

WHAT WINGER PRESENTLY GETS WRONG:

HAVE WE MISUNDERSTOOD ‘WIVES SUBMIT’?

[22 January 2023]

Do Paul and Peter prescribe a hierarchy of authority in marriage, husband above wife?

This article responds to Mike Winger’s video ‘Women in Ministry Part 9: Have We Misunderstood “Wives Submit”?’¹

If you’re in a hurry, go to www.bit.ly/3YmpGbH for a quick summary.

You can see our online or pdf articles on other videos by Mike at www.terranwilliams.com/articles/. Or use these links:

- [Part 2 \(Genesis\)](http://www.bit.ly/40lo9oh) — www.bit.ly/40lo9oh
- [Part 3 \(OT Women\)](http://www.bit.ly/3jAjCNX) — www.bit.ly/3jAjCNX
- [Part 4 \(NT Women\) part A](http://www.bit.ly/3JDVRiB) — www.bit.ly/3JDVRiB
- [Part 4 \(NT Women\) part B](http://www.bit.ly/3X08GXx) — www.bit.ly/3X08GXx
- [Part 8 \(Meaning of Head\)](http://www.bit.ly/3RwliET) — www.bit.ly/3RwliET
- [Part 9 \(Wives submit\)](http://www.bit.ly/3l8CmVv) — www.bit.ly/3l8CmVv
- [Part 10 \(1 Cor 11, Head Covering\)](http://www.bit.ly/3Y2Zp2l) — www.bit.ly/3Y2Zp2l

Still to come: Part 5 (Female Apostles), Part 11 (1 Cor 14, Silencing Women), Part 12 (1 Tim 2).

Please do not misunderstand our title ‘What Winger Presently Gets Wrong’ as implying any personal criticism of Mike. On the contrary, by including his name in the title, we are acknowledging the prominence of the ministry to which the Lord has called him. His Bible teaching is often of good quality and of much benefit to many people. He is a valued brother in Christ. But on this topic of Women in Ministry we are convinced that he has made mistakes and has misread Scripture.

Of course, Mike tries hard to think clearly and teach biblically. But if you think that Mike consistently succeeds in that aim, this article will give you reasons to reconsider, as will our two-part article responding to his video about Women Leaders in the New Testament, at www.bit.ly/3YPVNRr

Who are we, and why are we responding to Mike Winger?

Andrew Bartlett is based in the UK. He is the author of [Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts](#) (2019). He has been studying Scripture for nearly 60 years. In his day job as an international arbitrator and judge, he specializes in dispassionate analysis of texts, evidence and arguments. He has a degree in theology and has served in lay leadership in several churches.

¹ The video can be found on Mike’s own site biblethinker.org and on YouTube.

*Terran Williams is a South African pastor-teacher, with a ministry of planting and nurturing churches. He is the author of **How God Sees Women: The End of Patriarchy** (2022) and a number of other books.*

‘Complementarianism’ subordinates women under men’s authority in the church and in the home. When Andrew and Terran wrote their books, Andrew was a member of a complementarian church and Terran had just completed his long tenure as a leading pastor of a complementarian church. They each engaged with the leading scholarly complementarian works and independently concluded that God’s word does not subordinate women under men.

Mike Winger started releasing his video teachings on ‘Women in Ministry’ soon after Terran’s book was published. Because Mike’s lengthy videos have been watched by many thousands of people, he has emerged as one of the world’s most influential complementarian teachers. On reviewing Mike’s videos, Andrew and Terran found that there were substantial errors in Mike’s research, reasoning, and handling of Scripture.

Since the ordinary believer is more likely to get their information about Scripture from free online resources than from scholarly books, Andrew and Terran decided to team up and write some freely available responses to Mike’s teaching. Terran credits Andrew with doing the lion’s share of the work.

We love Mike’s heart. He repeatedly indicates his readiness to change his mind if solid reasons are put to him. He says: ‘If you’re a scholar who’s really studied in this area and you want to give me pushback, I really would like to read it now. If I’m wrong, I want to know it. Love to see that pushback.’ [Part 8 video, 0hr6mins] We commend Mike for his openness, and we thank him for his invitation. We are hopeful that his engaging with our feedback will result in a good conversation in which we all make progress in our understanding of God’s word.

If you find that we have made some errors of our own in this response, please write and tell us, so that we can make any needed corrections. You can email us at terranwill -at- gmail.com.² Please put these words in the subject-line: Winger Part 9.

² You’ll need to replace “ -at- ” with “@”.

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Rightly handling Scripture

In his Part 9 video, Mike Winger offers his interpretations of five excerpts from New Testament letters which teach about marriage: 1 Peter 3:1-7; Colossians 3:18-19; Titus 2:5; Ephesians 5:21-33; and 1 Corinthians 7:3-5.

Mike believes the Bible teaches-

'there's an authority imbalance in the marriage relationship between husbands and wives, and ... the husband is the one who has that greater authority' (0hr1min).

In other words, God has placed the husband in authority over the wife, and for that reason it is a wife's duty to submit to her husband. This is the thread that runs through his interpretation of what Peter and Paul write in their letters.

When we saw Mike's approach to interpreting these excerpts, we remembered the title of his Part 1 video: 'Why We Can't Think Biblically About It' and could not avoid considering 'why he can't think biblically about it'.

When we drive a car, there are certain basic precautions that we take for safety. The brakes are periodically checked. If our sight is imperfect, we wear glasses. We put on our seat belts. The precautions help to prevent crashes and injuries.

In the same way, when there is controversy over how a passage in a New Testament letter should be understood, we can take some basic precautions so that our interpretation isn't a car crash.

Those precautions include:

- *Context*: Consider the whole context – literary, historical and cultural.
- *Words*: Look closely at the exact words, not relying only on English versions but checking what is in the Greek.
- *Train of thought*: Trace the writer's train of thought through the letter and through the particular passage under discussion.

- *Reasons for writing:* Consider why the writer considers it important or relevant to say what he says.
- *The big picture:* Scripture is God's story with the world, a story about the coming of the Messiah (the Christ). A Christ-centered and canonical approach will ensure that our interpretation is true to the big picture of what Scripture is about. Adopting a canonical approach means that we assume a basic unity in the message of Scripture, so that where a passage is unclear and could be interpreted in more than one way, other passages, which are clearer, may guide us to avoid lines of interpretation which would produce a contradiction.³

Of course, the precautions overlap. They are not separate; they need to be done together.

Surprisingly, Mike does not sufficiently attend to these basic precautions. He has a great ministry. We are keen to serve him, if in any way we can, by helping him be more rigorous in faithfully handling Scripture.

Our main focus will be the passages in 1 Corinthians, Ephesians and 1 Peter. We are not providing a full commentary but will aim to say enough to show why Mike's interpretation is in conflict with the text and intent of Scripture. We will include brief comments on the passages in Colossians and Titus as part of our discussion of Ephesians.

We will show that Peter and Paul do not teach that God has placed the husband in authority over the wife. That is not the reason why they instruct wives to submit to their husbands.

Instead, we will see an inspiring vision of Christian marriage, in which there is an equal balance of authority between husband and wife, who are adopted as equal members of God's own family. In this vision, the partners are called to mutual submission. And as part of this, husbands are called to give themselves up in self-sacrificial, loving service to their wives, both imitating and portraying Christ's self-sacrificial love for his body, the church.

Sex, prayer and decision-making in 1 Corinthians 7

1 Corinthians 7 stands in direct contradiction of Mike's view that there is a God-ordained authority imbalance in the marriage relationship.

Let's start with some historical and cultural context.

The year is 55 AD. We're going to imagine a Christian married couple in Corinth. But first let's sketch the Greco-Roman culture in which they live.

³ Mike correctly states: 'One of the important things about interpreting Scripture is that it's not only consistent with the context but it's consistent with other scriptures as well.' (1hr27mins)

The pithy (and to our ears, shocking) summary in the Athenian speech ‘Against Neaera’ conveys the flavor of how unequal the marriage relationship could be in traditional Greek culture, and how some men viewed their wives:

‘We keep mistresses for our enjoyment, concubines to serve our person each day, but we have wives for the bearing of legitimate offspring and to be faithful guardians of the household.’⁴

The ‘mistresses’ were *hetairai*, meaning courtesans. The ‘concubines’ were probably not concubines properly so called but female slaves in the household.

