

. . . Just as Christ . . .

There is a very expressive little Greek word which often turns up in the New Testament, *kathōs*. It means 'in exactly the same way as', and that close comparison can be seriously challenging, as it is here in **Ephesians 5:25**: "*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her, so that . . .*"

We can explore that 'so that' later, but let's look at the context: In **Ephesians 5:21-33**, Paul's main message is about husbands and wives and the way their relationship works. Sometimes we may have used this passage to concentrate on just one aspect of that relationship – perhaps to emphasise to wives that they need to be 'subject to' their husbands or, alternatively, to underline for husbands the vital need for them to love their wives with truly sacrificial love. Depending on which side of the gender gap we may be, we may feel that it is vital for those on the other side to get their act together, but we have to face the fact that the responsibilities on our own side are mind-blowing. So let's try to look at the overall picture.

Paul did not write these verses in isolation. They follow on as a specific application of what he has just written in general terms to all the believers there in Ephesus: "*. . . always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to the God and Father; being subject to one another in the fear of Christ. Wives, to your own husbands, as to the Lord . . .*"

What does 'being subject to one another' really mean? 'Arranging yourself in order under one another' is an attempt at a literal translation. It's not an organisational instruction but speaks directly to our attitude towards each other in Christian fellowship. Not finding ways to 'lord it' over each other, but rather looking for – and finding – ways to 'place myself under' other believers, recognising their strengths and gifts and how they can contribute to my life. This is a valuable aspect of real life in the Body of Christ, the church. Not a structure (especially not a leadership structure!) but mutual benefit, an acknowledgement of different ways in which we can follow each other.

Look at the Lord Jesus with the Twelve. Why did they follow him? Yes, he had called them, one by one, but what kept them with him? They could have gone away at any time if they had wanted to, but they didn't. You can only follow someone if they are moving forwards, and they could see that he was definitely doing that. They didn't understand it all at the time, but he told them about the coming of the rule of God, the 'kingdom of the heavens', and gave them words that breathed life into them. Where else could they go? ¹

Much more than that, as the Twelve could not see at the time, the time was coming when he gave himself up for them – for the whole church – because of his sacrificial love for them (and us): Something he did at a point in time, in the past tense and with specific purposes in view (**Ephesians 5:25**). And later, Paul could write that he 'nourishes and cherishes' the church – because it is his own body – **now**, as an ongoing process, in the present tense (**Ephesians 5:29**).

Even without taking this any further (and there is certainly plenty more to consider!), the challenge for any husband is staggering: to love his wife 'in exactly the same way' as Jesus – the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah – poured out his life for the church, and **to continue to nourish and cherish** her in the same way as he currently does for the church, caring for her as his own body.

This may not look like 'leadership' as we might expect to describe it, but it characterises the leadership that Jesus demonstrated to the Twelve: self-sacrificing and always seeking to lead them forward into more life, more truth, more liberty in the Spirit. As he himself said, "*For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you [literally, 'in the midst of you'] as the one who serves.*"² Not just a servant, but the servant; and not above or below them, but in their midst. In a very real way, he 'placed himself under' them! ³

Is this the sort of life that we expect to see when we think about the husband being the head of the wife? Maybe not! We may think of the husband being the 'senior partner' in the marriage, the one with the

¹ See **John 6:66-69**

² **Luke 22:27**. See the whole passage, **v.24-30** : more about leadership!

³ See also **Matthew 20:25-28, Mark 10:42-45, John 13:4-17**

casting vote, the one who 'calls the shots', perhaps even the figurehead of the family. But then, all of these (and more) are true of the position that the Lord Jesus holds in the church. And what is the basis on which he holds that position? Please don't say 'because he is God and we need to obey him'! Although that is true, of course, the basis of his leadership, and of our following him, is not his position, but the same as it was for the Twelve: his sacrificial love and his determination to see us move forwards – and our response to that love.

Now can we see a bit more of why the Twelve followed Jesus? If we had been there ourselves, would we have followed in the same way? Would we have had questions? Of course! Doubts? Definitely! Sometimes (like Peter) even strong disagreements! But he still followed, allowing himself to be led even when he did not understand.

Can you, as a husband, see your way to lead your wife in this same way that Jesus led?

Can you, as a wife, see yourself able to follow this sort of leadership in your husband?

In both cases, it would be easy to reply, 'Yes, if my spouse will do this or that . . .' But the responsibility for our action rests with us, not with our partners. The imperfect husband cannot expect his imperfect wife to follow him perfectly, and the imperfect wife cannot expect her imperfect husband to lead her perfectly. But each one has the clear calling to fit together in this way.

