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Jesus, Power, and Gender Roles

by S. Scott Bartchy

These theses were first created as a "hand-out" to support teaching on "headship" as presented in Ephesians 5 that I was asked to do in seminars at Fuller Theological Seminary. They have grown and been modified in light of questions from those participating in the seminars.

Yet the basic structure of the original draft of the theses has not been altered. I recognize that improvements in the structure will be necessary before these theses are expanded in some form. For example Theses #4 and #5 should be re-ordered as sub-points under Thesis #2. Thesis #28 is not a thesis at all—and there must be a better way to introduce this question into the flow than I have found here. Furthermore, Theses #18–20 are all relatively long and tightly interrelated; perhaps the ideas should be divided into smaller units than at present.

I am swallowing a little pride and permitting the theses to be distributed "as is" because I am *very* interested in *your* response before I make further revisions and expansions in them.

It seems to me that there is real dynamite set under the conventional understanding of the husband as "decision-maker" by the observations that are presented in Theses #17–22. I am eager to learn if you also think so. If so, please suggest to me how I may express this insight more winsomely and persuasively—for I truly desire to persuade and not to alienate.

Thank you for thinking with me on these very significant matters.

Historical-Exegetical Theses

1. Jesus is not remembered to have discussed directly the issue of authority in marriage. Yet his teaching about power and privilege and their uses in human relationships is both central to his mission and the pattern for *all* inter-personal relationships between Christians. See, e.g., Mark 10:35–45.
2. By his teaching and life Jesus re-defined the understanding of true and valid power. That is, he rejected using power to control others (and the presupposition that true power is in limited supply) and affirmed using power to serve others, to lift up the fallen, to forgive, to encourage maturity and responsibility, and to give power to the powerless (for which the presupposition is that there is no lack in the supply of such authentic power). (See, e.g., Ephesians 4:15–16.)
3. The Holy Spirit continues this understanding and practice of power in the early congregations. Indeed, the Holy Spirit provides precisely this kind of power in unlimited amounts according to the growing capacity of each Christian. (However the Holy Spirit may be perceived in relation to the issue of authority in the Christian community, *this* Spirit does not maintain

dependency relationships or provide power for one Christian to use in controlling other Christians.)

4. Jesus' insistence on equality for women and men with respect to the laws of marriage and divorce is consistent with his teaching about power and may be regarded as a direct application of that teaching to husband-wife relationships (Matt 19:3–9/5:31–32; Mk 10:10–12).
5. Jesus led his male disciples in not regarding women as sex-objects, thus opening the possibility of a mixed group (male/female) of disciples traveling with him as well as of women functioning as his representatives (see John 4 and the initial resurrection appearances—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John!).
6. Paul applies Jesus' definition of power as strength for serving others rather than as control over others in his reply to the sexually ascetic "pneumatikoi" ("spiritual ones") in Corinth, when he urges that the husband belongs to the wife in the very same way (*homoios*) as the wife belongs to the husband (1 Cor. 7:2–5), when he addresses both women and men regarding divorce (calling on Jesus' authority; 7:10–13), and when he notes that a Christian woman (as well as a Christian man) has the power to make "clean" a marriage to a non-believer (7:14–16).
7. Paul also implicitly calls in question the authority of the oldest male family member (*patria potestas*) by addressing Christian women without reference to their husbands' authority as well as Christian slaves without reference to their owners.
8. Paul specifically and forcefully applies Jesus' definition of power in Ephesians 5:21, where self-subordination to other Christians is presented as the third characteristic of the Spirit-filled life. This exhortation is underlined by a strong reference to respect for Christ himself. (See also Philippians 2:3–5 and Romans 12:10.)
9. This exhortation for mutual subordination is applied to Christian wives in 5:22. The strong connection between vs. 21 and vs. 22 is stressed by the continuation of the theme and especially by the reliance in vs. 22 (in which there is no verb) on the verb "subordinate yourselves" in vs. 21. (Thus *no* paragraph division between vs. 21 and vs. 22 can be permitted.)
10. This exhortation for mutual subordination is applied to Christian husbands in Eph. 5:25–33a, where husbands are exhorted three times to love (*agapao*) their Christian wives by special appeal to Christ's use of power in his relation to his Church—which led to his sacrificial death.
11. Indeed, the exhortation to Christian wives in Eph. 5:22–4 is based on a tight comparison of the husband to Christ and the wife to

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the church, in which Christ is described as “the head” of the Church and thus the husband as “the head” of the wife; and the wife’s subordination to her Christian husband is further motivated by the example of the Church’s subordination to Christ.

