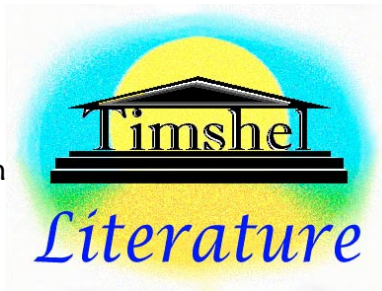


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**Just Thinking, 09/01/03:**

**Marital Insubordination**

by Justin Katz

It fell to me, last week, to stand before all attending Sunday mass and read what is perhaps the most controversial and dissent-inspiring passage in the New Testament, Ephesians 5:21-32:

Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ.  
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.

For the first time, as a lector, I wondered what the rule might be for choosing to read the shorter version, which in this case skips to the obligations of the husband:

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.

Though it may have been my imagination (to some extent), I thought I saw the priest fidgeting in my peripheral vision when I spoke the first words of the unadulterated text. The babies, seeming to sense the mood of their mothers, kept still. Indeed, the entire church was

silent, save for the clearing of feminine throats. I would swear that, when I later helped with the collection, I received few return smiles from the ladies, particularly those under sixty, as I walked by with the basket.

As a matter of course, I read the longer versions, so choosing the shortened passage would have represented a much more deliberate statement than would simply following my usual practice. Nonetheless, I might have done just that had I been required to make the decision back when I was satisfied to ignore the “obey thy husband” stuff as the antiquated rules of a different time. So much has it become a matter of cultural comfort to dissent from this apparently chauvinistic dogma that I had never deigned to give its content much thought – until I read C.S. Lewis’s book, *Mere Christianity*.

Lewis presents marriage as a nation of two. In order for it to be sustained for an entire lifetime, there must be a constitution, including a strategy for addressing disagreements that loving, respectful discussion cannot resolve. Lewis then makes a general observation that I had never even considered but have come to see as true, to the extent that such broad conclusions can be:

The relations of the family to the outer world – what might be called its foreign policy – must depend, in the last resort, upon the man, because he always ought to be, and usually is, much more just to the outsiders. A woman is primarily fighting for her own children and husband against the rest of the world. Naturally, almost, in a sense, rightly, their claims override, for her, all other claims. She is the special trustee of their interests.

That men have historically been the spouses to interact with the world through professions is probably related to the impression that husbands mitigate the “family patriotism of the wife.” Over centuries of cultural development, the breadwinner and the homemaker could have each developed tendencies appropriate to their daily tasks. However – the declarations of true chauvinists and radical feminists notwithstanding – deciding between cause and effect in these pervasive matters is tricky.

Even if it is not an innate gender distinction, other arguments (excuses, to some) are available for believing that this aspect culture developed purposefully. For instance, one might suggest that, not only does a consistent, immediate method of ascertaining who is the “head” of another family make things go more smoothly for society, but removing the potential for power struggles reduces the strain on newly married couples. Handing the title to the more physically imposing gender makes sense for a variety of reasons (albeit not always overriding ones). But to delve into these various justifications, whether they have merit or not, is to lose sight of the more important piece of St. Paul’s mandate: husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the Church.

Men have quite a duty, here, considering the degree to which Christ submitted to the punishment meted out by humanity. We are all to “be subordinate” to one another, and this mandate is confirmed explicitly for wives, but husbands are to *give themselves*. Several translations refer to the model that Christ “gave his life” for the Church. In this light, the husband is called to submit to the wife at an even deeper level.

Our problem in the modern day is with the very idea of subordination or submission. This is certainly not an aversion on which a lifelong relationship can easily be built. If it is true that men are more inclined to wander and more in need of forced maturation, then there is no more efficient way to foster responsibility than to make the man responsible. In this light, the requirement to love makes the head of the household not an infallible dictator, but an accountable leader, culpable above all for the wellbeing and happiness of his family.

Of course, it cannot be denied that this template for marriage has gone awry in the past. It seems likely that the distorted thinking was related to a distorted view of God. A world that believes in a domineering God will have husbands – and, more generally, leaders – who reflect that misunderstanding of what it means to love like Christ. Yet, by the same token, deleting the

other half of the metaphor of marriage, as the shortened reading does, is dangerous in its own ways.

For one thing, if the fear is that the passage lends itself to misapplication, excising it from public consciousness merely enables it to be rediscovered without any immediate context, unless its source is to be discarded entirely. The better answer is continual discussion about why it remains true despite women's lib, but why women's concerns are justified. For another thing, the inclination to see all relationships in terms of power, and then to denounce submission, is sure to lead us to place ourselves on the same level as God. This step taken, denial of God's existence is inevitable, because a being with no more power than a human being cannot exist and still be God.

Last Sunday, I kept smiling, despite the disapproving expressions of the women as they threw their collection envelopes in my basket. I'm not married to any of them.