

Reclaiming Unity in the Letter to the Ephesians

Betty L. Scheetz

The author invites readers to reflect on one of the most argument-inducing lines in the Bible: “Wives, be submissive to your husbands.” After providing an analysis of first-century Mediterranean culture and its household code based on values of honor and shame, she suggests that the Letter to the Ephesians contains a world-changing vision of marriage and all other relationships with the power to transform today’s culture.

A male leader, during the World Day of Prayer ceremony in my community, bowed his head and asked that we all pray for “wives to be submissive to their husbands, *just as the Bible says!*” This commonly quoted statement “Wives, be submissive to your husbands” is often understood to be the key message in the Letter to the Ephesians. This condensed version ignores twenty centuries of cultural changes and misses the original meaning intended by the first-century author of this letter. In this essay I will re-present the household code section of the Letter to the Ephesians through a basic understanding of the first-century Mediterranean culture in which it was written, then bring it forward with suggestions on how this passage can apply to our own lives.

The statement “Wives, be submissive to your husbands” is found in three places in the Christian canon of Scripture: Colossians 3:18, Ephesians 5:22, and 1 Peter 3:1. These few words are the only ones repeated verbatim in all three letters. Perhaps this is the reason these specific words have been pulled from the Scriptures as a core message.

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The First Letter to Peter gives sage advice on how Christian women should act toward their non-Christian husbands. Colossians and Ephesians are addressed to husbands and wives who share the Christian faith. Colossians was written prior to Ephesians and seems to have been written in haste to address problems within the church at Colossae. Ephesians, on the other hand, was carefully thought out and intended to circulate through all of the churches. The Letter to the Ephesians contains more detail in the household code section than does the Letter to the Colossians. According to Hubert Richards, the author of *The Gospel According to St. Paul*, this letter may have been written to clarify the hastily written letter to the Colossians.

First-Century Mediterranean Culture

We listen to these passages through the filter of twenty-first century American culture. By studying first-century Mediterranean culture we can perhaps enrich our understanding of these words in an attempt to hear them in the same way that the original listeners would have heard them. There are three major first-century cultural values that are helpful in understanding the deeper meanings in this Pauline letter: honor and shame, limited goods, and the purity code. These cultural values had a profound impact on marriage and love as understood by first-century people.

Honor was the highest value in this ancient culture and was embedded in the hierarchal male figure. The first-century definition of honor was “a public claim to worth and public acknowledgement of that claim” (Pilch, 1999, 36). The way a male preserved his honor was to act sexually aggressive, authoritarian, defensive, thereby showing concern for his prestige and precedence (see Malina, 1981, 45). The male head of the household, the patriarch, embodied the family honor. If this honor was lost, he would seek to regain or restore it by such means as public challenges or competition, which always involved risk. If honor could be gained or regained, it could also be lost. The Gospels contain many examples of honor challenges, including the temptations of Jesus in the desert (see Matt 4:1-11). As expected in these encounters, Jesus always wins the challenge and maintains or increases his honor.

The female side of honor was shame. Although shame in our culture presents a negative image, for the first-century people it was a positive reference to the female’s sensitivity toward the male honor. Females displayed this sensitivity by being sexually exclusive, submissive to authority, and avoiding risk. They would act with shyness, timidity, and restraint. Women were very passive (see Malina 1981, 45). Acting otherwise would be a threat to the honor of the male figure, whether it was her father or her husband. If a female acted outside set boundaries, there was no recourse to regain her sensitivity. It was lost forever.

Just as we recognize that natural resources, such as oil and coal, are not inexhaustible, the first-century people believed virtually everything, tangible and intangible, was in limited supply. This society was steeped in the belief of limited goods. Whatever God had made had already been distributed as God chose to give it out. No more could be produced. Examples of tangible goods would be wealth, grain, food, blood, and semen. Intangible goods were such things as honor, love, power, and friendship. There were only two ways of increasing one's supply, through inheritance or by taking it from someone else. Since honor was their highest value, it was the most sought after. Losing a debate or fight meant losing honor, which would then be acquired by the winner. "This competition was created by the ancient experience that everything was limited" (Mueller, 2001, 22).

The Purity Code, also called the Holiness Code, is a set of rules that govern persons, places, events, and things. God ordered the world by distinguishing day from night, winter from summer, and land from sea and sky. Order was an important value to this culture because good order was associated with being closer to God. The rules governing the right order of things are part of the Law found throughout the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament. Everything had a place and, to assure order, everything had to be in its proper place. Anything out of place was seen as unclean, impure, outside, or defiled. If someone or something was out of place, it was important to get the offending person or thing back into its proper place as quickly as possible. Only then was order restored. In this ancient society male and female roles were completely separate from one another. Recall the characteristics of the male and female roles connected with honor. They are exact opposites. A man would become impure or *un-whole-ly* by emulating someone below his status, for example, by taking on the job or characteristic of a woman, child, or slave. If such an action occurred in the public arena, honor would be lost.

Marriage in this society was a business arrangement between two males, the father of the bride and the husband to be. Wives were possessions, like livestock, and love was not an expectation of marriage. Love was seen as "group attachment and group bonding" (Pilch and Malina, 110). Respect was the key element in this understanding of love; emotional feelings of affection were not part of this concept. Life in this first-century Mediterranean culture was harsh, especially for those without power. People were locked into a specific social status based on their gender and genealogy. Thus, to understand these cultural values

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opens a door into a fuller comprehension of the Scriptures, especially the Pauline letters.

Greek, Latin, and English Translations

According to Dr. Steve Mueller, the original Greek and Latin words for “submissive” were *hupotassein* and *subordinare*. In Greek *hupo* means “under,” and *tasso* is “to place in a certain order.” In the Latin translation *sub* means “under,” and *ordinare* is “to order.” The Greek and Latin words have been translated into three different English words: “submissive,” “subordinate,” and “subject.” The specific word used depends on the translation: King James Version, New American, New Jerusalem, or New Revised Standard. All three of these English words are often interchanged with the word “obey.” In both Greek and Latin, the sense of ordering receives strong emphasis, reflecting the first-century cultural value. By the time the translation gets to the English language, the notion of order is diluted. Over the distance of time and space, and with our cultural filters, the English words used are negative and dis-empowering to women in our culture. The synthesis of Ephesians, as used by the leader at the World Day of Prayer, is not good news for women seeking equal status with men. Consequently, many of our young adults are eliminating the readings from the Pauline letters that contain these words. It is important to reclaim Ephesians with a deeper understanding of this beautiful letter. To do so we must “re-order” our thinking.

An Overview of the Teaching of Ephesians

The Letter to the Ephesians is divided into two main sections, “the first dogmatic, the second moral” (Flanagan, 197). Another way of describing these two sections is: this is what you need to believe, and, this is how you are to live what you believe. The statement “Wives, be submissive to your husbands” is in the moral section of the letter. Nevertheless, it is important to have an understanding of the dogma behind this letter if we are to fully grasp the intended meaning in the moral section.

The early Church began as a Jewish sect, similar to the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Throughout the first century the fledgling Church grew rapidly; however, this new growth was primarily due to Gentile converts. Tensions resulting from the mixing of Jewish and Gentile cultures were addressed in the Pauline letters. A common thread woven throughout these letters is the theme of unity among Christians, which is highlighted in Ephesians. Unity in the Letter to the Ephesians begins with the genesis of a new human being created by Christ’s

work and composed of both Jew and Gentile. This new human is instructed to “not live according to the old pattern of life” (Brown, 623). Jesus is upheld as the model for this new being to follow.

The second thread woven throughout the Pauline letters, and a primary focus of Ephesians, is the universality of the Church. The metaphor of the human body is used to emphasize the universality of the Church with only one leader, the head, and that is Jesus. The people are the body, and no one is excluded from becoming a part of the body. Members of the body have different gifts to support the body, but all are of equal importance.

The First Letter to the Thessalonians, the first of the Pauline letters, proclaims that Jesus would come soon and whisk away the chosen to a heavenly dwelling. Pauline eschatology developed and changed throughout the letters, culminating in a different view of salvation in Ephesians, the last of the Pauline letters. There, salvation is achieved through unity and the building of the universal Church. The drastic change was the view of salvation happening here on earth. Salvation is seen as an ongoing process, not a one-time happening. The three themes of unity, universality, and salvation in the dogmatic section of Ephesians set the foundation for the moral section.

Morality in Ephesians

To achieve this unity and bring about the vision of the universal Church, a Christian must act in certain ways. A new way of acting or living for this new being is addressed in the moral section of the Letter to the Ephesians under the household codes which were directions, or moral imperatives, on how members of a household should act. Households consisted of the nuclear family and would include married sons and their families, unmarried adult daughters, and slaves. The household code instructs husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves (Eph 5:22-6:9). The instructions start with the foundation of all human relationships, the bond between husband and wife which then fans out to include the whole household. This is the pattern in which united relationships grow to reach the universal vision.

The metaphor of the body that started in the dogmatic section continues in the moral section. Relationships between humans run parallel to the relationship between humans and God. Jesus is the one who bridges these relationships.

Returning to the phrase that the gentleman used at the World Day of Prayer, we can see if the values of the first-century Mediterranean culture now present a different understanding of the advice given to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:22-29. At the same time, recall the image of the first-century wife, with the female characteristics of shame: sexual exclusivity, submission to authority, restraint, and timidity and passivity. Apply this vision of the wife to the passage

“Wives, be submissive to your husbands.” Perhaps the image can be sharpened by a recent example of a culture more similar to this first-century people than our own. Imagine you are a woman, a wife, in Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban. How would you respond to this “news”? My response, as I understand the culture, would be: “That is what I am already doing. My only choices are to submit, be severely beaten, or die!” This part of the passage is not news, let alone good news. Pulling this statement out of context disconnects the moral teaching from the dogmatic themes of unity and universality.

The quoted statement above omits a portion of the sentence in the text. The passage as it is translated in the New American Bible reads: “Wives should be subordinate to their husbands *as to the Lord*” (Eph 5:22). Starting at the begin-

ning, the opening word in this passage would attract the attention of the listener. It was customary that household codes address the men first. This deviation continues by first addressing the children and slaves before the men. The first to be addressed in Ephesians are the powerless. “Personal dignity has been granted to subordinate members where it was not given before” (Osiek, 362). It seems that the author of this letter is not so concerned with promoting traditional honor and order. The midsection of this statement merely repeats the status quo. For the women, there is nothing new here; this advice is exactly how they are acting. The part so often dropped in this sentence connects with the Pauline dogma of the new creation, using Jesus as the model of subordination to God.

The remaining passages (Eph 5:23-24) continue to give the women advice on how they should be subordinate to their husbands using the metaphor of the body. The husband is head of the woman just as Jesus is head of the Church.

This statement becomes clearer in the closing statement (Eph 5:33b) where the word respect is used. This is the new way of acting for women. The passage introduces a benevolent respect for the husband that was not the norm in this culture.

The core of the moral advice in this letter is directed at the husbands. Husbands are told to *love* their wives (Eph 5:25a). This is shocking advice to the husbands who view their wives as property. This statement is followed by two examples of how the husband is to love his wife. The first example is a masterful work in metaphorical language depicting how a man should love his wife

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(Eph 5:25-27). The intent of metaphor is to take the reader, or hearer, beyond the mere word, to excite the imagination, and lead one into a deeper experience of a mystery. This metaphor is an attempt to explain the unexplainable—the mystery of love. The artistry of this passage is like holding a holographic picture; with the slightest movement, the image is transformed to a totally different picture. The passage starts with a role reversal as the husband gives himself over to his wife.

