

“Wives, Do What?!”

Ephesians 5 and St. Paul’s Life-Changing Vision of the Christian Family

The Problem with Paul

1. Once a year, on the Feast of the Holy Family (Sunday in Christmas Octave)
2. We hear the following words of Saint Paul (*if they read the ‘long form’!*):

Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and avoid any bitterness toward them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, so they may not become discouraged. (Colossians 3:18-21)

3. This is a shorter version of Saint Paul’s Longer teaching:

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her with the washing of water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church. (Ephesians 5:21-32)

4. What are most peoples’ response to Saint Paul’s teaching?
 - a. One extreme: Paul the misogynist (tyrant husbands and doormat wives)
 - b. Another extreme: mutual submission with no true headship for husbands
 - c. How do we as Catholics understand these words?

God is the author of Sacred Scripture... Therefore, all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirms should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit. (Catechism 105, 107)

Saint Paul’s Teaching in Context: Renouncing Former Life in Paganism

Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that *you must no longer walk as the Gentiles walk*, in the futility of their minds; they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart; they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness. You did not so learn Christ! *...Put off the old man that belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts*, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and *put on the new man*, created *after the likeness of God* in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:17-24)

The Context of Ephesians 5: Renouncing Pagan Immorality

Therefore be *imitators of God*, as beloved children. And walk in love, *as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us*, a fragrant offering and *sacrifice* to God. But *immorality* (Greek *porneia*) and *impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you*, as is fitting among saints. Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting; but instead let there be thanksgiving. *Be sure of this, that no immoral man* (Greek *pornoi*) or *impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolator), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not associate with them, for once you were in darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is a shame even to speak of the things they do in secret...

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father. (Ephesians 5:1-20)

1. Imitate God
2. Walk as Christ walked, giving yourself “in sacrifice”
3. Avoid sexual immorality (*porneia*)
 - a. Has no place among “saints”
 - b. Destroys the soul: exclusion from the kingdom
4. The Days are Evil: first-century paganism in the Roman Empire
 - a. Gentiles known for their abortions (Jewish view of Gentile houses as graves)
 - b. Contraception out of control (Roman government paying citizens to procreate)
 - c. Homosexual sex and Pederasty condoned by the Gentile culture

The Opening Line: Mutual Submission within Marriage

1. St. Paul *begins* with the principle of *mutual submission* within Marriage:
“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Ephesians 5:21)
2. This is based on the biblical teaching of the *equal dignity* of man and woman:
So God created man *in his own image*, in the image of God he created him; *male and female he created them.* (Genesis 1:27)
3. Pope John Paul II on Mutual Submission in Ephesians:
This relationship [between spouses] is nevertheless not one-sided submission. According to the teaching of Ephesians, marriage excludes this element of the contract, which weighed on this institution and at times does not cease to weigh on it. Husband and wife are, in fact, “subject to one another,” mutually subordinated to one another. The source of this reciprocal submission lies in Christian pietas and its expression is love. (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 473)

Saint Paul's Message for Christian Wives

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. (Ephesians 4:22-23)

1. Wives be "submissive" (*sub-missio*, "under" the "mission" of the husband)
2. Husband is the "head" of the wife, as Christ is "head" of the Church
3. Husband works for salvation of the wife, as Christ is the "savior" of the Church
4. Let wives be submissive "in everything," as Church is to Christ

Pope Pius XI on the Order of Love in the Christian Family

26 Domestic society being confirmed, therefore, by this bond of love, there should flourish in it that "*order of love*," as St. Augustine calls it. This order includes both the primacy of the husband with regard to the wife and children, the ready subjection of the wife and her willing obedience, which the Apostle commends in these words: "Let women be subject to their husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife, and Christ is the head of the Church."

27 *This subjection, however, does not deny or take away the liberty which fully belongs to the woman both in view of her dignity as a human person, and in view of her most noble office as wife and mother and companion; nor does it bid her obey her husband's every request if not in harmony with right reason or with the dignity due to wife; nor, in fine, does it imply that the wife should be put on a level with those persons who in law are called minors, to whom it is not customary to allow free exercise of their rights on account of their lack of mature judgment, or of their ignorance of human affairs. But it forbids that exaggerated liberty which cares not for the good of the family; it forbids that in this body which is the family, the heart be separated from the head to the great detriment of the whole body and the proximate danger of ruin. For if the man is the head, the woman is the heart, and as he occupies the chief place in ruling, so she may and ought to claim for herself the chief place in love.*

28 Again, this subjection of wife to husband in its degree and manner may vary according to the different conditions of persons, place and time. In fact, if the husband neglect his duty, it falls to the wife to take his place in directing the family. But the structure of the family and its fundamental law, established and confirmed by God, must always and everywhere be maintained intact.

29 With great wisdom Our predecessor Leo XIII, of happy memory, in the Encyclical on Christian marriage which We have already mentioned, speaking of this order to be maintained between man and wife, teaches: "*The man is the ruler of the family, and the head of the woman; but because she is flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, let her be subject and obedient to the man, not as a servant but as a companion, so that nothing be lacking of honor or of dignity in the obedience which she pays.* Let divine charity be the constant guide of their mutual relations, both in him who rules and in her who obeys, *since each bears the image, the one of Christ, the other of the Church.*" (Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter on Christian Marriage, *Casti Connubi* 1930, 26-29)

Saint Paul's Message for Christian Husbands

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her with the washing of water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body. (Ephesians 5:25-30)

1. Husbands: “love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her”
 2. Purpose of Husband's Love: to “sanctify” his Wife (sacrament of service/sacrifice)
 3. The Wife is the “Body” of Her Husband, like Church is the “Body” of Christ
- Then the man [Adam] said: “*This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman (ishah), because she was taken out of Man (ish). Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Genesis 2:23-24)*

St. John Chrysostom on the Husband's Christ-like Love for His Wife

Have you noted the measure of obedience? Pay attention to love's high standard. If you take the premise that your wife should submit to you, as the church submits to Christ, then you should also take the same kind of careful, sacrificial thought for her that Christ takes for the church. Even if you must offer your own life for her, you must not refuse. Even if you must undergo countless struggles on her behalf and have all kinds of things to endure and suffer, you must not refuse. Even if you suffer all this, you have still not done as much as Christ has for the church. For you are already married when you act this way, whereas Christ is acting for one who has rejected and hated him. So just as he, when she was rejecting, hating, spurning and nagging him, brought her to trust him by his great solicitude, not by threatening, lording it over her or intimidating her or anything like that, so you must also act toward your wife. Even if you see her looking down on you, nagging and despising her, you will be able to win her over with your great love and affection for her. (St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians 20:5:25*; in Mark Edwards, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, 195).

The Mystery of Marriage: Christ's Love for the Church

“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” *This is a great mystery (Latin magnum sacramentum), and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church... (Ephesians 5:29-33)*

Husbands' #1 Complaint

‘She doesn't respect me’

Wives' #1 Complaint

‘He never chooses me’

Saint Paul's Solution

Wives, be submissive to your husbands

Saint Paul's Solution

Husbands, love your wives

God's Purpose: Peace

God's purpose in ordering marriage is peace. One takes the husband's role, one takes the wife's role, one in guiding, one in supporting. If both had the very same roles, there would be no peace. The house is not rightly governed when all have precisely the same roles. There must be a differentiation of roles under a single head. (St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Ephesians 20:5:33*, in Edwards, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, 200).