12. Yet because of the common metaphorical uses of “head” in English, we must note very carefully that the term for “head” in Koine Greek (*kephale*) rarely carries the metaphorical meaning of “one who possesses superior power or rank” (such as in “head of a company” or “head of the family”). The common Greek metaphorical usage of *kephale* to indicate “source” or “origin” made good sense to the original hearers/readers of Eph. 5 as an important link to Genesis 2, the scriptural passage on which Paul was reflecting when writing Eph. 5:23–31 (as a “midrash”).
13. But do not the common metaphorical meanings “source” and “origin” seem also to suggest *some* kind of priority for the husband, a priority that is called on further to motivate the self-subordination of his wife to him (5:23)? The logic of the passage leads to this answer: “Source/origin”-language is linked to the self-subordination of the wife but *not* to any general or gender-specific authority or decision-making role of the husband.
14. In contrast to the various “chain of command” theories, it must be stressed that Paul did not develop the image of the man as “source/origin” of woman (Gen. 2) as a basis for urging husbands to function as decision-makers or for giving them permission to rule over their wives, but rather for motivating them to love (Eph. 5:28–29): “husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loves his wife loves himself . . . and the two shall become one flesh (Gen. 2:24).”

***The Holy Spirit does not maintain
dependency relationships or provide
power for one Christian to use in
controlling other Christians.***

15. The women had been socialized to be submissive in all relationships with men. They routinely subordinated themselves for psychological and physical survival, as well as for attaining their own ends by subtle means. Thus what is called for in Eph. 5 is not so much a new behavior but a new *motivation*; and a new standard is presented by which these women must evaluate their continuing behavior as Christians and as wives.
16. The men had been socialized to dominate women and to expect to be served by them. In marriage they expected to be served by women both younger and far less educated than they were. Thus what is called for in Eph. 5 is both a new *behavior* and a new *attitude* from these men. They also are confronted with a new standard by which they must evaluate themselves as Christians and husbands.
17. Thus both husbands and wives as Christians were exhorted to subordinate themselves to each other. And although such mutual subordination seems to defy a healthy sense of “order” (so S. Clark), such an apparently paradoxical considering of others as “better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3) formed the heart of all human relationships in the realm where *Jesus* is the Lord.
18. If it should be asked: “Did Jesus ever subordinate himself to the Church?” the answer must be a clear “Yes, He did! And He continued to do so!” First of all He used his power in human relationships in such a self-subordinating manner that He finally “gave himself up” (Eph. 5:25) for his Church. His self-restraint

and loving care in his use of his own power has been dramatically demonstrated by his obvious and concerned patience in response to the Church’s various decisions *not* to remain without “spot or wrinkle” or “holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27). That is, his leadership of the Church has not been expressed by using power to control or coerce the Church “for her own good” or “his own good.”

19. Jesus’ goal for his Church—“attaining the full measure of perfection found in Christ” (Eph. 4:13, NIV)—determined his means for reaching that goal. That is, the kind of human maturity and community for which Jesus “gave himself up” could not have become possible through Christ’s “loving domination” of the world. Rather, his authority among human beings rested in his radical integrity and was expressed through his ability to empower human beings to “become mature”—not in his compelling them to do so.
20. Thus Jesus did not use his power or authority to make his disciples’ decisions for them nor did He seek to protect them from the results of their own bad decisions (think of Judas and Peter). Rather he proclaimed the Kingdom of God as the only sphere of authentic Reality and called human beings to make responsible decisions in light of their real options. Jesus never encouraged his disciples to escape personal responsibility for their lives by turning over the task of decision-making to him. Indeed, Jesus could not have been true to himself nor to his goal for human life if he had made decisions for his disciples “for their own good.” For his vision of “their own good” required that they learn to make their own responsible decisions in light of the new Reality (“Kingdom of God”) that he was making possible in their midst.
21. Thus the sole force and purpose of the daring comparison of husbands to Christ in Eph. 5 was that of radically challenging tradition-honored male-dominant behavior. By no means could this text have been appropriately understood as “permission” to husbands to “have things their own way” or to think of themselves as the intermediary between their wives and God.
22. Is it not then clear that the proper understanding of the daring comparison of husbands with Christ is totally dependent on the believer’s understanding of *who Christ is* (Christology)? Thus it is significant that in Eph. 5 it is not Jesus the *Lord* who is described but Jesus the *Savior*. (Although it must be stressed that to acknowledge Jesus as “Lord” is to accept a complete re-definition of “lordliness” in terms of servanthood.) The One who gave himself up for the Church and who has continued to do everything he can to enable her to become all she is meant to become, he is the One presented by Paul in Eph. 5 as the example by which husbands were to measure their behavior.

Hermeneutical Theses (Applying Eph. 5 to Our Situation in Western Culture)

23. The goal of exegesis is to determine what a text *meant* to its first hearers/readers. The goal of applied hermeneutics is to discern what the *equivalent meaning/effect* of that text would be in new circumstances, such as ours.
24. The authority of a New Testament text dealing with human behavior lies first of all in the *direction* in which any aspect of first century behavior is being modified by the text in question (i.e. *from* wherever Christ encountered the new behavior *toward* maturity in Christ).
25. Eph. 5 meant to give Christian women a new motivation for their behavior and an exhortation to practice “at home” the new kind of human relations they were experiencing “in Church.” Mutual submission among men and women working together in the Christian community can provide models and experience for decision-making and life-together at home.

