

Domestic violence and the Bible

The LCA has recently launched a campaign for the prevention of domestic and family violence. The attempt to address this issue is surely something we can all support. Domestic and family violence are never okay, and we would be naïve to think this problem does not also exist in our church. Most pastors I know have come across such situations. Those who act violently in the family need to hear God's law against any such behaviour, and to be led to repentance. Those who have experienced pain and trauma due to family violence need the healing balm of the Gospel. Those still feeling trapped in violent circumstances need practical help in finding safety and security. This campaign seeks to address these sorts of issues.

In this little article, I'd simply like to look at one Bible passage that sometimes arises in discussions on domestic violence, namely Ephesians 5:21-33. I think this is important, because tragically this passage has been perverted and misused by some to justify violence and abuse, whereas St Paul is attempting to achieve the very opposite. In fact, far from being a justification for any domestic and family violence, I believe these words of Scripture are one of the Church's richest resources in attempting to prevent it.

As it happens, Pastor Fraser has also made reference to this passage in his article on marriage in this same edition of News for the Pews. Here it is again from the NRSV:

²¹ Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. ²² Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. ²⁴ Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. Ephesians 5:21–28

So, let's unpack this a bit. Firstly, we note the mutual submission of all Christians to each other. St Paul will now go on to describe one way this works itself out between husband and wife. It's true then that the relationship between husband and wife is described in the language of the husband being 'the head' and the wife being 'subject' to him. The problem is that we tend to latch on to these words in isolation, without noting carefully how they are explained in the rest of the passage. This is absolutely nothing to do with domination, oppression or any such thing. We need to ask, for St Paul what is the model for this headship? It is our Lord Jesus. For St Paul, what shape does this headship therefore take? It is that of loving, self-sacrifice. In complete contrast to using this headship selfishly for his own benefit, a true Christian husband is called to exercise his headship by serving his wife, even to the point of laying down his very life for her. This is true headship, modelled after our Lord Jesus, and could not be further from the picture of a violent husband.

What about when it comes to the other side of the relationship, the 'being subject'? Here too we see that we cannot take this concept in isolation. For the picture here of 'being subject' is not that of a person who is 'under the thumb' and obligated to suffer abuse. The picture is not a master and his slaves, or a king and those he rules. The model instead is Christ and his Church. If we want to see what 'being subject' actually looks like, we consider what it is for we Christians together to be subject to Christ. Seen in this light, 'being subject' does not diminish in any way the one adopting this posture. Rather, because the Church knows Christ loves her, has laid down his life for her, and continues to serve her, she gladly and willingly subjects herself to him and finds true blessing therein.

It's worth noting in this connection too, that nowhere in the New Testament is a husband ever told to *make* his wife subject to him. Instead this submission of the wife is only ever freely given. The picture seems to be that when a husband lives out his loving, self-sacrificial, servant-oriented headship, a wife is freed to gladly and willing submit herself to him, and both can flourish.

St Paul is not ignorant of the fact that this teaching is far from the reality of most marriages, including those of Christians. This mutual submission does not come naturally to us, but is something which needs to be revealed from heaven and worked in us by the Spirit. But that we live as sinners in this broken world, and that some have even perverted this very passage of Scripture to defend violence, should not lead us to give up on this teaching and way of life. It truly contains Spirit-given power to *prevent* domestic and family violence in the Church. Here our Lord Jesus, through his Apostle, invites us into a new way of life the world does not know, which with the Spirit's help we can truly strive to live.

If you have been a victim or perpetrator of domestic or family violence, please know your pastors will endeavour to offer pastoral care and other practical help as best we can. As a congregation let's be sensitive to those caught up in these situations, and pray without ceasing for God's mercy and help.

Yours in Christ, Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer