

## Appendix 5

### Spirit-filled Marriage (Ephesians 5)

In the writing of this book I have encountered many surprises. But none is more startling than this discovery: *the interpretive clue to a proper understanding and application of Ephesians 5:15-33 is held by Tom Bergeron*. I never would have expected that in a thousand years. I bet you didn't know it either.<sup>1</sup>

"I still don't," I hear you say. "What in the world are you talking about?"<sup>2</sup>

It will take a few pages to explain it. But let's start by unpacking the statement. In order to share in my discovery, you must understand two things: 1) what Ephesians 5:15-33 says; and 2) Who Tom Bergeron is. The short answer is that the passage in Ephesians 5 contains the primary instruction by the Apostle Paul on the subject of marriage. And Tom Bergeron . . . well, we'll get back to him in a few pages.

The longer answer begins with a reminder of the task at hand. The single adult who is contemplating marriage should gain an accurate understanding of what marriage is about. The most reliable source for such information is the "Owner's Manual" provided by the Creator of marriage. His design is revealed through a historical narrative that is arranged somewhat like a symphony in four movements.

In the first movement, we witness the institution of marriage when the first man and the first woman became the first spouses. But in the second movement, marriage became corrupted through the rebellion of the first couple. One practical consequence is that each subsequent marriage places "two sinners in close proximity to each other for

long stretches of time.” This sad reality strains the best of marriages and ultimately destroys all too many of them.

But the good news is that the symphony does not end with the fall of mankind. There is a third (and even a fourth) movement. Jesus has come and paid sin’s penalty and broken sin’s power. By his Spirit and through his Church he is working to reconcile what was alienated and restore what was ruined. To that end, he has retrofitted the institution of marriage for believers. And he transforms Christian spouses to actualize the functions of marriage in their lives.

So a godly, Christ-empowered marriage places two redeemed and *recovering* sinners into close proximity for long stretches of time. If these two individuals, who are strongly committed to one another, utilize the means of grace at their disposal, they can actually help each other grow! Indeed, by virtue of the intimacy afforded through marriage and the sheer quantity of time available for mutual edification, the marital relationship should enable each of them to be the *greatest human influence* for spiritual advancement in the life of the other. Whenever this happens, marriage serves as a vehicle for transformation, which is a key part of what Jesus has in mind for Christian unions.

In Chapter 4, we saw the modifications that Christ has made to the institution of marriage in the present age. In this essay, we turn our attention to his redeeming influence on Christian spouses as they seek to advance his present mission. What we learn is that Jesus intends to substantially *reverse* the effects of the fall in Christian marriage.

### **A Little Controversy**

The most comprehensive instructions given to Christian husbands and wives in the New Testament are included in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. At the outset of our exploration of this key segment, we must acknowledge that the verses in question have become the subject of no small debate. Some scholars (often called "complementarians"<sup>3</sup>) hold that Ephesians 5:15-33 contains apostolic guidance that defines marital roles throughout the duration of the third movement (including our own period of history). These commentators assert that this passage describes what a godly marriage should look like in a fallen world. Others (often called "egalitarians"<sup>4</sup>) emphasize that Paul was addressing first-century Christians who lived in a patriarchal culture that is substantially different from our own. It is true that he was describing what a Christian marriage should look like in the context of the ancient Greco-Roman culture; but contemporary Christians need to identify the timeless principles of the apostolic instruction and apply them with sensitivity to our own social setting. Egalitarians do not agree with complementarians that the marital roles described in Ephesians 5 were intended to be permanent or transcultural.

While my preference would have been to ignore this controversy, I have chosen not to for two reasons. The first is the reality of history: While the biblical text was originally addressed to believers living in a patriarchal culture, contemporary Christians inevitably read those words from the perspective of a social setting wherein sexual equality is emphasized and gender roles are not precisely defined. To oversimplify, Paul's original audience would be more aligned with the complementarian perspective while our own culture is more egalitarian. That difference requires us to exercise great care in applying Paul's teaching to our own time.

My second reason for acknowledging the debate stems from the purpose of this book. The objective is to equip unmarried Christian adults to make wise marital choices. If you choose to pursue marriage and find a candidate who is similarly inclined, the two of you need to be on the same page with respect to how you intend to apply this passage to your union. The argument between complimentarians and egalitarians may be intellectually entertaining. But attempting to unite spouses with opposing views within one marriage is another matter entirely. In the end, it matters little whether you agree with my conclusions. It matters a lot whether you have essential agreement with your mate.<sup>5</sup>

In the remainder of this chapter, I will attempt to explain Paul’s teaching to Christian spouses. Then I will present my take on the appropriate application of that instruction for contemporary believers. (Then you will have to figure out what you think about my presentation.)