The language of the metaphor dances through the mind as the husband begins to slowly and gently bathe her to make her perfect, to make her whole, to make her holy. The actions are full of caring and emotion. It is an intimate, sensual scene between husband and wife. Suddenly, the picture changes to Jesus as the bridegroom caring for the Church. Or is Jesus the bride? Or are the characters God and Jesus? The characters become undistinguishable from one another, the husband from the wife, Jesus from the Church, and the wife from Jesus, Jesus from God. The picture that has been painted is the perfect picture of unity in a universal Church. It is the Pauline view of salvation!

The second example is more concrete than the first. The advice to the husband is to love his wife as he loves his own body (Eph 5:28-30). He nourishes and cherishes his body in the same way that Jesus nourishes and cherishes the Church. Just as man has one body, the relationship of husband and wife should be similarly united.

The advice given to the men is more poignant than the advice given to the women. The old values system is re-ordered, necessitating a paradigm shift. The old order, that caused delineation and division of relationships, has been brought into balance with the new way. The new way opens the door for new and deeper relationships where all are on an equal level. The old notion of love being in limited supply is replaced with a new vision: love, growing and deepening with feelings of affection.

The old view of honor is superseded with a new and daring way. Men are to take on female characteristics coinciding with the benevolent way in which the new man is to act. The highest value in the old way is being replaced with a new value. Honor is replaced by love. The new way of acting and forming relationships is based on love. Unity can only be achieved when there is a balance in the power structure and respect for the human dignity of others.

Jesus' Treatment of the Disempowered

Jesus is the model of this new human, with a new way of acting. To be Christian is to follow Jesus' teaching toward establishing a right relationship with God and with God's family, that is, all of God's children. Ephesians is a retelling of the gospel message. Throughout the Gospels the message of Jesus is to love

one another and love your enemy. Jesus always sided with justice and equality. He defended those who were powerless, worked to elevate their social status, and treated them as equals. The powerless were women, children, slaves, foreigners, the sick (both physically and mentally), and sinners.

The story of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4-42) is a prime example of Jesus' treatment of the powerless. The main character is a woman, a foreigner, and a sinner who has been ostracized by her community because of her sins. Jesus reestablishes a relationship with this woman and elevates her from her place of suffering and restores her dignity.

A second example of Jesus' treatment of women is in the story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42), where Martha is doing the household chores and gets a bit miffed at Mary whom Jesus is teaching. Jesus gives Mary permission to step outside the traditional role of women and recognizes her as a student, a role confined to men in this first-century culture. These are two of many such stories that relate to Jesus as a proponent of women.

Conclusion

Synthesizing the message of Ephesians into "Wives, be submissive to your husbands" misses the mark. Scripture used in this manner continues to cause division. Ephesians is a message of hope to the disempowered. The clear message of this letter is directed towards a unified and universal Church. The Letter to the Ephesians gives us more than great insights in how we can contribute; it gives us insights into ourselves. We must all play a part in achieving salvation. As Richards says, "This is what you are; now *be* it" (121).

It is essential to bring this passage forward into our world and apply it to our own lives and culture. I will present one example of applying the message to Ephesians to our culture and include several suggestions for further reflection.

Honor was the highest value in the first-century culture and Christians were instructed to replace that value with another. Money or wealth is a likely candidate as the highest value in the American culture. Is this value a benefit to building relationships? Does it cause division or unity? Is it a value that Jesus modeled? Are we being asked to make a paradigm shift? If so, what would the message of Ephesians suggest to us as a replacement for our value of money? What would our world look like if we changed values? How would we go about making the changes? What is my part in making the shift?

Similar questions can be applied to our family relationships (husband and wife, children, and extended family), work relationships, our church (parish, the wider church community, the diocese, the worldwide Church, and the church leadership), our community, our country, and the world. Creative applications might include asking the questions above in light of the Feminist Movement and

the current crises of sexual abuse in the Church. Now our task is to go *be* what God is calling us to be.

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