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# The Fear of Christ is the Beginning of Wisdom:

## Ephesians 5:21-6:9

by David Powlison

**H**ow should we understand, define, and structure the primary human relationships? Marriage, family, and workplace—the “domestic” issues that Ephesians 5:21-6:9 addresses—are hot topics. Should a wife submit to her husband, or is that notion a throwback to primitive patriarchy? Is a husband “the boss,” whose home is the castle where he calls the shots? Must a teenager get permission from parents regarding birth control or abortion? What does “family” mean in a society of divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, homosexuality, prolonged singleness, and out-of-wedlock births, where the “nuclear family” is no longer typical? Can a mother spank her child in the supermarket for throwing a tantrum? Is the chief purpose of schools to discipline and instruct children *in loco parentis*, or is their core mandate to foster self-expression, while medicating those who get out of hand? Can one party in the parent-child relationship “divorce” the other party? Can an employer fire an employee for shoddy work? Can an employee insist that an employer offer domestic partner benefits for a homosexual liaison? Both the legal system and popular opinion are seized with perplexity about such issues. Rights, responsibilities, and authority are all up for grabs. While the believing church is not dancing out on the ragged edge of such issues, Christian people are still deeply affected by the

climate of uncertainty. We are often confused and too often divided.

Ephesians offers keys to sanity and wisdom to enable the people of God to grow up into oneness and maturity. But its answers might surprise you, whether you tend to be “traditionalist” or “egalitarian” about role relationships. Most of those who assert that Christ’s grace *establishes* proper authority, hierarchy, and role distinctions cite Ephesians 5:21-6:9—end of discussion. The commands are clear and clearly consistent with the rest of Scripture. Only willful perversity can twist them to say other than they say. But a closer look at this particular passage and a wider look at the context put a radical spin on submission and authority, pressing us with complementary truths that are often overlooked. Most of those who assert that Christ’s grace *eliminates* authority, hierarchy, and role distinctions use other parts of the Bible to trump Ephesians 5:21-6:9. For example, both Galatians 3:28 (“there is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”) and the prominence of “one anothering” commands (in Ephesians 4, and elsewhere in Scripture) override the embarrassingly hierarchical language of Ephesians 5-6. But an honest look at this passage shows how the message of role differences—and Paul is only a message-bearer from Jesus Himself—is inextricable from the message of mutuality.

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This article will look at three interlocking truths that make us wise. First, we all have a common call from God, defining us as peers with each other. Second, we each have a particular focus within our primary relationships, defining servant-leadership and servant-submission. Third, most of us wear multiple hats, sometimes called to lead and other times called to submit. Hold these three things together—personalize them; teach the body of Christ to live them—and we will live our life together with clarity, grace, and confidence, to the glory of God.

**A. You have a *common calling* in all relationships to walk worthy of your identity as the Wife, Child, and Slave of the Lord.**

The Lord calls you to please Him by humility, forbearance, candor, generosity, and tender-heartedness to all others. This *common calling* operates irrespective of the social roles you fill. It establishes a core attitude of mutuality that threads through every single relationship. We are one with each other and we are equals, leveled before God, whether apostle or new-hatched convert, tycoon or welfare recipient, genius or retardate, four-star general or buck private, CEO or janitor, competent adult or helpless infant. We live as peers before Him who is no respecter of persons. Differences of competence, power, wealth, intelligence, achievement, opportunity, sex, age, and ethnic background vanish. Wyoming and Vermont each get two senators, just like California and New York.

All of Ephesians 1:1-5:20 and 6:10-24 applies always, to every Christian, in every relationship. You have been given God's grace, and commanded by your Lord Jesus to give grace to every other. Whether you are married or single, male or female, child or parent, employee or boss, you live, move, and have your being within a mutuality: one church, saints together, members of one body, fellow citizens, neighbors, God's household and dwelling, brothers and sisters to one another.<sup>1</sup> You are a we. So you are called to be patient and constructive in every relationship and every interaction. A husband and wife, a parent and child, ought to communicate openly, drawing on each other for help and perspective, seeking to understand and encourage each other, repenting of the sins that interfere. You dare

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<sup>1</sup>Ephesians does teach one distinction among people within the common calling. God has given certain people as gifts to the rest in doing the ministry of His Word (4:11). Their task is to equip everyone else within the body, so that all of us will do the work of ministry (4:12f), learn to avoid the world's lies (4:14), do our part with our words and gifts (4:15f), and change our thinking, motives, and lifestyle (4:17-6:9), participating in Christ's victory over darkness (6:10-20).

