

# Relationships in Order?

Ephesians 5:22-6:9

Many people consider that the church in Ephesus reached something of a peak of fellowship life. Certainly Paul was able to share much with them that he did not share so fully in other letters - with the possible exception of the letter to Colossae.

So it may seem a little strange that he takes these 21 verses to give them what looks like a list of things to do. However, this passage is written in the context of all that he has already said.

The 'practical application' part of this letter really starts in ***Ephesians 4:25***. The verses just before this, like the passage in ***Colossians 2:8-15***, remind Paul's readers that their old life **is** dead and so needs to be laid aside, plus they can be 'renewed in the spirit of their mind' and put on the new human being "*created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness*". Not by effort on their part, but by taking hold in their lives of God's provision in Christ. It is vital for us to realise that Paul's practical instructions have their roots in this truth.

As a result, there are several 'therefores', each one following a little extra snippet of truth, in ***ch. 4:25, 5:1, 5:7, 5:15*** and ***5:17***. (and in ***6:13***)

As part of the section following ***v.15***, "*Be very careful, then, how you live - not as unwise but as wise . . .*" Paul starts to talk about the need for us all to submit to each other 'out of reverence for Christ'. The Greek word is actually 'phobos' - *fear*, not *reverence*, which seems to be a softer word put into some translations for modern taste.

Just briefly to put fear in context . . . The Bible refers to 'the fear of man' (***Proverbs 29:25***) but it does not necessarily mean a 'fear and trembling' sort of fear, but rather a fear of other people's opinions which can easily divert us and trap us. The fear of the Lord, especially in the New Testament, has a parallel meaning - being strongly aware of the Lord's 'opinions' and definitely NOT wanting to displease him.

So what does 'submitting' mean? The Greek word means 'to arrange (yourself) under' so, in other words, to place others above yourself.

Our passage looks at various contexts in which that submitting needs to take place and it is **essential** to remember that these are instructions to believers, not a blueprint for the rest of the world. We cannot impose them on people who do not submit to the Lord Jesus.

**v. 22-24** Wives to husbands, as to the Lord, **because** the husband **is** the head of the wife. Not 'he **should be**' but he **is** - that's the way it is arranged; the husband is the head of the wife just as the Christ is the head of the Church - and the saviour (or deliverer) of it.

So there's a vital role for husbands here, to be the one who sets his wife free - while still being her 'head', and . . .

**v. 25-33** . . . basically to care for his wife with a view to her total well-being, growth, development and transformation, giving himself up for her just as Jesus the Anointed One gave himself up for the Church - WOW!

We have a multiple picture here. Paul uses the image of a bride being made ready for her marriage as representative of the way that the Church is being made ready for presentation to the Lord Jesus when he returns. The selfless love of Christ for his Church is a challenging demonstration of the depth of a husband's love in seeking the very best for his wife, which also gives us a fresh insight into the purpose and direction of the love of Jesus.

There would be no question of the Church saying to Jesus "OK, we will submit to you, just so long as you fulfill your responsibilities to us." Equally, a wife cannot say the same to her husband! The responsibilities of a husband are great, but his wife cannot hang them over his head as a condition for her submission.

It goes the same way for the husband. He cannot say to her "I will only seek the very best for you if you submit to me." As Paul says in **v. 28**, husbands owe it to their wives to "*love their wives as their own bodies*", irrespective of the response they may get!

In each case, the love is unconditional. No 'ifs'.

Paul says he is speaking with reference to Christ and the Church (**v. 32**) and the picture is inspiring, whether we are husbands, wives or neither. **Verses 25-27** sum up in very few words the heart of the purposes of God, all that he is doing at the moment.

The whole drive of what is on God's heart is to fully prepare the Bride for the Bridegroom's return. We can see this same picture, in **2 Corinthians 11:2, Revelation 19:7, 21:2 & 21:9**. In more direct language, we see Paul sharing his heart in **Acts 20:18-24, Romans 1:9-12, 1 Corinthians 3:6-17, 9:16-23, 2 Corinthians 4:7-18, Ephesians 1:15-23, 3:14-19, Philippians 1:6-11, Colossians 1:9-12, 28-29, 1 Thessalonians 2:9-12** - to name but a few!

Paul's driving passion is to see the Church built up - individually and corporately, *"So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."* (**Ephesians 4:11-16**)

It is too easy for us to miss the connections between the Father's eternal plan for the Church and our own involvement in fellowship life. It is great to see something of what he intends, but very little use if we are not prepared to let our own church life be directed and shaped by his purpose. This is very different from our tendency to come up with 'good ideas' of our own and then ask the Lord to bless them!

Again, we need to be aware that the whole thing is built on the personal transformation of individual lives. There is no benefit in trying to build an ideal church fellowship structure without the vital foundations of lives that continue to be transformed on the basis of what God has done for us in Christ - again, back to **Ephesians 4:21-24** and **Colossians 2:8-15**!

Paul continues into **Ephesians 6:1-9** by extending the 'submitting' instructions to other family relationships and out into the world of employment.

Children are not simply told to do whatever they are told, but to 'listen under' their parents - in other words, to listen to what they say from a position of submission. This is not easy for Christian youngsters with unbelieving parents, but the teenage Jesus submitted to Joseph and Mary even though they didn't really understand (**Luke 2:51**). The same Greek word is used in this verse as in **Ephesians 5:21**.

Paul's instruction to believing fathers (mirrored in **Colossians 3:21**) calls again for a responsible attitude - not just demanding obedience, but with a real concern for growth and development. This is really a slightly 'smaller' version of the attitude of husband to wife that he has already taught - once again, balancing the submission with genuine love.

Slaves? None of us are actual slaves, but we sometimes think of ourselves as slaves to our jobs, and of our employers as taskmasters. Paul's words are relevant for the Christian employee. Again, he uses the word meaning 'listen under' - respectful attention to our bosses (the word is the same as 'Lords') - with fear (as in **5:21**) and singleness of heart as if to the Messiah. Quite a demand to those serving bad employers, and he goes on . . .

We are to work from the heart, as slaves of Jesus, and not just putting on a front of seeming to serve properly, and all of this with good will! Seemingly impossible, perhaps, but remember that all these commands are addressed to us as those who have laid aside the old life and are being renewed from the inside. And a definite reward is promised! See also **1 Timothy 6:1-2**.

Bosses - treat your employees in the same way and don't threaten them! (**6:9**) Again, it seems like an extension of the words to husbands and fathers, with a final reminder that all this submission is based on the fact that we are each of us in submission to our 'Boss' !

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The ways in which all these relationships work out are expressions of the reality of the new life which we have in the Lord Jesus Christ. If we treat Paul's writing about them as a 'rule book' to be followed rigorously, we shall find ourselves trapped in legalism and miss out on the Lord's grace to us.

On the other hand, if we disregard them because we think they are old-fashioned and not relevant to our lives today, we run the risk of thinking that our ideas (and maybe the influence of present-day philosophy) are more valid than the Lord's clear principles.

The only way that 'works' is for us to go back to the basics of what it means to be 'in Christ'. We have already looked at **Ephesians 4:21-24** and **Colossians 2:8-23** which goes into more detail.

By the grace of God, we are not only forgiven but also have been included in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, so that we can learn in experience the reality of our old life being over and the new life of the Holy Spirit changing us - **from the inside!**

Dave Taylor

April 2013

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