### **This Is How You Do That**

The instruction given to husbands and wives (5:22-33) is contained within a larger section that addresses relationships within the Christian home – wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters (5:22-6:9).<sup>6</sup> This material that Martin Luther labeled “Household Codes” resembles similar guidelines for family relationships that appear in Jewish and Greek literature of antiquity.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the impact of Christ in the lives of family members produces dramatic differences in those relationships.<sup>8</sup>

The household codes themselves are part of larger segment, beginning in 5:15, in which Paul explains that Christians should conduct themselves with wisdom in a fallen world:<sup>9</sup> “Therefore be very careful how you live [literally, “walk”] — not as unwise but

as wise, taking advantage of every opportunity, because the days are evil.” The key to such wise living lies in obeying the central imperative: “Be filled by the Spirit” (5:18). In this context, to be filled by the Spirit means to be controlled by the Lord on a continual basis.<sup>10</sup>

What would such a life look like? Well, one “symptom” of the Spirit’s control is submission: “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). Rather than seeking to exert control over our own lives while manipulating others to serve our ends, we are to come under the authority of God’s Spirit and show reverence to Christ by submitting to our fellow Christians. This is one manifestation of wise living.

If we want to know what Paul meant by “submit to one another,” he proceeded to illustrate his point by explaining how this would be applied in the home (Ephesians 5:22-6:9). It is as though he continued verse 22 by saying, “Wives, *for instance*, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.”<sup>11</sup> In subsequent paragraphs he extended the obligation of submission to children (“obey your parents” – 6:1-4), and slaves (“obey your human masters” – 6:5-9).<sup>12</sup> It is within this framework that the apostle gave his instruction to Christian spouses.

[B]e filled by the Spirit, . . . submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, [submit] to your husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is the head of the church—he himself being the savior of the body. But as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to sanctify her by cleansing her with

the washing of the water by the word, so that he may present the church to himself as glorious—not having a stain or wrinkle, or any such blemish, but holy and blameless. In the same way husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one has ever hated his own body but he feeds it and takes care of it, just as Christ also does the church, for we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This mystery is great—but I am actually speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless, each one of you must also love his own wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband (Eph. 5:18, 21-33).

### **Did He Really Say That?**

I wish I could have been in attendance at the Ephesian church the day this letter from Paul was read to them. I suspect that the section addressed to husbands and wives was greeted with gasps and the buzzing of whispered astonishment – especially among the women.

If Paul’s instruction to Christian spouses was surprising to his original audience, it would not be for the reasons that would shock us today. That wives were expected to submit to their husbands – a concept so jarring to the modern mind – would not have fazed the believers in Ephesus. That’s because in their culture, men literally ruled the roost. As “king of his realm,” the husband/father/master had absolute authority over everyone in the family. His responsibility was to “rule” over the members of his household. Indeed, the Greek household codes did not directly address those in the

“inferior” position in the home – only the *pater familias* (the “master of the house”). The patriarch was instructed to “see to it” that everyone else submitted to his rule. When the subservient members of the household were mentioned, it was often in a deprecating manner.<sup>13</sup>

So for the wives in the Ephesian church the first surprise is that Paul *addressed them at all*. And the second surprise was what he did *not* say – he avoided the word “obey” when describing their submission to their husbands. For obedience is not an appropriate category in a relationship between two equal partners. Paul was a fierce proponent of the fundamental equality of all persons in Christ – including men and women (Galatians 3:28; see Genesis 1:27; Acts 2:18). And he understood marriage to be a one-flesh relationship (Ephesians 5:31). He also had a living model of this partnership between equals in the marriage of Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:1-3, 18-19, 24-26; Rom. 16:3-5a; 1 Cor. 16:19). *So even though Paul used the vocabulary of the prevailing culture, his message was strikingly different.*

If the obedience demanded of their Greek/Roman counterparts was not required of Christian wives, what was the nature of the submission enjoined by the apostle? The answer to that question will be determined by our understanding of two key terms in this passage: (1) “submission,” and (2) “head.”

The verb translated “submit” means “to order oneself under.”<sup>14</sup> It “denotes subordination to those considered worthy of respect, either because of their inherent qualities or more often because of the position they held.”<sup>15</sup> The word “submit” belongs to the vocabulary of role relationships. As far as I can tell, some identifiable authority

structure is present in every other instance where the term appears in the New Testament.<sup>16 17</sup>

And that holds true for Paul's admonition to wives. They were given three reasons for submitting to their husbands: (1) such submission is an expression of being filled by the Spirit (18); (2) such submission is given out of reverence (literally: "fear"<sup>18</sup>) for Christ, "as to the Lord" (21-22); and (3) such submission is to be given because "the husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is the head of the church" and she is to emulate the church in her submission to Christ (23-24). In all three reasons, the appeal to the wives was based on their recognition of what is owed to three persons who are, in some sense, "over" them: the Spirit, Christ the Lord, and, yes, their husbands.

Just as the Ephesian wives were not surprised by the admonition to submit to their husbands, so they were not taken aback by Paul's assertion that "the husband is the head of the wife." They may have found the analogy to Christ and the church to be of interest, but initially it would only have confirmed what they already knew – that they were under the authority of their husbands.<sup>19</sup> They were used to patriarchal domination.