That famous speech was made in the fourth century BC, but in Hellenic society in the Roman empire in Paul’s time, women’s status was largely unchanged.

In first-century Hellenism, wives were often still treated as their husbands’ property. In the home the husband’s word was supposed to be law. The imbalance was all the more pronounced because women usually married at a young age, in their early or mid-teens, and their husbands were usually significantly older, typically by ten years. This is not to say that the situation was uniform, but the general picture remained that the husband was usually in firm authority over the wife.

Corinth was a Roman colony, where Roman laws were in force. The power of the *paterfamilias*, the male head of the household, was considerable. It extended to the legal power of life and death over his children. Even after infancy, members of the family could be condemned to death by the *paterfamilias* under a formal domestic judgment.

Plutarch (the Greek philosopher and essayist) wrote about marriage a few decades after Paul. His essay shows us how little things had changed. While Plutarch commends mutual agreement in marriage, he makes clear that this is merely a decorous veneer over the husband’s rule. Every activity carried on by mutual agreement should disclose the husband’s leadership and preferences. In sexual matters, if the husband’s preference is for sexual liaisons with a mistress or a female slave, his wife should not be indignant. And the wife should not herself initiate sexual intercourse with her husband. However, it is her duty to respond to her husband’s sexual advances.⁵

Now let’s imagine a Christian married couple who lead a busy life in Corinth. We’ll call them Apelles and Julia. They live in an *insula* (a two-story property) on a main street in the city. Downstairs they make and sell garments. Upstairs are their living quarters. They have their own room, and there are several small rooms or areas for other household members, who also work in the business. It is hard going to make enough to live on, and they also have children to look after. They work long hours and get very tired.

⁴ Demosthenes 59.122. The present article draws especially from Andrew Bartlett, *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts* (IVP, 2019), chapters 2, 3 and 4. For further discussion and sources regarding Hellenic and Roman culture in regard to marriage, see *Men and Women in Christ*, 39, 24.

⁵ *Moralia*, ‘Advice to Bride and Groom’, 11, 16, 18. For further details, see *Men and Women in Christ*, 24.

They are part of an *ekklēsia*, a group of Christ-followers, which meets in a large villa not far away.

There's been a lot of talk in the *ekklēsia* about sex. Some teachers have been urging that it is good for couples to abstain from sexual intercourse. Jesus is coming back soon, and then we'll be like the angels. So it makes sense to start being like angels now. And anyway, they say material things are tainted with evil and are passing away. Christians should be wholly spiritual, and that means abstaining from sex.

This teaching has caused conflict in marriages. Some of the wives have been boldly refusing sex. They've been saying that the time that used to be spent on sexual relations ought to be used for prayer.

Some of the husbands have reacted by brazenly resorting to prostitutes, either inviting high-class courtesans for dinner and sexual recreation afterwards, or going out to the brothel. After all, they say, if material things are passing away, it doesn't matter what we do with our bodies. And resorting to prostitutes is what even respectable pagans do, if their slaves are not suitable for satisfying their sexual desires.

Other wives have been disappointed in their husbands in a different way. Julia is one of those. She longs for regular physical intimacy, but Apelles says he is just too exhausted at night after working all the long day. And anyway, if they do find an occasional evening when they're not both worn out, shouldn't they be praying together then? There are so many needs and concerns to pray for – their children, their other household members, their *ekklēsia*, their neighbors, and the famine that everyone knows is coming because out in the countryside the harvests have failed again.

And with all this going on, some of the unmarried people in the fellowship, even some who are already engaged, are wondering whether they should marry or whether it would be better to remain single.

It is into a situation much like this that Paul writes his first letter to the Corinthians.⁶

In his letter, Paul explains some principles to help the Corinthian believers sort out their lives in a way that is pleasing to God. They include:

- It does matter what they do with their bodies. They were bought at a price, paid at the Cross. It is wrong to use prostitutes.
- The basis of marriage is that the two become one flesh (Genesis 2:24). Are the men meaning to be joined in marriage to the prostitutes?!
- Each marriage partner has authority over their 'one flesh'. When it comes to fulfilling their sexual obligations to one another, each should think not of themselves but should acknowledge the other's rights and needs and struggles with temptations.

⁶ The imagined scenario is partly based on 1 Corinthians 6:12 – 7:9; 7:25-40.

- Contrary to the general view among the pagans, the ‘one flesh’ means that husband and wife have equal authority. So, when they make decisions about when to have sexual relations and when to give time to praying together, those decisions should be made jointly, by mutual consent.

Paul addresses the matter of using prostitutes in chapter 6. In 6:16 he cites Genesis 2:24 (‘the two will become one flesh’). Then in chapter 7 he writes:

‘Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.’ (1 Corinthians 7:1-5, ESV).⁷

If Mike’s view of marriage is right, shouldn’t Paul have said that the husbands should exercise their leadership and that the husbands are to take responsibility for having the final say over when to have sexual relations and when to spend time in prayer together?

What is Mike’s answer to this puzzle? How does he interpret 1 Corinthians 7?

Disappointingly, Mike’s examination of 1 Corinthians 7 is superficial and flawed (0hr49mins to 0hr52mins).

Here are six important points that Mike misses:

1. Sexual relations, prayer and decision-making: three central aspects of marriage

Mike claims that verses 3-5 of chapter 7 are specifically about sexual rights of the marriage partners, and therefore not relevant to other aspects of the marriage relationship. But that claim is in conflict with Paul’s plain words. Paul writes not only about sexual relations, but also about praying together, and decision-making. And these are all central aspects of marriage.

A couple’s sexual relationship is a central aspect of marriage because it is the physical intimacy which distinguishes marriage from all other relationships.

Spending time in prayer together is a central aspect because it is the beating, spiritual heart of the marriage.

⁷ We often refer to or quote the ESV in this article. We do this simply because it was produced by complementarians and is a favorite among complementarians. Our use of it does not imply endorsement of it as a version or preference over other English versions. For a thorough analysis of the complementarian ideology of the ESV, see Samuel L. Perry, ‘The Bible as a Product of Cultural Power: The Case of Gender Ideology in the English Standard Version’, *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* 2020, 81:1, 68-92. Available at www.bit.ly/3Xbvuoq.

Decision-making is a central aspect of marriage, because the way a couple makes decisions expresses the true nature of the relationship, whether it is a truly equal partnership or whether there is an imbalance of authority.

2. Equality of authority, and its theological rationale

This is the only passage in the New Testament which speaks *expressly* of the husband's authority in marriage – and it specifies the wife's authority with identical words. Paul is unmistakably teaching equality of authority in marriage.

In Mike's Part 2 video on Genesis, he argues that Eve was in submission to Adam's higher authority before they disobeyed. That mistaken view handicaps him when he comes to 1 Corinthians 7.

In our response to his Part 2 video we ask, if Genesis 2 should be understood as teaching the husband's sole authority, and if that applies to Christian believers, then how could Paul have written what he did in 1 Corinthians 7:4?

The equality of authority that Paul portrays in 1 Corinthians 7 has an ample theological basis in Genesis 2:24, which teaches that the marriage partners become 'one flesh'. We know that Genesis 2:24 was in Paul's mind when writing, because he has just referred to it, a few lines earlier (in 6:16). If the partners are one flesh, they have authority over each other, as we explained in our response to Part 2. That is God's design for marriage.

Paul's words and God's design stand in stark contrast to Mike's view that the husband has higher authority over his wife.

3. Scripture teaches joint decision-making

Paul teaches that the couple's decisions about sexual relations and about praying together should be taken by agreement, by mutual consent (*sumphōnos*, from which we get the word 'symphony').

This is the only passage in the New Testament (or, indeed, in the whole Bible) which explicitly teaches how decisions should be taken in marriage.

Mike apparently believes that a couple's sexual relationship is an exception to a general rule that a husband is placed by God in authority over his wife.

