

• **Godliness applies to relationships**

Paul now moves on to deal with relationships. He has given a general appeal ^{☐1} and has considered some detailed matters ^{☐2}. He has put the appeal for godliness in some other ways ^{☐3}. Now he comes to deal with relationships. Christian godliness involves relating skilfully to people who are close to us: husbands, wives, children, parents, workers, employees.

^{☐1} 4:17–24
^{☐2} 4:25 –5:7
^{☐3} 5:8–21

Wives are to model themselves on the submissiveness of the church

Wives are to model themselves on the submissiveness of the church. Paul begins: *‘Wives, subject yourselves to your own husbands, as something you do for the Lord’* ^{☐1}. The Greek word ‘subject yourselves’ is not actually present in verse 22. It carries over from verse 21. More literally it reads: ‘Submit to one another ... Wives to husbands...’. Sometimes too much is made of this, as if wifely submission was **only part** of mutual submission, and Paul really means that husbands must also submit to wives as well (which he does not say!). It is true that there is such a thing as **mutual** submission among all Christians across all relationships ^{☐2}, but this does not cancel out what is dealt with in 5:22–33, and the fact that the verb is carried over from verse 21 does not change this. Paul does not call husbands to be submissive to wives, or parents to obey children, or masters to obey slaves! Verse 21 does not cancel out the leadership patterns of 5:22 through to 6:9. And the verb is present in verse 24!

^{☐1} 5:22

^{☐2} 5:21

• **The wife is not in any way inferior**

‘Wives, subject yourselves to your own husbands, as some-thing you do for the Lord’ ^{☐1}. It does **not** mean that the wife is in any way inferior. She is not less human, or less Christian. It does not mean that she is less gifted, less intelligent – or anything along those lines! It means that in the team-work between husband and wife, the husband is the team-leader.

^{☐1} 5:22

• **The husband is the team leader**

‘For the husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is the head of the church, and is himself the Saviour of the body’ ^{☐1}. *‘As the church submits to Christ...’* The Greek begins ‘But as the church submits...’, yet it is not likely that it is a contrast with anything in verse 23. The Greek *alla* seems to mean ‘But to go back to what I was saying about husbands...’. I leave it untranslated. *‘As the church submits to Christ so should wives submit to their husbands in everything’* ^{☐2}. ‘Head’ means ‘ruler’, ‘leader’. Sometimes an attempt is made to avoid the thrust of Paul’s teaching by understanding the word translated ‘head’ as ‘source’. But certainly in this passage the meaning ‘source’ does not fit. The husband is the team-leader of a marriage, as Christ is the leader of His church. The wife is to follow a husband’s lead; it does not mean she is without a voice or is timid. It simply means that the **final** decisions in the home are the husband’s responsibility. He does not have the only word, but he has the last word. Why should there be any difficulty over this? Anglicans have bishops who can be quite autocratic, sports teams have captains, industries have managers, charismatic churches have ‘lead-elders’ – and marriages have husbands! Why should one form of leadership be thought wrong, but in every other department of life moderate hierarchy and leadership are seen to be necessary? Absolute equality of leadership-position is practised nowhere else. Why should the Christian view of marriage be an exception to what is recognised everywhere? Teams need leaders, even a team of two.

^{☐1} 5:23

^{☐2} 5:24

• **Head means ‘leader’ not ‘source’**

• **Final decisions are the husband’s responsibility**

• **Like Christ – the husband is a protector and rescuer**

Christ is the head of the church and ‘Saviour of the body’. Ephesians 5:23 picks up from 1:22. This last phrase is a strong hint to the husband that he would help his wife’s submission if he too, like Jesus, were a protector and rescuer of his wife when the situation calls for it.

• **Submission in everything – except sin**

Jesus has plans for His church. The church finds out His will and follows His lead. So – says the New Testament – *‘should wives submit to their husbands in everything’*. Everything! It is quite an extreme statement! Paul

will have some extreme statements for men too in Ephesians 5:25–33. There are limits, however. A wife does not have to follow the lead of the husband if he wants her to sin. The principle of Acts 5:29 applies.

• **Applies even if the husband is not a Christian**

Does this instruction apply even if the husband is not a Christian? 1 Peter 3:1–6 lets us know that the answer is ‘yes’. The wife is not to act one-sidedly in anything. She consults her husband on all major decisions. A Christian husband should not stifle his wife (of course not!) or act insensitively. On the other hand the wife does not submit to her husband only on **condition** that he is as sensitive as she would like him to be. He may not even be a Christian at all. She follows her husband’s lead (generally speaking) as something she does for the Lord Jesus Christ, not as something she does for her husband because he is such a deserving person!

Paul addresses the wife first. He wants **first** the basic structure required by God to be accepted. He addresses the one **under** authority before he addresses the one **in** authority. Then he is able to turn to the one **in** authority and tell him to make use of his responsibility with a loving attitude.

Husbands model themselves on the love of Jesus

Husbands model themselves on the love of Jesus. Paul moves from wives to husbands. He puts forward the Lord Jesus Christ as a model for the husband. ‘*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her*’ ¹, *in order that He might sanctify her, cleansing her by the washing of the water through the word* ². (As soon as Paul talks about a husband’s love he switches to talk about Jesus’ love for the church. *Upon the cross Jesus gave Himself up as a sacrifice, in great love* ³.)

1 5:25
2 5:26
3 5:25

• **Jesus sacrificed himself for his bride**

Christ is the husband of the church. He came to this world as a bridegroom seeking a bride. His purpose on the cross was that He might do what needed to be done for sinners to be cleansed and become His bride. In spite of all the sin and wickedness which He saw in sinners, He showed great love. He did not reject His church because of her weaknesses and sins. He took the practical step of sacrificing Himself for her upon the cross. His purpose on the cross was to ‘sanctify’ the church, to put the church once-and-for-ever into the position of being special to God, and then continue the process of cleansing in her life.

The thought is similar to Titus 2:14. The prospective bride of Ezekiel 16 received a cleansing bath and a new set of clothes and then is presented to the prospective husband. Christ humbled Himself in loving sacrifice upon the cross. His purpose was that He might ‘sanctify the church, cleansing her’. The cleansing is the means by which the sanctifying takes place.

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