not do otherwise. No superiority, no double standard, no favoritism. If kids should not backtalk parents, then parents should not yell at kids. If wives should not be shrewish and domineering, then husbands should not be brooding and domineering. In the common call, sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

More pointedly, when you think about the core of your identity, you are first and foremost *Wife*. You are

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one part of the body of Christ in union with her one Husband (5:25-32).<sup>2</sup> Whether you are male or female, married or single, you are Wife to Jesus Christ, called to fear Christ and live subject to Him. Similarly, at the core of who you are, you are essentially *Child*, beloved of the one Father (1:2, 1:5, 5:1). Whether you are a parent or a child, you are Child to God, called to obey and honor Him. Furthermore, you are essentially *Slave* to the Lord (5:8-10; 6:5-9). Whether you are in authority or under authority in your workplace, you are Slave to Christ, called to obey and fear Him. You may be a guy, but you *are* a Wife. You may have kids, but you *are* a Child. You may have people answering to you, but you *are* a Slave. Each of us in our core identity is meant to live as a subordinate.

We each and all receive the love, provision, attention, mercy, protection, will, and upbuilding grace of our Husband, Father, and Lord. Christ is head, leader, master, dominant partner. He is our "superior" and we are His "inferiors," in the good, old sense of the words. We are subjects, followers, and dependents. We stand

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<sup>2</sup>Note that the church is likened to the *wife* of Christ—imperfect, in need of cleansing and transformation by the word of grace. The word "bride" does not appear in Ephesians, though theological shorthand often uses that word to describe the church's wifely relationship to Jesus. Wife is not only literal, but better, because Paul stresses the ongoing process of a one flesh relationship with someone who has failings, not a single glorious moment. We are not yet the radiant bride, adorned in all her glory. The Holy Spirit alludes to the future, bridal glory of the wife in 5:27. One might well say that the glories of the wedding ceremony occur *after* the rough-and-tumble, give-and-take of living as husband and wife with Christ! In Revelation 21:2 the *bride* is finally revealed perfected, in all her adornment. Christ's wife gets better looking with age—cleansed from every spot and wrinkle (5:27)—and the wedding celebration comes at the end of the story!

under Him. This subordinate relationship with the God who rules us and cares for us must color and dominate every aspect of life.

Growth in Christ, then, has a striking double thrust. First, maturity deepens submission. You increasingly learn to serve Christ, to please Him (5:8-10). But, second, by this very act maturity heightens your likeness to Him (4:32-5:2). You become increasingly masterful, imaging forth the one you serve. You increasingly picture the essence of leadership. You say No to self-will and self-serving. You say No to world and devil. You say Yes to a purposeful life for God that embodies clarity, conviction, integrity, wise counsel, forgiveness, generosity, patience, and self-giving love. So as any Christian submits to Christ's leadership, he or she becomes more of a leader in the best sense of the word. Good subjects grow masterly. Whatever the particulars of your calling as a husband-wife, parent-child, or boss-worker, they never override your core identity and common call as Wife, Child, and Slave. The common call conditions every detail.

**B. Your calling to "walk worthy" has a particular focus within each primary relationship in marriage, family, workplace.**

The Lord calls you to please Him by emphasizing either submission or love within the spheres of your particular domestic relationships. The *particular focus* operates within "your own" domestic circles: with your own husband or wife, your own children or parents, and your own boss or workers. Within the various roles you fill, Christ says, "Pay particular attention to *this*." Your particular foci do not override and cancel the common calling that makes all of your life radiant for the Lord. The common calling does not mute and cancel the particular foci that make your life shine with your distinctive beauty.<sup>3</sup> We might liken this to an orchestra and massed choir that assemble to play a symphony in praise of the glory of God's grace. The common calling defines the key, rhythm, melodic themes, and lyrics which all performers and instruments hold in common

<sup>3</sup>The language of beauty, glory, radiance, and adornment is particularly appropriate regarding these issues. Ephesians 5:27, 1 Peter 3:1-5, and Titus 2:10 use language of adornment and glorious beauty to comment on the results of rightly ordering domestic relationships. God's glory shines in us with remarkable brilliance when we get right these things that are so hard to get right. The opposite is shame and dishonor to God: Titus 2:5 and 1 Peter 2:12; cf., the stains and dishevelment of the Wife in Ephesians 5:27. A wider use of this metaphor threads through 3:8-5:14, indeed, through the entire letter. When every part does its part, the church shines with the glory of Jesus Christ; when the devil gets a foothold and we live by instinct and habit, all is darkness.

as they submit to the conductor. The particular focus defines the distinctive parts performed by each instrument and voice, the timbre and harmony of bassoon and violin, of soprano and baritone.

