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002

What is Christian Marriage

What is Christian marriage? Is it fundamentally different from marriage between non-Christians? We hear words related to marriage, such as headship, submission, and love: What do these terms mean? Are these cultural relics of the 1st century? Are they western cultural patterns? Or are they vital for our understanding and practice of marriage today among all Christians?

The most extended treatment of marriage in the Bible is found in Ephesians 5:22-33; these verses are followed by 6:1-4 on parents and children. These sixteen verses form the outline of our course. Paul grounds none of his teaching concerning marriage and family on cultural grounds, or on the specific circumstances found in Ephesus in the 1st century. Instead, all that he says is grounded on theological truths, particularly on the teaching that he has given the Ephesians in the first four and a half chapters of the book, as well as the relationship between Christ and the church. We consider these two topics in turn.

The Context of the Passage: Eph 1:1-5:21

Many discussions of Eph 5:22-33 in courses on marriage take these verses out of context, considering them by themselves. But these verses are intimately related to the first section of the book, and build upon what Paul has said in the earlier chapters. In order to understand these verses rightly, we need to understand why Paul brings up this topic at this point. These verses are intimately integrated with all that precedes them in this letter, and our insights into marriage are improved by considering the relationship between these verses and the preceding chapters.

Recall that Paul begins this letter by praising God for the spiritual blessings that we have in Christ:

- God has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight;
- God has redeemed us, purchasing us from slavery to sin, through Christ's blood;
- God has revealed to us the mystery of his will: that He is in the process of summing up all things in Christ;
- God has sealed us with the Holy Spirit, as a guarantee that we have a part in the summing up of all things in Christ.

Furthermore, all of these spiritual blessings, great as the benefits are to us, are to the praise of God's glory; they reveal His character, so that all creation will praise Him.

Given that all this is true, Paul then prays that while we are here on earth, we would know three things:

- the hope of our calling,
- the riches of the glory of God's inheritance in us,
- and the resurrection power which is ours.

Paul concludes the first chapter by saying that God:

gave Christ as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:22-23)

So this entire passage concerns the relationship between Christ and the church. We, the church, are in Christ, purchased by His blood; He is summing up all things in Christ according to His eternal plan, and he involves us in that process; God gives us Christ's resurrection power to enable us to play our part in that process; we are Christ's body, intimately related to Him, created to do His will; we are his fullness, glorifying him in what we are becoming.

In chapter 2, Paul notes the astounding nature of this relationship between Christ and the church. There were two powerful barriers that would seem to make such an intimate relationship impossible. The first barrier is our flesh, our sinfulness. We were dead in our trespasses and sins, helpless, hopeless. We were by nature objects of God's wrath, deserving his just punishment. The perfectly holy God could have no partnership with such sinful creatures; the perfectly just God *must* punish such creatures.

Chapter 2 verse 4 begins with two powerful words: BUT GOD. We were dead and without hope, BUT GOD made us alive together with Christ, BUT GOD raised us by His grace, BUT GOD seated us with Christ in the heavenlies, and prepared in advance good works for us to do. By identifying us with Christ instead of looking at us on our own, God makes us righteous in His sight. Our union with Christ, our intimate identification with Him, is what allows God to take us, sinful creatures as we are, to Himself.

In addition to our individual sinfulness, the second barrier is that many of us are Gentiles, and therefore excluded from the promises God made to the people of Israel. BUT GOD now has brought us near by the blood of Christ, reconciling both Jew and Gentile into one body through the cross. God had pictured his relationship to Israel as a marriage in the Old Testament; now not only the Jews but all who are in Christ are reconciled to each other and to God through Christ Himself.

In chapter 3, Paul says his particular calling is to reveal the mystery of God's redeeming both Jews and Gentiles. Verse 10 highlights one of God's purposes in this plan of redemption: to show the greatness of His wisdom even to angels and opposing spiritual powers. Paul then prays that we might be strengthened through the Spirit so that Christ might dwell in our hearts, and that we might be able to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge.

Thus ends the first half of the book. Why didn't Paul simply stop here? He doesn't stop because Christian doctrine always has logical consequences for Christian behavior. Our faith has implications for how we live. So, in chapters four through six, Paul builds on the truths concerning the blessings, privileges, and power which are ours, arguing that if all this is true, we have a glorious calling – a calling to display the wisdom, love, and power of God in our lives – and thus must walk in a manner worthy of that calling.

Consider three implications of this latter section of Ephesians:

First, note that Paul does not here give us a list of moral do's and don'ts; he is not laying down a standard and then saying, "Live this way." Instead, he is basing his commands on the doctrine he has taught in the first part of Ephesians. The New Testament always does this; morality is never divorced from doctrine. These days we often hear someone say, "Oh, I don't believe in the Bible's teaching about Jesus as the Son of God, and all that, but I admire and try to live up to its moral teaching." Nothing could be more antithetical to the biblical position. Indeed, nothing could be more foolish. In all of the New Testament, behavior is a logical consequence of doctrine; morality does not stand alone.

Second, God gives us the power to live lives that are pleasing to him. Christian morality is not a matter of our using our own power to live up to God's commands. Paul has already said in chapter two that on our own we are dead in our trespasses and sins, without hope. Yet God's power has raised us and seated us with Christ, and this same resurrection power is available to us to accomplish His purposes in us. So Paul in this last half of Ephesians reminds us that it is not only logical for us to behave

this way, but it is also possible for us to behave this way because of the power of God within us.

Third, note that Paul still finds it necessary to give us these commands. Thus, it must be possible for us to be Christians and yet not live in accordance with God's desires. So this process is not automatic; *we can be chosen by God and sealed by the Holy Spirit, yet still live lives that are unworthy of our calling*. Thus, living lives worthy of our calling is not a simple, one-time event, not a decision we make once in our lives, but a battle that we must fight day by day.

Note three aspects of our salvation: (1) God promises that we are saved from the guilt of sin, we are justified – that was accomplished on the cross, and becomes effective for us by God's grace the first moment we exercise saving faith. Justification is indeed a one-time event.

(2) We are saved from the power of sin -- God has made us alive in Christ, we are united with Christ both in His death *and* in His resurrection. Alive in Christ, we are no longer slaves to sin. This, again, is a one-time event; God frees us from slavery to sin at one point in time.

(3) God also promises that he will make us Christlike, that he will perfect us -- but this sanctification does not happen immediately. We continue to fight the fight of faith for our entire lives.

This concept is central to our understanding of Christian marriage, so let's delve into it a bit more deeply. Consider Galatians 2:20, which I hope many of you have memorized:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Paul is saying that we who are Christians have been identified with Christ's death, and that we have died to self. But note that we still live *in the flesh*, we still live in our old, fallen bodies. The habits we have developed, the patterns of reacting to life's circumstances, persist and continue to influence us. Furthermore, although Satan has lost his control of us, he continues to fight against us, as Paul will remind us in Ephesians 6. And Satan still influences the world around us, so that to our eyes it looks as if God is not in control. For all these reasons, we must live by faith -- faith in God's sovereignty, faith in God's power, and faith in God's promises. While we remain in this world, then, we must exercise our will minute by minute and hour by hour, turning our thoughts to God in active dependence on Him. When we fail to live by faith, we stumble, and live lives that are not worthy of our calling.

So, in this last half of Ephesians, Paul finds it necessary to exhort us to behave in a manner consistent with our calling by the power of God within us, through living by faith minute by minute. Let us, then, consider how he organizes these exhortations in chapters 4 and 5. In the first 16 verses of chapter 4, Paul asks the question, "How should we live within the body of Christ? How should we relate to other Christians?" His answer: we should be humble towards each other, we should build each other up, especially via the gifts that the Spirit gives us. This leads to our growing together to maturity.

Beginning in 4:17 Paul turns his attention from our lives as part of the church to our lives as individuals in relationship to others. Here, in effect he is answering the question, "Does the way I live matter?" If it is true that God will forgive whatever sins I commit if I am a child of God, then why not sin? Paul here shows -- as he shows via a somewhat different argument in Romans 6 -- that anyone who asks such a question simply does not understand the fundamental change that takes place when one is saved. The old life is darkness, ignorance, corruption, and slavery. There is no benefit to living that way -- rather, it leads to death. As he says in 5:5, no immoral, impure, or covetous person has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ -- and anyone without such an inheritance

has no hope whatsoever, but will be subject to God's wrath. So since you are children of God, act like it! Imitate him! You were once darkness, but now are light! Walk in the light, not in the darkness! Take care, consider the way you walk -- it indicates who you are! This is the will of God.

Beginning in 5:18, Paul emphasizes our need for the Spirit's power in order to accomplish this. We must be filled with the Spirit if we are to live worthy lives. We must let the Spirit control us, let Him fill our minds and thoughts, let him infuse all our relationships with His presence, as he stands alongside us, encouraging us, enabling us to be Christlike. As Paul points out, when we are filled with the Spirit, He will affect our speech ("speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs"), our inner attitudes ("singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father"), and our interactions with others ("submitting to one another in the fear of Christ"). In the next lengthy section, Paul elaborates on what it means to submit to each other in our most intimate relationships.

It is absolutely vital to see that *submitting to one another is a result of being filled with the Spirit*. Submission is neither natural nor easy. But because we as Christians are a new creation on the inside, because the Holy Spirit lives in us, we CAN live a new life, we CAN put off the old self, we CAN live as children of light, submitting to one another.

Paul highlights three intimate relationships:

- between husbands and wives,
- between parents and children
- and between employees and employers.

He selects these relationships because this is where "the rubber meets the road", as we would say in the US. It is in these relationships that we reveal the true nature of our hearts. Most of us can become pretty good at play-acting on Sunday mornings, pretending that we are good Christians. We can do the same in our occasional, casual relationships in civic organizations. But it is much harder to fool our employers and employees, and it is virtually impossible to fool our wives, husbands, children, and parents. Whatever we are on the inside will come out, at least occasionally, in these close relationships. If Christianity does not have an impact on these most intimate relationships, it is not worth very much. But a relationship with God that will transform these relationships is exactly what so many long for!

The Relationship Between Christ and the Church

We will spend the bulk of this course discussing the first of these relationships, between husbands and wives. Paul here tells us what it means for husbands and wives to submit to each other by the power of the Spirit. Paul draws an explicit analogy, saying that the relationship of husbands to wives is similar to the relationship between Christ and His bride, the church. Now, this is an exceptionally helpful analogy -- IF we understand the relationship of Christ to the church. Unfortunately, since most of us have little or no understanding of this relationship, we are unable to draw out the proper implications for us as husbands and wives. So we focus now on gaining a deeper understanding of this marriage in heaven, so that we might here have heavenly marriages.

