

In the name of the One who loved the Church and gave himself up for her—Jesus Christ, dear friends,

Marriage is under attack! Have you seen the news lately? “Obama vows end to ‘don’t ask, don’t tell,’ wants Marriage Act repealed” was the headline last Sunday. The article noted that the president was speaking about these things at an annual dinner for a gay civil-rights advocacy group. Our president wants a law that extends more benefits to same-sex domestic partners.

The writer of an *Arizona Daily Star* editorial on Monday referred to David Letterman and Bill Clinton as men who cheated on their spouses and proposed that cheating is the new national pastime. She suggested that divorce should be done before the cheating takes place, saying “America’s divorce rate is already at 50 percent. A few more here or there aren’t going to make much of a difference.” A bit of a casual approach to both subjects, don’t you think?

A recent news article called *The Health of Marriage in America* speaks of “Cohabitation increasing dramatically. Unmarried births rising dramatically. Divorce rate stabilizing at a high level.” It points out that a quarter of the women in the United States are living with someone they’re not married to and another quarter have done so.

Popular opinion tells us that gay is okay and domestic partnerships are so accepted that we need laws protecting their rights. It tells us that living together outside of marriage is so important because you wouldn’t want to make a mistake and marry someone without knowing for sure you could live with them. Wrong and wrong! Gay is not okay according to God—it is sinful and it is not the plan he has for us. And if you really want to doom your relationship then you will go right ahead and live together with the one you love before you’re married. You see the dirty little secret that no one will tell you is that people that live together before they’re married are 80% more likely to divorce later on once they do get married! Oh...and God calls that sinful even if there were no stats like that to speak against it.

There is a lot of confusion out there when it comes to marriage! Since the world’s plans for marriage...and maybe even your plans for marriage...aren’t working out too well—and because we want our direction for life to come for our Creator and Savior, let’s look at

GOD’S PLAN FOR MARRIAGE.

What God outlines here in Ephesians 5 is what I call the “What? Why? And How?” of GOD’S PLAN FOR MARRIAGE.

You notice that God speaks to all Christians and says **Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.** All of us are to put others before ourselves, to give up things for each other because we love and respect our Savior. When Christians see how Jesus humbled himself to serve all people, they want to be humble and put others first as well.

He then makes a specific application that begins like this: **Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.**

WHAT does God say is his plan for wives? That they are to submit to their husbands. Some of you don’t like to hear that. Even a pastor might choke on those words as he conducts a wedding fearing what the people at that happy occasion might think. We might feel that way because the word ‘submit’ has an unpleasant connotation in our language. If we have to submit to someone, then we have the sense that someone is better than us in some way. I can tell you that it’s a much uglier word in

English than the way God had it written in Greek. In Greek the root word is neither negative or positive; it's absolutely neutral. It just means to put in a certain order or position. It does not mean inferior or anything like that. It is not a demeaning word.

I'd like to share with you some excellent comments on these verses from the *The People's Bible* on Ephesians:

All comparisons limp, but a situation from the sports world can perhaps bring us a step closer to grasping the meaning of "submit." Take the case of a pitcher and catcher on a baseball team. Both are on the same side and have the same objective; both want to make their contribution to winning the game. But the things they do are quite different! Usually it's the catcher who decides what pitch should be thrown. The pitcher "submits" to that decision. That doesn't mean he can't ever "shake off" a pitch or that there might not be an occasional conference at the mound, but in general, the catcher calls the pitches. Does that mean the catcher is better than the pitcher? Is the pitcher inferior because he submits to the catcher's selection of pitches? Not at all! That's simply the way things work best. They both recognize that each can't be doing his own thing if they want to win the ball game. Somebody has to decide whether a fast ball or a change-up is more likely to strike Casey out. It's a matter of assigned roles, a designated order of things. That's the essence of team play. (Panning, p.203)

To submit really means to understand that God has different positions for husband and wife to play on the marriage team. The Christian wife knows that God would have her support her husband in his role of leadership in their relationship. That's what it is...and that's all it is.

But WHY would a godly wife do this? Because **the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church**, our Savior explains. The reason is that God has put the husband in the position of leading the marriage. He has a great deal of responsibility in the Christian home. Just as Christ leads his Church, the husband is to lead the marriage. The WHY? is really pretty simple—because God has arranged it this way and he calls wives to this particular action as a fruit of faith. And that leads to the HOW—HOW is a wife to submit to her husband? **Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.** Ask yourself this question: How does the Church submit to Christ? If you can answer that, you'll have your answer to how a wife submits to her husband. How does the Church submit to Christ? How do you follow Christ's lead? Willingly, right? Without fear, right? Out of love for him, right? You don't despise Christ for his position and you aren't forced to follow him and you're not afraid of him because he leads you. As a Christian, my sense of self worth is not threatened because Christ guides me. It's really just the opposite, isn't it? A woman is no less of a woman because she understands the role her husband has been called to in their marriage and supports it. In fact, some would say she is more of a woman because of her faith and spiritual maturity. And certainly she is a precious woman in the eyes of her Lord.

