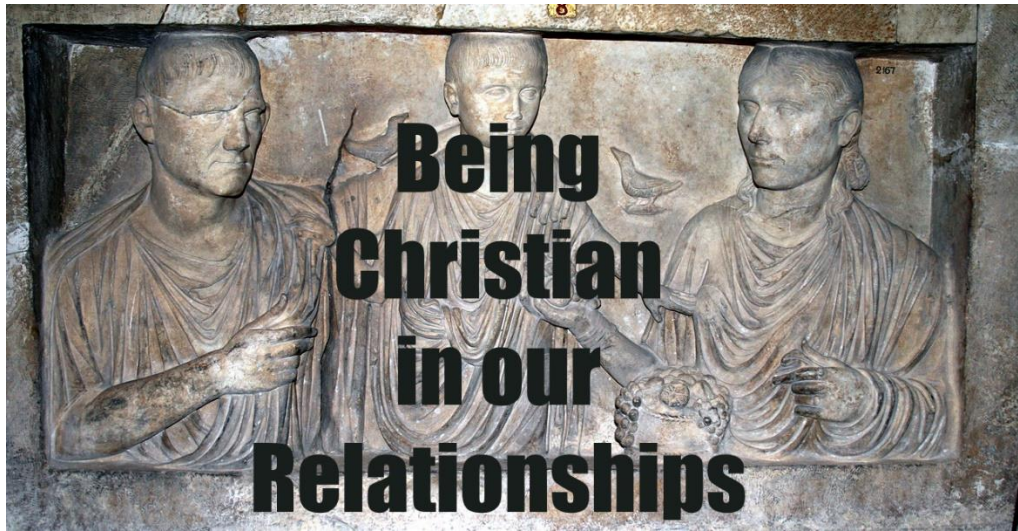


24 October 2021
Ephesians 5:21-6:9
Being Christian in our Relationships
First Mennonite Church

"Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."

Back in 1967, Pierre Elliot Trudeau said, "there is no place for the state in the



bedrooms of the nation." I share this quote with you as a reminder of how bold and daring Ephesians is in presenting the implications of the gospel. In Ephesians 1:10, Paul talks about God's strategic plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. The return of Jesus will finally bring about this restoration of all things, even including intimate human relationships, to how God intended it.

You see, Ephesians has no qualms about tackling cultural assumptions about husband and wife, parents and children, and masters and slaves head on and **modifying** them based on the new creation brought into the world by Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Ephesians doesn't have a problem worming its way behind closed doors of Christian households and giving practical instructions for how wife/husband, parents/children, and masters/slaves are to live in family relationships, while, at the same time, living amid a pagan society.

These practical instructions are known as the Household Codes. Different versions of the Household Codes exist in other NT books like Colossians and 1 Peter. In the bulletin insert, I acknowledged these verses are the most difficult and controversial verses in Ephesians. Since dealing with all three relationships will take too much time, I will deal with only one, the relationship between husband and wife. Even though I will restrict myself to the husband/wife relationship, I still feel like an Egyptian mummy—pressed for time!

Before I look closer at how Ephesians tackled cultural assumptions in the ancient Roman world, let's look at a few of our own. These assumptions are often accepted uncritically by many Christians as biblical, and even God ordained.

First, many Christians assume God originally created social and political structures, like family systems and nation states. This isn't biblical. Human beings create structures of society, and these are not necessarily of God.

Second, many Christians assume God created the patriarchal family. Patriarchy means male dominated. In the Bible the extended family was considered the family. For example, a 90-year-old father was still the head of all his sons, even though they may be married and have children on their own. It was the patriarch who made decisions and had the power of life and death over those in his family.

In the Old Testament, God struggled with the patriarchal family by how unkind it was to the widows, orphans, the poor, the stranger, and even women who were divorced by their husbands. For example, Deuteronomy 24 assumes the man can divorce his wife if he finds something objectionable about her. If the woman didn't have this certificate of divorce, she would have been destitute as she couldn't remarry as she was the property of the man. Nor could she return to her family as she would have brought shame upon them. Her only recourse would have been prostitution. The certificate of divorce was there to protect women from the system of patriarchy.

No, God didn't create the patriarchal society or family. **You can be a Christian in a patriarchal society, but that is very different from saying that the patriarchal society is Christian.**

Finally, Christians often assume men and women were not created equal. We use arguments from scripture, specifically the book of Genesis, to say that the woman was created out of man, to be a helper, subject to her husband. Adam said, "she is bone of my bone", which is another way of saying, she is my equal. In the Old Testament the word "helper" is used mostly for God. In Isaiah 41:10 it says,

*do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will **help** you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.*

If God is the helper of Israel, does that mean that God is submissive or subservient to us? Never! Women became subservient to men because of sin.

Years ago, it was very common in our culture and in the church to refer to married women by their husband's name.

The impact was two-fold. **First**, my mum and two grandmas' identities were through their husbands. Friends of mine married in their 40s. She made a fascinating observation about how her church viewed her before she was married. She said, "even though I'm university educated, have a teaching job, earning an income, and own a house, my church doesn't really see me as a real person." She said this changed after she married. Many in the church felt that with a husband, she now had an identity.

Second, by being known through their husbands made women dependent on their husbands. In a patriarchal system the husband was the breadwinner and the woman, dependant. Women, who had jobs outside the home prior to marriage, needed to quit so they could cook, clean, and raise the family. My Grandma was at a complete loss when her husband died. She lived alone on the farm, never learnt how to drive a car, and didn't know anything about the finances. Thankfully, her children were there to help.

