

The Foundation of Marriage: Oneness with Christ and Each Other

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I. Introduction

As a Christian you may be aware that you're part of Christ's Body, the Church. But did you know that your relationship with Christ is supposed to affect your relationship with others? If you're a husband or wife, how should this affect your marriage? And when God tells the wife to submit and the husband to die, how should they view these commands, as individuals detached from one another or as individuals joined to each another?

II. Our Oneness in Christ Affects Our Oneness in Marriage

The moment we believed in Christ, He gave us everlasting life, John 3:16. But what does this mean, what does it mean to have everlasting life? Everlasting life is an intimate relationship with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, John 17:3 and 20–26.

How close is this relationship? Extremely. We are permanently joined to Christ, "togetherwith," Ephesians 2:5–6. We are "in Him," Ephesians 2:6, 7, and 10. We are literally part of His Body, Ephesians 1:22–23.

How does our oneness with Christ affect our oneness in marriage? Before God talks about our oneness in marriage, He talks to us about our oneness with Christ. Whatever we do in life, including in marriage, we do while we are "in Him"; it's inescapable. Thus, the first thing we need to know about unity is our unity in Christ. And the model God uses to teach us about unity is Christ. As Christ suffered and died to unite us to Him, Ephesians 2:14–18, so we are to suffer in order to keep our unity with Him, Ephesians 4:3. Instead of behaving like our old wicked selves, we're to behave selflessly towards one another, Ephesians 4:17–32.

Therefore, before God speaks to us as husbands and wives, He reveals that we have an obligation of unity within the Body of Christ, one that demands our submission. Christ is our Head, we are His Body. We must submit to His headship in order to maintain unity in Him.

Then God begins talking to us as couples, He starts by telling us that we have to submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21), which again echoes the fact that we must die to self for the sake of unity. And notice, it's a mutual submission: wives submit to husbands and husbands to wives.

Thus, God speaks to us not just as individual body parts, but body parts that are joined to one another and must maintain our unity at all costs, not only to protect our marriage, but the greater Body of Christ. The oneness we have with our Lord affects the oneness we have with our spouse.

With the first marriage in history, God defined the roles: the man is to be the leader and the woman the helper. And they were to be joined to one another. Now in Ephesians 5:22–33 God further clarifies these roles, but oneness is still at the heart of it: we have oneness with Christ and oneness with each other, both affect our marriage.

III. Our Oneness in Marriage

Ephesians 5:22–24, God commands the wife to submit to her husband as she would submit to Christ in everything. Is this oppressive? Is our submission to our Lord oppressive? No, our submission to our Lord liberates us to live in harmony with each other. He takes away all our selfish tendencies which allows us to live sacrificially towards one another. Likewise the wife's submission to her husband is not designed to enslave her, but free her to fulfill the role God designed for her: to complete that which is lacking in her husband.

Does she have to submit to him "in everything"? Yes, she must respect her husband's authority as she would Christ's. This means that if her husband makes a decision that she disagrees with, then she must accept it and not try to undermine or overturn it. Why? Because God's command to submit applies whether or not her husband makes the right decision.

Ephesians 5:25–33, since this is mutual submission, how is the husband to submit to his wife? God commands him to love her by dying for her as Christ died for the Church. This means literally, but more importantly figuratively, by daily putting her interests above his own. When it's done properly, the woman will never fear that her rights are being trampled on. Instead, the husband's sacrificial love alleviates her fears about submitting to him.

What's the purpose of this sacrificial love? It's so that his wife will be the best wife she can be. His oneness with her as his own flesh and as a member of Christ's Body, is to be the driving force behind his sacrificial love. Thus, he is supposed to die for her because she is part of him and she is to respect him because he is her head.

What does a submissive wife look like? Does being a submissive wife mean that she cannot be independent but must do only that which her husband allows? Is this God's idea of submission? In Proverbs 31:10–31 God presents the model wife. She is an entrepreneur twice over (31:16, 24), a philanthropist (3:20), provides lavishly for her household (3:21), wears fine clothing (3:22), is virtuous (3:25) and wise (3:26), a diligent family provider (3:27), and is respected by her children and husband (3:28–29).

So, is this a submissive woman? The God who wrote Ephesians 5:22–24 also wrote Proverbs 31:10–31. And if God holds her up as the model wife, then she has to be submissive. But how can such a strong woman qualify as submissive? When God says submissive, He doesn't mean a menial servant whose word carries no weight. He means a woman who uses her talents and abilities to their fullest extent. However, her actions do not undermine her husband's authority in order to establish her own. Instead, she fulfills her role as her husband's helper and the results are magnificent: her husband implicitly trusts her (31:11–12) and respects her (31:29), and she is a source of honor for her husband (31:23).

IV. Conclusion

God calls husbands and wives to submit to one another. That is, He commands them both to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of the other. The wife's role is to submit by respecting her husband's leadership. The husband's role is to submit by dying for his wife daily. When they both fulfill their commands, God is glorified not only because of the unity in their marriage, but because of the unity they engender within the Body of Christ.