

THE HUSBAND'S ROLE AND ITS DUTIES

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EARLY CHRISTIAN writings show a marked advance in the area of spousal relationships in comparison to pagan writers and Roman law prior to the middle of the third century AD. In contrast to the practice and secular laws of the time, the early Christian church regarded marriage as a loving, reciprocal relationship, with no husband possessing absolute rights over the wife. The Christian belief that wives are 'weaker vessels' was not an arbitrary licence for husbands to dominate them out of any innate mental inferiority or emotional flaws, but as fitted by nature and the surrounding society to be solicitously sheltered by their husbands, who were stronger due to their larger body mass and physical strength, and greater experience with the evils outside the home.

In early Christian teaching, a husband's role was best described as 'head' of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church. This appears in Ephesians 5:23, as well as in Origen's *Commentary on Ephesians 5:22-23*. Origen was considered the greatest Bible scholar, teacher and preacher of the first half of the third century. Dean of 'the first Christian university' (McGuckin 2004, 1), he was well-posed to know and record the consensus of Christian beliefs and practices from region to region, because he travelled frequently throughout the eastern Mediterranean at the invitation of local clergy as a theological consultant. He composed his *Commentary on Ephesians* sometime between AD 232 and 244.

The husband's headship is also indicated in the *Didascalia Apostolorum 3*, a Syrian manual of church and individual Christian practice compiled in the first three decades of the third century.

Origen also designated a higher but nevertheless loving status for the husband. Hus-

bands, Origen wrote, are to relate to their wives in the way that Jesus relates to the church, while wives are to relate to their husbands as the church does to Jesus. In the same vein, Origen instructed husbands to think and do the things of Christ while wives are to think and do those of the church (*Commentary on Ephesians 5:22-23*).

A wife is under the further duties of helping her husband in all things, and 'fear' him (*Didascalia 3*), which is the word that older ancient Christian translations use where we say 'respect', the latter being employed for the same feeling in Heine's translation of Origen's *Commentary on Ephesians 5:33*.

There are many passages in early Christian literature that instruct wives to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22, 24; Colossians 3:18; Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus 3:12*; *Didascalia 3*; Origen *Commentary on Ephesians 5:24*; 1 Peter 3:1; Titus 2:5). Unlike the abuse of the Bible in comparatively recent times, this is not submission like a slave but springs from the acknowledgement that the wife is a 'weaker vessel' (1 Peter 3:7), whose conformity to her husband materially aids him in his role as the 'stronger vessel' that protects and provides for her. In his *Homilies on Joshua 3:1*, Origen explained it as an analogy from why men but not women fought as soldiers in the ancient Israelite army: a weak vessel is not sent into conflicts lest it become broken and useless.

Today's Olympics and other sporting events recognize that women are weaker when they provide separate competitions for them. This is not men lording it over women but recognition of differences in ability and specialization conferred by nature. The difference in function and status that results from being weaker does not mandate abject subordination; rather, 1 Peter 3:7 commands Christian hus-

bands to honour wives as the ‘weaker vessel’. It is the duty of the husband to brave conflicts in order to protect his wife.

Besides being equipped by nature to fight in literal battles, husbands until the twentieth century possessed a greater knowledge of ‘the world’—workplaces, business, and evil men therein—acquired by working and associating with many people outside the home, at a time when females were confined to home and family. For this reason, says Origen’s *Commentary on Matthew* 14:24, a Christian husband has a right and duty to prevent his wife from doing what is not fitting, and from associating with such men he knows from general experience to have dishonourable intentions. Clement mentioned the additional duty of keeping his wife from acting in a way that contravenes virtue and salvation (*Stromata* 4:19).

To maintain the balance of wifely submission and husbandly leadership, the church father Tertullian around AD 200 forbade husbands to be ruled by their wives (*On Patience* 16), and for a woman to select a man to marry on the basis that she could dominate him (*Letters to His Wife* 2:8). Tertullian was a Roman lawyer before being converted and ordained, and became founder of Latin Christian literature from his base in Tunisia.

Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 14:34f, that women must not voice questions aloud in church but must ask them at home from their husbands, are not evidence of female subjection or disenfranchisement. Origen’s *Homilies on Joshua* 3:1 explains that one person cannot help another unless the intended helper can teach something to the other person. Husbands thus have a duty to help, teach, and inform their wives and themselves on spiritual matters.