Are you a Wife, Child, and Servant of Christ who is also a *wife, child, or servant* to other human beings? You must particularly aim to submit, fear, respect, obey, honor, and serve. Thereby you do good to your own husband, your parents, and the persons over you in the workplace.<sup>4</sup> You particularly serve Christ by standing under those God has placed over you. Your interactions with those persons should be continually shaped and informed by a series of life-centering questions. "How can I visibly and consistently demonstrate respect, honor, and submission to the person God has placed over me? How will I communicate by words, actions, and attitudes that I stand under him or her? How am I disrespectful, contrary, headstrong, lazy, or manipulative?" Ephesians takes hold of you: if you would fear Christ, fear your husband; if you would obey the Lord, obey your parents; if you would serve the Lord, serve your master.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Just as God's directives to "kings and subjects" find legitimate extension to governmental arrangements that obtain in our less autocratic time and place, so the Bible's commands to "masters and slaves" apply in principle to the very different economic relationships of our corporate economy that has replaced a household economy.

<sup>5</sup>In these headstrong and self-assertive times it is not popular to speak the language of subordination. But the Bible is consistent in the way it speaks of obedience, submission, and fear. First, we all do such things to God, but God never does them back to us. The common call presses all of us to obey, fear, and submit to the Lord. The only alternative? Serve the world's agenda, your own sinful flesh, and the devil.

Second, the particular focus consistently presses wives, children, slaves, citizens, and the flock to serve those over them. But husbands, parents, masters, rulers, and pastors do not do the same back; they are to serve the welfare of those in their care. Both parties repent of self-will, but in different ways. Will you be headstrong and rebellious, or will you be consciously subject? Will you be headstrong and rebellious, or will you consciously love? (In addition to Ephesians 5-6, see Colossians 3-4, 1 Peter 2-3, Titus 2, Romans 13, Hebrews 13, and 1 Timothy 6.)

Sometimes in the Bible's discussion of these things, the semantic field broadens to embrace the common call as well as the particular focus. For example, the call to "honor" another is usually applied to those who stand under another: child, slave, flock, and citizen (Eph. 6:2; 1 Tim. 6:1; 1 Tim. 5:17; Rom. 13:7). But honor should be shown to one's wife as if she were a precious, cherished, and fragile vase; to widows who have earned their gray hairs of wisdom; to one another in the body of Christ; and to all human beings, because the opposite attitude would be disrespect (1 Pet. 3:7; 1 Tim. 5:3; Rom. 12:10; 1 Pet. 2:17). Similarly, the call to live as a servant of another is naturally applied to slaves and to children (Eph. 6:7; 1 Tim. 6:2; Phil. 2:22), but then it is also generalized to everyone:

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The anarchistic, liberationist point of view contradicts what the ruling Lord says about these things.<sup>6</sup> It must either ignore, dismiss, or twist the words Jesus has spoken through His messenger. The grain of truth—our common humanity—turns perverse when one asserts one's own will against God's will to submit. But many who would defend the Lord's clear words also weaken their force. Some, in effect, only pay lip-service to God's will. They give so much attention to the *exceptions* to the rule that they fail to establish the relevance, beauty, and authority of the rule. "Yes, God

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calls a wife to submit, but of course if a husband is harsh and neglectful, or asks her to sin, or does not consider her point of view, or won't lead spiritually, or is irresponsible financially, or...." But Ephesians lists no exceptions. Paul camps out on the rule only, because the rule of submission so directly challenges our instinctive, reinforced, and habitual craving to get our own way.

Others weaken the force of the Lord's words by making the Bible sound as if it demeans and squelches humanity. They describe or live out submission and obedience as slavishness to domination by others. They forget the common calling, and misunderstand the particular focus. They make submission sound or look like "put up and shut up." They don't give obedience the ring of freedom from sin and freedom for love, courage, and purposeful living. Stand under those whom God has placed over you. The rule of submission, rightly understood and rightly lived, makes beauty, freedom, joy, and the glory of God shine forth.

