

Response to Lisa Marie Belz, OSU, "Should Only a Woman Be Subordinate?: Examining the Subtle  
Corrective of Ephesians 5:21-33

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I find it necessary to state that the irony of a man responding to a paper such as this is fully acknowledged, and the following response is thus issued in a spirit of both fear and trembling, but mostly fear. So before attempting to crack open the can of worms I carry with me at all times, I'd like to begin by stating that I share deeply the desire to read the New Testament household codes as transformative and even empowering to women. We live in a culture in which women are to be mutually respected alongside men, however this respect is far from universal and there exist many who will dismiss the notion of mutuality as "liberal nonsense" or, at best, an "impossible ideal." The codes under examination in this paper have been used in the past and present to vindicate and even provoke injustice against women at the hands of patriarchal society. Clearly, there is much work left to be done, and in this light, the conclusions offered by this paper are both welcomed and refreshing; the desire to read these passages as promoting mutual respect and even mutual subordination between husband and wife is both understandable and respectable. However, as I bring forth my can-opener, I wonder if mutual subordination is truly what the authors envisioned when they penned their mandates almost 2,000 years ago.

A quick glance at the apparatus of the Nestle-Aland will reveal that the reception of Ephesians 5 by early scribes was multi-faceted. The current reading of 5:22, αἱ γυναῖκες τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ, is in fact a minority reading found only in the Vaticanus and P<sup>46</sup> manuscripts. There are two alternate traditions for this verse, and both insert imperative forms of ὑποτάσσω after ἀνδράσιν. The first, υποτασσεσθωσαν, is supported by Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, and others. The second, υποτασσεσθε, is supported by Claromontanus and the Majority Text. These variants serve two purposes: first, they solve the problem of the missing verb in 5:22, so instead of "wives to your husbands as to the Lord," we read, "wives be subject (or subject yourselves) to your husbands as to the Lord." Second, and related to the first, they supplement the participle in 5:21, ὑποτασσόμενοι, as instruction for wives but not necessarily for husbands.

As mentioned, scholarship is still unclear as to where the household code of Ephesians 5 actually begins; the variant readings would suggest that most scribes saw it as beginning in 5:22, thus their desire to supply the verb. Notably, there are no variants of this sort in 5:25 and following, when the author addresses the behavior of husbands. I raise these text-critical issues, not to suggest reverting to the explicit imperatives of the variant readings, but rather to illustrate that although we may wish to read these verses as calling for mutual subordination of husband and wife, the majority of scribes did not seem to read them as such...whether they were offering their own interpretations of a verbless clause or serving to reinforce what they saw as a necessary hierarchical mechanism is difficult, if not impossible, to determine. A study such as this would be greatly enriched by addressing the ways in which the New Testament household codes have been interpreted in the reception of texts themselves as well as in the history of exegesis. Is there *any* evidence from early interpreters to support the claim that Paul is here advocating for mutual subordination as a means to correct the household codes of his own time?

Undoubtedly, there are some who are now questioning my commitment to equal rights; let me assure you, as I made clear in the beginning, that I could not agree more with the conclusion that husbands and wives should be mutually subordinate one to the other. My concern is not with the product, but rather with the means of production. In my mind, the process by which we deliberate is equally as important as the conclusions we reach, and the question at hand is fundamentally one of method, as well as the location of Scripture in our moral discourse. More specifically, I wonder, by what standard are we to judge those passages that are in need of a creative reading such as this? Should the outcome of our exegesis arrive at a different interpretation than the "literal" or even "traditional" meaning of a given text, what place does that interpretation enjoy in our deliberations on social issues? Is such reading even necessary for discussions to progress? Today, for example, Christians who maintain that slavery is consistent with Church teaching are few and far between. There are certainly some who would dissent, but by and large the opinion is held that owning people is *not* a Christian activity. However, Paul writes in Ephesians 6:

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ; not in the way of eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of

God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that whatever good any one does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. Masters, do the same to them, and forbear threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Paul does not here condemn slavery, or hierarchy for that matter, for he has no need to; it is merely a fact of the society he inhabits, and he accepts it as a given. He does encourage mutual respect between master and slave, but the institution of slavery exists nonetheless. Taking this verse at face value, however, does not lessen the claim that slavery is inconsistent with Christianity. As well, the existence of such statements in our canon does not hinder the call to vigorously seek justice in the world.

So, to perhaps stimulate further discussion on the issue, I pose the following questions:

1. What place *does* Scripture play in the progression of social awareness? Does our consciousness of certain issues inspire our exegesis, or is it the other way around? Put another way, which comes first, the chicken or the egg?
2. By what standard do we judge those passages that are due for a revisiting and perhaps reinterpretation? What motivates us toward such reinterpretation?
3. With the example of slavery in mind, what is to be done with those passages that we find to be so bound by history that they seem to contradict everything on which we stand? Must we make them fit in order to acknowledge them as Scripture?

In closing, the household codes of the New Testament, perhaps especially Ephesians 5, do seem to be doing something that rubs against the grain of the Greco-Roman status quo; this paper, in my mind, has done a fine job of showing as much. However, while Ephesians 5 may offer a subtle corrective, claiming that husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the church, verse 33 still instructs the wife to *fear* her husband. So, while I submit that the author could very well be doing something new, I would hesitate to claim that what they endorse is fully mutual or bi-lateral subordination of husband and wife. It would seem as if the subtle corrective, while perhaps revolutionary for its time, can only take us so far in the present. Passages such as this remind us that, as we approach Scripture to inform our moral discourses, we must be constantly aware that the Biblical authors, no matter what clothes we might choose for them, must still be understood on their own terms. You can dress Paul up, but he still might embarrass someone if you bring him to dinner.