Recall four earlier verses that refer to this relationship: 1:22-23, and 4:15-16:

1:22 And [God] has put all things under [Christ's] feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

4:15 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with

which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Now read our present text, 5:22-33. There is much about human marriage in these verses, but on this reading, look instead for what the text tells us about *the relationship between Christ and the church*.

Let me draw your attention to four principles brought out in this section which together define the relationship of Christ to the church: unity, love, headship, and perfection. This section considers how these principles relate to Christ and the church. In the bulk of the course, we will consider how these same principles apply to husbands and wives.

(1) The Unity of Christ and the Church

We have already pointed out how we are the body of Christ; we are united with Him in His death and resurrection., and thus organically linked to him. The quotation above from Ephesians 4 makes this clear, as does Romans 6. But we can go further. In God's plan, God's love is incomplete without the church!

"But wait a minute," you say. "How can the love of God be incomplete? Look again at 5:31-32:

FOR THIS CAUSE A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, AND SHALL CLEAVE TO HIS WIFE; AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. 32 This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.

Verse 31 is a quotation from Genesis 2, after the first marriage between Adam and Eve. Adam -- created by the perfect God -- was incomplete without Eve. In all creation there was no helpmeet suitable for him. So God fashioned Eve out of Adam's rib, so that together Adam and Eve would become one perfect, complete flesh.

Paul is saying that, while the mystery is great, the same holds true for Christ and the church. We are so intimately one with Christ that his love is made complete through us, the church. Recall that 1:23 says we are his fullness. What does this mean? Consider 1 John 4:17:

love is perfected with us . . . because as He is, so also are we in this world.

God is love -- but that love is perfected, or made complete, with us. We are so united with Christ that we represent him in this world, that we complete his love in the world.

Furthermore, Christ chose to assume the role of mediator between God and man, and thus to unite us with him. This role as mediator is not complete until all of those called according to his plan are joined with him. So we, the church, are essentially one with Him.

(2) The Love of Christ for the Church

In 5:25, Paul writes:

Husbands love your wives just as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself

Love is one of the most misunderstood words today. When we say, "I love you," we may mean, "You make me feel tingly all over," or "I want to have sex with you," or "I enjoy being around you," or "I want you to feel wanted." But Christ's love for the church is not a feeling. This love is giving, sacrificing, selfless. This love is a love that shows itself in action.

How did Christ act out His love? Verse 1:7 says, "we have redemption through his blood," while 2:13 says we Gentiles are "brought near by the blood of Christ." His love extended all the way to the shedding of His blood for us -- and the shedding of His blood for us when there was nothing attractive about us. As Paul says in Romans 5:8,

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

"While we were yet sinners!" When there was nothing attractive about us, God showed His love to us through the death of Christ. So the love of Christ for the church is a self-sacrificing love that acts.

You recall that God had Hosea act out such a love in his own life and marriage. His wife, Gomer, was guilty of brazen adultery, even to the point of selling herself as a prostitute. But God tells Hosea to go down to the slave market and to buy her -- to buy the woman who was properly his, and had rejected him -- he tells Hosea to redeem her and to take her back as his wife. This is the type of love Christ has for the church.

(3) The Headship of Christ Over the Church

In addition to telling us that Christ and the church are one, and that Christ loves the church sacrificially, this passages reiterates 1:22 in telling us that Christ is the head of the church. The idea of headship is intimately related to the unity and love we have already discussed. In particular, note that Christ as head is *not* an external authority telling the church what to do, but Christ is *one* with the church -- indeed, *the* one whose love brought the church into being. Headship is an organic notion -- the head is part of the body, just as much as the foot or the arm.

Just so, submission to the head is a result of confidence in the unity and love we have discussed. We as the church submit to Christ because we know He has our good at heart, even when following Him means acting in a way that seems to make little sense. We know that He who died for us when we were without hope loves us with an undying love, and so we express our love to him by being obedient to his headship.

Now, what does a head do? Let me suggest three ideas:

First, the head decides on goals.

Second, the head coordinates all action so as to accomplish its goals. Without a head, the different parts of the body would not work towards a common purpose. But when every part submits to the guidance of the head, the body can work effectively to accomplish its mission.

Finally, the head looks out for the good of the entire body. There may be times when an action in the short run will hurt one part of the body. But the head knows this pain is worth it so that the whole body might grow.

The next and final principle draws this idea out:

(4) The Perfection of the Church Through Christ

Consider some of the words Paul uses in our text describing the impact of Christ on the church:

- He sanctifies and cleanses her (26), washing us from our sins and then setting us apart for his purposes;
- He makes her to have no spot or wrinkle, but to be holy and blameless (27);
- He nourishes and cherishes her (29), not being willing to stop at cleansing us, but giving us everything we need in order to grow up into Him;
- He is her savior (23).

The purpose of headship is the completion, the perfection of the church. Christ is one with the church, and loves the church so much that he is determined to make her all she should be.

Consider again the story of Hosea. When Hosea remarries Gomer, bringing her back into a right relationship with him, would he be satisfied to change her position from prostitute to wife? No! Not if he loves her! He wants her to fulfill her potential, to become all that God intended her to be -- and, furthermore, he wants them together, in their essential unity, to become what they together might be.

Just so, Jesus does not stop with changing our position before Him. We were full of sin and unable to enter God's presence because of his holiness. But we as believers are covered by the blood of Jesus, so that our position has changed. Jesus saves us from the consequences of our sin, from eternal damnation. But he has determined to do so much more! He has determined to perfect us, to fulfill our potential, to make us what we were intended to be, to make us together with him into his fullness, glorifying himself in the process.

The difference between changing our position and perfecting us is similar to the difference between the roles of doctor and coach. My doctor is concerned with disease. He identifies the disease that plagues me, and then attempts to cure it. But being cured of a disease and fulfilling my potential are two very different things! I can be healthy in the sense that there is no disease present in my body, yet still be fat, lazy, and out of shape. In that case, my body would be falling far short of its potential.

My coach, or physical trainer, on the other hand, has the goal of making me the best athlete possible. My coach will look at me and see all I am capable of attaining, then set forth a plan whereby I can achieve my potential. He will make me work hard, he will cause me pain, he may yell at me occasionally, but my coach -- if he is good -- does all this so that I, together with my teammates, can fulfill our potential.

Similarly, Christ is not satisfied with healing our disease, with keeping us from hell. Instead, he perfects us individually and corporately.

How does Christ perfect the church? One way is through the leadership gifts discussed in chapter 4. Recall 4:11-13:

11 And He gave some [as] apostles, and some [as] prophets, and some [as] evangelists, and some [as] pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

The leadership gifts result in our maturing, in our growing up to be what Christ intends. Similarly, God works all things together for our good, using trials, using difficulties, using each other so that we are whipped into shape, so that we attain the perfection that he desires.

And the final result of our perfection is his being glorified! Recall 3:10 where Paul writes that the perfected church displays God's wisdom to all spiritual beings! God is proud of the church, and displays her beauty to others; Christ shows who he is by the perfection of his wife.

Think of the most beautiful sunrise you have seen recently, one that was particularly magnificent as deep reds changed to pink with increasing brilliance. The sunrise displays the beauty of its creator. Just so, we as the church are being perfected so that all creation will see us -- holy and blameless, perfect and complete -- and sing praises to God.

The perfected church bringing praise to God is pictured in Revelation 19:

6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; 8 to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure"-- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. 9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."

Can you imagine this scene? The huge multitude of all the created order will sing praises to God *because of us!* We are his bride, clothed in the very deeds we have done through his grace. The perfect Savior marries the perfect bride -- and we, together, are that bride.

So Christ our Savior and Husband is one with us. We are organically linked to him. He loves us with an active, sacrificial love. He who is one with us is also our head, directing us, helping all parts of his body to work together for His glory, and He directs all things together so that we might become his perfect creation. He nourishes us, providing all that we need to join Him at the marriage supper, proclaiming his glory, perfect in every way.

Implications for Marriage of the Relationship Between Christ and the Church

Let's begin this section with a question for all who are married: When was the first time you looked at your spouse and thought, "How in the world did I choose to marry this person?"

Most of us who have been married for more than a year have asked that question at some point. Oh, when we stand at the altar, although we know that most couples quarrel, and although we know that we have quarreled prior to marriage, many of us believe that ours will be the first marriage in the history of the world to be characterized exclusively by tenderness, respect, and love. It usually does not take us too many weeks to discover that this seemingly perfect spouse, amazingly, has not escaped the stain of sin. And we begin to wonder what we're in for.

Before we begin to move from our discussion of Christ and the Church to talking about marriage, it is important to emphasize that we are describing an ideal. And every marriage represented in this class -- including my own -- falls short of that ideal. But the promise of God is that in Christ we are new creations, we are the temple of the Holy Spirit, we can be filled with the Spirit; Christ is in us, thereby providing us with the hope of glory. Whatever your failures, whatever your mistakes in marriage, you can begin today to live out the ideal Christian marriage by -- and only by -- depending on the power of the Holy Spirit within you. And when you fail, when you step out in your own power and make a mess, you need to seek forgiveness from God and your spouse, and begin again. Paul has already told us to walk in a manner worthy of our calling, to walk as children of light. Children don't learn to walk over night. They learn by falling -- and picking themselves up and trying again. And we too must pick ourselves up after our failures, and thereby learn to walk in the area of marriage, learning to depend on the Holy Spirit in this most intimate, most difficult, and most rewarding area of our lives.

Recall God's command to Joshua:

I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be terrified, do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go. (Joshua 1:9)

As we gain a deeper understanding of God's ideal for marriage, many of us will see the stark contrast with our own marriages. Satan will try to use that contrast to make you think, "This is hopeless. I am a failure as a husband or wife. My marriage can never reflect this ideal." God commands us, "Do not be discouraged. Do not be afraid. I am with you. I will uphold you. Depend on me, and the years the locusts have devoured I will redeem, and use for my glory in your life." So let us focus on the ideal, and then by God's power strive to attain it.

Recall that in our examination of the context of Ephesians, we have seen the relationship between Christ and the Church described in several ways. In the previous section, we highlighted four aspects of this relationship that become particularly clear in 5:22-33:

- The unity of Christ and the church
- The sacrificial love of Christ for the church

- The headship of Christ over the church, and the submission of the church to Him
- The perfecting of the church by Christ

Now we ask these questions: How does the image of the relationship between Christ and the church shed light on the relationship between husband and wife? If Christ and the church provide a pattern for the ideal Christian marriage, what are the lessons for marriage today?