In both cases, leading and following, the way is sacrificial, doing what needs to be done, out of love. Just a glimpse of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane shows us that. Leading and being led. By 'giving in' to his loving Father's plan, the Son affirmed their relationship – '*Not what I will, but what you will*'.¹ Without his willingness to be led, we would none of us be here today.

We are thinking about leading and following and, as has been wisely said, a leader is someone who is being followed. No followers = No leadership! A leader needs to be moving forwards in order to be able to lead. Leadership, even in the world system, is not a static position to be held. If it becomes static, the followers stop following. The dry husk of an organisation may remain and its structure may still contain those who are called 'leaders' but, if they are not moving forwards, they are not leading. Progress halts.

In the church and in the Christian family, the need is even more urgent. We have all seen those near-empty shells, where once there was real and overflowing life, now sunk into structure, pattern and routine, almost (but maybe not quite) devoid of anything fresh from God himself. Churches with little or no sense of God's ongoing purpose; families with no sense of direction. Newness is not in itself any guarantee of life, but all life demonstrates some change, some progression, some growth, even if it is small and slow.

And in the family, the challenge for the husband is to be the one who is leading, in the same way that Jesus led. By sacrificial love, by serving and **by moving forwards**. To be the one that his wife can follow, who can truly lead her and their children forwards to discover more of the purposes of God for them all. To be the one who genuinely nourishes and cherishes his life-partner in a way that demonstrates and teaches the love of God. This is a **partnership**. It has been well said that the best thing a man can do for his children is to love their mother.

The challenge is not, first of all, for the wife to 'be subject to' her husband, but for the husband to be leading in such a way that his wife has little difficulty in following him. So what can a wife do, whose husband is not leading effectively? Obviously, following him is not going to be very easy! Exasperation can all too quickly lead to undermining him, which of course has exactly the wrong effect, making it even less likely that he will learn to lead – and the situation starts to spiral out of control! But by encouraging him to lead, she genuinely 'builds him up' and helps him to move more into loving leadership, at the same time demonstrating her own willingness to follow. Even when the husband is already learning to lead effectively, this sort of encouragement is genuinely helpful and strengthens our marriage bonds together.

I have mentioned 'the purposes of God' a few times. As we read the life and ministry of our Lord, we see him always lining himself up with his Father, never 'doing his own thing'. At the time of his visit to Jerusalem with Joseph and Mary, aged 12, he already knew where his priorities lay, and was apparently a little surprised that they didn't immediately know where to find him. "*Why is it that you were looking*

¹ **Mark 14:35,36**

for me? Did you not know that I had to be in the things of my Father?”¹ No sense of outer obligation there, but an inner compulsion to follow up the purposes of God. His understanding and answers amazed the teachers in the temple. Even at that age, he knew who he was and was at least beginning to see the direction of his life.

Years later, soon after the beginning of his public ministry, he makes it clear again: *“the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.”*² Was he exercising leadership? Yes, very definitely, but that leadership was characterised by the fact that he himself was following – following his Father!

You will have realised by now that I believe leadership is primarily a male role, both in the family and in the church.³ I have sometimes quoted the comments of a female pastor who told me years ago that she also agreed that leadership in the church is a male role, and that the only reason she was doing pastoral work was that there were no men available to do it! “Lord, here am I; send my sister.”!

If a man is not exercising leadership in his family, and specifically in the relationship with his wife, it will be impossible for him to be effective in spiritual leadership in the church. Paul makes that clear in his directions to Timothy and Titus as they seek to recognise genuine leaders in the churches where they were serving.⁴ It is easy to look at these ‘qualifications’ which Paul sets out and think that perhaps they are ideals, maybe even that they were advisable in those days but are not relevant today. I believe that these guidelines for spiritual leadership in the church are, if anything, **more** relevant today, when the emphasis often tends to be on natural ability, organisational structure and efficiency.

Paul tells them *“An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. One who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity”* and *“above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.”*

Maybe that all sounds a bit too tightly defined? Here is a possible exception in my own experience: Long before I was married and when I was working in travelling evangelistic teams, I was called upon to exercise leadership in some situations. Significantly, more than 99% of that leadership was in teams of young men of about my own age, all engaged in the same work. I was called upon to be the motivator, the one who would help the team to move forwards, so in that sense the others could follow me in the direction in which I wanted to move. And in fact, although I was the main decision-maker in the situation, we had a lot of discussion together before many of those decisions were made! In one isolated situation, I needed to co-ordinate a small conference in which teams of young women as well as young men would be taking part. My tactic there was to find group leaders and let them do the leading of the smaller groups.

Looking back on it, I can see that all, or almost all, of that leadership was organisational, not specifically spiritual. My responsibilities were to encourage and enable my fellow team members to **do** things. The small percentage of spiritual leadership centred around our relatively brief times of ‘devotions’, when we would look at the Bible, study and pray together. Perhaps I was able to pass on something of what the Lord was doing in my life, so maybe there was **some** spiritual leadership there, and there was definitely two-way sharing. But it certainly was not a normal ‘church’ situation!

Tragically, many apparently normal church situations are handled the same way: to get people to **do** things. There is absolutely nothing wrong with doing things, of course! But you only need to read Paul’s letters to see that he spends most of his energies sharing spiritual truth and revelation **in order to** enable his readers to grow spiritually and only then to **do** things out of genuine spiritual motivation.

¹ **Luke 2:41-51.** Mary evidently remembered this clearly and passed the memory on to Luke.

² **John 5:19**

³ For a much fuller examination of this question, I recommend reading *Leadership is Male* by David Pawson – whether you agree with the title or not!

⁴ **1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9**

Getting back to church and family leadership, it is clear that Paul sees the two as closely interlinked. And because he sees the husband's role in marriage to be the one who leads the partnership, any thought of female leadership in the church simply does not arise, with the small but significant exception of the role of mature women who have a vital role to lead and instruct younger women.¹ For a woman to lead a man upsets the divine design, and it is for this reason, not from any supposed misogyny or 'customs of the time', that Paul does not allow a woman to exercise authority over a man !

In **1 Timothy 2:12**, the word translated 'exercise authority' is defined as "1) one who with his own hands kills another or himself; 2) one who acts on his own authority, autocratic; 3) an absolute master; 4) to govern, exercise dominion over one" (*Thayer's Greek Definitions*). Obviously a strong word, and this is the only place you will find it in the Bible. There is no suggestion that proper male leadership – in either the family or the church – is anything like as domineering as this, so any attempted female 'leadership' that looks like this has not simply turned away from 'following' but has gone even further, into domination and control.

There is a really nasty example of this in **Revelation 2:20-24**, where the glorified Lord Jesus identifies a woman in Thyatira who certainly seems to have dominated the church there – and they have let her get away with it! By calling her 'Jezebel', he links her to the Old Testament queen of the same name, who was a Sidonian princess before King Ahab of Israel married her – and then followed her into the worship of Baal, leading the people of Israel completely away from the LORD.² This New Testament version of Jezebel has led at least some of the believers in Thyatira into immorality, probably into idolatry as well, and he links it all to Satanism. There is judgement in store for her and for her followers – church members! A salutary warning about the wrong kind of leadership – from the Lord Jesus himself.

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The **purpose** of Christ's love for the church, what motivated him to give himself up for his bride-to-be, is revealed back in **Ephesians 5:26-28**: ". . . so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So [literally 'in this way'] husbands ought also to love their own wives . . . " This is not just leadership, and it goes beyond what the world sees as 'love'. This is a reflection of that same sacrificial love of Jesus – sacrifice for a purpose – and it calls out to husbands to follow its example. The 'nourishing and cherishing' has an end in view. A wife who is cleansed, without defect, set apart for God and blameless. Without the spots of adolescence or the wrinkles of senility, but in her prime – truly 'in all her glory'.

What a challenge to a husband! To love and lead his wife in such a way that helps to bring her to an overflowing life, mature in Christ and glorious in herself. And, like the Lord Jesus with the church, to be able to 'present' her back to himself. She is to be glorious in herself and also a glorious 'gift' back to the husband who loves her sacrificially and with whom she is 'one flesh'. True fulfilment of the purpose of the marriage partnership . . .

. . . and also a wonderful picture of the purposes of God for the church as the bride of his Son! As Paul writes: "*This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.*"³

And here is a challenge for us all, individually, in our marriages and in fellowship together: To be people who are moving forwards in the purposes of God, with a growing appreciation of all that he has done for us in Jesus, learning to live from the indwelling life of Jesus by his Holy Spirit and not from any external code of rules or expectations. For our lives to be practical demonstrations of the internal transforming power of that same Spirit, to be the means of assisting others who are on the same road and also others who may be interested to join that road.

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¹ **Titus 2:3-5**

² **1 Kings 16:31** and onwards

³ Please read the whole passage! **Ephesians 5:21-33**