**THE PARALLEL RELATIONSHIP**

***Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 23******For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24******Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.***

Ephesians 5:22-24 (NIV)

Paul has been outlining the new standards which God expects of His new society, the church, especially in terms of its unity and purity. These two qualities are indispensable to a life which is both worthy of the calling and fitting to the status of the people of God. He has told his readers that they need to be filled with the Holy Spirit (5:18) and that this on-going filling will show itself in their changed lives. They will find release in fellowship, worship, thankfulness and submission (5:19-21). Picking up this final outworking in submission, he moves on now to the new relationships in which God’s people inevitably find themselves, beginning with the practical, down-to-earth relationships in the home. Husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants were to be found in the earliest Christian congregations.

Detailed, practical instruction on Christian family life and on Christian responsibility in ‘employment’ seems to have been given by the apostles from the beginning (Colossians 3:18-4:1; Titus 2:1-10; 1 Peter 2:18-3:7). Teaching that emphasises personal relationship with Christ without any attempt to outline its consequences in terms of relationships with the people we live and work with, is incomplete.

‘*Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord’* (5:22). Because there is no verb in Paul’s original 5:22, the call for submission in 5:21 (‘*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ’*) is intended to carry over into 5:22, forming a bridge between two sections. This is probably why the NIV and other versions make 5:21 a paragraph in itself. The Greek verb for ‘submit’ in 5:21 is a present participle (i.e. ‘submitting’) as were the verbs in the verses preceding this one: ‘*speaking to one another’* (5:19a), ‘*singing and making music’* (5:19b) and ‘*giving thanks’* (5:20). All four participles depend on the command to ‘*be filled with the Spirit’* (5:18) and describe the consequences of the Holy Spirit’s fulness. A Greek participle could sometimes be an imperative (command) and pretty clearly here, the demand for mutual submission leads on to the submission asked for wives, children and slaves.

What is beyond question is that the three areas of relationship that follow are given as examples of Christian submission. Wives are addressed before their husbands and told to ‘*submit’* to them (5:22); children are mentioned before their parents and told to ‘*obey’* them (6:1); and slaves are addressed before their masters and similarly are told to ‘*obey’* them (6:5).

Women in many cultures have been exploited; children have often been suppressed and squashed, and workers have been unjustly treated, not to mention the appalling injustices and barbarities of slavery and the slave trade. The church has often acquiesced to the status quo and so helped perpetuate some forms of human oppression, instead of being the vanguard of those seeking social justice. But nothing in Paul’s instruction is inconsistent with the true liberation of human beings from exploitation and oppression. It was Jesus Christ who treated women with honour in an age when they were despised. It was Jesus Christ who beckoned children to Himself despite His own disciples’ objections in a period of history when unwanted babies were consigned to the local rubbish dump and children abandoned in the forum for anybody to pick up and rear for slavery or prostitution. It was Jesus Christ who dignified manual labour by working as a carpenter and fulfilled the role of a slave when He washed the disciples’ feet.

In the light of the teaching of Jesus and the apostles we need to confirm three truths:

1. the dignity of womenhood, childhood and servanthood
2. the equality before God of all human beings, irrespective of race, rank, class, culture, sex or age, because all are made in His image
3. the unity of all believers, as fellow members of God’s family and of Christ’s body

Codes of household duties were familiar to the Greeks from Aristotle on and became a familiar part of Christian instruction (cf. Colossians 3:18-4;1; 1 Peter 2:18-3:7). Paul begins with the basic relationship in the home – between husbands and wives. Throughout this section husbands and wives are reminded of their duties and not their rights. Husbands and wives are equal before Christ (Galatians 3:28). There is no difference in worth between the two. But for the order of the family there must be leadership and the responsibility of leadership ordinarily fell on the husband and father. While in Colossians 3:18 wives are told to be subject to their husbands ‘*as is fitting in the Lord’* the phrase here, ‘*as to the Lord’* has a different force. The ‘*Lord’* is Christ and not the husband and the implication is that a Christian wife’s submission to her husband is one aspect of her obedience to the Lord.

‘*For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body’* (5:23). Husband and wife are to see their relationship as following the patterns of the relationship between Christ and His Church. There is Old Testament background to this in the way the prophets regarded God as husband to His people, entering into marriage covenant with them, and loving them faithfully, even when, because of their idolatry, they were like an unfaithful wife who had committed adultery (Isaiah 54:1-8; 62:4,5; Jeremiah 3:6-14; Ezekiel 16; 23; Hosea 1-3). There has been much discussion about the biblical meaning of ‘*head’* as ‘source’ rather than ‘leader.’ ‘*Head’* as ‘source’ is the obvious meaning in 4:15,16 but the term is generally better understood in terms of ‘leader’ (1:22; Colossians 1:18; 2:10). Paul adds ‘*of which he is the Savior’* (5:23). He might be wanting to parallel the sacrificial concern of Christ for His church with the need for the husband to have a loving and sacrificial concern for his wife.

‘*Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything’* (5:24). In the context and culture of his day, Paul wanted every Christian wife to make the responsibility of marriage and family higher than any independent aspirations. Following the parallel, as the church wholeheartedly devotes herself to Christ, so the wife is called on to wholeheartedly maintain a submissive heart to her husband (who in turn is to be the loving leader who sacrifices for her welfare).

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

‘The Epistles to the Colossians and the Ephesians’ (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) by F. F. Bruce (William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984)

‘Ephesians’ (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) by F. Foulkes (Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, England, 1989)

The Message of Ephesians (The Bible Speaks Today Series) by John R. W. Stott (Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, England, 1999)

‘The Prison Letters (Paul for Everyone)’ by Tom Wright (SPCK, London, 2004)

‘Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words’ by W. E. Vine (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1996)