Unity in Christian Marriage

Let us begin by considering unity. Husband and wife are one. From the beginning, God said:

for this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)

What does this mean?

First, *husband and wife are one because they are both parts of the body of Christ*. This is why Christians are to marry Christians. How can I be one with Christ, and also one with someone who is not in Christ? In the ideal Christian marriage, Christ is the head, the husband, of each partner in the marriage individually; both the man and the woman, as part of the church, are the bride of Christ. So Jesus Christ is at the middle of the relationship. The unity of husband and wife in its essence begins with the unity of the two in Christ.

So the statements we find in the parts of Scripture that deal with spiritual gifts apply to husbands and wives also. In 1 Corinthians we read:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." (1 Corinthians 12:21)

And recall that earlier in Ephesians we saw Paul make much the same point:

we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (4:15-16)

Each part of the body needs to do its part to build up every other part of the body, so that all together they grow into Christ. So the husband needs his wife, and the wife needs her husband; they build up each other when both are one in Christ.

But the unity between husband and wife is more profound than the unity that exists among all Christians. When Genesis says, "The two shall become one flesh," it is speaking about more than our oneness in the body of Christ. Surely sexual union is part of this; physically we become one flesh when we share sexual intimacy (we will elaborate on this under the topic of love). But recall that the unity between Christ and the church is not something that happens regularly or occasionally; the two are essentially one, at all times. Paul emphasizes this truth for marriage in verses 28 and 33:

husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself, for no one ever hated his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it . . . 33 let each of you love his own wife even as himself.

So Beth and I are one, in the same sense that I am one with my body. When Beth is built up, and honored, and growing, I am built up, and honored, and growing; if she hurts, I hurt.

In the magnificent novel *Anna Karenina* the 19th century Russian author Leo Tolstoy uses a dual story line to examine marriage. He compares and contrasts Anna's marriage with that of Levin and Kitty. Anna and her husband make mistake after mistake, eventually leading to the destruction of their marriage, while Levin

and Kitty exemplify a good marriage. Theirs is not perfect; but they understand their essential unity. Tolstoy clearly had thought long and hard about Ephesians 5 prior to writing this book. Permit me to excerpt a rather lengthy section for you; this occurs shortly after Levin and Kitty marry:

Levin had thought there could never be any relations between himself and Kitty other than those based on tenderness, self-respect, and love: But the first month of their marriage showed otherwise.

Their first quarrel arose because Levin had ridden over to inspect a new farm. He returned half an hour late because he had attempted a short cut and got lost. He rode home thinking only of her, of her love, of his own happiness, and the nearer he came to the house the warmer grew his tenderness for her. He rushed into the room with a feeling that was even stronger than the one with which he had gone to propose to her, yet was all of a sudden met with a grim expression he had never seen on her face before. He tried to kiss her, but she pushed him away.

"What's the matter?"

"You're having a nice time . . ." she began, trying to appear calm and venomous.

But the moment she opened her mouth, she burst into a flood of reproaches, senseless jealousy, and everything else that had been tormenting her during the half hour she had spent sitting motionless at the window. It was then that he clearly understood for the first time what he had failed to understand when he led her out of the church after the wedding. He understood that she was not only close to him, but that he could not now tell where she ended and he began. He realized it from the agonizing feeling of division into two parts which he experienced at the moment. He felt hurt, but he immediately realized that he could not be offended with her because she was himself. For a moment he felt like a man who, receiving a sudden blow from behind, turns round angrily with the desire to return the blow only to find that he had accidentally struck himself and that there was no one to be angry with and he had to endure and do his best to assuage the pain. . . .

It took him a long time to recover his senses. His first impulse was quite naturally to justify himself and explain that she was in the wrong; but to show her that she was in the wrong meant to exasperate her still more and to widen the breach which was the cause of all this trouble. One impulse quite naturally drew him to shift the blame from himself and lay it upon her; another much more powerful feeling drew him to smooth over the breach and prevent it from widening. To remain under so unjust an accusation was painful, but to hurt her by justifying himself would be still worse. Like a man half awake and suffering from pain, he wanted to tear off the aching part and cast it away, but on coming to his senses he realized that the aching part was himself. All he had to do was to try to help the aching part to bear it, and this he did.

Isn't that a wonderful illustration of this truth? Levin "could not now tell where she ended and he began." "He could not be offended with her because she was himself." You see, when we build each other up, we ourselves benefit, because we are one. If we lash out at each other, and justify ourselves individually, if we break the sacred bonds that unite us, we are only in the end hurting ourselves. Just as we try to assuage the pain when our bodies hurt, so we need to comfort and forgive each other when we (inevitably) hurt each other.

This true unity has many important implications for how we live in marriage. Let me draw out four of them:

First, in order to be one in marriage, *we must no longer be one with the family in which we grew up*. As Genesis 2:24 says prior to stating the unity between husband and wife, "a man shall leave his father and his mother." Many parents try to hold on to their children even after marriage. In many African cultures, the wife becomes part of the husband's family, even becoming a servant for the husband's mother. In other cases, the wife or husband will feel more loyalty and unity with the family in which he or she grew up than with the spouse. But Genesis tells us we are to *leave* our parents. We continue to respect them, we continue to be in relationship to them, we hope to involve them as grandparents in the raising of our children; furthermore, if we are all Christians we all clearly continue to be part of the same body of Christ. We can say even more: our parents may have valuable advice to give us concerning marriage. Nevertheless, husband and wife must both recognize that they are one in a deeper, more profound sense than in their earlier family relationships. God has joined them together; they are a picture of Christ and the church; when one hurts, both hurt; when one has joy, so does the other.

Before a marriage takes place, it is very important that the couple as well as both sets of parents understand this point. In most Christian marriage ceremonies, the parents or father of the bride give her away to the bridegroom. This is an important symbol of the breaking of the old family, and the creation of a new one.

Second, in order to be one in marriage, *we must take an interest in the other's passions*. For example, suppose that my wife has always had a strong interest in music; she sings in the choir, forms small ensembles that perform special music in church, and knows how to play several instruments. Suppose that I cannot carry a tune, play no instrument, and on Sunday morning sit wishing we could cut out most of the singing and just get to the sermon. Now, how should I act after we are married? Should I say to her, "I don't like music, so you have to stop spending so much time in this way"? Or should I say to her, "You go ahead and sing if you wish," but then ignore her involvement: never encourage her with praise, never talk about music with her, never try to learn more about the subject? By no means! Her interest gives me an opportunity to cause her joy and pleasure by trying to learn about music. Since we are one, I receive joy and pleasure from giving the same to her. Now, in the case described, I may not have any natural talent for music, and will probably never be able to perform with my wife. But I *can* learn enough to talk about the matter with her, to encourage her, and to share this part of her life with her.

Application: What are the passions and interests of your spouse or potential spouse? What can you do to learn about those passions? Have you neglected this means to becoming more united with each other?

Third, in order to be one in marriage, *we must share our hopes and dreams*. We must talk with each other, looking to the future, discussing where we see ourselves going in the years ahead, examining areas in which we need to grow in Christlikeness, and planning on how to grow together. This is an area that is frequently difficult for men. Many men do not sit and talk with their wives; when they do, they frequently refrain from opening their hearts, either because of a misplaced desire to spare their wives from knowing their troubles, or from a feeling of vulnerability, not wanting to be ridiculed or gossiped about. But we cannot be truly one unless we talk with each other about those matters that concern us most deeply.

Application: Schedule a time with your spouse or potential spouse to have a serious discussion about your hopes and dreams for the future. Make it clear ahead of time that this discussion is confidential, including matters that neither of you will share with anyone else. Try to arrange so that you will not be interrupted, and then truly listen to your spouse during this time.

Fourth, just as her dreams will be his dreams, and vice versa, if the two become one, also *his burdens will become her burdens*. In

Christian marriage, the couple will share all aspects of their lives with each other, dreams for the future as well as burdens of the present. The analogy with Christ and the church makes this clear: We as the church take on more and more of the concerns of Christ Himself as we grow: His concern for the spread of the gospel, His concern for the glory of the Father; He, on the other hand, tells us to cast our burdens on Him. Just as Christ never tells His people that their concerns and cares are unimportant, we as husbands and wives must listen with compassion to the problems faced by our spouses.

The importance of our unity as husband and wife will come out in other ways as we go through this part of the course. But these four applications should give you some idea of the central importance of this idea in Christian marriage. Just as Christ and the church are one, man and wife are essentially one flesh, they form an essential unity. Any assertion of self, of my rights, is a denial of this fundamental truth. God has truly joined man and wife together, making them one. Let us not separate one from another.

Love in Christian Marriage

In addition to emphasizing that Christ and the church are essentially one, our passage highlights Christ's love for the church. Recall also that Paul in these verses is expanding not only on the idea of our being filled with the Spirit, but in particular on the idea expressed in verse 21: we are to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. In this context, Paul commands the husband to love his wife -- this is his method of submission.

What does Paul mean by love? Recall that Christ's love for the church was for *sinners* (as we saw in Romans 5:8). We, the church, did nothing to deserve that love, as it was conditioned on nothing in us. God justifies the wicked (Romans 4:5); He loves the rebellious world (John 3:16). And we husbands are to love our wives in the same way, with a love not conditioned on their response.

Let us clarify the idea by examining a number of things that Paul does *not* mean here:

- (1) Paul is not saying, "Love your wife *if* she submits to you." That would be a love conditioned on a response.
- (2) Second, he is not saying that husbands are always to follow her lead, responding to her statements with, "Whatever you say, dear." That would be to give up the husband's headship, which, as we will see later, is a key element in Christian marriage.
- (3) Third, Paul is not here talking about erotic love. The word "erotic" comes from the Greek *eros*, a love that responds to the beauty of the other. When Paul tells husbands to love their wives, he does not use this term; indeed, the Greek word *eros* is never used in the New Testament.

Now, the Bible clearly teaches that sexuality is one of God's gifts, and that the joy of sexual relations between husband and wife is an expression of their essential one-flesh unity. The Song of Solomon, for example, is a celebration of erotic love in its proper context. In beautiful images, the author expresses the longing for sexual fulfillment prior to marriage and the consummation of that longing after marriage.

Recall also the command that God gives the Israelites in Deuteronomy 24:5:

When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out with the army nor be charged with any duty; he shall be free at home one year and shall give happiness to his wife.

"He shall give happiness to his wife." I believe God here is talking about more than just taking out the trash and playing tiddly-winks; surely he also means giving her sexual pleasure.