There are, of course, exceptions. In every situation where you are called to stand under another, you must always "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Because of this overarching common call, a wife may need to admonish her husband for his attitude, a daughter challenge her mother's tone of voice, an employee dispute the boss's unfairness. In each case, the attitude of submission both to God and the person lends persuasiveness by making the confrontation sweet. There may be a time to call in the elders or even

the police. There may be a time when a wife, child, or employee must say "I want to honor you, but in conscience I can't participate in that because it's wrong." There may be a time to flee for safety. The particular focus never calls you to sin in violation of the common call to serve Christ. But consider the immense quantity of gossip, contention, back-biting, sniping, covert and overt rebellion, shrewishness, stubbornness, disrespect, nagging, laziness, rolling of eyes, manipulating, grumbling, and domineering done by wives, children, and employees. These things are *never* right. Never. That long and ugly list of contrariness does not need either the occasion or the excuse of someone else's wrongdoings. Such things happen regardless. But even when a husband, parent, or boss is doing something terribly wrong, *never* pay back evil for evil to *anyone* (Rom. 12:17). Even when a person who ought to look out for your welfare is looking out only for his or her self-interest, let *no* rotten word come out of your mouth, but *only* such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment (4:29). The sin of another never cancels out either the general call or the particular focus. When godliness must challenge or resist human authority, it does so in a godly way, respecting both the human being and the office, even while opposing the sin of the human being who holds the office.

Is Christ's will difficult? Yes. Is it utterly contrary to the way the whole world acts and reacts by nature and habit? Yes. Is it contrary to the way you act and react by nature and habit? Yes. Is it contrary to what we most often hear from those around us and most often think? Yes. But is it right? Yes. And will Jesus Christ Himself help you? Yes and amen. If you aim for submission when Christ calls you to submission, your life will thrive.

Christ calls other people to particularly develop nurturing intentions and actions. A Wife, Child, and Servant who is also a *husband, father, or master* particularly aims to love, provide, care for, nourish, cherish, value, bless, bring mercy, give grace, purify, build up, teach, and treat fairly. Thereby you do good to your own wife, your children, and the persons under you in the workplace. You particularly image Christ by looking out for the well-being of those God has placed within your care.<sup>7</sup> Leaders are to model themselves on

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<sup>7</sup>Mothers are included in the "father" role of Ephesians 6:4. They are mentioned twice in the previous verses (6:1f), where "parents" and "father and mother" receive their children's obedience and honor. Why are only "fathers" pointedly addressed in 6:4? That is a vexed question. Some teach that fathers are particularly tempted to provoke or discourage children through harshness and domineering (thus the negative commands of 6:4 and Colossians 3:21). Others suggest

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<sup>6</sup>"serve one another in love" (Gal. 5:13).

<sup>6</sup>The "egalitarian" point of view drifts in this direction.

Christ's way of leading: "Christ loved and gave Himself up for us" (5:2 and 5:25). It is striking that the common call tells each of us to follow His example (5:2), pursuing a merciful and redemptive agenda towards all others. His same example of self-giving is then particularly pressed upon husbands (5:25). By implication, such attentive concern for those in one's care and charge is also pressed upon parents and managers-supervisors. Your interactions with your wife, children, and workers should continually be shaped by crucial questions. "How can I nourish, protect, care, and treat fairly the person God has placed under my care? How will I communicate by words, actions, and attitudes that I am looking out for his or her welfare? How am I unfair, self-serving, harsh, neglectful, irritating, discouraging, or domineering?" Ephesians takes hold of you: if Christ loves you, love your wife; if your Father nourishes you, nourish your children; if your Master does you good, do good to those who serve you.

The chauvinistic, authoritarian point of view contradicts what the self-giving, pursuing Lord says here.<sup>8</sup> The grain of truth—the necessity and propriety of authority relations—turns perverse when one asserts one's own will against God's will to give love. The submission of others to one's demanding, imperial will becomes the goal. This tendency, whether defended as a point of view or simply lived out, weakens Christ's words by emphasizing the *rights* of an authority and the *responsibilities* of subordinates, rather than the

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that fathers are uniquely tempted to neglect their responsibility to get involved and nurture their children (thus the positive command of 6:4). There may be a grain of truth in these observations. Fathers do sin in these ways. However, mothers are tempted to identical sins of domineering and/or neglect.

I suggest that Paul is not making an implied statement about temptations supposed to characterize fathers alone. Rather he uses "fathers" to highlight the *pattern* that we have seen runs through this entire section. God is the *Father* who abounds in Psalm 103 tenderness, generosity, wisdom, and mercy; we are all *children* who have received all His benefits. God's children who are also "fathers" (i.e., including both fathers and mothers) have particular responsibilities to image the Father by loving and guiding rather than domineering or neglecting. Both tenderness and teaching are ways both mothers and fathers image God the Father. Psalm 103, Isaiah 49:15, and 1 Thessalonians 2:7f ascribe tenderness and mercy to both fathers and mothers; 1 Thessalonians 2:11 and Proverbs 31:26 ascribe wise teaching to both.