Okay, but what about the guys? What are the WHAT, WHY and HOW for the husbands?

WHAT you are to do, husbands, sounds simple. God says **Husbands, love your wives.** "*If I didn't love her, I wouldn't have married her!*" you say. Ahh, but there's more to it than that. When God tells men to love their wives, he does not use the Greek word for love that means "best friend" kind of love. Nor does he use the Greek word that means love of a physical nature. No, he uses the word "agape." That is the kind of love that makes sacrifices for someone else, that puts another person first. It is the word used of God himself and shown to the world as he gave up his one and only Son. Husbands are to have this "agape" love for their wives.

WHY is a guy supposed to do this? It's very simple—because God called you to this position and to these actions of love. God explains that **husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church.** WHY show a love like this? Because the two of you have become one in marriage and it only makes sense that you would care for her like you care for yourself.

HOW is a man supposed to do this? Are you ready for this? A husband is to love his wife, **just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.** Wow...everyone just let that sink in for a minute—husbands are to show the kind of love that Jesus exhibited when he **loved the church and gave himself up for her.** Jesus put a world full of people first. At the very brink of his suffering and death he considered and he asked his Father if there might be another way other than the torture and cruel death. But there was not and so he continued, even dying for us. That is the highest kind of love. We husbands are supposed to live that love toward our wives every day. Your love is to show itself in how you lead in your marriage. Leadership and responsibility require a love that will sometimes move you to make yourself less and put her needs and desires before your own. Do you see how this kind of love for your wife might be as difficult as your wife's submission to you? The truth is that these are both high callings from God!

GOD'S PLAN FOR MARRIAGE found in Scripture can be summed up fairly simply: One man and one woman each fulfilling these roles of submission and love for a lifetime together—giving glory to God as they live for him. These words have given us some of the basics of God's plan and they really reveal that his plan requires respect and trust

First, GOD'S PLAN FOR MARRIAGE requires respect. In order to follow a plan like that—or if you are not married, to encourage those who are—we must respect our God. The God who loved us enough to create us, to send his Son to live under the law's pressure and suffer the pain of the cross for us, and to send his Spirit to call us to faith in Christ is the one who came up with the plan. You must know that the God who loves you dearly has blessings in mind for men and women who are united not only to each other but to their Lord. Respect for our God and Savior allows us all to respect GOD'S PLAN FOR MARRIAGE. And trust goes hand in hand with respect, doesn't it? If I respect God and his plan, I will also trust him to bless the relationship. The holy God who loves me is the one I trust completely. I trust him to love me. I trust him to forgive my sins. I trust him to take me to heaven when my time expires here in this world. As a Christian husband or as a Christian wife, I will trust his marriage plan too.

But the plan also requires respecting and trusting the person you're married to. This is where we run into problems, isn't it? You say *"No one outside of God is perfectly trustworthy or respectable!"* I've heard some of you say things like *"I've never known a man I can trust."* or *"Every woman is crazy."* There is no doubt that our sinfulness and the sinfulness of others has made us leery, gun-shy. We have real issues with trust and respect...even when it comes to our spouse or as we are dating and considering marriage. But this much is true: a husband must respect his wife and a wife her husband. A man needs to trust and so does a woman. Otherwise it's every man—and woman—for him/herself. And that's not marriage. Every husband and every wife must know what the Lord has called them to and be willing to live according to his will, holding up his or her end of the relationship even when the other doesn't. And the beauty of this for Christian couples is this—forgiveness, true forgiveness.

We all know that sin gets between people in relationships and marriage is no exception. But Christians do what they pray. We pray **"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."** And we mean it. We want to forgive others—especially in such a tight relationship as marriage. We want to forgive and we know how to forgive because Jesus our Savior shows us.

His sacrifice of love that serves as an example to husbands is the example for all Christians. He went to the greatest lengths to forgive people who didn't deserve it. When I realize the sins for which I am forgiven, I can be forgiving to others. Repentance and forgiveness in a marriage enables respect and trust to continue so that both husband and wife can serve their Lord and each other as God calls them to do.

That Jesus would serve and forgive unworthy sinners is the mystery God speaks of. He says **This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.** If not for the Holy Spirit giving us faith, we wouldn't believe that God's only Son would love and serve and forgive like he does in order to unite us to him. What a blessing it is that we have something in our human experience—in marriage—that mirrors the love and unity of Christ and his Church!

Whether you are married or not, ever were, or ever will be, at least don't miss that image. Let the love and unity of marriages that you see remind you of the love and unity you have with your Savior. And for those of you who are married, stick to GOD'S PLAN FOR MARRIAGE—not just because it works, but because it is the Lord's will for you that he might bless you. Don't let the sinful world's attack on marriage lead you to doubt God's plan, but instead hold to him and his plan ever more tightly. Amen.