

The Military and the Biblical Meaning of Marriage

Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, He himself the savior of the body. As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything.

-Ephesians 5:22-24

I'm sure this title will get a lot of looks, as first appearances suggest a connection between two things that ought not to be connected at all. But one of the things about properly understanding Christianity is that everything that is real is connected to each other in ways we cannot imagine. Reality is like an impossibly complex spider web in which everything both depends on and supports everything else.

But what is even more incredible than the connection between Biblical marriage and the military is where I first heard this concept in a meaningful manner. It came from a war movie I can no longer remember the name of. At the end of the movie, a new platoon leader takes charge of the troops and mentions to his soldiers that the relationship between a platoon leader and the platoon sergeant is like a husband and wife, which creates a shocked reaction from the platoon sergeant. But while the intent of the line in the movie was to promote the tired old straw man that all officers are either evil or clueless and the enlisted only have themselves to rely on, in this case the script writer got things right for the wrong reasons.

For those who are not familiar with the way the army works, let me explain. Every officer in charge of soldiers has a sergeant to serve as his "right hand man." Platoon leaders have Platoon Sergeants. Company commanders have First Sergeants. Commanders of higher level units have Command Sergeant Majors. These sergeants are bound to obey their officers just like any other soldier under the officer, yet to assume that this is all there is would be a gross misunderstanding of just how their relationship should work (and indeed does work for any unit that has any degree of cohesion).

For every army unit that functions at even the minimum level, the officer is out doing things. Getting guidance from the higher level commander, receiving orders from the operations section, coordinating with logistical personnel, ironing out details with other leaders, going out to reconnaissance the area in which the mission will take place, and, finally, writing an operations order for his unit when he has all the information he needs. There are other functions, but this list is a good representation of what he does. In other words, the officer is taking a look at the reality outside the unit he is in charge of, and then uses this information to make decisions on what is best for his unit in the upcoming mission.

While the officer is doing this, his sergeant is taking care of the unit. Ensuring soldiers are paid, fed and get enough sleep are important daily duties. Ensuring the soldiers have the skills they need to survive and complete the mission is another critical job of the sergeant. Identifying shortages in equipment, ammunition and supplies also falls under his purview. While this list could also go on and on, the last one I will address is unit discipline. A good sergeant will "nip small problems the bud," where the soldier can simply have a "lesson learned" event and not be brought to court marshal where a life-altering event will take place. In other words, the sergeant is looking at the reality of the unit, and then uses this information so that the unit is ready and able to do the mission when the officer returns.

I hope the parallel between the job of the officer and of the sergeant with the Biblical understanding of the man's role and the woman's role in the family is obvious. It was the man who left the house to go into the world at large and provided the means for the family to survive. Furthermore, while he was out in the world, he could get news that might affect his family and have an opportunity to prepare or react to it. Meanwhile, the wife remained in the household, taking care of all the personal needs the husband didn't have time to do himself, as well as the needs of the children too young to help themselves. Furthermore, she would be responsible for training the children so that, when they came of age, they could be productive citizens in whatever capacity they were expected to fill. She would enforce discipline in the household, and only get the husband involved if it was beyond her ability to fix.

This division of duties remained the norm for mankind until only recently, even in wealthy families. As seen in the *Downton Abbey* series, the mistress of the house was in charge of all the house servants, while the master would be responsible for the servants that worked outside the house or in his business. But let me get back to the military side of things.

As I have said before, even though the sergeant needs to be obedient to the officer, it would be disastrous for the officer to treat the sergeant as anything less than as an equal. The information and experience the sergeant has is just as important as the information and experience the officer has. They are different types of information and experience, but they are both equally valuable. To blindly disregard one or the other would spell disaster for the unit. As such, a good unit will never see the officer and sergeant disagree in public. In a good unit, very little disagreement will take place in private either. When discussing things in private, it is not a contest to see who is right, it is an attempt to bring all the myriad facts and concerns together into a single plan both can agree on. Of course, democracy is impossible between two people, so one of them has to have the authority to override the other. But such authority is not a weapon; it is a means of bringing necessary unity. The officer should never override the sergeant without a good reason to do so, and the sergeant should obey the spirit as well as the letter of the officer's decisions.

To those who are more familiar with the military and know that sergeants oftentimes have many more years experience than the officers they serve, it may seem reasonable to question why it is the officer and not the sergeant who has this authority. And this is a legitimate question. But then we need to remember what the officer does and what the sergeant does. The officer is primarily looking at the world at large whereas the sergeant is primarily concerned with the unit entrusted to his care. When things work as they should, the officer has a much bigger understanding of what the unit needs to do for long-term success, while the sergeant is more concerned about the immediate needs. It is these world views that make the difference. Does this mean that the officer is always right? No. But thousands of years of experience (at least since early Roman times) have shown that this system works [much] better than others, and more often than not.