He accepts that in regard to 'sexual rights, conjugal rights, that there is an equality in authority' of husband and wife (0hr52mins). But if the husband is truly the higher authority, why should the man's and woman's authority in such a central aspect of the marriage be equal? Mike offers no explanation of how that could be. Nor does Paul's letter offer any such explanation. Nor does Paul give any indication that the sexual relationship even *is* an exception to a more general rule.

And Mike's analysis overlooks what Paul teaches about husband and wife *praying together*. If Mike's view of the husband's authority is correct, prayer would have to be another exception

to a general rule that significant decisions rest with the husband. How could that be, in such an important aspect of the marriage? Again, there is no explanation from Paul of why it is an exception. Again, there is no indication in Paul's words that mutually deciding on joint prayer even *is* an exception to a more general rule.

Complementarian teachers often place on the husband an obligation to be the overall spiritual leader of the marriage. But in perhaps the most spiritual thing that a couple can do – initiating joint prayer – there is no trace of such an obligation when Paul writes about it.

To make an exception in decision-making on these central aspects of sexual relations and joint prayer would strike at the root of a relationship of one-way authority.

It is well understood by leading complementarian scholars that, to be consistent with the complementarian system, there should be no exceptions for any decisions on matters which involve both spouses: all such decisions are the husband's responsibility.

Here again is Grudem on the practical application of complementarian male headship to marriage:

'... in every decision, whether large or small, and whether we have reached agreement or not, the responsibility to make the decision still rests with me. (I am speaking here of the decisions that involve the both of us, not the individual decisions we each make about our personal spheres of responsibility.) I do not agree with those who say that male headship only makes a difference once in ten years or so when a husband and wife can't reach agreement. I think that male headship makes a difference in every decision that the couple makes every day of their married life.'⁸

According to *Grudem's* teaching, it is the husband's responsibility to take decisions about sexual relations and about praying together. But according to the apostle *Paul's* teaching, those decisions should be made by mutual consent.⁹

Paul's teaching also stands in stark contrast to Mike's view that the husband has the 'deciding vote' (0hr4mins).

⁸ *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth: an analysis of 118 disputed questions* (2004, 2005), 42.

⁹ Strangely, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* there is a passage in the introductory chapter of questions and answers where Piper and Grudem mention 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 and say: 'when some suspension of sexual activity is contemplated, *Paul repudiates unilateral decision-making*' (2021 printing, 109, emphasis supplied). But in the rest of the book, and in Grudem's other writings, this insight is ignored. When he comes back to this text in *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 212, Grudem strongly affirms the husband's 'authoritative leadership role in the marriage that the wife does not have', and provides no meaningful explanation of how he squares that with Paul's words. He merely comments that he agrees that 'there are areas of mutual obligation between husband and wife, and that we can extrapolate from that and say that the husband's leadership in the marriage should not be a selfish leadership that fails to listen to the concerns of his wife.' But in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul is not saying 'husbands, be unselfish in the exercise of your leadership authority over your wife'. He is telling couples that the partners have the same authority and they should make their decisions on sex and on joint prayer by mutual consent.

If, as Paul teaches, there is equal authority and mutual submission at the physical and spiritual centers of the relationship, it would be strange indeed for there still to be an overarching God-ordained hierarchical relationship (what Mike calls an ‘authority imbalance’) applicable to less central matters.

There is no hint in Paul’s text that we should not understand mutual consent to be God’s general will, on how decisions should be taken in marriage. Nor is there any passage of Scripture which teaches a different approach to making decisions in a marital relationship.

The radical import of Paul’s teaching could not be missed by his first listeners in Corinth, for it was revolutionary. Marriage in Greco-Roman society was an unequal and hierarchical relationship. In sexual and religious matters, as in others, the husband’s word was law.

Paul could not have contradicted the prevailing view more plainly. He is not simply placing restraints on the husband’s exercise of his social and legal powers over his wife. He is redrawing the relationship as a truly equal partnership, in opposition to the surrounding culture. If Paul believed God’s design was that a husband should have an ascendancy of authority over his wife, how did he come to write these extreme, countercultural words for the believers in Corinth?

4. Paul’s perspective on marriage

Paul’s immediate objectives here are to disagree with total sexual abstinence and to combat sexual immorality (verses 1-2, see also 6:13-20). If Paul had believed in the husband’s higher authority, then in order to pursue those objectives, he did not need to write what he did in verses 3-5. All that he needed to say was that the marriage relationship should include regular sexual relations.

His statement that the wife has authority over the husband’s body goes much further than is necessary for his objectives. Why go so far?

It must reflect his overall perspective on marriage. The broad reason which he states in verse 4 (that each spouse has authority over the other’s body) shows Paul’s view of *the equal nature of the relationship*.

Verses 3-5 also show that Paul thinks of marriage in terms of *mutual submission of husband and wife*.

His words to husbands and wives in verses 3–5 commence with marital obligations (‘The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband’). Thus, his first emphasis here is on obligations, not on rights or entitlements.

He then switches to the language of rights in a way that to modern ears may sound like a licence for sexual exploitation:

‘For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.’

But Paul is not encouraging exploitation, for he is using the language of rights with a negative emphasis, saying first what the wife is not entitled to ('does not have authority over her own body') and then what the husband is not entitled to ('does not have authority over his own body'). Thus, he is not promoting the exercise of rights but, rather, calling each partner to yield to the other.

This is egalitarian in the sense that it treats husband and wife as full equals. But Paul is not calling for the exercise of individual rights. Rather, in a setting where each partner has equal authority, each is called to submit to the other.

5. The entire chapter teaches complete equality of relations between men and women, as regards marriage

Mike omits to consider the chapter as a whole.

Paul makes a series of twelve statements in which he carefully balances what he says about men and what he says about women, so as to make abundantly clear his view of the complete equality of relations between men and women. Here are the first eleven:

- v 2: each man, each woman – equal access to sexual relations;
- v 3: the husband, the wife – equal duties in the marriage bed;
- v 4: the wife, the husband – equal authority over the other partner and equal submission to the other;
- v 8: the widowers, the widows – same advice for both sexes;¹⁰
- vv 10-11: a wife, a husband – same divorce restrictions for both;¹¹
- vv 12-13: brother with unbelieving wife, woman with unbelieving husband – same rule for men and women;
- v 14: wife, husband – each is spiritually affected by the other in the same way;
- v 15: brother, sister – same rule for men and women if the unbelieving partner leaves;
- v 16: wife, husband – each partner has the same potential for saving the other;
- vv 25-28: betrothed man, betrothed virgin – same advice for the engaged of both sexes;
- vv 32-34: married or unmarried man, married or unmarried woman – singleness has the same spiritual advantage for both sexes.

None of these first eleven statements makes an assertion of unique male authority or rights.

¹⁰ For explanation of how the context shows that the 'unmarried' (*agamois*) in v. 8 should be understood as meaning 'widowers', see Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT), (1987), 287–288.

¹¹ The words translated as 'separate' and 'divorce' should not be understood anachronistically, as if reflecting the later legal distinction. In this context, they mean the same thing. And no court proceedings were required. See further Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT), (1987), 293–294; Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 106.

Paul's only nod towards the patriarchalism of Corinthian culture is in his twelfth statement, where he gives some advice specifically for fiancés. As males, they are expected to make a decision about whether to convert an engagement into marriage (verses 36-38). But the balance of equality is not disturbed, for Paul joins with this some advice specifically for widows, where he makes clear that a woman is free to make her own decision about whether or whom to marry (verses 39-40).

In short, Paul does not teach that God has placed the husband in higher authority over the wife. There is no imbalance of marital authority anywhere in 1 Corinthians 7.¹²

We have a question which we would respectfully urge Mike to ponder. What was the train of thought that was going through Paul's mind when he wrote such a long part of his letter in a way that shows the full equality and equal authority of men and women in personal relations, specifically in regard to marriage? How is it possible that in chapter 7 there is not even one mention of the husband's unique, God-given authority, if Paul believed as Mike believes?

6. Failing to engage with this chapter is a failure to discern the Bible's teaching on authority in marriage

Mike claims that his video series on Women in Ministry is 'exhaustive'.¹³ So it seems he does not consider Paul's series of twelve statements in 1 Corinthians 7 to be worthy of serious discussion. Mike therefore offers no explanation of how Paul could make these twelve statements if he truly believed in one-way male authority in personal relations with women.