When one person holds all the power, the risk of abuse rises. No doubt, we've read and are deeply saddened to hear stories of how late Ravi Zacharias leveraged his reputation as a world-famous Christian apologist to sexually abuse women; how the late John Howard Yoder used his position of authority at AMBS to sexually abuse his students. I've read stories where abused women were counselled by their pastors to return to their abusive husbands because of a patriarchal reading of Ephesian 5:22. "Wives submit to your husbands" is the most common scripture used to justify violence in the home.

All I'm trying to say in naming these three assumptions is that **patriarchy is not of God**, it's a system that humans created. You can be a Christian in a patriarchal society, but that is very different from saying that the patriarchal society is Christian.

Patriarchy is like going out for dinner and being served traditional gender rolls!

The Household Codes in Ephesians and other NT books aren't uniquely biblical concepts but were prevalent within the culture of the day. As far back as the fourth century BC, Greek philosophers considered household codes to be a miniature copy of society and ultimately the universe. In the bulletin insert, I included three quotations from philosophers and historians who included their own versions of the Household Codes in their writings. I won't quote them but let you read them for yourselves.

I included them because they all argued that a man's authority over his household was critical to the success of a society. Many Roman officials believed the household codes to be such an important part of Pax Romana (the peace of Rome) that they passed laws ensuring their protection.

When writing to the church about family relationships, Paul uses the same categories of husband/wife; man/woman; parent/child; slave owner/slave relationships as Aristotle, Philo, and Josephus. But Paul significantly **modifies the Household Codes** to reflect how Christians are to Christian in their relationships. These modifications change the meaning of the code. It's the upside-down world of the gospel!

Let's look at some of the modifications.

First, Ephesians 5:21 says, *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.* This is a key verse that introduces the section on the Household codes. It provides the overall framework and the key concept that underlies the entire code. "*Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" Be subject means to place oneself under the other. To be subject wouldn't have been a virtuous practice in a patriarchal culture of Rome, but it does reflect Paul's understanding of what it means to be Christian in our relationships. That is, put others first. Seek the welfare of others above one's own. This is one basic reason why so many Christians have gone ahead and received the Covid vaccine—they've done it for the protection of the larger community.

There is a real irony in being subordinate to each other. If everyone is a slave of the other, then everyone is also a master. In Philippians 2, Paul uses this irony to speak about Christ:

*though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,*

*but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.*

This is how Christians are to be in their relationships. They are to model Christ, imitate Christ. They do this **not** by modelling the behaviour of the emperor, international fashion moguls, TV preachers, arrogant politicians, Residential School leaders, nor famous philosophers, but the carpenter from Nazareth.

This verse already puts a knife to the roots of patriarchy because it calls for mutual submission within the community: men, women, husbands, wives, children, parents, slaves, slave owners. Everyone.

Second, Ephesians 5:22-23 says, *Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church...*"

You know the thing that amazes me about these verses addressed to wives? It's that Paul would even address them. After all, they had no power, no rights, no authority. Why would he even ask them to be subject to their husbands when it was already the case?

I think it's here we come to one of the major revolutionary aspects in husband-and-wife relationships. It's the new creation brought into existence by Christ the Lord. Since Jesus is Lord, then the emperor nor husband are lord. Since Jesus is Lord, then all human relationships, traditions, rules and regulations have been transformed. We, in the church, must live into that new reality.

Finally, Paul then turns his attention to the husbands in verses 25-33. To be sure, husbands were the dominant and most powerful person in the household back in those days. Paul isn't under our modern-day illusion, which says that we are all equal, that there are no inequalities between people, no power differences. It's quite clear that Paul knows that husbands are the more powerful in the relationship, and in society. That's why he uses **nine verses and 92 words** just for husbands! And Paul does this not because husbands are easier to write to, or that he wants to make a good impression on them. Rather Paul writes as much as he does is for the simple reason that those used to being in power and authority need more instruction on how to be Christian in all their relationships.

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. . .". Christ again is the model for how husbands are to love their wives. Not your neighbour, nor the adulterous businessman or power-hungry politician, nor the emperor. But Christ. Christ is the standard. As Christ showed us the character of God in the way he lived, so we are called to live our lives as Christ lived.

Love your wives as Christ loves us. It's sacrificial love. It's other-directed love. It's a love which loves the other as much as your own body. It's a love which voluntarily gives up all claims to power, control, domination, self-interest, and self-assertion; it's a love which says, "I'll be subject to you out of reverence for Christ."

The new creation which has come through Christ is not just limited to a private inner faith in God. Ephesians has told us that God has a plan for all of creation and history. With the coming of Jesus there is now a new order in creation as the old is passing away. This new order is changing all the old ways of doing things, all the old relationships, the old ways of living.

In the new creation, the word headship has now been radically changed too, turned on its head, as it were. No longer does headship mean power, dominion, authoritarian behaviour. Now in the new age, it means **servanthood**. Servanthood means giving up your power, prestige, and privilege, and becoming a servant of your wife, becoming subject to your wife out of reverence for Christ.

"Be subject to one another". It's the Christian way of being in relationship with family members. This way of living runs through the entire New Testament like a thread through a sweater. Since Jesus Christ is Lord, then all other claims to power, including patriarchy, are relativized. My professor, the late Dr. David Schroeder, once wrote, "On this model all are servants; all are subject to one another. There is no more ruling over each other in the church or outside the church. But there is equality; there is mutuality. . ." ¹

Paul doesn't say it in so many words. But it's there in a gentle and subtle, yet clear and unmistakable way. In Christ everything has change. All things are becoming new. As citizens of this new age, we are guided not by our culture but

¹ The Church as a Theological Community pg.63

by the Spirit of Jesus who changes us so that we become more Christian in our relationships. Amen.