Of course, women who carry leadership responsibilities in the workplace or elsewhere are included in the "master" role. Both master and mistress commanded their male and female slaves, just as a man or woman may exercise authority over men and women in business, education, medicine, the arts, volunteer organizations, and the like.

<sup>8</sup>The "traditionalist" point of view tends to drift in this direction.

responsibilities of those in authority. "I am the principal of this school, and I've learned to win by intimidation in my dealings with students, parents, teachers, and staff." "I am the parent, and what I say goes. Try me, and you'll regret it." "I've had a hard day at work, and when I get home I expect to just kick back with the TV remote control in one hand and a beer in the other." But Ephesians does not list rights. Paul camps out on the

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rule only, because the rule of love so directly challenges the instinctive, reinforced, and habitual craving to get our own way.

Christ makes a devastating indictment of the normal habits of leaders, and He lived out a dramatic alternative. Yes, "the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45). He served our best interest, but He did not serve our will, just as He did not come to indulge Himself. We who were so served learn to serve His will. Where we are called to lead others, we learn to do so on His pattern. Husbands, parents, managers, repent both from self-will and from serving the other's will so that you can serve the other's well-being before God. Paul is only reiterating Jesus' teaching: "Those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all" (Mk. 10:42-44). Look out for those whom God has placed under you. The rule of love, rightly understood and rightly lived, makes beauty, freedom, joy, and the glory of God shine forth. Husband, pursue your wife's well-being. Parents, give yourselves to nurturing your children. Bosses, pour energy into being fair and doing good to those who work for you.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Ephesians 5:21—"submitting to one another in the fear of Christ"—does not wash out the particular distinctions that 5:22-6:9 teaches, contrary to how the verse is often used today to flatten all role distinctions. Paul's logic in 5:21 is not unambiguous, but the net effect is the same whichever way the verse is interpreted. On the one hand, if Ephesians 5:21 expresses the common call, then it is analogous to Galatians 5:13. The Spirit uses servant and submission language to establish the general attitude that saturates all relationships of grace (see footnote 5). The call sets up, rather than eliminates,

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There are, of course, rights. In every situation where you are called to look out for another's welfare, you must always lead. You cannot let your own desires rule. But you also cannot reverse roles, whereby the desires of wife, child, and employee rule. There is a time to make a decision that will be unpopular, and to insist on compliance. There is a time to call someone on the carpet, to put an employee on probation, to discipline a child. There is a time when a husband, parent, or boss must say "I love you and I want your best, but this is what we are going to do even if you don't like it." There is a time to take charge of a situation and frankly assert authority. The particular focus of showing tender consideration does not allow you to sin by shirking the responsibilities of leadership. The sins of others never justify either ducking the particular focus on pursuing others' well-being, or forgetting the common call. Consider the immense quantity of hostility, inconsiderateness, laziness, violence, self-serving, ingratitude, sheer neglect, favoritism, capriciousness, and bull-headed domineering done by husbands, parents, and bosses. These things are *never* right. Never. That long and ugly list of self-serving tyranny does not need either the occasion or the excuse of someone else's wrongdoings. Such things happen regardless. But even when a wife, child, or employee is doing something terribly wrong, *never* pay back evil for evil to *anyone* (Rom. 12:17). Even

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the particular emphasis either on submission or on loving nurture in what follows. Husbands and wives will express their dedication to the Lord and each other in different ways. Note how "submit" and "fear" are pointedly repeated as characteristics for wives as Paul develops the analogy of church and Christ (and note the parallelism within all role relationships throughout this passage and elsewhere). On the other hand, the force of 5:21 may be something more like shorthand for, "Rightly order your domestic relationships," as a segue into the first party that Paul will discuss. As an introductory and transitional statement it utilizes one part of a more complex thought to stand for the whole. The entire thought would be something like this: "Submitting to one another in the fear of Christ [and loving one another like Christ loved you and gave Himself, in each case emphasize what is appropriate to your particular role relationships]." The tight syntactical link between 5:21 and 5:22 is often obscured both in discussions and in Bible versions: the verb from 5:21 serves in 5:22. If Paul had chosen to open each pair of relationships the opposite way, beginning with husbands, he might have said in 5:21f, "Loving one another, as Christ loved the church, husbands [should love] your own wives...." Then when he switched to wives (the equivalent of 5:25), he would have said, "Wives, as the church submits to Christ, so also the wives [submit] to their husbands in everything." Whether 5:21 is a heading for all six role relationships (common calling), or a transition that predominantly applies to the three relationships of subordination (particular focus), the net effect is the same as we receive the total thought world of our Lord regarding these matters.

when a person who ought to stand under you acts in flat out rebellion, let *no* rotten word come out of your mouth, but *only* such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment (4:29). The sin of another never cancels out either the general call or the particular focus. When godliness must challenge another's wrong, it does so in a godly way, communicating the grace of God in word, deed, and attitude. It respects

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both the human being and the obligations of patient, redemptive authority, even while opposing the sin of the human being who is opposing authority.