Proverbs 5 also highlights our Creator's positive view of sexuality:

Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, 19 a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you

at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.
(Prov 5:18, 19 ESV)

Husbands are *commanded* to delight physically in their wives, to be drunk, or carried away with her love. The sexual relationship between husband and wife is one of abandonment to the other.

This idea carries over to the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians, Paul says:

For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. (1 Cor 7:4 ESV)

(Note that the NIV translators add words not found in the Greek in saying "the wife's body does not belong to her alone"; the ESV and NAS are more literal here). Our bodies belong to each other; the husband has authority over the wife's body, and the wife has authority over the husband's body. Many husbands want to claim the former but do not acknowledge the latter. Biblically, authority over the other's body goes both ways – the wife does indeed have authority over the husband's body.

So in a strong Christian marriage, the sexual act provides us with a beautiful picture of the unity between man and wife; as we yield to each other and give pleasure to each other we increase our own delight. And sexual intimacy binds us closer and closer to each other, as we share aspects of our selves with each other that we never share with another.

Some Christians have been confused on this point, and have provided poor teaching. Sexual expression even within marriage has sometimes been considered something only tolerable, allowed by God as an outlet for passion for those not able to live celibate lives, or as a necessary allowance so that the human race can continue. But such an interpretation ignores the verses cited above, as well as the foundation verse for Christian marriage, Genesis 2:24. God delights in the proper expression of sexuality within marriage; after all, He invented sex.

In many (probably most) marriages, sexual expression does indeed bring joy, but it also brings considerable tension. Most often the tension arises from the husband's desire to have sexual relations more often than the wife would prefer; the wife begins to feel like a tool to satisfy her husband's passion, and withdraws more and more from him. The husband may react in a number of ways that heighten the tension: forcing her to have sex when he wants; withdrawing from all sexual relations with her, even when she desires it; seeking sexual satisfaction outside of the marriage. These problems result in large measure from both partners failing to understand and put into practice the two central concepts we have discussed so far: the nature of unity within marriage, and the type of love that should characterize the marriage. The mutual authority over each other's bodies of 1 Corinthians 7:4 precludes all these negative behaviors. In true Christian marriage, our sexual pleasure is a joint sexual pleasure, and we will delight to help our partner to be intoxicated with our love. At the same time, the love and unity we share will mean that we will refrain from making sexual advances when we know there are reasons why our spouse will have difficulty responding positively.

So erotic love is not only sanctioned by the Bible, but also *commanded* within the confines of marriage. A solid Christian marriage in which both partners are healthy will be characterized by an exhilarating sharing of each other's bodies. Yet the love Paul commands in Ephesians 5 is more than erotic love.

(4) Furthermore, love in marriage is more than friendship love. Now, love between spouses should include friendship love. Indeed, in Titus 2:4 Paul commands the older women to sober the minds of the younger women so that they might love their husbands – and a number of commentators suggest that the emphasis here is on friendship love. Some of the applications of unity from the previous section are examples of friendship love:

Sharing interests, having deep discussions, bearing each other's burdens, simply enjoying being in each other's company -- all these are vital parts of a good marriage. Certainly the command in Deuteronomy for the man to give happiness to his wife includes being her friend and growing in their enjoyment of each other, as well as sharing sexual intimacy. But love between man and wife should be more than friendship love.

So love in marriage is not conditional, nor is it obsequious; love in marriage is not solely erotic, nor solely friendship. What is the positive teaching about love?

The Nature of Love in Christian Marriage

When Paul writes, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church" he tells husbands to have a love for their wives patterned after the love of Christ for His people. And how did Christ love? He gave of Himself. This is exemplified by the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son

God loved – and so He gave. This godly love gives, this godly love has the interest of the other at heart, this godly love yields its own rights in order to show love to the other.

Jesus exemplifies this type of love in numerous ways. Consider two Scripture passages: John 13:3-5, 12-15 and Philippians 2:2, 4-8.

3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, 4 rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. . . . 12 When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. (ESV)

Verse 3 is amazing. Jesus is fully conscious of His status, of His glory, of His authority. Indeed, He reminds His disciples of some aspects of His status in verse 13. Now, most men of exalted position act exactly opposite to the way Jesus acts here. Knowing their status, they sit and wait to be served. Knowing their importance, they command others to serve them. They have a right, so they would say, to this service; certainly Jesus had that right. But Jesus, knowing His status, acts like a servant. Indeed, on a human level, He demeans Himself. And then He drives the point home: We too are to serve each other, we too are to be willing to demean ourselves for the purpose of serving others.

This holds true for all Christians, but it holds particularly within marriage (and within marriage, particularly for husbands, as we will discuss below). The love which Christ models is a love that serves, doing good for the other at one's own expense.

Paul gives us more of the background of Jesus' actions in Philippians 2:

2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. . . . 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant (a slave), and being made in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (NASB)

Jesus was highly exalted, the second person of the Godhead. Yet He was willing to give up all that glory and honor, He was willing to empty Himself of that majesty and power, yielding the form of God and taking on the form of a slave. Even as a human, He gave up his right to be served by His disciples (as we saw above), and died a terrible death on the cross. Jesus loved and gave, not because of anything inherently good in us, not because we were attractive or shared some interest with him, but simply because He loved us.

In addition to these two examples of love in action, Paul gives us a beautiful description of godly love in 1 Corinthians 13. Here is my rather wooden, literal translation of verses 1-9a, which tries to maintain both the word order and the sense of the Greek; words in parentheses are alternative translations:

1 If in the tongues of men I speak – even of angels – but I have not love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 Even if I have prophecy and I know all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to move mountains, but love I have not, I am nothing. 3 And if I feed the poor with all those things which are mine, and if I give my body in order to be burned, but love have not, I am benefited not at all.

4 Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy (have jealousy), it does not boast, it is not puffed up, 5 it is not rude (ill-mannered), it does not seek its own, it does not become provoked (irritated), it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 It does not rejoice in evil (unrighteousness), but rejoices together with the truth. 7 It covers over (endures) all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures (bears up under) all things. 8 Love never falls.

Patient. Kind. Not desiring something owned by another. Not arrogant, not thinking highly of oneself. Not telling others how great you are. Well-mannered, treating the other with respect. Not selfish in any way. Not provoked or irritated, regardless of what the other person does. Not hanging on to old hurts and past disappointments, but forgiving from the heart. Not gossiping or telling demeaning stories about each other, but keeping confidential what you say and do among each other. Looking at the good in each other, and believing that God is doing a good work in your spouse, and that he or she will become what God intends him or her to be. No matter what the trials – financial, physical, mental – godly love continues, enduring the difficulty, never falling.

This is the pattern for love in marriage. As we have seen, we should enjoy our sexual relationship and we should enjoy friendship with each other. But the fundamental love in Christian marriage is this godly love, a love that gives, a love that serves. “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church.” We are to give of ourselves, we are to die to self as we serve our wives.

Paul makes this type of love the primary requirement of the husband. Look again at Ephesians 5:28-29:

28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it (ESV)

(The NIV for verse 29 is misleading. One might “feed and care for” a pig; one would not “nourish and cherish” a pig. While “feed and care for” is a possible translation, surely we should take account of the context when translating and use words with connotations appropriate to that context.)

We husbands are one with our wives, one body with them. Think of a man who is an athlete. How does he treat his body? He exercises it so that it can reach its potential; he feeds it well; he provides appropriate clothing and shelter for it; if it begins to hurt or ache, he soothes the pain in the best way he knows how; if the

pain becomes worse, he seeks the help of his athletic trainer or doctor. The athlete must take good care of his body.

Just so, the husband for the wife. We must look out for our wives: are they thriving? Are they growing spiritually? Are they developing their minds? Are they healthy physically? Am I, the husband, protecting her from things that might harm her? Am I aware of her hurts, her sorrows, the pressures she feels? What am I doing to soothe, comfort, and cure her? Do I need to seek out help for her from outside the home? The husband must nourish and cherish his wife.

Question: We know that husbands are to love their wives; should wives show similar love to their husbands? Surely this is so. So why doesn't Paul command wives to love their husbands rather than emphasizing their submission and respect? I believe Paul here is commanding each marriage partner to do what is *hardest* for him or her. Husbands are most tempted to dominate their wives, and thus are commanded to love sacrificially; wives are most tempted to look down on their husbands, so are commanded to submit to them and respect them (we'll come back to this point and elaborate on it when we discuss the nature of maleness and femaleness).

So in marriage there is a place for erotic love, and a place for friendship love. But the greatest of all loves is a godlike love, a love that gives, a love that does not demand or hold onto rights, but has the good of the other at heart.

Does Godly Love Seek Its Own?

Please at this point read from John Piper's book *Desiring God*, chapter 4 (online at <http://www.desiringgod.org/dg/id96.htm>).

Think particularly about these quotes:

[Love] is not a resolute abandoning of one's own good with a view solely to the good of the other person. It is first a deeply satisfying experience of the fullness of God's grace, and then a doubly satisfying experience of sharing that grace with another person.

[Quoting C.S. Lewis] Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it. . . . The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation.

Love is the overflow of joy in God that meets the needs of others. The overflow is experienced consciously as the pursuit of our joy in the joy of another. We double our delight in God as we expand it in the lives of others. If our ultimate goal were anything less than joy in God, we would be idolaters and would be no eternal help to anyone. Therefore, the pursuit of pleasure is an essential motive for every good deed.

Submission and Headship in Christian Marriage

Now that we have discussed unity and love, we can begin our discussion of a topic that is frequently misunderstood: headship and submission.

Look again at Ephesians 5:23-24:

23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. (NIV)

The statement cannot be clearer. Christ is the head of the church; the husband is the head of the wife. The church submits to Christ; just so, the wife submits to her husband.

Yet these statements continue to generate a tremendous amount of controversy. Paul has been called all sorts of names because

of what he says here. We can clear up some of that controversy by beginning in the same way we began with love: considering what Paul does not mean.

First, Paul is not talking here of submitting to an external authority. In Christian marriage, submission is based on the unity and love we have already discussed. The husband and wife are essentially one body, one unit, just as Christ and the church are essentially one. So the head is not someone coming from the outside, telling the wife what to do; the head is her own self, lovingly directing their joint life.

Second, submission does not imply blind obedience. Remember, this passage follows all of Paul's injunctions to walk as children of light, to walk in a manner worthy of our calling. Should our head direct us in ways that violate God's clear commands, we are not to follow.