We do not know how Mike came to decide that the only consideration which this passage of inspired Scripture required was a cursory comment on verses 3-5. He must surely be aware that it is considered important in the discussion of Paul's teachings on marriage.¹⁴

Mike says that he deals with the best arguments that he has found (0hr15mins). But, without explaining why, he judges that this long and foundational passage is only worth some three minutes of his listeners' attention (0:49:25 to 0:52:25), among many hours of teaching. Within that three minutes, he spends less than 30 seconds addressing egalitarian views on 1 Corinthians 7, and confines his superficial discussion of them to verse 4 alone (0:51:52 to 0:52:20).

This is all the more perplexing when for his Part 10 video he chooses to spend more than six hours on the topic of head coverings or hairstyles in 1 Corinthians 11 – a passage that is not

¹² For a fuller discussion of 1 Corinthians 7, see chapter 2 of *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts*.

¹³ Part 4 video (0hr0mins): 'exhaustive'; Part 8 notes: 'exhaustive series'.

¹⁴ Mike has Philip Payne's book, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, where Payne devoted a whole chapter to this passage of Scripture and demonstrated its importance in the discussion. He also has Andrew Bartlett's book, *Men and Women in Christ: Fresh Light from the Biblical Texts* (2019), which took the discussion further, and at more length. Similarly, there is a whole chapter on it in the egalitarian book which Mike engages with most, *Discovering Biblical Equality* (3rd edn, 2021) – chapter 6, which Mike quotes in his Part 8 video.

explicitly about marriage and which, on any view, does not state a restriction on the scope of women's ministry.¹⁵

We do understand that people have questions about 1 Corinthians 11, and that Mike believes 1 Corinthians 11 provides some support for his view on male authority. Even so, we are puzzled by his choice of priorities. After (as he says on multiple occasions) months of study, in his judgment, verses 3-5 of chapter 7 are merely 'supplemental', and he deems the remainder of the chapter not worthy of mention.

He considers that 1 Corinthians 7 is not among 'the most relevant passages that deal with marriage, husband-wife relationships' (0hr8-9mins). Yet it is by far the *longest* passage in the New Testament concerning the relations of men and women as regards marriage, and it is the *only* passage which speaks directly of decision-making in marriage and of a husband's and wife's authority.¹⁶

If Mike's exposition of Paul's teaching about men and women were to have credibility, it was essential for him to address 1 Corinthians 7 in a thorough manner. The whole thrust of the chapter is in conflict with the view of male authority which Mike puts forward.

Mutual submission and the husband's sacrificial service in Ephesians 5

If in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul teaches the mutual submission and equal authority of husband and wife, we might expect him to teach consistently with that in Ephesians 5. On a thorough reading, that is exactly what we find.

We will see that Mike's view of the husband's higher authority in Ephesians 5 is in conflict both with Paul's train of thought in its context and with his exact words.

Mike's foundational mistakes are:

- He misunderstands the meaning of Paul's word for 'submit'. This leads him to misinterpret what Paul writes.
- He starts his exposition in mid-sentence, which disables him from understanding the context and accurately tracing Paul's train of thought.
- He does not pay close attention to Paul's Greek text but instead relies mainly on an English translation. This leads to multiple errors of understanding.
- He ignores Paul's own explanation of his 'head' metaphor, as applied to the husband.

¹⁵ See our response to Mike's Part 10 video on Head Coverings.

¹⁶ For clarity, we are not suggesting that Mike is unusual in downplaying 1 Corinthians 7. Neglect of 1 Corinthians 7 is widespread among complementarian teachers: see *Men and Women in Christ*, 18-19 (chapter 2, under '*Some recent history of 1 Corinthians 7*').

(These foundational mistakes are not special to Mike; we suspect he has been lulled into them because they are commonly seen in complementarian writings.)

We will consider, in turn:

- (1) The meaning of Paul's word for submit (*hupotassō*)
- (2) Paul's long sentence that includes 'submit'
- (3) Paul's own explanation of 'head' in Ephesians 5:23
- (4) The first word of 5:24
- (5) The theme of saviorhood (humble, self-sacrificial service and nurture) in 5:25-33
- (6) Paul's use of Genesis in Ephesians 5
- (7) Mike's objections to mutual submission
- (8) The big picture and Paul's reasons for writing
- (9) Comparison with Titus 2:4-5
- (10) What is the lasting significance of Ephesians 5 for marital conduct?
- (11) Conclusions on Ephesians 5

(1) The meaning of Paul's word for 'submit' (*hupotassō*)¹⁷

Mike's first foundational mistake concerns the meaning of Paul's word for 'submit'.

He says that the term *hupotassō* consistently means that someone is in submission to a higher authority (0hr12-13mins).

This is not correct. BDAG, the lexicon which Mike rates most highly, acknowledges this.

Mike reads from a definition of *hupotassō* in BDAG: 'to cause to be in a submissive relationship, to subject, to subordinate' (2hr27-28mins). We agree with that definition. But Mike does not read out the part of the BDAG entry which says: 'Of submission in the sense of voluntary yielding in love, 1 Cor 16:16; Eph 5:21; 1 Pt 5:5b v.1'.

To appreciate the significance of this, we need to understand some important differences between the Greek word *hupotassō* and the English word 'submit'.

Most people know what a 'submission' is in professional wrestling. Hearing the English word 'submitting', we think of yielding to the will or authority of another person, with connotations of surrender to a superior force. Lists of synonyms include 'succumbing' and 'acquiescing'. The related adjective 'submissive' brings to mind words like 'compliant', 'docile' or even 'doormat'.

¹⁷ This word can also be transliterated as *hypotassō*. There is no difference – that is simply the use of an older convention for transcription of Greek into the letters of the English alphabet.

Those are not the connotations of *hupotassō*. This word is derived from *hupo*, meaning ‘under’, and *tassō*, meaning ‘set in position’/‘rank’/‘arrange’, as in Luke 7:8, where the centurion says, ‘I am a man ranked [*tassō*] under [*hupo*] authority.’ As a centurion in the Roman army, he is positioned under a higher authority. The primary idea of *hupotassō* is to put in subjection, to rank under, to place in a lower position, to subordinate.¹⁸

Because *hupotassō* carries the idea of being placed below someone, it is apt not only for compulsory submission to higher authorities but also for voluntary yielding in love, that is, for voluntary submission as an expression of humility in personal relationships between equals (or even for humble submission of a higher-ranked person *under* a lower-ranked person). So-

- In the case of submission under a higher authority, there is an objective ranking in a hierarchy. For example, if believers are under the authority of a lawful government, they should behave in submission to that authority.
- In the case of personal relationships between equals, the ranking is subjective. Believers are to rank themselves below others *as if* in a hierarchy in which the others are ranked higher. That is, they are to choose to take a lower position and treat others as more important than themselves – for this is the essence of Christian humility – even though in reality they are equals.

So, for example, Paul writes:

‘You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the Lord’s people. I urge you, brothers and sisters, to submit (*hupotassō*) to such people and to everyone who joins in the work and labors at it.’ (1 Corinthians 16:15-16, NIV).¹⁹

Paul is calling all the brothers and sisters in Corinth to humbly rank themselves below everyone who joins in the work, including the household of Stephanas – in other words, to treat them as more important than themselves. The household of Stephanas probably includes women and slaves. By the customs of pagan society, women and slaves rank lower than free men. In Christ, all rank equally. Nonetheless, all the brothers and sisters are instructed to rank themselves below the household of Stephanas and other co-workers, because the voluntary taking of this lower position expresses proper Christian humility.

Mike’s theory about the meaning of *hupotassō* would require that in 1 Corinthians 16:15-16 the whole household of Stephanas, men and women, free people and slaves, together with all

¹⁸ To be clear, the Greek verb does not directly correspond to the English verb ‘submit’, which we do not use transitively in the relevant sense – I cannot ‘submit’ another person under myself; for that meaning we have to use other verbs, such as ‘subject’ or ‘subordinate’. The Greek term *hupotassō* can only be translated by the English word ‘submit’ when it is used in the middle or passive voice.