But again, male authoritarianism is not what Paul was advocating. So the next surprise was what Paul did *not* say to the husbands. *There is nothing in the text directing him to assert his authority.* Paul declined to instruct husbands to "see to it" that their wives submit. There was, in fact, no mention of authority at all!<sup>20</sup> The focus throughout is on the husband's *responsibility* of leadership.<sup>21</sup> The question, then, is not whether the husband is to be a leader, but what sort of leadership did Paul (and God) have in mind? And if leadership entails responsibility, what is the nature of his assignment?

What the Ephesians heard Paul say is not what they expected. What they expected him to say was, “Husbands, *rule* your wives.” What he said was, “Husbands, *love* your wives.” That’s when the buzzing started!

When a pastor asks an engaged couple why they want to get married, the first words out of their mouths are likely to be, “Because we love each other.” Telling a modern-day husband to “love your wife” may sound like a profound grasp of the obvious. But in Paul’s world, the directive given to the husband would have been as shocking as the wife’s call to submissiveness is in ours. Professor Harold Hoehner called this exhortation “revolutionary.”<sup>22</sup>

To understand why this command was revolutionary, we must make note of three things. First, this is not about romance or affection. The marriages of most of the husbands directly addressed by Paul had been arranged – usually by parents. Most people got married for reasons other than being “in love.” Accordingly, second, the verb Paul used, *agapaō*, connoted an unconditional commitment to pursuing the highest good of the other. It is a need-meeting love. And third, the sacrificial nature of this love was made clear by the descriptive analogy, “as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her.”

How does a leader love? Jesus himself acted it out for us. On the night he was betrayed, when Jesus and his disciples arrived in the upper room to observe the Passover meal, no one fulfilled the customary courtesy of washing the participants’ feet. So Jesus arose, removed the outer cloak that identified him as a rabbi, wrapped a towel around his waist (the attire of a servant), and washed his disciples’ feet (John 13:1-5). *The leader became the servant without ceasing to be the leader.* “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’

and do so correctly,” Jesus explained, “for that is what I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you too ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example—you should do just as I have done for you” (John 13:13-15). In like manner, marital love is to be “foot washing” love.

If the husband is to emulate Christ in the *nature* of his love (self-sacrifice), he can also learn from Christ concerning the *goal* of such love: “. . . to sanctify her by cleansing her with the washing of the water by the word, so that he may present the church to himself as glorious—not having a stain or wrinkle, or any such blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:26-27). As Christ determined to do whatever was required to make the church, his bride, spiritually beautiful, so the husband should have similar commitments with respect to his wife. As Pastor John Stott summarizes, “He will give himself for her, in order that she may develop her full potential under God and so become more completely herself.”<sup>23</sup>

At the outset of Paul’s marital instructions, the Ephesian wives would have had no difficulty making sense of the analogy in which their husbands’ headship was likened to that of Christ “over” the church. They may naturally have thought that the point of comparison was with Christ’s sovereign rule – his lordship – over his people. But then Paul added this qualifier – “he himself being the *savior* of the body.” And then he proceeded to spell out the husband’s demonstration of headship in terms of self-sacrificial provision and care. He wasn’t describing *ruling* headship; he was advocating *servant* headship! It must have taken their breath away. “If my husband loved me like that,” one of those wives must have said, “I would think I was in paradise.”<sup>24</sup>

So what would the wife's submission look like (to return to the question we left hanging)? I think the best clue in the text is found in the closing statement of the segment: "and the wife must *respect* her husband" (5:33). The word "respect" is the same word as "fear" in 5:21, where the object of the reverential regard is Christ.<sup>25</sup> While the husband does not occupy the same position in the life of his believing wife as Christ does, this word conveys something important about the attitude behind her submission. She must not lightly regard the position in which God has placed him in the home. Submission in that case would include a *recognition* of the office of headship assigned to the husband, and whatever supportive *responses* she may deem appropriate.<sup>26</sup>

### **Cultural Transposition**

As we seek to apply Paul's instruction in our own setting, we return to the debate as to how we ought to regard the marital roles mapped out in this passage. Should we think of them as permanent and transcultural, or temporary arrangements reflecting the Greco-Roman culture? (The comments which follow represent my contribution to the discussion; they will not resolve the controversy. Sorry.)

In our considerations, it will be necessary to interact with three approaches to the text. The first we might label "hierarchical." I didn't mention this view at the beginning of this chapter, but it continues to be held by many people today. This perspective emphasizes the ruling headship of the husband and the subordination of the wife. Marriage, on this view, is an "over-under" relationship. It is a less severe version of the patriarchy that existed in the Ephesian culture of the first century.

Hierarchicalism is, in fact, the arrangement that prevailed throughout most of the history of our country.<sup>27</sup> It was the dominant paradigm for my parents' generation – what

I grew up with – and it held sway through the 1950s and beyond.<sup>28</sup> This was the “traditional” marriage of “Ozzie and Harriet” where the husband is breadwinner and the wife is homemaker. This view holds that the roles referred to in Ephesians 5, understood hierarchically, were intended to be permanent and applicable to our time and place.

What this view misses, in my judgment, is that the “over-under” ranking is a product, not of the original intent (which was side-by-side), but rather the Fall. Hierarchicalism may be a kinder and gentler version of patriarchalism, but it remains patriarchal nonetheless. What is lost in this arrangement is a sufficient sense of equal partnership in the marriage and the call to servanthood on the part of the husband.