Third, submission does not imply inferiority. In this passage, all of us are told to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. The husband's submission implies his loving his wife sacrificially; the wife's submission implies following her husband's lead. Galatians 3:28 and other passages show clearly that men and women come before God equally:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28)

If submission does not imply following an external authority, blind obedience, or inferiority, what does it mean? Let's consider what submission means positively by examining the motivation and the extent of submission.

The Motivation for Submission

A literal rendering of Ephesians 5:21-22 reads:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ, wives, to your husbands, as to the Lord.

Wives are not to be subject to their own husbands *in the same way* they are subject to the Lord; rather they are to submit to their husbands *because* they are subject to the Lord. In other words, the wife is saying, "Because of what Christ has done for me, because I know he has my good at heart, and because he commands it, I will submit to my husband." So the wife shows her submission to Christ by her submission to her husband in the areas of his authority.

Ray Stedman relates these words written by a woman who had struggled with these issues:

My submission to my husband is a kind of gauge or a measure of the degree to which I am submitted to Christ. . . I realize that my submission to my husband is not my gift to him, to be received gratefully on his part, and to be returned in kind. Nor is it to be a subtle form of blackmail. (See how submissive I was in this circumstance, Lord? Now what about seeing some results!) In fact if I were submitting to him as unto the Lord I wouldn't care what the results were -- that's his business

She is exactly right. This is the meaning of submitting to the husband as to the Lord.

Now, it is important to note that this type of submission is not natural, not logical. But that is true of many of the commands offered to us as Christians -- we walk by faith, not by sight. Consider these other, similar commands:

- Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities (Romans 13:1) (Paul wrote this when Nero was emperor . . .)_
- Do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5:39)
- If a Roman soldier forces you to carry his pack one mile, offer to carry it a second mile. (Matthew 5:41)

How can we possibly agree to do such things? Won't this type of behavior end in our being run over by the strong and arrogant?

Our motivation for submitting to our husbands and obeying these other commands must come from our certain faith in the power and goodness of God. Because I know that God is in control, because I read this clear command in the Bible, because I know that He has promised to work together all things for the good of those who love him, because Jesus said, "If you love me you will keep my commandments," -- for all these reasons, I can submit. Unless one believes that God is in control, submitting is not logical, it makes no sense from a worldly point of view -- but God *is* in control, and we walk by faith not by sight.

The Extent of Submission

Now let us consider the extent of the wife's submission to her husband. Look again at verse 24:

Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands . . .

What comes next? Does Paul say that I as a wife should submit only:

- in those cases when I'm wrong and my husband is right?
- at those times when I feel like it?
- on relatively unimportant issues?
- as a reward when my husband shows love for me?
- as a reward when he begins to act like so-and-so's husband?

No, "so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything." Now, we have already said that submission does not extend to following our husbands into sin. Remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira; they both died for their sin of lying to God. Had Sapphira not lied, she would not have died.

Nevertheless, in everything not forbidden to Christians, the wife is to submit to the husband as the church does to Christ. That means completely.

Later, we'll clarify the meaning of headship and submission by use of an analogy -- but first, let us consider the nature of headship.

The Nature of Headship

Let us begin once again with a negative. Headship is not harsh and domineering. Paul elsewhere writes:

Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. (Col 3:19)

The true head who loves and is one with his wife will never embitter her or dominate her. That is completely contrary to the ideal relationship as exemplified between Christ and the church.

For the positive teaching about headship, let us consider another parallel.

Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:3)

So we have three relationships that are in parallel:

Wife to husband
Church to Christ
Christ to God the Father

In each of these relationships, one partner is head and the other submits. We have already seen how the relationship between Christ and the church gives us insights into the marriage relationship; let's now explore the relationship between Christ and God.

We can summarize the relationship between Jesus and God the Father with four words:

- Unity: Jesus says, "I and the father are one." (John 10:30)

- Cooperation: 'But Jesus answered them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working.'" (John 5:17)
- Honor: "Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you." (John 17:1)
- Submission: "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me." (John 6:38)

We might summarize the relationship this way:

- Identity as to nature,
- Cooperation as to work,
- Honor as to person, and
- Submission as to final decisions.

These four categories hold for the headship relationship between husbands and wives. The marriage partners are essentially one, they cooperate to achieve a common goal, they honor and respect each other, and the wife submits to the husband with regard to final decisions.

Conclusion of Submission and Headship in Marriage

Consider this military analogy that helps to clarify the headship relationship between husband and wife:

Imagine a nation fighting a war. Two army corps are fighting in separate locations, under two generals of the same rank. The enemy is massing in one location, so the commander-in-chief instructs the two army corps to come together to engage the enemy. In such a situation, the commander-in-chief must name one of the two as commanding general of the engagement. The other must submit to the leadership of the commanding general. Now, the commanding general, if he is wise, will honor and respect the other general, and will seek his counsel. He will listen to his subordinate's advice, especially to that general's assessment of the qualities and capabilities of the units under his command. Indeed, any good subordinate general must offer advice. Ideally the two generals will agree on an overall plan for the engagement; it is possible for them to conduct the entire battle without the question of submission arising. But if they do not agree on a plan, in the end the commanding general must assume responsibility and decide on the course of action to be taken. The subordinate general must submit – even if he is convinced that the chosen course is a mistake. Why should he submit? Not because the commanding general is smarter, wiser, or more senior than he, although he may be; not because the commanding general's plan is superior to his, although it may be; but he submits because the commander-in-chief, with the good of the country in mind, has placed him under the command of his fellow general. What happens if the subordinate general disobeys orders, and tries to carry out his own plan? The two corps will act in an uncoordinated fashion, and then the enemy is likely to defeat the two parts of the army one by one, leading to disaster for the country.

This is the true meaning of submission and headship. There is no implied difference in worth or ability – just as the two generals may have been of the same rank and skill. Instead, submission implies that one person voluntarily agrees to follow the leadership of another for the good of everyone concerned. Just as Jesus and God the Father are equal, but Jesus submits to his Father, just as Jesus was superior to his parents but submitted to them, the wife submits to her husband. Thus, submission for the wife means that she willingly acknowledges the headship of her husband over her, and has confidence in God that He has set this authority over her for her own good. Headship for the husband means that he respects and listens to his wife, that he sacrifices his own good for

her good, and that he takes responsibility for making decisions that will build up the family and glorify God.

The military analogy is useful in many ways, but fails to bring out the fundamental differences between men and women, and the reasons why God has chosen men to serve as heads. These differences arise in the next area of our concern, the perfection of the marriage partners.

The Perfection of Each Other in Christian Marriage

We have examined three areas in which the relationship of Christ and the church parallels the relationship of husband to wife: Unity, love, and headship/submission. The fourth and last area deals with the perfection of the husband and wife as a result of the marriage relationship. As Christ perfects the church, the husband perfects the wife and, we will suggest, the wife perfects the husband. This, indeed, is the purpose of the husband's headship.

We will examine this issue by considering what *type of perfection* we are discussing, and then *how* the husband perfects the wife, and vice versa.

Recall verses 25 and 26 of our passage:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her.

Christ loved the church for a purpose: to sanctify her, to put her to her proper use, to allow her to fulfill her potential.

What is the parallel with husbands and wives? How does the husband perfect the wife?

First, note that nowhere does the Bible say that the husband is the spiritual head of the wife. No, Christ is the spiritual head of the wife and Christ is the spiritual head of the husband. All of us are the bride of Christ; he is our husband spiritually, our head. Christ will perfect us spiritually through his love. For married men and women, Christ will use our spouse in the process of perfecting us, but He, not our spouse, is our spiritual head.

But the husband is the head of the wife as a human – as man to woman. We perfect each other in our maleness and femaleness through the marriage relationship. Through marriage, we become the men and women that God intends us to be.

The Nature of Maleness and Femaleness

In order to discuss this point, we need to consider the purposes of men and women in creation. Why does God make man the head of the woman? In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul says that the reason goes back to creation. So let us examine the first three chapters of Genesis to see what we can learn about maleness and femaleness. First, consider Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

In the first sentence, God says He will make man in His image and likeness – and then immediately says that they will *rule*. One aspect of God's image found in humans, therefore, is their *authority and ability to rule*. Then, verse 27 says, twice, that God created man in His own image, concluding that He made them male and female. Somehow, this maleness and femaleness is related to our being created in His image. We suggest that *our ability to be in relationship* is the key issue here. We as males and females become one, creating a unity in diversity that reflects what is found in the Trinity itself.

Thus, our being created in God's image means, in part at least, that we are created to rule, and that we are created to be in

relationship. Now consider the account of the creation of man and woman found in chapter 2.

7 the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. . . 15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. . . 18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." . . 21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." 24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (ESV)

This is all we know about man and woman in God's perfect creation. The very next verse describes the temptation that leads to the fall. So what can we discern from these verses?

First of all, note the relationship between Adam and Eve. The man and woman were in a perfectly intimate relationship. There was no hiding, there were no barriers between them. The man is to "hold fast" to his wife. This Hebrew word -- traditionally translated "cleave" -- is not a sexual term. In several places in the Old Testament the same word is used commanding the Israelites to "hold fast" to God. It signifies the unity of man and wife, the degree of commitment and bonding between them. The next phrase -- becoming one flesh -- is clearly sexual in part, but as we have seen in our discussion of unity, it refers also to a deep unity between them.

Second, what does this passage tell us of the differences between man and woman in the perfect created order? There is no definitive anthropology here, but there are several intriguing hints. We would like to propose that this passage suggests that *man is primarily functional in orientation while woman is primarily relational in orientation*. What do we mean by "functional" and "relational?" Man is functional because he receives his greatest satisfaction from performing a task or accomplishing a deed. Woman is relational because she receives her greatest satisfaction from building relationships. There are at least three hints or clues that suggest this conclusion:

HINT 1: What material is used to create the man and the woman? Man is made of an inanimate substance -- dust -- while woman is made from part of another person, living flesh.

HINT 2: What tasks are they assigned? For what purpose was each of them created? In verse 15, man is put in the garden to "work" or "serve" it, and to "take care of", "keep", "guard," or "watch over" it. It is interesting to note that man was created to "serve" the creation. This word -- translated "work" in the NIV and ESV -- is the same word that God uses when he speaks through Moses to Pharaoh saying "Let my people go that they may serve me in the desert." Though created to rule, man's relationship to creation is not domineering, but one of tending, serving, and guarding.