¹⁹ We use NIV here, because ESV has ‘brothers’ where Paul’s meaning is ‘brothers and sisters’, as the ESV’s footnote acknowledges.

who joined in the work, were in a position of actual authority over Paul's readers. That is not a realistic interpretation.²⁰

When Mike sees wives submitting to their husbands in 5:22 and 5:24, he jumps to the conclusion that God has placed the husbands in authority over their wives.

But the conclusion does not automatically follow. It is a serious error to ignore the possibility of voluntary submission, of treating someone as if they are higher even though they are not. It is necessary to look more closely at what Paul writes, in order to find out whether Paul envisages the wife's submission as being to a higher authority (compulsory submission to a lawful higher authority, in a hierarchical relationship) or whether he envisages it *as if* to a higher authority (voluntary submission, in a personal relationship of equals).

Because of his foundational error about the range of meaning of *hupotassō*, Mike does not consider this question.

(2) Paul's long sentence that includes 'submit'

Mike's second foundational mistake is that he starts his exposition of Ephesians 5 in mid-sentence. By doing this, he disables himself from understanding the context and accurately tracing Paul's train of thought.

This is related to his third foundational mistake, which is that he does not pay close attention to the Greek text but instead relies mainly on an English translation.

The ESV ends a paragraph with verse 21. There is then a blank line and an editorial heading 'Wives and Husbands'. After another blank line, it begins a new paragraph with verse 22: 'Wives submit to your own husbands ...'.

That presentation puts clear blue water between the mutual submission of verse 21 ('submitting to one another') and the submission apparently instructed to wives in verse 22. Visually and verbally, the separation encourages the belief that Paul is not promoting mutual submission within the marriage relationship.

But that presentation does not accurately reflect Paul's original text.

Paul's sentence begins in verse 17 and runs through to the end of verse 24. The word 'submit' does not even appear in verse 22; in Paul's Greek, it is implied from verse 21.

To understand how this works, let's go back a little and see the literary context of this sentence in Paul's letter.

After talking in 4:15-16 about Christ's provision for the body (the church), with a view to its being built up in love, in union with Christ, Paul goes on to speak about conduct that is truly Christian:

²⁰ For another example where there is no actual higher authority, see 1 Corinthians 14:32 – 'the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets', ESV.

‘Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do ...’
(Ephesians 4:17, ESV)

From here, he pursues this theme of truly Christian conduct until nearly the end of the letter (6:18).

The most prominent idea in truly Christian conduct is that it should imitate God and Christ (4:20, 24, 32; 5:1-2, 21, 25).

It is in this context that we find Paul’s long sentence (5:17-24).

He begins his sentence with four crisp commands, two of them negative (not to be foolish, not to get drunk), and two positive (understand the Lord’s will, be filled with the Spirit):

‘[17] Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is, [18] and do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit ...’ [ESV words, with punctuation altered for clarity]

After his positive command to be filled with the Spirit, Paul goes on to describe ways in which he expects this to be seen in the Ephesians’ behavior. He does this in a series of descriptive present participles. If we largely follow the ESV but amend it to more closely match the Greek in verse 22, his descriptions of the Spirit-filled life go like this:

‘[19] addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, [20] giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, [21] submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ, [22] the wives to their husbands as to the Lord’

The five descriptions in verses 19-21 (‘addressing one another ..., singing ... making melody ... giving thanks ... submitting to one another ...’) apply to believers generally. These are the expected outcomes of being Spirit-filled. It is crystal clear that ‘submitting’ in verse 21 refers to submission between the believers generally.

With an accurate understanding of *hupotassō*, this makes perfect sense. The phrase ‘submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ’ is a generally applicable description of a Spirit-filled and truly Christian life, as understood by Paul. Reverence for Christ points back to verse 2, where Christian behavior is to be modeled on the one who so humbly put himself at our service: ‘as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God’.

In Ephesians 5:21, the grammatical form of *hupotassō* is a present participle in the middle or passive voice. In this verse, therefore, the believers are subordinating themselves to one another (middle) or are being subordinated to one another (passive). In other words, each believer is taking a lower position in relation to other believers. While *hupotassō* can refer to being subjected to an actual higher authority, the fact that Paul enjoins submission ‘to one another’ here makes it reciprocal, showing that this is submission between equals, submission

that is voluntary and mutual.²¹ Even complementarian George Knight III affirms that verse 21 is a general exhortation to Christian believers to mutual submission to one another.²²

This is in line with what Paul repeatedly writes elsewhere. Because of the example of the humble service of Christ, who voluntarily took the lowest place, the slave's place (Matthew 20:27-28; John 13:1-17; Philippians 2:7), believers should humbly submit to and serve one another –

- Romans 12:10: 'Honor one another above yourselves';
- Philippians 2:3: 'in humility value others above yourselves';
- Galatians 5:13, literally: 'through love serve as slaves of one another' (our translations).

This is how all believers are called to live, as if they were slaves of each other, each treating others as ranking higher than themselves.

In the same sentence, after the phrase about submitting to one another, Paul adds, without any break, 'the wives to their husbands as to the Lord'. As noted, the word 'submit' is not contained in verse 22 but is implied across from verse 21.

With the best and earliest Greek manuscripts as our guide, it is not appropriate to introduce after verse 21 a break, a heading and a new paragraph.²³

Let's return to our question. Does Paul envisage the wife's submission as being to a higher authority, or does he envisage it *as if* to a higher authority – in other words, voluntary submission in a personal relationship of equals?

With Paul's original sentence in mind, and having traced his train of thought, our question is easy to answer. Paul could scarcely have made it any clearer in his original text that the submission of wives to their husbands is one particular example of voluntary mutual submission between believers. The meaning of 'submit' cannot plausibly change from verse 21, where it is expressed, to verse 22, because it is only in verse 22 by implication from verse 21. In this context, it is the voluntary taking of a lower place, not submission to a higher authority.²⁴

²¹ We do not have a middle voice in English; the nearest we can get is to say that we are doing something to ourselves. In practice, there is little discernible difference in meaning between the middle and passive of *hupotassō*. In the two definite instances in the New Testament where it is used of relationships between human beings in the *passive* voice, some translations render it as 'submit yourselves' – see 1 Peter 2:13 and 5:5 in NIV, KJV. The grammatical forms of *hupotassō* in the middle and passive voice are often indistinguishable; it could be either middle or passive in Romans 13:1, 5; 1 Corinthians 14:32, 34; 16:16; Ephesians 5:21, 24; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5, 9; 3:1; 1 Peter 2:18; 3:1, 5. (The use of the middle voice in New Testament Greek is complex. Our explanation is simplified. If desired, more details can be found in Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (1996), 414-430.)

²² *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (2021 printing), 215.

²³ We are not singling out the ESV for criticism here. That would be inappropriate. There is a long tradition of starting a new paragraph at verse 22, with the insertion of the word 'submit', which goes back to Codex Sinaiticus in the mid-fourth century. But no earlier Greek manuscript has those features. For further information, see Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 278-279.

²⁴ Some translations say: 'to their own husbands' in v 22. English versions are split roughly 50/50 on

Because of his three foundational mistakes, Mike misses this. He even misses Paul's central practical command, which governs the words that Mike claims to explain – *to be filled with the Spirit*, who will enable those in the Christian household to live a truly Christlike life.

However, we must also consider the last phrase of verse 22. Wives are to submit to their husbands 'as to the Lord'.

Similarly, in verse 24, they are to submit 'as the church submits to Christ ... in everything'.

Does that comparison with submission to the Lord Jesus Christ mean that the husbands are, after all, in high authority over their wives?

If it does, that would be a strange anomaly. It would mean that, even though this is all one sentence, the meaning of the word 'submit' has somehow changed in mid-sentence. That does not seem possible here. Working back from the end, the meaning of the express word 'submit' in verse 24 is evidently the same as the meaning of the implied 'submit' in verse 22. But the implied meaning in verse 22, because it is only implied and not express, is the same as in verse 21. And in verse 21, the meaning is mutual submission among equals, as the context from verse 17 onwards firmly shows. (Mike raises some objections to understanding verse 21 as describing mutual submission; we will answer those separately below.)