Is Christ's will difficult? Utterly contrary to the way the whole world acts and reacts? Contrary to the way you act and react? Yes. But is it right? Yes. And will Christ Himself help you? Yes and amen. If you aim for nurturing love when Christ calls you to nurturing love, your life will thrive.

Notice that in each case, you stand under or look after "your own." This is very important to keep straight. If you are a wife, you have a particular responsibility to submit to "your own" husband (5:22; cf., Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:1), not to all other husbands, or males in general. If you are a husband, you are responsible to pursue the particular welfare of "your own" wife (5:28), not of every wife or females in general. As an employee, you owe obedience and service to "your own" master (Titus 3:9), not to all masters. The same pattern applies between parents and children, and to bosses with their workers.

Neither the common call nor the particular focus cancel out or override each other. They work in symmetry. This is crucial to conducting timely and appropriate counseling ministry. For example, the mutuality between beloved children called for by Ephesians 4:1-16 and 4:25-5:2 *always* applies between husband-wife, parent-child, master-slave. Many counseling problems are resolved as both parties tackle the common call to mercy, forgiveness, speaking the truth in love, and so forth. Generally, when both parties are being addressed in counseling, these issues will be on the table first. When a couple exchanges angry and destructive words and each harbors bitter attitudes, the solution naturally begins with the common call to both. Communication

problems and conflict resolution usually have a certain temporal and logical priority: "How will each of you repent of bitterness and hostility, and of the demands and expectations that drive you? How will you learn Jesus, and so learn mercy, humility, and generosity? How can you communicate constructively?" Similarly, each person's knowledge of Christ and vital faith (3:14-21), each person's call to a lifestyle of change (4:17-24), and each person's walk of either folly or wisdom (5:3-20) will come on the table early and often. Two saints growing up out of their sins can learn to communicate with grace. Many counseling problems are resolved as each party heeds the common call.

Ministry naturally proceeds to the particular focus of each person, to basic role failings that breed trouble. As husband and wife, they sin, and they can learn either to look after the other or to stand under the other, respectively. Many counseling problems are resolved as each party individually focuses on either the requisite submission or the requisite love. When counseling a wife, it is always timely to explore, "How are you respectful towards your husband? How will you as a wife learn to actively pursue honoring your husband, rather than nagging him, ignoring him, resentfully going along with him, or despising him?" When counseling a husband, it is always timely to consider, "How are you self-sacrificing, constructive, initiating, and constant in love towards your wife? How will you as a husband learn to actively pursue the well-being of your wife, rather than neglecting her, being preoccupied, acquiescing to her, or getting irritated?" Analogous questions operate in family and workplace conflicts.

Grasp the common call and the particular focus and you will be able to counter both the liberationist and the authoritarian tendencies in yourself and others. Each seizes onto one good thing and misses balancing truths. Liberationists are alert to grievous sins of tyranny and abuse, to inequities of power, to unfairness. They aspire to maximize mutuality and humility, and to protect the weak. But they lose sight of the importance our Husband, Father, and Lord places on submission to husbands, parents, and masters, and His reproof of insubordination as a primal sin (cf., 2 Pet. 2:10). Authoritarians are alert to grievous sins of anarchy and disrespect, to headstrong individualism, to disorder. They aspire to respect duly constituted authority, and to protect the order within which human life thrives. But they lose sight of the importance Christ places on patient love for wives, children, and workers, and His reproof of authoritarianism as a primal sin (cf., Mk. 10:42ff). The Bible presses God's people to a third way, alert to the gamut of sins and aspiring to the gamut of righteousness.