What is the task of the woman? She is created, according to verse 18, as a "helper" "fit" or "suitable" for the man. The word translated "helper" is used most often as a military term; "ally" is a possible translation (see Ezekiel 30:8). But in the Old Testament the word often refers to God, frequently coupled with "shield" -- "My help and my shield" (see, for example, Psalm 115:9-11). Psalm 121 includes these well-known opening verses that shed some light on the meaning of the word:

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? 2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

The Psalmist looks up at the hills in fear, knowing that his enemy could come in large numbers over those hills at any time. Where are his allies? From where can he seek military assistance? His ally is the Lord, the creator Himself -- so he need not fear.

Although there is a clear difference in importance between the Lord and us, like our word "ally," this Hebrew word need not imply any difference in importance between man and woman. Instead of a difference in importance, what we have seen so far suggests that the difference is in focus. Man's focus tends to be on the created order, the very stuff of which he was created -- he rules over it, serves it, guards it; woman's focus tends to be on the very stuff of which she was created -- on other people, particularly on being the ally and helper of her husband.

HINT 3: For our third hint, turn to chapter 3 and the results of the fall. As you read, note that the results of the fall for each are frustration and pain in their primary area of focus: relationships for the woman, the created order for the man. Begin reading in verse 16:

To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; thru painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat the food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3:16-19 NIV)

Let's consider the woman first. As a result of her sin, she will experience frustration and difficulty in her family relationships, both with her children and with her husband. The phrase "your desire will be for your husband" is talking not about sexual desire but about the desire to dominate and control. Note that God uses the same phraseology in speaking to Cain in chapter 4 verse 7: "Sin is crouching at the door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." This interpretation is supported by the next phrase -- "yet he will rule over you." The woman will experience frustration in her marriage, in which she will desire to dominate and control her husband, but in the end he will dominate and rule over her. Now, have we seen the word "rule" used with regard to the man and the woman prior to this? No. Man's rule over woman is a result of the fall, part of the frustration that woman experiences after that event. This is not a command to man -- "you shall rule." We do not find the husband commanded to rule over his wife in Ephesians 5 or anywhere else in the Bible. This is a tragic and painful result of the fall, an implication for fallen marriages, *not* a prescription for the ideal Christian marriage.

What about the results of the fall for man? His frustration, his toil, is with respect to the created order, the ground. Thus, if this functional/relational difference between man and woman is correct, God points out to each of them that their sin will hurt them in the very area they care about the most. This is the essence of sin; we hurt and destroy what we love and want most.

In conclusion for this section, let me emphasize that these functional/relational differences between men and women are differences on a continuum; relationships and function are both important to all of us. Each of us is at a different point on the continuum; the differences between men and women are true in general, not necessarily for every two individuals. I encourage you to reflect on your own experience, and see if this perspective makes sense in understanding yourself and members of the opposite sex. Most of all, I encourage you to search the Scriptures

to see if these things are true, to dig more deeply into this and other passages in order to figure out what God tells us about differences between men and women.

How Do We Perfect Each Other?

Given this understanding of the nature of men and women, how do we perfect each other in our maleness and femaleness? One husband, when hearing that he should play a role in perfecting his wife, said, "I've been trying to perfect her for years; whenever she does something wrong, I scold her for being wrong, and then I tell her how to do it right!"

Of course, that is not what God intends. Let us consider some of the wrong ways to perfect our spouses. We will not perfect our spouses by:

- Having a critical attitude towards them.
- Being silent about their faults.
- Comparing them to others.
- Nagging them (A woman once asked her husband to define nagging. He said, "When you tell me once, that's a suggestion; when you tell me a second time, that's a reminder; when you tell me a third time, that's nagging.")
- Manipulating them, bribing them with affection or other favors.

If these methods are not the proper ways to fulfill the command, how are we supposed to perfect our husbands and wives? Paul tells us in our core passage, Ephesians 5:22-33. Fundamentally, the wife perfects the husband by respecting him, and the husband perfects the wife by loving her (verse 33).

Let's consider the wife's respect for her husband first. We'll look at four aspects of her respect.

(1) A wife perfects her husband by making her respect for him obvious.

A man is freed to love his wife when he knows that she respects him. Without that confidence, truly giving of oneself sacrificially is incredibly frightening, as one is open and laid bare before her. So it is easier for me to love Beth if I have confidence in her respect. Indeed, the best way to get your husband to love you is to ensure that he knows you respect him. A disagreement over what action to take, followed by the wife's gracious submission to her husband, as she states that she trusts his judgment and will follow his lead, shows clearly that she respects him. That is why Peter writes:

In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives (1 Peter 3:1).

Do you see how the perfecting is taking place? God intends for the man to love his wife – that is the man's ideal role in Christian marriage. The wife helps her husband to live up to that role, she perfects him as a man, when she respects him in all ways. So submission and respect are not just right for wives because they are commanded; obedience in these areas leads to the man becoming what God intended him to be.

(2) A wife perfects her husband by making HIM her head.

It is very tempting for woman to set up some other man as her head: A pastor, her father, or a Christian teacher. In such cases, the wife will say or think things like, "Why can't my husband be more like so-and-so?" Wives, God chose your husband especially for you. You can learn from other men, but always remember that *your husband* is your head, not any other man.

This is most difficult for the wife when her husband is making bad decisions; it is especially hard when he is not a Christian. Yet, in setting up the man's headship, God is promising to the wife that He will work for her good through her husband. Even if the

husband errs, even when he makes a bad decision, the wife's submission honors God, and He will redeem that decision. This is walking by faith and not by sight – the very essence of the Christian life.

Once again, if the husband feels that his wife looks up to other men more than himself, he will be reluctant to love her sacrificially. Her respect for him and trust in him – particularly in the functional aspects of their marriage and home – free him from the fear that she will second-guess his decisions and criticize him. He is also more likely in such cases to be willing to delegate responsibility to her in areas where she may be capable and gifted, knowing that she will not use that opportunity to try to take over more and more of the matters of the home. Once again, the husband becomes more and more what God intends men to be through the wife clearly making the husband her head.

(3) A wife perfects her husband by communicating with him.

As the military analogy shows, submission does not mean silence, it does not mean simply agreeing without discussing. Consider again the relationship between Christ and the church. The church is to submit completely to Christ. But God wants us to tell him everything!

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6)
Pray without ceasing. (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Just so, there should be open communication from wife to husband. This too leads to his perfection as a man. By himself, he is not able to discern his wife's needs and desires; he will not know how best to nourish and cherish her. Given her particular stress on relationships, she is likely to have insights and strong feelings about matters regarding children, friends, church members, and family members. Note that her talking about such matters is good not only for the wife, but also for the husband. Now, this communication needs to be respectful, and, as with our prayers to the Lord, in final decisions she must yield her own will. But communication concerning her thoughts, desires, and dreams is one way she perfects her husband.

(4) A wife perfects her husband by discerning his desires.

With their functional orientation, many men find it hard to talk about their inner selves. A wife performs a great service for her husband when she studies him and learns about him, so that she understands his goals and desires, even when he does not state them explicitly. She can then assist him in the accomplishment of his goals, without his asking her directly to do so. Then her husband knows that she is truly his ally, his helper intent on aiding him in the accomplishment of his goals. Once again, in most cases this will lead to his responding by loving her more and more, as he appreciates her help. Thus he becomes what God intends him to be.

Now let's turn our attention to husbands. Fundamentally, the husband perfects the wife by loving her. As in the case of the wife, the husband frees the wife to respect him by loving her. When we discussed love in marriage, we noted the words used of Christ and the church: love her, cleanse her, nourish her, care for her. How do these ideas and our understanding of the nature of maleness and femaleness translate into practical lessons for ways the husband's love perfects the wife as a woman? We will consider four ways the husband perfects his wife by working to build up their relationship.

(1) The husband perfects his wife by giving her time.

As we have seen, women in general put a high emphasis on relationships. Husbands need to note this, and must take care not to let work, recreation, or ministry opportunities crowd out time with their wives. You cannot love your wife sacrificially, you cannot build a relationship with your wife, without spending time with her.

(2) The husband perfects his wife by speaking to her.

Time spent together must include discussion. Christ communicates to the church through His word, and husbands must communicate to their wives by using words! Husbands, how many times in the evenings do you answer your wife's questions with grunts? Again, since men are primarily functional in orientation, this can be difficult. Nevertheless, a loving husband will force himself to talk, even when he does not feel like it. This can include speaking about seemingly trivial matters as well as sharing with her your hopes and dreams. Talk!

(3) The husband perfects his wife by listening to her.

Time spent together must also include listening. Husbands, listen when your wife speaks to you even about unimportant issues. Seek out your wife's opinion on important matters. Now, her submission and respect free you to do this. Many men do not seek out their wives' opinions because they want to avoid fights and disagreements. If, in the past, differences of opinion on important matters have led to fights, the man has every incentive to make those decisions on his own without discussion. When the man knows that his wife respects him, when he knows that even if she disagrees in the end she will accept his decision, he is much freer to seek her advice and listen to it. This is the beauty of God's plan for headship and submission. And as he listens to her, she gains confidence in his love and care, thus freeing her to respect him and submit to him.

These first three ways work together to assure your wife that you love her. And as she comes to trust more and more in your love and in the quality of your relationship, she becomes more like the perfect, spotless bride that God intends her to be.

(4) The husband perfects his wife by taking care of her needs.

Here the husband's functional orientation can help him to show love to his wife, thus meeting her relational needs. Think about what she needs, about what would help her, both in her day-to-day work and in her spiritual life. Pray about those needs, and be creative in finding ways to please her and build her up. Be fully conscious of her failings and weaknesses, and help her to avoid situations that will cause her to stumble as a result of those weaknesses. When she does stumble, continue to take care of her needs: avoid condemning her, or irritating her, or getting annoyed with her, but instead, forgive her and seek to build her up. When we marry, we marry a whole person – beauty and ugliness, successes and failures. Our wives need to know that we love them unconditionally, and that we are here not to berate and condemn, but to help them to become what God intends them to be. And as we do so, our wives will become more and more like the wife of the ideal Christian marriage.

Results of Christian Marriage

So we have seen that husband and wife display the unity, love, headship/submission, and perfection that we find in the relationship between Christ and the church. When a man and a woman live out these truths, when their marriage becomes what God intends it to be, what is the result? We will highlight four results.

First, *the husband shows his inner character by what his wife becomes.* Just as Christ's character is displayed in the glory of the church, so a husband's character is displayed through the person his wife becomes. Remember verse 27 of our passage? Jesus sanctifies and cleanses the church so that

He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless.

He presents to himself the church. A loving husband will be able to present to himself his wife in all her glory, set apart for him, perfect in her womanhood. After many years of marriage, she will be a woman at peace, a woman who responds lovingly to him in

every way. And it will be apparent to all that this man is a man of love.