Origen received his formal theological education at the world’s foremost institute of Christian learning at Alexandria in Egypt. The dean at the time was Clement, the most outstanding Christian thinker of the day. In the AD 190s Clement wrote much about relationships between spouses, particularly the sexual aspects. While the celibate Origen wrote in generalities that husbands are to regulate the



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matters of marriage (*Commentary on Ephesians* 5:22-23), the married Clement gave details. The husband, wrote Clement, is under an obligation to control and regulate himself and his desires so that he loves and delights in his wife as a person more than as a source of pleasure in intercourse (*Stromata* 3:7 [58]).

According to Clement, a husband’s trustworthiness, reliability, good behaviour, self-control, honesty, and love of others that characterize a Christian in his relations with outsiders are also to be exhibited to his wife. Indeed, said Clement, marriage should be the training-ground for developing and practising love of neighbour (*Paedagogus* 2:10 [97]).

Clement also taught that the husband has a duty to ask the wife’s consent to sex, a novel idea at the time. In an age when wives and other slaves were considered mere playthings and tools for a free man’s pleasure, Clement revealed new ground by allowing a woman to veto her husband’s advances (*Stromata* 3:7 [58]).

Christianity before the middle of the third century AD introduced yet another novel duty (and, for its time, outrageous) for husbands. Husbands were obliged to actually love their wives. There are many more injunctions in the early literature that a husband love his wife than that she should love him.

Husbands are instructed eight times to love their wives: 1 Corinthians 7:33, Ephesians 5:25, Ephesians 5:28, Ephesians 5:33, Colossians 3:19, in two of Clement’s books (*Paedagogus* 3:12; *Stromata* 3:7 [58]), and in the *Letter from Ignatius to Polycarp* 5:1. Ignatius was a bishop of Antioch who had worked alongside apostles and was martyred

around AD 107. Love by wife for husband, without mentioning that he love her, is found only in Titus 2:4, Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians* 4:2, and Origen's *Commentary on Romans* 10:20. Writing in the first half of the second century, Polycarp was a bishop who in his youth had associated with the Apostle John and other first-generation Christians. He was probably 'the messenger of the church in Smyrna' in Revelation 2:8.

What was this new love? Ephesians 5:25, Clement (*Paedagogus* 3:12) and Ignatius (*Letter to Polycarp* 5:1) said that the husband is to love the wife 'as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it', while Ephesians 5:28 commands husbands to love their wives 'as their own bodies', adding that 'he that loves his wife loves himself.'

Of course, men can 'love' many things: their dogs, their automobile, their football team, and—among Roman men in the early Christian centuries—a sex partner of either gender. But these are means to an end, put aside when he becomes more interested in something else. Love for wife was to be permanent and constant. A husband must spend time with the wife and for the wife's benefit by teaching her, considering her sexual needs (1 Corinthians 7:3-5 and Clement *Stromata* 3:15 [97]), controlling his sexual passion, protecting her from evil-intentioned persons, living considerately with her and honouring her (1 Peter 3:7), and leading the way towards God (Origen *Homilies on Genesis* 4:4). Such love excludes bitterness and harshness (Colossians 3:19). To perform these responsibilities he needs to be head of the wife.

There was a wide contrast between Christian teaching and Roman law of the time, when a wife was just another of a male's possessions,

and a father had the right to put a family member to death, while Christian literature before AD 250 was remarkably lacking in the concept of a husband owning his wife. The Christian husband's role and the sort of 'submission' his wife was to render him were more like the relationship between a loving, benevolent teacher and an eager pupil, not between a master and his serf as it became many centuries later in Christian society.

The duties and relationship between spouses were to produce the happy Christian marriage described in Tertullian's *Letters to His Wife* 2:8:

Together they pray, together prostrate themselves, together perform their fasts; mutually teaching, mutually exhorting, mutually sustaining. Equally are they both found in the Church of God; equally at the banquet of God; equally in straits, in persecutions, in refreshments. Neither hides ought from the other; neither shuns the other; neither is troublesome to the other. The sick is visited, the indigent relieved, with freedom. Alms are given without danger of ensuing torment; sacrifices attended without scruple; daily diligence discharged without impediment. There is no stealthy signing, no trembling greeting, no mute benediction. Between the two echo psalms and hymns; and they mutually challenge each other which shall better chant to their Lord. Such things when Christ sees and hears, He joys. To these He sends His own peace. (ANF 4.48)

In this quotation we see how marriage was envisioned by the Christian church. Unlike common practice and secular laws of the time, the early church regarded marriage as a loving, reciprocal partnership, with no husband possessing authoritarian rights over the wife. What rights one spouse had to the other was for the benefit of both, and were intended to help one or the other to fulfill a responsibility.

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