Few people question this relationship between an officer and sergeant, or why it works so well. Yet when it comes to family, the parallels seem to be lost. The officer and sergeant work together like they do because it is the only way the unit can be successful. A husband and wife need to work in a similar manner because it is the only way the family can be successful. The only meaningful difference is that a dysfunctional unit is relatively easy to identify, whereas a dysfunctional family is often harder to see, even by those close to the family. It is not that the outcome is different; it is how many people see the outcome.

And so now we can discuss more practical matters of the family. The first sentence of the

scripture I quoted above is often used to prove how tyrannical and misogynistic the Church is towards women. The full verse is rarely mentioned, much less all three verses. This is a pity, because it becomes clear that women's obedience is not meant for a tyrannical husband. By comparing the husband to Christ, the husband has a very high standard to live up to, and success in reaching this standard allows for no tyranny. But there is still more.

A proper reading of this section of the Bible should also include the following six verses:

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed Himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. So [also] husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, because we are members of His body.

Far from endorsing a tyrant, the Bible encourages the husband to adore his wife to a point just short of worship. Arguably, the duty of a husband to his wife is actually greater than that of the wife to her husband (note that the husband's duties took twice as many verses to explain). That being said, it is true that society has traditionally made it almost impossible for a woman to be treated fairly if the husband does not do his part. But to blame Christianity for this is absurd. The problem wasn't that Christianity failed society, the problem was that society didn't promote the Christian marriage ideals well enough.

There was a time when a proper understanding of what a Christian marriage should look like might have changed the way things are now. For the most part, I think the plight of women in marriages before the 1970s is exaggerated. Literature from ancient times to relatively contemporary times suggests that women were more worried about being widowed than being married to the wrong man. In arranged marriages, the temperament of the husband is commonly considered, and there are many examples where the girl is able to influence the choice of spouse. Many of the "bad marriages" that are found in cultures where arranged marriages are common actually had the girl marry against the better judgment, or even in open defiance, of the family (Jane Austen's book *Pride and Prejudice* gives examples of each of these situations).

Most men, although perhaps ignorant on how to properly treat a woman, nonetheless want to do right by their wives. I've never been in a crowd where a man who was known to mistreat his wife was accepted by his peers. He might have been tolerated (one rarely gets to choose who one's co-workers are), but never approved of. How a man treats his wife is an excellent indicator of his true character. Yes, there were women who were forced into bad marriages, but the sinful nature of man means no solution will be perfect. The question is not whether or not women were abused by the marriage policies of the past (that is a given), but if the new practices are any better (this is not so clear). But what is done is done, and now there are new things that need to be addressed.

The contemporary solution is to let women work as well as men. I'm not concerned if that is good or bad, only stating that this is what we have today in the United States. What I *am* concerned about is that the duties the woman used to do did not go away (details changed, but not the duties). Some new division of labor needs to be made to ensure the duties are done. Yes, it is great that both the officer and sergeant got to see the enemy position on the hill. But if no one is ensuring the unit has

enough ammunition for the attack, then it is all in vain. Yes, it is great that the children can have a higher quality of life (in terms of material things). But if the children are not properly taught the importance of education, hard work, or their faith, then it is all in vain.

There are two solutions to this problem. One is to return to the Biblical norm, with one parent at home and the other at work. I do not believe the one at home must needs be the woman. That still probably needs to remain the *norm* (200,000 years of genetics can't be discarded on a whim), but need not be the *rule*. I know many couples where the skills and temperaments of each of them would be best used by switching the traditional roles. In this case, it would be the husband who ought to be obedient to the wife, while the wife glorifies her husband.

The other solution is to carefully divide the duties traditionally performed by the wife by both spouses. If the man's duties can be so divided, then so should the woman's. And I think this is where our culture is actually degrading the woman in the name of "liberating" her. All the talk about liberating a woman is focused on correcting hiring ratios in jobs still dominated by men and about breaking "glass ceilings." I hold it as self-evident that even if a woman got the job a man used to have, was paid just as much as he was, and had the same opportunities to advance as he did, then she is *still* being "oppressed" by the fact that she *still* has all the traditional wife roles to perform on top of all that. It seems to me that our current culture is committing the same mistake they accuse our ancestors of making: a failure to educate the man on how to be a proper husband. Actually, the mistake might be bigger, as despite their independence, many women are too proud to ask their husbands for help. In the old system, the woman was expected to ask the husband for help. If women were not being too prideful in asking for help, then how much time the father gets to see the children would not be so hotly contested in divorce court. From my humble perspective, the plight of the woman seems worse off now than before. She has twice the responsibilities with none of the assistance that used to be there. At best, the expectations of her are greater, not lesser, than before.

Hopefully, we can come to a consensus on how to divide the traditional wife roles in a two income family, but even so we still need to address the matter of who is to be obeyed and who is to be glorified by their respective spouses. I don't have a firm answer on this, but it seems to me that each two income family must sort this out between themselves. This is not a trivial issue, as a healthy marriage is when two people each forsake the "I" for the good of the "we." In order to keep the "we" healthy, pride must never be allowed to elevate the "I." This comes, in no small part, from recognizing one as having ultimate authority in return for glorifying and honoring the other above all else except God.

Raymond Mulholland
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