Second, *the wife shows her character by what her husband becomes.* Proverbs 31:10-31 makes this clear. This section begins,

10 An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. 12 She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.

The excellent wife has an impact on her husband's life: he is at peace, trusting in her, lacking nothing. He continually benefits because of what she is.

Verses 13 to 23 detail the various types of work she does. The result is recorded in verse 24:

23 Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land.

She contributes to her husband becoming a respected elder of the people, because of who she is, because her husband is able to trust her and rely upon her. He recognizes his debt to her, and honors her above all women:

28b Her husband . . . praises her: 29 "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."

But the praise is not limited to her husband. Others also will recognize that the husband's success and character are due in large measure to the character of his wife:

30 Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. 31 Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.

Third, *a Christian marriage testifies to the truth and power of the gospel.*

Jesus says, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you . . ." what? If you have love one for another. This is true of all Christians, but it is especially true of marriage. The truth of the gospel is manifested when those outside the church:

- See the tenderness a husband and wife have for each other after decades of marriage,
- See the mutual regard husband and wife have for each other,
- See an example of godly headship and submission,
- See the true, essential unity of Christian marriage.

Living out a Christian marriage is a tremendous witness, a tremendous testimony to the power of God, particularly in today's culture. Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it this way: "There is no greater recommendation to the truth and power of the Christian faith than a Christian husband and wife, a Christian marriage, a Christian home."

Fourth, *a Christian marriage grows over time.*

For many marriages, the first joyous months are the apex. Everything is downhill after that. But a truly Christian marriage will grow and grow as each partner perfects the other. We need to ask ourselves continually:

- How can I come closer to loving my wife as Christ loved the church?
- How can I show respect to and honor my husband, as the church does to Christ?
- How can I build up my wife, or my husband?

Conclusion

Do you want to give your husband or wife a gift? The greatest gift you could possibly give to your spouse would be to commit to living out your role as a Christian wife or a Christian husband by the power of the Spirit.

Let me emphasize those last five words: "By the power of the Spirit." Because if you are like me, you husbands are thinking that

you cannot possibly love your wife like Christ loved the church. And you women are thinking that you cannot possibly submit to your husbands in everything. I assure you, all of us struggle with this. Jesus tells us to be perfect as he is perfect. And not one of us is perfect.

But God has promised that His people will become perfect -- He will change us and mold us into Christlikeness. Count on that!

Satan will try to say one of two things:

"You're doing well enough in your marriage, at least better than most others; don't be fanatical about this -- you don't need to change anything." But I tell you, don't be satisfied with a marriage that is less than perfect. Examine yourself. If you are failing to live up to these ideals, confess this to God, and ask Him to change you.

Or Satan might say, "It's no use. If you could start over, maybe you could make this marriage work. But given your spouse, given all that has happened in your marriage, there is no hope."

This is a pack of lies. Now, by yourselves you cannot change the habits of relating to each other you have created. "Apart from me you can do nothing." If you try to change depending on your own natural resources, you will fail. But, remember! We began this course with an overview of the truths in this great book of Ephesians:

- You ARE raised with Christ, you are seated with him in the heavenlies!
- You ARE LIGHT; You CAN walk as children of Light!
- You can be FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT!

All this is true. By conscious, continual dependence on the Spirit within you, you can forgive your spouse, you can change old, negative patterns of relating to each other; you can live out the ideal Christian marriage.

So let us learn to walk by the Spirit in our marriages, imitating the relationship between Christ and the church.

Husbands, love your wives.

Wives, respect and submit to your husbands.

Attitude towards children:

What are children? How should we consider them? The Scriptures suggest four ideas:

First, that children are a GIFT FROM GOD. Consider these verses:

Psalm 127:3 Behold, children are a gift of the LORD, The fruit of the womb is a reward. 4 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So are the children of one's youth. 5 How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them;

Genesis 33:5 Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. "Who are these with you?" he asked. Jacob answered, "They are the children God has graciously given your servant."

Psalm 128:1 Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in his ways! 2 You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. 3 Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table. 4 Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD.

Since children are a gift, it is clear that we must not expect every marriage to be blessed by them. Children are not the purpose for marriage. Every marriage is to be characterized by love, unity, headship/submission, and perfection of each other, but not every marriage will produce children.

Also, if children are a gift from God, clearly they are not a curse. At some point -- after struggling with rebellion or disobedience or

crying -- probably every parent feels his children are a curse. But the Bible clearly teaches that they are blessings, given to us in part for our benefit.

The second idea suggested by Scripture is that children are LOVED BY GOD:

Mark 10:13 People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." 16 And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

The disciples thought Jesus was too busy to deal with children. They thought they were protecting him from distractions by keeping the children away. But Jesus is deeply angered by their action. He loved the children, and wanted to take them in his arms and bless them. Indeed, He holds up the children as examples for all of us, saying that we must receive God's kingdom with the wonder, trust, and straightforwardness of a child.

The third idea suggested by Scripture is that CHILDREN ARE ENTRUSTED TO US, THEY DO NOT BELONG TO US. As we have seen, children are gifts put into our care, but they are not our property. Consider this verse:

Isaiah 43:1 But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

'You are mine!' God says this over all of creation, over all of humanity: 'You are mine!' Our children belong to God, not to us. We receive them as gifts and keep them in our homes for a few years; God blesses us through them in many ways; but they belong neither to us nor to our parents; they belong to God. We are stewards over them, with responsibilities to care for them, to cherish them, and to bring them up in the fear and admonition of the Lord. But they do not belong to us.

The fourth idea suggested by Scripture is that CHILDREN ARE SINFUL; they are neither a blank slate, ready to become good or bad, nor are they basically good. David writes:

Psalm 51:5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

This is very important to remember. Although God gives these precious little ones to us as gifts, although they are blessings to us, they are not good. Like every human born in the normal way, every child inherits the sinfulness of our entire race. Without any encouragement from others, they will show pride, self-will, jealousy, anger, covetousness and every other sin. Left to themselves, they will show clearly their fallenness.

So children are a precious gift from God, loved by Him and entrusted to our care for a period of time. But they, like all of us, are by nature children of wrath; they are infected with sin, and need godly upbringing to teach them the ways of the Lord.

How are we to treat these children? WE ARE TO TREAT CHILDREN THE WAY GOD TREATS US. Again and again the Bible uses the picture of a family to describe our relationship to God. God is our father, we are His children; we are brothers and sisters in Christ; we are heirs of God; He disciplines us the way a father disciplines his children. So we are to pattern our relationship to our children after God's relationship to His people.

How does this work in practice? Luke 2:52 says that Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and men. We'll use this as an outline of parents' responsibilities toward their children: First, we'll consider how we help our children to grow in wisdom and in favor with God as they learn of God's love, God's

Word, and their need for Him. Second, we'll examine how we help them grow in favor with men, as we train them in knowing how to relate to others, and in good habits of life. Finally, we will look at how we help them grow in stature, providing care and nourishment for them.

Growing in Wisdom and in Favor with God

The Bible is very clear about the parents' responsibility to teach children the ways of the Lord. Consider these verses:

Deuteronomy 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Proverbs 22:6 Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.

Ephesians 6:4 Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction (or "admonition") of the Lord.

Colossians 3:21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

Genesis 18:19 For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him."

In Deuteronomy 6, the Israelites are commanded to impress God's commands on their children. This is not an option that only a few especially spiritual parents are supposed to do, but a command to **all** of the people. And when are they to do this? Do you see the point of verses 7 to 9? They are to use all the normal activities of life as opportunities for teaching their children about God. Getting up in the morning and going to bed at night; walking or sitting; going into your house or out your gate; in every case you are to be discussing the things of the Lord with your children.

Note that **this command is given to parents, not to the church.** Certainly all of the Israelite community should be anxious to help each family raise its children, and certainly in the church today there are ways that we can help each other. But the primary responsibility for training children in the ways of the Lord falls upon the parents. If your children are not learning the Bible, if they are not learning the gospel message, if they are becoming disobedient and opposed to the things of the Lord, the responsibility to correct and train them lies not with the church but with you as parents.

When should we begin to train our children in the ways of the Lord? Early, when they are still infants. Note these verses:

Proverbs 4:3 When I was a boy in my father's house, still tender, and an only child of my mother, 4 he taught me and said, "Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live.

2 Timothy 3:15 and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Timothy knew the Scriptures as an infant; the author of the proverb was taught when a young boy. By beginning very early, we impress our children when they are most impressionable with devotion to the Lord, delight in God's character, reverence for the Word, and love for God's people.

What methods should we use to accomplish this? How can we go about teaching our children? First and foremost, we must be good examples ourselves. Consider:

Jeremiah 32:38 They will be my people, and I will be their God. 39 I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them.

Singleness of heart and action leads to fear of the Lord, which is of benefit to the people themselves AND to their children. When you are devoted to the Lord, when you treasure Him above everything in heaven and earth, when you are focused on Him and delighting to do His will, your children will see and learn. And they will receive great blessings from your example.

But teaching by example, as important as it is, is not enough. We must also actively teach the Word to our children. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 again is very helpful: in every circumstance of our family life, we are to bring out the relevant truths of God's Word. This implies having times of family devotion together; praying together; talking more informally about the Lord as circumstances warrant; and reading good books together that illustrate spiritual truths.

The specific methods we use are likely to vary somewhat with the ages of our children. Even when they are infants, we can sing to them, pray over them (particularly when putting them to bed), and keep them near us as we read the Bible and pray ourselves. When children are a little older and able to walk around, we can teach them simple songs and encourage them to take part in family devotions. They are quite able to memorize Scripture at this age, particularly Scriptures set to music. Although they will usually have a difficult time sitting still, train them to do so – initially for short periods of time – while you read the Bible, and emphasize the importance of their paying attention. Tell Bible stories to them with expression and animation, showing them by your attitude that the Bible is interesting and exciting. Be consistent in setting aside some time each day, and show the child your own delight in the Lord.

As children reach primary school age, times of reading the Bible can become longer. We have read through the entire Bible together over about 18 months of family devotions with children as young as 6 and 7. Sometimes it is helpful to provide paper and a pen, and encourage the children to draw a picture relevant to the story while you are reading. Encourage the children to ask questions, and take the time to explain difficult passages. Also, as soon as they are able to read, give them the gift of a Bible and encourage them to read short sections by themselves. As they grow and mature, encourage their regular reading according to a reading plan, and have them read aloud sections of Scripture during family devotions. Make use of a good program of Scripture Memorization. Psalm 119:11 says "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." The memorized Word is powerful in many ways, and children are better able than adults to memorize quickly when even a small amount of time is set aside for this purpose daily.

