

“Submit to One Another in the Fear of Christ”

Ezekiel 16:8-13; Hosea 2:19-20; Ephesians 5:21-6:9

March 8, 2020 • Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • BSCC

Dear Congregation of Christ: In 1994, before we set off from Walnut Creek to Waxhaw, North Carolina for “jungle training” as missionaries of Wycliffe Bible Translators, we were prayed for and presented before the congregation. After describing what our work would be in Colombia (South America), our pastor asked Evelyn, “What do you think of this major decision in your life?” She answered without hesitation, “The Bible says, ‘Wives, submit to your husbands.’” And the congregation smiled and laughed.

In our culture, the “S” word is usually ignored if not rejected and mocked. Most people, even Christians, do not accept this teaching in verse 22 of our text, primarily because it is misunderstood and one-sided when preached or taught, especially in weddings. Most women today would imagine an unloving, even cruel, husband asking his wife to get him a beer and make him his dinner while he lounges on a couch watching a football game. Worse, thoughts of a wife-beating husband come to mind with the word “submission.”

In the first-century world, most girls would be married off by their fathers when they were in their early- to mid-teens. And the men would be about ten, twenty or even thirty years older than the girls. The rights of a husband over his wife would be absolute, even if he treats her like a slave. There was no police protection, no battered-women shelters, and she could not go back to her father’s house because the father has no more legal rights over her. By the time she reaches her twenties, she would already have had several children, and maybe even grandchildren. So, in her thirties, she would be considered “old” and have health problems. That culture was extremely difficult for women.

Therefore, this command was probably shocking to the Ephesian believers, as it was counter-cultural. However, most of Paul’s letters were actually counter-cultural, because, like today, the world’s culture is anti-Christian. In this letter, he first focuses on God’s merciful election of undeserving sinners “dead in sins,” again, offensive even to Christians today. Then he reveals the mystery of the gospel—that of God saving both Jews and Gentiles through the sacrifice of Christ. In Chapters 4 and 5, Paul explains how they are to walk as Christians, putting off the old sinful self, and putting on the new creation, and walking in godly love and wisdom. Submitting to one another in verse 21 is part of this putting off and putting on instruction.

But what does the word “submit” mean? Though “obey” is part of the meaning, it means to “be subordinated” or to “be subjected” to someone (BDAG, 2000, 3rd ed., 1042). What then does Paul mean by “submitting to one another”? Are husbands to be subject to their wives? Must parents obey their children? Should masters be subordinate to their servants? Certainly not. Paul does not teach “mutual submission.” Husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and servants do not have equal authorities and roles. What Paul is teaching in our text is that “submission” must be

according to the order and authority established by God in creation. The three relationship examples in Christian households, often called “household codes,” explain this principle.

Paul also grounds these examples in the relationship between Christ and the Church. All Christians are to submit to Christ, as Christ submitted himself to God when he “emptied himself” of his kingly glory and authority, and willingly came down from heaven in his incarnation and crucifixion. Jesus was obedient to his Father all the way to the cross (John 10:18; Phil 2:8; Heb 5:8). However, all Christians are equal in standing as to their relationship with Christ as forgiven and justified people. This is what Paul teaches in Galatians 3:28, *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

WIVES SUBMIT, HUSBANDS SELF-SACRIFICE

Let us look first at the dreaded command, *“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.”* In this verse, we must note three things. First, it is a command, not a suggestion, recommendation or an option, even if the culture does not agree, and even if the husband is unlovable. Second, the husband is not the “lord” of his wife. Rather, Christ is the Lord of both the wife and the husband. Both are to be in submission to the Lordship and Kingship of Christ. Third, the wife is to be subjected only to her “own” husband, not to other men.

But notice the two most compelling arguments for the wife’s submission. First, wives must submit to their husbands because the relationship between Christ and the church is the perfect model of the husband-wife relationship, *“For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands”* (verses 23-24). Did Christ love his people because they were good and lovable? No, we were dead in sin, wretched, filthy, loathsome sinners before God. In spite of this, Christ loves, nurtures and cherishes his people, loving us while we were still sinners. God loves his people so much that he gave his only-begotten Son to save them from sin and his wrath.