I said earlier that Jesus’ intent was to substantially *reverse* the effects of the fall in Christian matrimony. And I believe that Paul was articulating a vision of marriage that did just that. I see two clues to that in the text.

The first is that the very areas addressed by Paul correspond precisely to “the areas where wives and husbands tend to sin”<sup>29</sup> (Genesis 3:16). Wives, who are influenced by the corrupting pull of sin to abandon their “helping” function and seek to control their husbands for their own selfish ends, are exhorted to respect and submit to their husbands. Husbands, who are influenced by the corrupting pull of sin to abuse their power, domineering their wives for their own selfish ends, are directed to love and sacrifice themselves for their wives.

Second, at the conclusion of his paragraph to wives and husbands, Paul directly links his instruction with *God’s original design* as established in Genesis 2. In Ephesians 5:31 Paul quotes Genesis 2:24: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” Apparently, Paul

intended that his instruction would demonstrate how the original design is to be actualized in a fallen world.

Does this mean, then, that there is no abiding leadership role to be exercised by husbands in the current setting? That is the view of egalitarians who take a position opposite that of hierarchicalists. To be specific, they do not object to requiring submission of wives; they just insist that the same obligation be placed upon husbands. This is the doctrine of “mutual submission.” Imposing submission on wives only, in their view, functionally nullifies the equality of women and men affirmed throughout the New Testament – especially Galatians 3:28. This conviction is based on two primary arguments.

Some egalitarians hold that the reciprocal directive to believers to “submit to one another” in 5:21 eliminates role distinctions by definition.<sup>30</sup> So even though husbands/fathers/masters are never explicitly told to submit to their wives/children/slaves in the passage from 5:22-6:9, the participle, “submitting” (in 5:21), governs the instructions given to them as well. The “submission” of husbands to wives is expressed in their self-sacrificing love. On this understanding, submission is a synonym for servanthood.

But this view overlooks the element of authority inherent in the semantic meaning of submission.<sup>31</sup> Apart from the recognition of role distinctions, the call to “mutual submission” makes little sense. It could be taken to mean that any believer would be obliged to yield to any demand made by any other believer.<sup>32</sup> But that is not the case. Sometimes, such as when another Christian is out of line in some way, we are required to do the opposite – namely rebuke (Luke 17:3; 1 Timothy 5:20; Titus 1:9, 13).

Furthermore, in the parallel passages (Colossians 3:18; 1 Peter 3:1) where wives are directed to submit to their husbands (without a corresponding directive to the husbands), any appeal to “mutual submission” is absent. In fact, the context in 1 Peter is explicitly concerned with submission to *authority* (citizens to civil rulers [2:13-17]; servants to masters [2:18-25]; and wives to husbands [3:1-6]). This would seem to indicate that the call to “mutual submission” in Ephesians 5:21 does not eradicate role distinctions.<sup>33</sup>

But are the role distinctions described by Paul in Ephesians 5 established by God to be permanent and transcultural? Egalitarians say no. Their second main contention is that the headship of which Paul speaks was not divinely ordered. Proponents view this headship either as a product of the Fall or a social feature of the Greco-Roman culture. In either event, modern-day believers are justified in “moving beyond” such a restrictive paradigm to embrace full equality for wives and husbands.

My response to this latter assertion has two parts. First, I find the complementarian counterargument – that Paul grounded his understanding of male headship in the creative order – to be more persuasive.<sup>34</sup> As I mentioned above, Paul’s citation of Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:31 expressly links Paul’s instruction to the original pattern for marriage. In the reasons he gives for the behaviors and attitudes he enjoins, he makes no reference to Greco-Roman culture. And his description of “servant headship” in this passage is the polar opposite of the male domination stemming from the Fall. It appears to me that Paul fully intended to describe to people living in a sinful world the dynamics of marriage as it was originally designed – dynamics that came so naturally to the first, innocent pair that they didn’t have to be spelled out.<sup>35</sup>

So, second, it is possible to have a concept of headship that is not patriarchal and domineering. This is evident from the part of Paul’s essay that provided information that was truly new – his revelation concerning the “mystery” of marriage.

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This mystery is great—but I am actually speaking with reference to Christ and the church. (Eph. 5:31-32).

What he’s saying here is that marriages that fulfill God’s design serve a previously unrevealed function – they *portray the “marriage” between Christ and his bride*, the church. In the book, we explore this “mystery” in more detail in Chapter 6. For now, the point I am making is that Christian spouses who follow Paul’s instructions in Ephesians 5:22-33 create a living parable that points to a more ultimate marital covenant – the one between Christ and his church. The grace-driven “headship and submission” of Christian spouses is designed to convey a picture of the “headship and submission” of Christ and his church. That sounds pretty normative to me.

To sum up, the normative nature of Paul’s revelation in Ephesians 5:22-33 is demonstrated by four textual features. This instruction describes a marriage . . .