In general, during these years we want to develop a delight and joy in God, a basic understanding of the thrust of the teaching of Scripture, and a growing hunger for the Word. As the Psalmist says,

Psalm 119:103 How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Psalm 119:16 I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.

That is the attitude we want to engender in our children: to delight in God's Word, to find it sweet, and to desire to know it better and better.

Finally, pray for your children. First, pray for their salvation earnestly. Study them carefully, knowing what is going on in their lives, the trials they face and the struggles they have. Understand

what strengths and weaknesses each child has, praying that they might grow in specific ways. See what sins they are prey to, and help them to avoid situations that lead them in to temptation. You can be the means of great spiritual growth in your children, through your leadership, example, teaching, and prayer. Serve them faithfully, and trust that God will work through you for the salvation and growth of these precious gifts.

Growing in Favor with Men

We encourage you to spend considerable time in a study of the book of Proverbs as it relates to child rearing. Many of the proverbs are instructions from a father to his son. Indeed, the word "son" appears more than 50 times in the book. The overall idea is captured well in 6:20-22:

20 My son, observe the commandment of your father And do not forsake the teaching of your mother; 21 Bind them continually on your heart; Tie them around your neck. 22 When you walk about, they will guide you; When you sleep, they will watch over you; And when you awake, they will talk to you.

The parents here have provided their son with commandments to guide his walk and to instruct him in all circumstances of his life. Using words that remind us of Deuteronomy 6, the father instructs his son to keep these commandments before him continually. Surely, many of these commands relate to spiritual life, as we have already discussed. But a quick survey of Proverbs shows clearly that much of this instruction concerns relating to other men, growing in favor with them, helping us learn how to ensure that our children are a blessing to others.

For example, 20:11 says:

Even a child is known by his actions, by whether his conduct is pure and right.

We want our children to be known as those whose conduct is pure and right, whose character is noble, whose behavior is commendable, who are blessings to others. We want our children to be good citizens, to contribute to the general welfare of the community, to take their places as valuable members of society.

How do we accomplish this? First of all, we must ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR TRAINING OUR CHILDREN IN PRACTICAL LIFE SKILLS. Education and other forms of training are in the end the parents' responsibility. We as parents may delegate some of the teaching responsibilities to schools, but WE must ensure that the schools are doing their job well, and supplement the teaching of the schools with extra help to fill in whatever gaps remain. Even a parent who has not been highly educated can help children with schoolwork. Many schools do an abysmal job of teaching basic reading skills and arithmetic. If your 10-year-old child has been in school but cannot read well or do basic arithmetic operations, the responsibility is yours to teach him. This is an important part of helping your child to grow in favor with men (in addition, reading is a vital skill for growing in wisdom, as we cannot read the Bible unless we are able to read well).

Second, we must SPEND CONSIDERABLE TIME WITH OUR CHILDREN. Proverbs 22:6 tells us:

Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it.

Children are different from each other; the way one should go may not be the way another should go. We need to be able to discern the gifts, skills, and personalities of each of our children so that we can help each in his particular way to grow in favor with men.

We can spend time together in work (10:4 Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth) and in play, enjoying our time together. All of these times help us to develop proper habits in our children: respect for elders, courtesy for others, diligence in work, appropriate speech (10:19 When words are

many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise), and responsibility in actions.

Third, we must TEACH OUR CHILDREN TO OBEY AUTHORITY. And we parents are the first authority they must learn to obey. You all have memorized Ephesians 6:1-3, where children are instructed to obey their parents in the Lord. Other passages teach the same:

Colossians 3:20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

Exodus 20:12 Honor your father and your mother

Proverbs 30:17 The eye that mocks a father, that scorns obedience to a mother, will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley, will be eaten by the vultures.

Children need to understand that parents are the authority in their lives, that obedience is not optional, but the command of God Himself. Like all of God's commands, these commands are for their good, and will lead to their growing in favor with men.

Training a child in obedience should start very early. For example, even a very young child can be taught not to touch certain things. We can help the child obey by moving most objects he might damage or that might hurt him out of his reach. But when he touches something forbidden, quietly but firmly say No and move the child away.

From the earliest time, parents should be firm and consistent. Our yes should be yes, and our no, no. This is absolutely vital. Even a very young child will quickly learn if you mean what you say. Again and again, we have seen parents tell a child something and not follow through. Imagine this scene:

"Lydia, put down that bowl." Baby Lydia continues to play with the bowl. Mother, louder: "Lydia, I said put down that bowl!" Baby Lydia continues to play with the bowl. "Lydia, if you don't put down that bowl, I will spank you!" At this point, Lydia puts that bowl on her head like a hat, and smiles at her mother. Her mother thinks she is cute, and smiles back – then another child comes into the room, and the mother forgets all about the bowl.

Baby Lydia has now learned that she need not obey her mother – she just needs to persist in what she is doing, looking cute if she can, and her mother will likely become distracted and forget about the command. Such interactions lead to persistent disobedience in older children.

But this brings up another point. While we must mean "no" when we say "no", we must limit the number of times we give commands and prohibit actions. We don't want to discourage our children, or make them feel like everything they desire is forbidden. We must limit our commands and restrictions to a few important areas – and then enforce those commands faithfully.

The goal of discipline is not the break the child's will and force your will on her – "I'm bigger and I'm stronger so I can *make* you do what I want!" – but to train the will so that the child chooses to do what is right. God's discipline works the same way. Once we belong to Him He trains us and encourages us to choose what is right. Consider these verses:

Proverbs 22:15 Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.

Hebrews 12:11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Proverbs 19:18 Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death.

Removing the folly from the heart hurts, but discipline leads to hope of change in the future – and not just a change in behavior but a change in the desires of the heart.

One aspect of discipline is showing that choices have consequences. One way to do this is to allow the child to suffer

the natural consequences of her actions, when those consequences are not dangerous. Touching a hot cup of tea and hurting her finger; pulling a cat's tail and receiving a scratch – allowing these minor hurts can provide valuable lessons on the consequences of actions.

Some actions have logical consequences that we as parents have to enforce. A child who spills tea should have to clean it up; if she breaks something, she should be required to fix it or replace it.

But some actions require punishment other than the natural or logical consequences of the action. This, too, is an important aspect of discipline. In some cases, the best form of punishment is simply separation, particularly when the child has been showing off, interrupting, or in other ways trying to draw attention to herself. Separation gives the child time to calm down, time to think about her action before the parent comes and discusses the problem.

Physical punishment, however, has a clear role in the discipline of children, primarily when a child disobeys a clear, unequivocal command. Proverbs 13:24 is well-known:

Proverbs 13:24 He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.

Even Psalm 23 includes the words, “your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” The word translated “rod” is the same as in Proverbs 14:24. The shepherd uses the rod and the staff to guide and correct wandering sheep, keeping them with the flock. The rod might hurt at times, but in the end it is a comfort, as the sheep knows it keeps him in the place of safety.

Although physical punishment is necessary, in our observation it is often misused in Cameroon (and in the US). Not only can this misuse harm the child, it can also defeat the purpose of the discipline. So we offer these guidelines for the use of “the rod”:

1) NEVER PUNISH YOUR CHILD PHYSICALLY WHEN YOU ARE ANGRY. Such situations, of course, are when we most *want* to punish the child physically. But that is just the point. In order for physical punishment to be effective in training the child in the way he should go, the parent must be setting a good example of mature behavior. A parent who lashes out in anger and smacks his child is not showing self-discipline or self-control. He instead is teaching the child that the bigger, stronger person can do what he wants.

Thus, a parent must calm down and judge the situation clearly before deciding on physical punishment. Separation may be important in order to allow this to happen. In our own case, often once we have calmed down we choose not to administer physical punishment. Furthermore, if we err and hit our child in anger, we must admit this before the child, and seek forgiveness. Matthew 5:24-25, though written about a brother, surely holds also for a child: If we remember that our child has something against us, let us stop whatever we are doing and seek forgiveness from that child.

2) DO NOT NAG YOUR CHILD, CONSTANTLY CORRECTING AND THREATENING HIM. One expert on corporate management teaches that a good leader gives three words of encouragement for every word of correction. That is not a bad guideline for the home. As noted above, Colossians 3:21 tells us not to embitter our children, or they will become discouraged. If we are always telling our children, “Don’t do this!” “Stop doing that!” the end will be discouragement. If instead the general atmosphere in the home is one of grace for past sins, love for the present, and encouragement for the future, the few times of punishment will be effective at changing the most important areas needing correction.

3) TAKE CARE WITH YOUR WORDS. We can cause considerable harm to our children by the use of careless, harsh words. As James tells us in chapter 3, the tongue can set on fire the entire course of a person’s life. And this can happen even if the words themselves are not harmful. We can hurt as much by

the tone of our voice as by the words themselves. In Ephesians 4:29, Paul tells us:

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

We do not benefit our children by angry, scolding words said in a harsh tone of voice. All our words – words of love as well as words of discipline – should aim at building up our children, so that they might become blameless and pure children of God.

In sum, when we educate our children, spend time with them, build them up, and discipline them lovingly and effectively, we lay the groundwork for a life ahead that will earn the favor of men. Such a life will be an effective witness of the grace of God – and also will bring great joy to the parents.

Growing in Stature

Finally, a few words about growing in stature. As parents, we are responsible for the physical health of our children right now, as well as being responsible for training them in good habits that will serve to keep them in good health in the years ahead. 1 Timothy 4:8 tells us that bodily training is of some value – it is not the highest value since its benefits do not extend into eternity, but nevertheless it is of value for all of our life on earth.

Here again our example as parents is important. If we take good care of our bodies, exercising regularly and eating the most nutritious diet our income allows, if we control ourselves at parties and fight the normal pattern of gaining weight as we age, our children will learn from us and be more likely to follow the same pattern. If instead we set a bad example, our children are likely to follow that also.

But we can also encourage our children by participating in physical activities with them, helping them to develop interests in exercise, attending their games at athletic matches if they participate in sports, and encouraging them to eat well, sleep sufficient hours, and follow good hygiene.

So we have seen that we as parents have an important impact on the growth of our children. We have treated these issues of growth from the most important to the least. Of most importance is their growth in wisdom and in favor with God. This must be our first priority. But just as Jesus grew in favor with men, so should our children, so that they might contribute in numerous ways to the betterment of their society, as well as being more effective witnesses for Christ. Finally, our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and good physical health will make us better able to serve Christ energetically. So we as parents must do our best to help our children grow in stature, through good habits of care of their physical bodies.

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