Christ is the perfect husband. In all Scripture, God’s people are often pictured as God’s wife. But this wife is also adulterous, because she worshiped and served idols, disobeyed and rebelled against him (Isa 54:5; Jer 31:32). In Hosea 2, Israel was pictured as an adulterous wife. But because of God’s infinite love, he forgave her and took her back. Israel then is a picture of us Christians who were formerly disobedient and rebellious idolaters whom Christ now “holds, loves and cherishes” forever.

And this is where the command to husbands come into view, *“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”* (verse 25). What did Christ do for his people? He loved them so much that he sacrificed his own body and blood for them. So should a husband love his wife, even to the point of sacrificing his own life for her. Sacrificial love is diametrically opposed to domination and control for the sake of his own convenience and satisfaction. And what was Christ’s purpose in his self-sacrifice? His purpose for the church is to make her clean, holy and blameless so that on his “wedding day,” the Church her Bride would gaze at her splendor, *“without*

spot or wrinkle or any such thing.” This imagery comes from Ezekiel 16:8-13 (which we read), where Israel, the Bride of Yahweh, is bathed, clothed and bejeweled on her wedding day.

Furthermore, verses 28-30 say, *“In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.”* Paul draws from the summary of the second table of the Ten Commandments, *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”* (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39). Since the Church is the Body of Christ, and Christ loves the Church, a husband must love his wife as if the wife is a member of his own body. And no one hates his own body (verses 29-30). Paul again brings the creation of Eve from Adam’s body to bear on the husband-wife relationship. They become united as one flesh in marriage (Gen 2:24), a profound mystery which has been revealed in the union of the Church to the Bride of Christ (verse 32).

This brings us to the second argument for the wife’s submission found in the creation account. In verses 31 and 32, *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”* Eve was taken from Adam’s side, so *“the husband is the head of the wife”* (verse 23). The husband is not merely the “source” of his wife, but this order of things was ordained by God on the very day that God created woman. She was created because God saw that *“it is not good that man should be alone,”* so she was appointed to be *“a helper fit for him”* (Gen 1:27; 2:18, 21-22). This distinction between the sexes is obvious in childbirth. Women bear children, men do not. But women cannot bear children without men (Gen 3:16). (This is why some people call homosexuality a culture of death.)

Therefore, the marriage relationship is a reflection of the headship of Christ over the church and the sacrificial love of Christ for the church. The purpose of the husband’s headship over his wife is to love her sacrificially. And the wife’s purpose in submitting to her husband is to respect him as the Church submits to Christ her Head (verse 33).

CHILDREN SUBMIT, PARENTS NURTURE

The second example of the relationship modeled by Christ and his Church is that of parents and their children. The admonition for children is, *“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother’ (this is the first commandment with a promise), ‘that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land’”* (verses 1-3). Again, notice a few things in this instruction.

First, since Paul addresses the whole covenant community in Ephesus and children are included in this commandment, it follows that children are members of this covenant community. And how were children initiated into this covenant community? In the old covenant, they were circumcised (Gen 17:11), and in the new covenant they were baptized (Col 2:11-12). Second, both boys and girls are included in this commandment, since if they were not, would Paul be approving of disobedient girls in the household?

Third, obedience to parents means that children submit to the will of their parents. In the Fifth Commandment, this obedience is a direct result of children honoring their parents. Just as the child Jesus submitted to his earthly parents Joseph and Mary, so children must imitate the Lord (Luke 2:51). Fourth, “in the Lord” means that obedience to parents is part of being a member

of God's covenant family. Fifth, "for this is right" signifies that obedience to parents is from the Fifth Commandment, and God and all of his commandments are perfectly righteous and just.

Sixth, Paul also mentions the promise attached to the Fifth Commandment: "*that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.*" God's promise to Israel of prosperity and long life—not salvation—in the Promised Land was contingent upon their obedience to God's law, including obedience to parents. However, under the new covenant in Christ, the promised land is not an earthly land, but a heavenly one. And our tenure in heaven is forever, not contingent upon our good works, but on the finished work of our Lord on the cross. As well, Christians often suffer poverty, persecution and even martyrdom for their faith, not health and wealth.