- governed by the *control of the Holy Spirit*;
- motivated by *commitment to the lordship of Christ*;
- *reflecting God’s original design* lived out in the context of a fallen world;
- *pointing beyond itself to the ultimate reality of the marriage of Christ and his church.*

So the position I occupy is between these two opposite views. But my location on the continuum is not equidistant between the two. Having expressed my difficulties with the egalitarian point of view, I find myself so empathetic to their values that I want to call my view “complegalitarian.” For I, too, adamantly insist that marriages must actualize the equality of wives and husbands; I, too, conceive of marriage as a side-by-side partnership of two individuals who share equally in the commitments, burdens, and blessings of the marital covenant.

My view is that Ephesians 5, properly understood, is normative for Christian spouses today. The “properly understood” part is summarized by four key words: servanthood, responsibility, support, and partnership.

If I could suggest a corrective for the egalitarian position, I would replace the emphasis on “mutual submission” with an emphasis on “mutual *servanthood*.” My epiphany on the distinction between these two concepts was inspired by Pastor John Stott’s summary of Paul’s teaching:

We have seen that the essence of Paul's instruction is “Wives submit, husbands love,” and that these words are different from one another since they recognize the headship which God has given to the husband. Yet when we try to define the two verbs, it is not easy to distinguish clearly between them. What does it mean to “submit”? It is to give oneself up *to* somebody. What does it mean to “love”? It is to give oneself up *for* somebody, as Christ "gave himself up" for the church. Thus “submission” and “love” are two aspects of the very same thing, namely of that selfless self-giving which is the foundation of an enduring and growing marriage.<sup>36</sup>

It is my contention that submission and servanthood are not identical concepts.

Here are the distinctions I see between them:

<b>SUBMISSION</b>	<b>SERVANTHOOD</b>
Ephesians 5:21	Philippians 2:3; John 13
Calling of those under authority	Calling of all leaders and followers
Acknowledges roles	Responds to persons
Self-suppression	Self-sacrifice
Response to role	Response to need
Service is my duty	Service is my gift (beyond the call of duty)
"I'll go where you lead"	"I'll do what you need"

And so while husbands are not called to submit to their wives *as wives*,<sup>37</sup> they are called to *serve* their wives through their self-sacrificing, care-giving love. And wives serve their husbands through supportive assistance. While both spouses are not called to marital submission, both are called to mutual servanthood.

The second word, "responsibility," is just for the husband. The trick with headship is to not allow it to degenerate into dominance. The way to prevent that is to think of it in terms of responsibility – not rank. It is true that responsibility calls for leadership; and it also entails authority. But all of these are assigned to the husband by God, not for his own benefit, but for the sake of his wife and family.

In my church, I hold the position of senior pastor. That does not mean that I do all the ministry. It does mean that it is my responsibility to see to it that ministry gets done. In a similar vein, in our marriage, I do not make all the decisions. Louise and I operate on the basis of a partnership. That means that we both have veto power over any decision. So where do I exercise "headship?" I am responsible to take initiative to see to it that decisions are made. And I am responsible for the decision itself. She can abstain. I cannot.<sup>38</sup> In particular, it is my business to encourage, promote, and invest in her spiritual health and beautification – to do what I can to help her to flourish.

Is this assignment of headship to the husband important in our day? I believe it is. The practical weakness of an egalitarian approach to marriage is that it may inadvertently encourage the man to become passive. I can't prove it, but I suspect we have more problems in Christian marriages caused by male passivity than are caused by male dominance. (And sometimes, the former is a disguise for the latter.)

The third word, for the wives this time, is "support." From the dawn of time, men have needed help in carrying out their assignments. Within a marriage, the wife is called to be a strong helper. "Submission-respect" is not her *role* – it's how she carries it out. When she contributes to her husband's success in fulfilling his responsibilities, she is contributing to their collective success in fulfilling their shared assignments as a couple.

The fourth word, for both husband and wife, is "partnership." To say that one member of the team has a leadership role does not imply that other member trails along behind. When I "exercise leadership" by driving the car on a trip, Louise does not ride in the trunk. Nor does she sit on my lap or straddle the hood of the car. She sits next to me and navigates. She also expresses her submission by alerting me (respectfully) when I am driving too fast. She is very good at this. The end result of our teamwork is that we get to our destination without having to waste money on a speeding ticket. (That's not a bad metaphor for a good marriage.)

### **Learning to Dance**

So what does Tom Bergeron have to do with Ephesians 5?

As I was studying reference works related to this chapter, I came across a paragraph by theologian Donald Bloesch that is very insightful. In it he develops analogies for the three views of marriage I have been discussing:

The symbol that best portrays [hierarchicalism] is the *march*. Here the man leads and the woman obediently follows. The . . . egalitarian model is the *race*.<sup>39</sup> Here man and woman both aspire to realize their particular aims and dreams in the framework of mutual support. The danger is that they may soon become competitors . . . The covenantal model is best symbolized by the *dance*. Here one partner (the man) leads and the other (the woman) dutifully though freely follows, and the result is an underlying harmony and beauty. What we see in covenantal marriage is complementarity in unity . . .”<sup>40</sup>

I think that dancing is a magnificent picture of “complegalitarian” marriage. And Tom Bergeron, as emcee of the currently popular TV show, *Dancing With the Stars*,<sup>41</sup> expands my appreciation for how fitting that image is. In this show, dance teams are formed by pairing up professional dancers with celebrities. The celebrities are selected from among the ranks of actors, athletes, models, politicians, musicians, and the like. Each week, the professionals choreograph their routines and teach the steps to their partners. Then, during the show, the teams compete in a dance contest. Each show features a different dance style; and in each episode, one team is eliminated. At the season finale, one team is crowned the winner.