### **C. Because you inhabit multiple roles, most of you will hear yourself addressed by Ephesians multiple times, from different angles.**

The common call addresses every one of us. But we each put our unique configuration to the particular focus. God places each person in a unique situation: "your own" domestic relationships. As many as five of the six particular emphases might come with your name attached. If your parents are alive, and you are married with children, and you answer to a supervisor and have others answer to you in the workplace, then you are both boss and worker, both parent and child, and either husband or wife. A few people—for example, a retired, single person without children or parents—are only addressed by the general call. Ephesians 5:21-6:9 will not speak directly to their situation. Of course, the general principles that drive the passage

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*God places each person in a unique situation: "your own" domestic relationships.*

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apply: we are Wife, Child, and Servant. Such persons still have plenty to occupy them, as the *rest* of Ephesians works into their heart and works out into their lifestyle! And they will always be embedded somewhere in church and state, the two sets of submission-love relationships that Paul does not treat here in Ephesians.

Single adults sometimes wonder, "Why does Paul leave me out of Ephesians? He only focuses on marrieds." But of course unmarried people are not left out by this single adult, Paul, who was sent out on a mission by another single adult, Jesus. If you are single, you are directly addressed by 1:1-5:20 and 6:10-24: the one flesh relationship between Jesus and His body. And much of 5:21-6:9 may apply. You are Wife. Though you do not have a calling as husband or wife, the background truths and specific exhortations will enrich your common call. You are Child. If you have living parents, you are addressed by 6:1-3; if you are a single parent, then 6:4 has your name on it. You are Slave. If you are an employee, you are addressed by 6:5-8 regarding your supervisor; if you are the boss, or have other managerial and leadership responsibilities, then 6:9 applies.

The net effect is that all of us are called to major on submission within some relationships and to major on initiating love within other relationships. Imagine the

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following situation. Five members of your church work for a company that manufactures electronic equipment: a salesman, the sales manager, a secretary, the president, and a custodian. All five people are called to pursue and live out all the attitudes and actions of the common call. These will saturate their lives inside and outside work: how they treat each other, how they treat customers, how they reconcile conflicts, and so forth.

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*Don't think you can drift, wriggle, or run away from His revealed will for you.*

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But each of them also has a unique configuration of responsibilities to submit or to nurture.

The *salesman* is a single, 28 year old man, who lives with his parents. His daily tasks take him on the road with customers, but he receives direction and administrative support from the home office. Ephesians 5:21-6:9 particularly addresses him three times. He is a child, servant, and master. He is called [1] to honor his parents, [2] to respect and serve his sales manager, and [3] to show kindness and consideration to his secretary who serves him. He naturally has no particular responsibilities to a wife or children. Notice how his submission to Christ gets channeled into submission to authority in some relationships and loving headship in others.

The *sales manager* is a married, 48 year old woman, with three college-age children and an elderly mother. Paul addresses her no less than five times, as a wife, child, parent, servant, and master. She is called [1] to respect and submit to her husband, [2] to honor her mother, [3] to nourish and lead her children, [4] to serve the higher level management of the company, and [5] to treat the salesman and secretary with kindness and fairness as she leads them. She is challenged in two places to learn how to lead others, and in three places to learn how to respect others.

The *secretary* is a 58 year old woman, never married, without children, whose parents have passed away. She serves as secretary to the sales department and directly oversees a filing clerk and the custodian. She hears Paul's letter address her only twice, as servant and as master. She is called [1] to respect and serve the president, the sales manager, and the salesman, and [2] to show a master's kindness to the clerk and the custodian who answer to her. She has no particular responsibilities to a husband, children, or parents. But, like all of us, God has placed her in a situation where she must learn both how to stand under others and how to look

out for others.

The *president*, a 35 year old married man with two elementary school children, inherited the company when his parents died. The Lord addresses him three times, in each case with the call to exercise leadership responsibly and constructively. As husband, father, and master, he is [1] to love and provide for his wife, [2] to nurture his children, and [3] to treat his employees in ways that do them good. Learning to live as Christ's Wife, Child, and Servant places him entirely in the leadership role in his domestic relations. He will learn submission elsewhere—in relation to his church elders, and in relation to the government authorities with whom he interacts regarding occupational safety, taxes, and legal disputes.

Finally, the *custodian* is a newly married, childless, 22 year old woman, whose parents are alive. She is addressed three times. She pours her energies into the roles of wife, child, and servant. She is [1] to submit to her husband, [2] to honor her parents, and [3] to serve all the others in her workplace. For her, submission to Christ places her entirely in the helper and subordinate role in domestic relations. She learns to image the loving authority of Christ only as part of the common call to resist the world, flesh, and devil, and to build up brothers and sisters in Christ.