Seventh and last, in the ancient pagan world, the father had absolute full power over his children. He could imprison him, scourge him, enslave him in the fields, or even put him to death. But the Jews treasured their children. They were a blessing and a heritage from God like arrows in his quiver (Psa 127:3-5) and treated with dignity and respect. However, if a son was rebellious, a drunkard and a glutton, even after having been instructed in the righteous laws of God, a father could have the son stoned to death by the elders (Deu 21:18-21). This is where nurturing and disciplining children comes in (6:4). Jewish parents were commanded to teach God's law to their children (Deu 6:7) and not spare the rod of discipline (Pro 13:24). Children were commanded to listen to their parents' teaching (Pro 1:8).

SERVANTS SUBMIT, MASTERS RULE JUSTLY

The third and last illustration that Paul uses in explaining "submission to one another" is the master-servant relationship. In the ancient pagan world, servants and slaves were indentured for life to their masters, unless they can pay for their freedom. Masters own them like property and have absolute power over them. They can sell them to other masters, work them long hours, or even put them to death for minor offenses.

This ancient slavery is different from slavery as we know it in America. It is not race-based, a false teaching before the Civil War that blacks are not fully human, and that they are subject to God's curse on Ham, one of Noah's three sons. This race-based slavery is opposed to the Bible's teaching that all human beings were created in God's image. Ancient Graeco-Roman slaves were those captured by the victors in battles. This slavery continued from generation to generation. Household slaves and servants, on the other hand, were treated as family members, though not having full rights as the children. Here in 6:5-9, Paul addresses these slaves, particularly the slaves of masters who were members of the church in Ephesus. Note again a few things.

First, slaves must submit to and serve their masters as if they were submitting and serving Christ. They are to serve with fear and trembling, because ultimately, they are accountable to God. Serving with "fear and trembling" are coupled with "a sincere heart" (verse 5), as should be the attitude of all Christians serving Christ. Second, they are to serve "*with good will [intent] as to the Lord and not to man.*" (verse 7). Even under the harsh conditions of slavery, they must serve with gladness and with their best effort to please their masters. Even if their masters are hard to please, slaves

must not serve only to please God and not only their masters. Third, with this pleasing service, they will be rewarded by their Christian master. But the best reward is from the Lord, *“knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free”* (verse 8). It is Christ who is their ultimate Master will in the end welcome them into his kingdom, saying, *“Well done, good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your master”* (Matt 25:23).

Fourth and last, masters are commanded to do the same: rule with fear and trembling and with good will, because ultimately, they too serve Christ as their Master. They must cease not only from threats, beatings, hard labor, imprisoning their slaves, and even putting them to death. Christian masters must remember that God shows no partiality with anyone, slaves or masters, and *“anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him”* (Acts 10:34-35; Rom 2:11).

Beloved people of God: Paul’s commandments for submission of wives to husbands, children to their parents, and slaves to masters were counter-cultural in his day. But even today, these instructions are still counter-cultural. We are to remember that the pattern for husband-and-wife relationship is the relationship between Christ and his Bride, the Church. Even as he is the Head of the Church, he gave himself up as a sacrifice for them.

The pattern for parent-children relationship is the relationship between God the Father and his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ. Jesus submitted to his Father’s will all the way to the cross. But the Father rewarded him, exalting him above all things in heaven and on earth with his resurrection, ascension and everlasting rule over his kingdom.

And the pattern for master-slave relationship is our relationship with God and Christ. Most of us have been or are employees, not slaves. Some of us have been or are supervisors, not masters. But all Christians, employees or supervisors, are the servants of Christ our Master. And we all are “slaves of God” (Rom 6:22), “servants of God” (1 Pet 2:16), and “slaves of righteousness” (Rom 6:18). We were formerly “slaves of sin” (John 8:34; Rom 6:16), but now we have the word of Christ, and the truth of his word has set us free from sin (John 8:31-32; Rom 6:18).

In the end, Christ will finally give us—his submissive and obedient servants—our heavenly inheritance for our good and faithful service to him our Master.