It is striking to me that the cultural inclination to eradicate gender roles has not penetrated the arena of paired dancing. Bloesch’s analogy remains apt: the man leads, the woman follows, and the result is harmony and beauty. And this is true even when the professional in the pair is a woman. Even though she creates the choreography and teaches her male partner every step he must take, when the music starts, he leads and she follows, and they flow (or rock) together.

Christian husbands and wives are challenged to reverse the impact of the Fall on marriage. What we see in Eden is a “side-by-side” relationship under the lordship of the Creator. The first disobedience produced an “over-under” relationship characterized by conflict. The redemption provided by Christ permits believers to realign themselves under God and draw on his resources to live in growing harmony within marriage. Couples who are becoming proficient in the “dance of Eden” find that as they focus on *mutual up-building* (Rom. 15:2; 1 Thes. 5:11), competitiveness is displaced by cooperation. More than mutual submission, our text advocates *mutual devotion* in love.

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### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. In what ways are Christian spouses to integrate their relationship with God into their marital relationship? How does this contrast with a secular view and practice of marriage?
2. In what ways does Christ serve as a model for both wife and husband in the execution of their marital assignments?
3. Some interpreters of Ephesians 5:21-33 hold that marital roles are not gender-defined but are “egalitarian.” How might those who hold this view legitimately apply this passage to the benefit of Christian spouses today?
4. What are some ways that a Christian wife might express “submission” and “fear” to her husband?
5. Describe the nature of the husband’s “love” for his wife. What are some ways that a Christian husband might express his love for his wife?

6. Can you think of examples of wives and/or husbands that you know who have instructed and inspired you in the way they have put this passage into practice? What, specifically, did they do?
7. How does Pastor John Stott diffuse the tension that often characterizes discussions of submission and headship?
8. In what ways is dancing a good metaphor for Christian marriage? Why do Christian spouses need to *learn* to “dance”?
9. Were you aware of the ways that marriage was designed to point to something “more ultimate”? What are they? How does your knowledge of this dimension of marriage affect your appreciation for it?
10. Take some time to identify and enumerate the ways that Ephesians 5 is relevant to the single Christian who is contemplating marriage.
11. What is the most significant insight you have gained from reading this essay?

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<sup>1</sup> I’m guessing even Tom isn’t aware of it.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Howard Hendricks used to say, “The reason most people never learn is because they have not first been sufficiently confused.” I’m just applying what I was taught.

<sup>3</sup> The label “complementarian” is derived from the conviction that though husbands and wives are equal in status and worth before God, they fulfill different, “complementary” roles in marriage.

<sup>4</sup> “Egalitarian” stems from the French word for “equal.” The proponents of this position hold that spouses are equal not only in status and worth, but also in role. On this view gender roles are flexible and negotiable within a given marriage.

<sup>5</sup> I do not mean to downplay the importance of having an accurate interpretation of Scripture. But egalitarians and complementarians actually agree on the meaning of most parts of most texts that address marriage. Their theology of marriage is mostly the same. The focal point of their debate is marital *roles*. When it comes to establishing a healthy marriage, godly character and mutual commitment are more important than having the “right” view on roles.

<sup>6</sup> In each set of household “pairs” addressed, the first member (wife, child, slave) was the one under authority. And in each set, the second member (husband, father, master) was the same person. The apparent reason for this sequence is that the instructions given to the first-mentioned members constituted specific instances of the practice of submission within the Christian home (see below).