As an aside, it is worth noting that all five persons are embedded in two other spheres where submission and nurture relationships play out, though Paul does not discuss these in Ephesians. The exact same pattern described above—an always-relevant common call and a particular focus, both expressing features of Christ's relationship with His people—holds for relationships within the church and with government authorities. First, in the church we are *all* Sheep of the great Shepherd. Those Sheep who have also been given as *undershepherds* have a particular responsibility to image forth shepherdly care, responsibility, and leadership over other Sheep placed in their charge. The Sheep who are also *sheep* in a local congregation have a particular responsibility to serve, honor, and submit to their undershepherds. In our case study, all five persons are sheep called to submit to their elders.

We are also *all* Subjects of the great King who rules generously and mercifully. Those Subjects who are also appointed as *kings* or *other rulers* have a particular responsibility to image forth the King of kings in relation to their subjects: provide, protect, maintain justice. Subjects of God who are also *subjects* have a particular responsibility to submit to those who govern them: pay taxes, obey laws, treat with respect. In our case study, all five persons are subjects, called to stand under local, regional, and national government.



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Notice that a person's roles usually change significantly over time. Leaving one's parents to cleave to one's spouse changes the forms of honor shown to parents. The death of a husband or parents cancels obligations of submission. Abandonment by a wife or the marriage of a child cancels or greatly alters obligations for loving provision and guidance. In our case study, if the custodian becomes a mother, she will gain a new role. If she gets involved helping with the youth ministry, she will gain two new obligations: to love and lead the teenaged girls with whom she meets, and to submit to and learn from the youth pastor and steering committee that set policy for the youth ministry. Responsibilities also modulate as circumstances change and time passes. The sales manager treats her college-age children in a different way than the president treats his elementary school children. Both remain parents, but the appropriate kind of nurture evolves. Similarly, the salesman now expresses honor to his parents with "less" obedience than when he was a young child, and with "more" obedience than if he were to marry and move out. His parents no longer tell him when to take a shower, but he lives by the rules of the house, rather than setting his own rules. Sometimes roles do not evolve: if one of the sales manager's children is mentally handicapped, she will exert a great deal of control as long as they both live. On the other hand, sometimes roles almost completely reverse. If the sales manager's aging mother becomes *non compos mentis*, the daughter will have to take charge of her affairs, imposing decisions on the mother who nursed her, led her to faith, and set her curfew. The call to honor her mother will remain until death as a core attitude affecting her manner and emotions, though in much of the business of life she must now act as a loving authority.

Finally, it is important to note that God is "no respecter of persons" (6:9; KJV). Some people tend to favor persons in authority, and confer subtle or overt superiority on husbands, parents, bosses, governors, and pastors. They tend to look down on "little" people. They see sins of rebellion more clearly than they see sins of control and domineering. Other people tend to favor persons who are in traditionally subordinate roles, and tend to despise the authority of husbands, parents, bosses, governors, and pastors in subtle or overt ways. They are soured towards "big" people. They see sins of domineering more clearly than they see sins of rebellion and self-will. But God shows no favoritism. He does not tip the scales either to the "great" who must love well (e.g., the company president) or to the "small" who must serve well (e.g., the custodian). A difference between Ephesians 6:9 and Colossians 3:25 is revealing. In Ephesians, Paul speaks

to *masters* and says, "Know that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is *no partiality* with Him." But in Colossians, Paul speaks to *slaves*, "It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and there is *no partiality*." God does not play favorites. Don't think you can drift, wriggle, or run away from His revealed will for you.

### Conclusion

This short letter to the Ephesians, and the wider Scripture within which it sings, gives us the wisdom to find our way amid all these variables. Trying to learn

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*God's pattern for relationships is  
exquisite and consistent.*

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what is pleasing to the Lord, we learn the fruit of light that consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth (5:9f). God's pattern for relationships is exquisite and consistent. Learn and live these three truths. First, all must obey the general call to treat one another with redemptive love. It saturates every relationship at all times. Treat everyone the same. Second, every person in a subordinate role must focus on standing under those placed over him or her. Every person in an authority role must focus on looking out for the welfare of those placed under him or her. Treat people differently. Third, life is so arranged that all of us must submit to Christ by standing under some people, and almost all of us (barring only the severely disabled) must image Christ by looking after other people. "Must" in all three of these truths is not a given, of course, but the agenda of the light. Those who submit to the prince of the power of the air follow the desires of body and mind instead, and they walk in darkness. Wherever they are called to whole-hearted submission, they will either usurp or play doormat. Wherever they are called to persevering nurture, they will either tyrannize or abdicate. They are blind to the radiant, wise lifestyle taught by the fear of Christ. But those who follow the Messiah Jesus, in whom the nations find both hope and God, will live in this light.