There is no such anomaly. The phrases 'as to the Lord' and 'as ... to Christ ... in everything' indicate the *manner* and the *extent* of the submission which Paul is calling for. The wives are to humbly rank themselves as if they were lower than their husbands in all matters, just as they humbly rank themselves lower than Christ in all matters. In short, the point of Paul's comparison is the manner and extent of submission, not the status of the person submitted to.

And although 'as to the Lord' is strong language, Paul does not intend it to be received in a foolishly extreme manner, as Mike agrees. Christ should be totally the Lord of our lives in every respect and without exceptions. But, as Mike rightly says, a wife can (at least) properly reject the decisions or instructions of a husband, for example, in safety issues, as the story of Abigail in the Old Testament illustrates (0hr45-46mins). And a husband should not be controlling and micromanaging his wife (0hr47-49mins).

This perspective is supported by the brief parallel passage in Colossians 3:18, where Paul instructs wives to submit to their husbands 'as is fitting in the Lord' (ESV). In the Lord, it is fitting for a wife to humbly treat her husband as if he were more important than herself, but it would not be fitting for her to follow her husband into foolishness or sinfulness. To put it

whether to include the word 'own' in the translation. In our view, that is a misreading. The Greek is *tois idiois andrasin* – literally, 'to the own men', which means 'to their husbands'. The word 'own' is reflected in English by the translation 'their husbands' rather than 'the men', and 'the wives' rather than 'the women'. Paul inserts *idiois* to show that he is now talking about husbands and wives, no longer about men and women in general. He is *not* implying that submission is applicable only in marriage and inapplicable in the general community of believers.

another way, only that subjection to her husband which is fitting in the Lord is to be countenanced.²⁵

Yet in view of those strong phrases ‘as to the Lord’ and ‘as ... to Christ ... in everything’, can we really be sure that Paul is not here teaching that the husband is a God-ordained higher authority?

Yes, we can.

What settles the matter is that there are four further indicators in Paul’s text which confirm that the wife’s submission in verses 22 and 24 is voluntary submission to an equal, not compulsory submission to a higher authority. These are:

- Paul’s own explanation of his metaphor in verse 23,
- the first word of verse 24,
- the theme of saviorhood in verses 25-33, and
- Paul’s use of Genesis in verse 31.

(3) Paul’s own explanation of ‘head’ in Ephesians 5:23

The cardinal principle for interpreting a metaphor is: if the writer gives an indication of the meaning, whether directly or indirectly, pay attention to it.

This principle is so obvious that we normally follow it without needing to be reminded. When we read in John 1:29 (ESV), ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’, we instinctively understand the meaning of the metaphor ‘Lamb of God’ by paying attention to John’s explanation ‘who takes away the sin of the world’. We would think it mighty strange if an interpreter put forward a meaning for the ‘Lamb’ metaphor which was not firmly tied to that explanatory phrase.

Mike’s fourth foundational mistake is that he disregards this principle: he does not pay attention to Paul’s own explanation of his *kephalē* metaphor in Ephesians 5.

We saw in Part 8 that there is variability in Paul’s use of *kephalē* metaphors. In some uses in Colossians and Ephesians there is an association with authority, in others there is not. Because of this variability, Paul needs to provide for his listeners a clear indication of the particular tenor (meaning) that he intends here. And that is exactly what he does.

Here is our own literal translation of what Paul says about the husband being head of the wife:

‘[22] the wives to their husbands as to the Lord, [23] since a husband is head of the wife as also the Messiah (Christ) head of the church, himself savior of the body’

Notice the three parallel phrases:

[A] ‘a husband is head of the wife’

[B] ‘as also the Messiah head of the church’

²⁵ Compare James Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC), 248.

[C] ‘himself savior of the body’.

Paul first makes a comparison between [A] the husband as head of the wife and [B] the Messiah as head of the church. Then he tells his readers the point from his head-and-body metaphor which he is applying to the husband, namely, as head of the body, Christ is [C] ‘himself savior of the body’.

For reasons of English style, this feature of Paul’s exact words is not clearly visible in many English versions. However, some versions do render verse 23 transparently, such as ASV and NASB:

‘For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, *being* himself the saviour of the body.’ (ASV)

‘For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body.’ (NASB)²⁶

In what sense is the head the ‘savior’ of the body?

Christ is the one who gives life to the body, causing it to grow, as Paul has already taught by means of his head-and-body metaphor in 4:15-16. As we saw there, the head, who is Christ, provides life to the body because the head is the vital source of nourishment and growth. Without the head, the body cannot live. In that sense, it is the savior of the body. (We discussed those verses in our response to Mike’s Part 8 video.)

Paul is here thinking of Christ’s saving work not as a single event but as a process. It involves a life of love, self-giving sacrifice and on-going care for the body (4:15-16; 5:2, 25-27, 29). It is this aspect of Christ’s example which Paul is applying to the husband, as is made clear by the phrase ‘savior of the body’ and also by further features in Paul’s text which we will examine below.²⁷

If we examine the whole of Mike’s Part 8 and Part 9 videos, to see what he makes of Paul’s own explanation, ‘savior of the body’, what do we find? The answer is: nothing.

In Part 8, he reads out Ephesians 5:23 three times, but makes no comment on Paul’s explanation (0hr39mins, 41 mins, 46 mins).

In Part 9, he again reads out this text (0hr36mins). Thereafter, in his exposition, each time that he mentions that the husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of his body, the church, Mike *omits* Paul’s explanatory phrase (‘himself savior of the body’) (0hr37-38mins; 0hr42mins; 2hr20mins).

In sum, in each of the two videos in which Mike discusses Ephesians 5, he pays zero attention to Paul’s own explanation of the ‘head’ metaphor.

²⁶ In these Bible versions, italics indicate a word that is supplied in English though not present in the Greek text.

²⁷ Interestingly, this is the first description of Christ expressly with the word ‘savior’ in the New Testament letters.

It is as if Mike is wearing complementarian spectacles which screen out the very phrase of Scripture in verse 23 that signals the meaning of Paul's metaphor, so that it does not register with him that it is there on the page.

We make no personal criticism of Mike. The problem is the spectacles – the complementarian system of teaching into which he has been drawn. Other complementarian teachers suffer from the same blind spot.

The severity of the blindness is bewildering:

- The big complementarian source-book, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (nearly 700 pages), is devoted to advancing the higher-authority idea of male headship. Since Ephesians 5:23 is one of only two verses in the Bible which refer to the man or husband as 'head',²⁸ one might expect a substantial proportion of the book to be devoted to considering Paul's explanation of his metaphor. But that is not the case. There is a chapter on Ephesians 5, written by George Knight. Every time Knight quotes verse 23, he *omits* the phrase 'savior of the body'. He never mentions it, or notices it, and he expounds the meaning of the passage as if it were not there. The word 'savior' does not appear in his chapter.
- Wayne Grudem in his 800-page book, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, offers forceful views on Ephesians 5. Grudem quotes from verse 23 on pages 41, 183, 440, 442, 492, 552 and 586. Every time, he *omits* the phrase 'savior of the body'. Like Knight, he expounds the meaning of the passage as if it were not there.
- In his videos, Mike frequently cites *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (revised, 2005), which contains complementarian contributions from Craig Blomberg and Tom Schreiner. Blomberg's essay addresses the Ephesians passage without mentioning the phrase 'savior of the body'. Schreiner also addresses Ephesians 5, and similarly omits the phrase 'savior of the body' when he cites verse 23, and simply ignores it.²⁹
- In his Part 9 video, Mike indicates that he will refer to Philip Payne's work on Ephesians 5 (1hr33mins). Payne puts particular emphasis on the significance of Paul's explanation of 'head' as 'savior of the body'.³⁰ But Mike does not engage with it.

This blinkered approach cannot be defended. An interpreter who wishes to arrive at a faithful understanding must, as a minimum, trace the apostle's train of thought and engage with what is there on the page, especially Paul's own explicit explanation of his metaphor.

Paul has only just referred to Christ as 'Lord', in verse 22. Yet he chooses to apply his *kephalē* metaphor to the husband specifically and only by the comparison to Christ as 'savior'.

²⁸ Paul's other use of a 'head' metaphor for a man is in 1 Corinthians 11:3. We will consider that in our response to Mike's Part 10 video on Head Coverings.

²⁹ *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, 106, 173-174, 301-302.

³⁰ *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 278-290. Mike similarly misses engaging with Payne's emphasis on the use of *hupotassō* in situations of voluntary submission to an equal.

If Paul had meant to convey that the husband was head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, being himself *lord* over the body, he would have said so. And he would have followed it up with instructions to the husband on exercising authority over his wife.

Instead, he says the husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, being himself *savior* of the body. And he follows it up with instructions to the husband on humble, self-sacrificial service and care of his wife, as we shall see more fully below.

And Paul commends this kind of headship to the wives as an additional reason for them to submit. Submission is encouraged, 'because' or 'since' (v 23 – *hoti*) the husband is the head of the wife, as her savior-like source of nurture and care (and this requires him to behave towards her in the way that Paul goes on to depict in verses 25-33a).

In his Part 8 video, Mike objected that egalitarian scholars impose an unnecessary 'either/or' upon Paul's 'head' metaphor – either 'authority over' or 'source of provision' (Part 8: 0hr33mins). Mike gave an imaginary example, based on his misreading of Pierce and Kay (see our response to his Part 8 video), but perhaps there are egalitarian scholars who do make that mistake.

However, there is an opposite mistake, which Mike falls into here, which is to attribute to Paul's metaphor a meaning which Paul does not.

As we were reminded in our Part 8 response, it is useful to remember Feature 1 – *partial assertion* (metaphors only ever intend a partial equivalence between the vehicle and the subject). Coming back again to the example of John 1:29, we know, without thinking about it, that John the Baptist does not mean that Jesus, as Lamb of God, is covered in curly wool, or eats grass. But what about the quality of gentleness? Lambs are gentle, and Jesus is gentle (Matthew 11:29). Is that also a point that John is making with his metaphor?

No. Even though it is true that Jesus is gentle, and that lambs are gentle, that is not part of the tenor (the meaning) of this particular metaphor. We know the tenor of this metaphor because of John's explanatory words 'who takes away the sin of the world', understood against the background of the sacrificial system for taking away sins in the law of Moses, in which lambs were used. It is not legitimate to add meanings to a metaphor which the writer or speaker of the metaphor does not add.

Here, Mike applies the meaning 'lord' to the husband, even though Paul does not. For the purpose of applying the idea of 'head' to the husband, Paul's explanation is 'savior'.

Paul goes on to lay out more fully what he means by this saving task of the husband as head in verses 25-33a. Before we look at that, we should attend more closely to verse 24, because it provides further confirmation of Paul's specific meaning.

(4) The first word of 5:24

We have already identified Mike's third foundational mistake, which is that he does not pay close attention to the Greek text but instead relies mainly on an English translation. Here we have another instance of the same mistake.

We now extend our literal translation to include verse 24, which completes the sentence that Paul began in verse 17:

'... [22] the wives to their husbands as to the Lord, [23] since a husband is head of the wife as also the Messiah head of the church, himself savior of the body, [24] but [*alla*] as the church submits to the Messiah, so also the wives to the husbands in all things.'

The first word of verse 24, *alla*, ('but') is an adversative conjunction. Its function is to introduce an idea which is a definite contrast to what has gone before. It tells the listener that, in Paul's mind, verse 24 is a definite contrast to verse 23.

If Mike's interpretation were correct, this would create a self-contradictory puzzle. If in verse 23 the husband, as head, holds authority over the wife, it directly follows in logical progression that the wife should submit to him, as indicated in verse 24. If the husband is a higher authority than the wife, then verse 24 is not a *contrast* with verse 23 but a *logical consequence* of it, so Paul has inexplicably used completely the wrong word to introduce verse 24.

Translators who interpret Paul's *kephalē* metaphor to mean that the husband is placed in authority over the wife are faced with a serious difficulty, because with their interpretation it does not make sense that Paul starts verse 24 with 'but' (*alla*). Consequently, they often do not translate Paul's word accurately. Various strategies have been adopted:

- The translators of the King James Version followed the logic of their hierarchical view of marriage in accordance with the culture of their times. They boldly reversed Paul's meaning, replacing 'but' with 'therefore'. To modern eyes this is brazen. 'Therefore' introduces something that evidently follows. 'But' introduces something that does *not* follow. This tradition of mistranslation has subsequently been reproduced in at least eight other English versions.
- The ESV, the NIV and some other versions also reinterpret what Paul writes but are not so audacious as to say the exact opposite. They replace 'but' with 'now', which removes the crispness of the contrast. (But the LSJ lexicon does not list 'now' as a possible meaning of *alla*.)
- Other versions, such as RSV and NRSV, are more coy. They similarly believe Paul cannot have meant quite what he wrote, so are unwilling to translate *alla* accurately, as denoting a contrast; but they cannot bring themselves to translate it by a word that does not match its meaning, so they miss it out, leaving it untranslated.

These are translation strategies of last resort. Their use is a warning. It shows that Paul's train of thought has not been correctly understood by these translators.

What is Mike's explanation for Paul's use of *alla* in verse 24?

He does not give one, because he has omitted the precaution of looking closely at the Greek text. So, he is unaware that this word creates an obstacle for the view which he puts forward.

We have not found an explanation for Paul's use of *alla* in verse 24 which both fits the context and upholds the idea that God has appointed the husband as an authority over his wife. As far as we know, there is none.

However, the puzzle dissolves as soon as it is accepted that 'head' does not mean 'authority over' but instead means 'savior', in accordance with Paul's own explanation in verse 23. Here is the contrast between verse 23 and verse 24:

- Verse 23 presents the husband only as 'savior' of his wife, not as her lord. If he is only her savior not her lord, wives may think it follows that there is no reason for them to submit to their husbands. But (*alla*, verse 24) they *should* submit to their husbands (in the sense we have explained, treating their husbands as if they rank higher). This is how, both as followers of Christ, and in view of their husbands' care for them, they should choose to behave.

(5) The theme of saviorhood (humble, self-sacrificial service and nurture) in 5:25-33

Having introduced in verse 23 the idea of the husband, as the head, being like a savior to his wife, as the body, Paul develops it further in verses 25-33a. He does this by repeating it four times in different words.

He draws out multiple similarities between what the Messiah (Christ) does for the church as savior and what a husband should do for his wife. If any reader missed Paul's signal in verse 23 that in this context to be head means to behave like a loving savior of the body, by these repetitions Paul puts his meaning beyond doubt:

- verses 25-27: to love and care for her and to give himself up for her, like Christ for the church;
- verse 28: to love her as his own body;
- verses 29–30: to nourish her and to care for her just as Christ does for his body;
- verse 33: to love her as himself.

Every occurrence of the English word 'love' (vv 25, 28, 33) translates *agapaō*, which denotes active care, as in 5:2. These instructions are about the husband rendering loving service in imitation of Christ's actions as savior. Not one of these commanded actions – to love, to nourish, to care – is about the husband exercising authority over his wife. Paul's instructions are all directed to the husband's calling to display the incomparable riches of Christ's gracious love through the way that he lovingly serves and nurtures his wife.

To appreciate the revolutionary nature of Paul's teaching, we need to recall the cultural and historical context.

In Paul's time, Ephesus was a city of the Roman empire. The structure of Paul's remarks – in turn addressing wives (5:22), husbands (5:25), children (6:1), fathers (6:4), slaves (6:5), slave-owners (6:9) – covers the various inhabitants of the Roman household, where the *paterfamilias* held sway as ruler. The law and society placed the senior male on a high pedestal of power and authority.

Let us visualize the Ephesian believers gathered together, listening to Paul's letter for the first time as it is read out to them. The husbands are typically ten years older than their wives, and better educated, and regarded by society as more important than their wives. The principal legal powers over the household are in their hands.