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- <sup>7</sup> “The secular forms [of ‘household tables’] do not include direct address to the ‘inferior’ parties. For Paul, however, children and slaves are part of the household church and take their place alongside the other members.” I. Howard Marshal, “Mutual Love and Submission in Marriage,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 186.
- <sup>8</sup> “At least as far back as Aristotle (fourth century B.C.), Greek ethics had addressed relationships within the household in a familiar pattern: husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves. Consistently, the interest was to help the male head of household learn to govern his family and slaves. In their treatment of such rules, Paul and Peter transform the question from how husbands, fathers, and masters dominate to how they can imitate the love of Christ they know in their own lives by nurturing those in their care. Simultaneously, as wives, children, and slaves define their roles in terms of service to Christ, they turn from being passive objects in a social world that devalues them, and become instead active partners with God in His plan to bring unity to a race divided by gender, age, and economics.” *New Geneva Study Bible*, ed. R. C. Sproul, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 1869.
- <sup>9</sup> This segment, in turn, contributes to the theme of the entire second half of the Ephesian epistle (chapters 4-6), summarized in 4:1: “live worthily of the calling with which you have been called.” This treatise might be entitled, “How to walk (that is, live) as a Christian.” Pastor John MacArthur helpfully summarizes the main thrust of the section in this way: “Over and over the New Testament calls us to another dimension of existence, a new way of thinking, acting, and living. To ‘walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which [we] have been called . . . and [to] put on the new self, which is in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth’ (Eph. 4:1, 24) is to fulfill the high calling to which we are called in a completely new life in a completely new, Spirit-filled way.” John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Ephesians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 279.
- <sup>10</sup> “The Spirit’s indwelling (John 7:37-39; 14:17; Rom. 5:5; 8:9; 1 Cor. 2:12; 6:19-20; 1 John 3:24; 4:13), sealing (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13; 4:30), and baptism (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27) occur at the time of regeneration and thus are not commanded. However, believers *are* commanded to be filled constantly with the Holy Spirit. Each Christian has all the Spirit, but the command here is that the Spirit have all of him. The wise walk, then, is one that is characterized by the Holy Spirit’s control.” Harold W. Hoehner, “Ephesians,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 640.
- <sup>11</sup> There is no verb, “submit,” in verse 22. It is “borrowed” from verse 21.
- <sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that the reverse is not stated: masters are not instructed to obey their servants, fathers are not required to obey their children, and husbands are not told to submit to their wives.
- <sup>13</sup> Women, in particular, were widely regarded as inferior to their husbands physically, intellectually and morally. They were expected to obey and serve their husbands. And they had no legal status, being essentially the “property” of either their father or husband. Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2002), 724.
- <sup>14</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 716.
- <sup>15</sup> A. Skevington Wood, “Ephesians,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Volume 11*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 75. “Christians are to submit to civil authorities, to church leaders, to parents, and to masters. The whole structure of society as ordered by God depends on the readiness of its members to recognize these sanctions. Without them anarchy prevails.”
- <sup>16</sup> “Elsewhere in the New Testament the verb is used of the submission of Jesus to his parents (Luke 2:51); of demons being subject to the disciples (Luke 10:17, 20 – it certainly cannot mean to ‘act in a

thoughtful or considerate way’); of citizens being subject to governing authorities (Rom. 13:1; Tit. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13); of the universe being subject to Christ (1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:22); of unseen powers being subject to Christ (1 Pet. 3:21); of Christ being subject to God the Father (1 Cor. 15:28); of church members being subject to their leaders (1 Cor. 16:15-16; 1 Pet. 5:5); of the church being subject to Christ (Eph. 5:24); of servants being subject to their masters (Tit. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18); of Christians being subject to God (Heb. 12:9; Jas. 4:7); and of wives being subject to their husbands (Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:5; cf. Eph. 5:22, 24).” Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, footnote 167, 401.

- <sup>17</sup> So when Paul says in verse 21 that Spirit-filled Christians submit themselves “to one another out of reverence to Christ,” he is describing what could be called “circumstantial submission.” An accurate paraphrase would be, “let each of you subordinate himself or herself to the one he or she should be subordinate to.” Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ. An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and The Social Sciences* (Ann Arbor: MI: Servant Books; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980), 76, n. 4. Cited in Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 717.
- <sup>18</sup> Such “fear” is stronger than simple respect. There is to be a reverence that recognizes Christ’s exalted nature and authority that prompts the believer to bow before Him in awe-filled humility and obey him even when the assignment is counter-intuitive.
- <sup>19</sup> And they would have been right. “[T]he most important factor for determining the meaning [of ‘head’] is the *context* of Ephesians and Paul’s other writings. The use of *kephale* in 1:22 and Colossians 2:10, where the issue is the subjection of all things under Christ, . . . [means] that he has authority over them. Some connotation of authority appears to be included in Paul’s metaphorical uses of *kephale*.” Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 295.
- <sup>20</sup> Nowhere in the New Testament do we read that husbands “have authority” over their wives or that men have authority over women. The idea of authority is inferred from the vocabulary of headship and submission. Jesus (echoed by Peter) appears wary of the tendency of “those in charge” to abuse their power. They both warn Christian leaders against “lording it over” those entrusted to their care (Mat. 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:2-3). The focus is never on the privilege of rank, but rather on the responsibility of the assignment.
- <sup>21</sup> “Ephesians 5:23 does not focus on authority, but on the self-giving love of both Christ and the husband. “Head” in this context suggests “responsibility for.” The husband has a leadership role, though not in order to boss his wife or use his position as privilege. Just as Jesus redefined greatness as being a servant (Matt. 20:26-27), Paul redefines being head as having responsibility to love, to give oneself, and to nurture. A priority is placed on the husband, but, contrary to ancient society, *it is for the benefit of the wife*.” Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, 295.
- <sup>22</sup> “This exhortation to husbands to love their wives is unique. It is not found in the O[ld] T[estament], rabbinic literature, or in the household codes of the Greco-Roman era.” Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 748. Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 167.
- <sup>23</sup> “The church’s head is the church’s bridegroom. He does not crush the church. Rather he sacrificed himself to serve her, in order that she might become everything he longs for her to be, namely herself in the fullness of her glory. Just so a husband should never use his headship to crush or stifle his wife, or frustrate her from being herself. His love for her will lead him to an exactly opposite path.” John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 229.
- <sup>24</sup> The men, apparently, heard the message in stunned silence. Or maybe not.

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- <sup>25</sup> It is noteworthy (and probably significant) that the two assignments given to the wives – submission and “fear” – are the prominent terms in the “hinge verse” that introduces the section: “*submitting* to one another in the *fear* of Christ” (Ephesians 5:21).
- <sup>26</sup> Biblical submission is a Christ-like response to recognized leadership (1 Cor. 11:3; Mat. 26:39). Here are the component elements of biblical submission: (1) acknowledgement that someone else is my “head;” (2) respect for the office of “head;” (3) recognition of the responsibilities assigned to the “head;” (4) an attitude of servanthood that supports the “head;” (5) a commitment to the legitimate success of the “head;” (6) an extension of subjection to the Lordship of Christ; (7) trust in the sovereignty of God; and (8) a reflection of the character of Christ.
- <sup>27</sup> Patriarchalism predominated world-wide prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- <sup>28</sup> American culture had a uniformly hierarchical view of marriage which was enshrined in civil legislation. “Head and master” laws enacted in every state gave the husband legal authority over his wife and children. Those laws were not repealed and replaced by others defining marriage as an association of two equal individuals until the mid-1970s. Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005), 194, 238, 255.
- <sup>29</sup> “As a result of sin, wives no longer naturally submit themselves to their husbands, so Paul says, ‘Wives, submit yourselves to our husbands, as to the Lord’ (Eph 5:22 NIV). In their struggle to rule, husbands tend to resort to any means at their disposal, so Paul forestalls these ‘blows’ with ‘Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’ (Eph 5:25 RSV).” Susan T. Foh, *Women in Ministry: Four Views*, Bonnidell Clouse and Robert G. Clouse, eds., (Downers Grove: IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 75.
- <sup>30</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 154.
- <sup>31</sup> As I noted above, every other use of the term in the New Testament delineates a specific role structure – one entity is acknowledging the authority of another. And the same is true in this passage, for the reasons given for the wife’s submission all pertain to her response to someone who is in some sense “over” her.
- <sup>32</sup> When my children were small, five-year-old Michael wanted his seven-year-old sister, Rachel, to go along with his plans. But she wasn’t cooperating. So he played his trump card: “The Bible says, ‘Obey one another.’” But her Bible knowledge was superior to his. “No it doesn’t,” she retorted. And she was right.
- <sup>33</sup> Nor does it follow axiomatically that role-related submission cancels out equality of essence – as is demonstrated by Christ’s subordination to his Father (John 5:19, 30; 14:28; 1 Corinthians 11:3; 15:28). “Husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants have equal dignity as God-like beings, but different God-appointed roles. As J. H. Yoder succinctly puts it, ‘Equality of *worth* is not identity of *role*.’” John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians (The Bible Speaks Today)* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 218.
- <sup>34</sup> I agree that the concepts of headship and submission (as gender roles) are not overtly developed in Genesis 1-2. But if such roles were not blatant, from the perspective of the New Testament it appears that they were latent. Paul likely inferred a leadership role for the man based on two facts: the man was created first (1 Tim. 2:13), and the woman’s function is defined by and derived from her relationship to the man (1 Cor. 11:8-9). “. . . [T]he woman was made *for* man; she was made *from* man; and she was given *to* man—the greatest of all God’s gifts. In the next section we find that she was named *by* man.” James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 107. In a similar vein, Andreas Köstenberger points out that “. . . nowhere is the *man* called the *woman*’s helper.” *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 37. Less decisive, but still pertinent, is

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the fact that when God confronted the rebels after their disobedience, He addressed Adam first (though He knew full well who had taken the first bite). Carolyn Custis James, *When Life and Beliefs Collide: How Knowing God Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 196.

<sup>35</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 126

<sup>36</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 235 (italics added).

<sup>37</sup> There are spheres *within* a marriage where a man would do well to submit to his wife as she exercises authority in an area where she has the greater competency. For example, I had the great good fortune to marry a woman who actually enjoys filling out tax returns! Louise is our family bookkeeper. I express my submission to her authority in that arena in three ways: 1) I keep track of all my business expenses and provide her with printed receipts for all of my expenditures; 2) I report to her my business mileage; and 3) I stay away from her when she's working on financial stuff. This is role-defined submission where functional duties are defined by mutual agreement.

<sup>38</sup> This means, among other things, I am ultimately responsible for the competent handling of our financial records. So it's a good thing Louise knows what she's doing.

<sup>39</sup> I don't know that a "race" is a fair analogy for the egalitarian model because it is competitive by definition. The best alternative I've come up with is rock climbing which is undertaken by two individuals (side by side) who may need to assist each other. Still, Bloesch's point has merit.

<sup>40</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 224-225.

<sup>41</sup> If, by the time you read this, *Dancing With the Stars* has faded into oblivion, you can google it. It's greatest value, in the grand scheme of things, is to provide an illustration for this appendix.