26. Eph. 5 meant to give Christian men an entirely new basis for relating to their wives, by which an especially strong appeal is made to Christ's sacrificial use of his power for the sake of the Church. These men are urged to treat their wives as they were learning to treat each other in Christ. Today, competition between Christian males both in the world and in the churches forms a significant basis for male insistence on "being in charge" at home. Experiences of mutual subordination among males "out of reverence for Christ" are very likely to be a prerequisite to practicing mutual subordination with their wives.
27. No specific male role is affirmed by Eph. 5 or by 1 Cor. 11. Nothing is said about leadership or decision-making (in spite of the claims of many modern teachers).
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- Jesus did not use his power or authority to make his disciples' decisions for them nor did He seek to protect them from the results of their own bad decisions.***
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28. Question: What authority does the daring comparison of the husband to Christ in Eph. 5 give to Christian husbands that Christ does not give to Christian wives? The remaining theses are meant to be explorations for an answer.
29. Any application of Eph. 5 that does not continue the *direction* of the change in behavior intended for the Christians in first-century Asia Minor is a false interpretation that is to be rejected in the name of Jesus.
30. Application of the "new direction" expressed in the remainder of this "Household Code" (Eph. 5 & 6—parents/children; owners/slaves) would lead to recognition of children as "real people" (as Jesus did) in family life and to profit-sharing and participation of employees in the decision-making processes of the business world.
31. In light of Jesus' goal for every Christian, mutual submission in marriage between Christians of similar ages, education, and maturity should be characterized by sharing of decision-making and accountability to each other. Where there are significant differences in age, education, or maturity, the "senior" partner in the marriage is obliged in Christ to overcome whatever dependencies such differences may encourage, in order to assist in the growth of the partner into "the full measure of perfection found in Christ."
32. True authority "at home" or "at church" is experienced through those characteristics of personality that are most fully conformed to the "mind of Christ" (Phil. 2:5).
33. The passion to look after others by "doing good" to them in *our* own way (and to contribute to their dependency on us and our control over them) continues to be far more common than the desire to put into everyone's hands the means and power to look after themselves. Yet does not Christ's goal for each of us demand that we do all that we can to assist each other as brother and sister, as wife and husband, to become as "powerful in the Lord" as humanly possible?
34. Neither the "gifts of the Spirit" (1 Cor. 12-14, Romans 12, Ephesians 4) nor the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-24) are gender-linked. Thus every Christian, in all relationships including marriage, is responsible first of all to God for developing the gifts that have been given, with husbands and wives bearing special responsibility for building up each other for the sake of the Church and the Kingdom of God.
35. Since the *primary* relationship between men and women in Paul's communities was that of mutual aid according to the spiritual gifts each had uniquely received (1 Cor. 12), it should be asked: How are such a gifted woman and man from such a Body of Christ related differently to each other in principle with respect to their spiritual gifts (and the obligation to build each other up with them) if they should decide to marry each other?
36. No specific guidelines can be found in Eph. 5 (or any other New Covenant text) for a unique division of gender-roles. Note for example:
- 36.1 Fathers are exhorted to change their behavior toward their children in Eph. 6 not because they are more responsible than mothers are for children but because of their traditional authoritarianism in the home.
- 36.2. Both mother and father are to be honored and obeyed (Eph. 6).
- 36.3. *Both* husbands (1 Tim. 3:4) and wives (1 Tim. 5:14) are urged to "rule their households."
37. In light of the continued history of male domination in the various cultures of the world and the full infection of the Church with this domination that began with the Constantinian (Theodosian) establishment of the Church, the concept "male headship" in marriage as such is not able to make a positive contribution to serious theological reflection on family life. Indeed, the prevalent uses of this concept to justify further male domination as God's order for the family call for forceful response in terms of servant-leadership as the only appropriate role for both wife and husband.
38. The core of this reflection should be Christology: What does it mean for the relations between Christian men and women in marriage to confess that Jesus—as He lived, taught, treated people, and died for them—has been exalted by God to the highest status of honor? How is hierarchy of *any* kind to be evaluated in light of his rejection of all privileges and power in terms of control and coercion?

THE GOSPEL AND URBANIZATION

Theological Students Fellowship is among the co-sponsors of this conference to be hosted by the Overseas Ministries Study Center April 23-May 4. Conference leaders include Samuel Escobar, Raymond Fung, Raymond Bakke, Roger Greenway, and Michael Haynes. The first week will focus on urban evangelization; the second will concentrate on the role of the pastor. For further information, or to register for either or both weeks, use the form on the OMSC advertisement in this issue, or write to Box 2057, Ventnor, NJ 08406.

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