It does not take much disciplined historical imagination to realize what question must have arisen when they heard Paul's words about mutual submission. In verse 21 ('submitting to one another'), Paul makes no exception for husbands. *But can it be possible for the husband to do that, in regard to his own wife? How can he treat his wife as ranking higher than himself in a relationship which society has made so unequal in the opposite direction?*

Paul gives his stunning answer in verses 25-33a. As in love the Christ, the Son of God, left behind the privileges of heaven and took the lowliest place as the slave of all, giving up his life for his people, so in love the Christian husband should climb down from his high pedestal and take the very lowliest place, giving himself up in self-sacrifice for his wife. The husband can express his Christian submission by his humble, loving, self-sacrificial service.

This is extreme teaching, and it is expressed in extreme words.

Amazingly, Paul calls the husband to imitate Christ by taking the very lowest place in service to his wife, and he does it with a startling figure of speech that applies the lowliest female category to Christ and by extension to the husband. In verse 26 Paul uses the figurative language of Christ washing his bride. In the kind of household which Paul has in view, the job of washing the wife was done by female slaves, as her bath attendants. As female slaves, they were the members of the household with the very lowest status of all.

So, the husband is to step down from the throne that he occupies in the household and rank himself as if below his wife, giving himself to her in humble service – even service as lowly as that of a female slave.

Paul also urges the husband to treat his wife like his own body (verses 28-29). This implies that in her being, she is his equal.³¹ Putting together verses 25-27 and verses 28-29, Paul calls husbands to behave as humble servants of their equals, as if their equals ranked above them.

Paul's teaching radically transforms the relationship between husband and wife that was expected in Greco-Roman culture.

³¹ More can be said. Westfall notes, this 'pragmatically bestows upon the wife male status in their relationship (she is now literally a male body), and so fulfils the mutual submission exhorted in 5:21.' 'Head' in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (2nd edition, due out in 2023).

This is a crucial insight.

By overlooking the contrast between the cultural setting and Paul's instructions, complementarians read this passage as if Paul were addressing the potential failure of husbands to rule and lead their wives. They teach that husbands need to step up and exercise their leadership authority over their wives both in spiritual matters and otherwise.

But Paul is writing to couples living under laws and customs which enforced the husband's hierarchical leadership, and he is dissolving the hierarchy by applying the message of Christ to their marriages. In other words, Ephesians 5 is not the promotion of hierarchical marriage; it is the redemption of such marriages. The only leading by the husband which Paul is envisaging here is that the husband should step out in humble, self-sacrificial service to his wife.

Mike doesn't see that Paul's instructions in verses 25-33a show the practical outworking of mutual submission (verse 21), as applied to the conduct of the husband.

Moreover, he doesn't seem to notice that in these instructions to husbands Paul says nothing about the husband exercising authority over the wife. To love and take care of someone is not the same thing as exercising authority over them.

If Paul is genuinely teaching in this passage that the husband is in a God-ordained position of authority over his wife, why does Paul say nothing to husbands about the exercise of that authority? Mike does not offer an answer. The reality of this passage is that Paul does not say that the husband is in a God-ordained position of authority.

We turn next to the fourth indicator which confirms that Paul envisages the wife's submission to her husband as voluntary submission to an equal, rather than as compulsory submission to a higher authority. After that, we will address the objections that Mike raises to mutual submission of husbands and wives.

(6) Paul's use of Genesis in Ephesians 5

In verses 29-32 Paul writes:

'[29] For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, [30] because we are members of his body. [31] "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." [32] This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.' (ESV)

Paul's quotation from Genesis shows that he is comparing the union of husband and wife to the union of Christ and his church.

By quoting from Genesis 2:24, Paul is reinforcing his head-and-body metaphor in its sense of the ongoing saviorhood of sustenance and nurture, as introduced in 4:15-16, and as signaled in 5:23. The husband's practical love for his wife, to whom he is united as one flesh, nourishes and sustains her. In a similar way, Christ's work of salvation achieves the unity of the church as one body growing into maturity in union with him.

Because husband and wife are 'one flesh', the submission of the wife to the husband is voluntary submission to an equal, not compulsory submission to a higher authority.

Complementarian interpreters make the mistake here of not paying attention to the point that Paul actually makes. Instead, they imagine a point that Paul could have made: Christ is in authority over the church, therefore the husband is in authority over the wife.

But Paul does not make that point anywhere in his letter. He does not make it in 5:23, where his point for application to the husband is that Christ is savior, not that Christ is lord. He does not make it in 5:25-33, where again it is Christ as servant-savior who is the model for the husband, not Christ as lord.

Paul makes no reference in this passage to an idea of the head ruling over the body. It is not legitimate to read this passage as if Paul were quoting from Genesis 3:16 ('he will rule over you') when his actual choice of quotation is Genesis 2:24 ('one flesh').

(7) Mike's objections to mutual submission

We saw above that 'submitting' in Ephesians 5:21 is part of a general description of Spirit-filled Christian life in 5:19-21 ('addressing one another ..., singing ... making melody ... giving thanks ... submitting to one another ...').

But Mike raises two objections to understanding 'submitting' in verse 21, and thence in verse 24, as mutual.

First, he says one should remember that there are three groups of people addressed after verse 21: husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves. He argues that mutual submission *would have to be applied equally to all three groups*, which he says makes no sense. If husbands should submit to wives, then in the same way parents should submit to children and masters should submit to slaves (2hr9-12mins, 14mins).

The short answer to this objection is one word: why?

Why must one imagine that mutual submission would have to be applied equally to all three groups? That is not what Paul says.

Paul transitions from the church fellowship seen as a generality (5:17-21) to three specific pairs of relationships, which differ from each other. Marriage is entered into between equals, by human choice. The relationship of parent and child is biological, and children are utterly dependent in their early years. The relationship of slave-owner and slave exists by violent conquest and/or by legal coercion. Paul gives three different sets of instructions for these differing relationships.

In verse 21 Paul has spoken about submitting (*hupotassō*) to one another, and he applies that directly to wife and husband in verses 22-33.

But when he moves on to speak of children in 6:1, his instruction is that they should *obey* (*hupokouō*) their parents. There may indeed be some ways in which parents are called to

submission in their relationships with their children, particularly as the children grow older, but, if so, Paul does not mention them. The only instructions to parents are those in verse 4.³²

In 6:5-9 Paul moves on to slaves and slave-owners. His first instruction to slaves is to *obey*. He shows them how to regard their service as being to Christ himself (6:5-8). (This is a good reason for obedience, rather than compliance with an unjust and ungodly legal obligation, which is a bad reason.)

However, in the next verse he returns to something that is close to his earlier theme of mutual submission. Having told slaves to serve wholeheartedly, he tells the owners to ‘do the same to them’ (6:9). The owners are to adopt the utterly lowly position of a servant to their own slaves! That is how owners are to submit to their slaves, treating their slaves as if the slaves ranked above them. Mike’s view that owners do not submit to their slaves (2hr12mins) is in conflict with Paul’s explicit instruction to owners.³³

There are clear contrasts in these sets of instructions. Paul evidently expects parents to issue instructions to their children, and owners to issue instructions to their slaves, which it will be the children’s and slaves’ Christian duty to obey. He says nothing about a wife obeying her husband. He evidently does not expect a Christian husband to be issuing instructions to his wife. This is unsurprising when we recall Paul’s view of the marriage relationship in 1 Corinthians 7, where decision-making is by mutual consent.

These clear contrasts do not negate the mutual submission of husband and wife; on the contrary, they are consistent with it. Mike’s first objection fails.

Second, Mike raises an objection based on the analogy between the husband’s relationship to his wife and Christ’s relationship to the church (2hrs12-14mins).

His point is that the church always submits to Christ, never the other way around – so there is no mutual submission between Christ and the church. Since that is so, how can Paul be teaching mutual submission between husband and wife?

³² In 6:4, ESV and many other versions have ‘Fathers’. CEB, CEV, GNT, TLB and notes in NIV and EXB have ‘Parents’. The Greek word in 6:4, *patēr*, in the plural, is used not only of fathers but also of parents: see the same usage in Hebrews 11:23, where it refers to Moses’ father and mother. LSJ gives references for this meaning from the first century BC onwards. The different word used in 6:1 for parents (*goneus*) means ‘father’ in the singular and usually ‘parents’ in the plural. The parallel between 6:1 and 6:4 indicates the meaning ‘parents’ in 6:4.

³³ By this instruction, Paul is effectively subverting the authority given to slave-owners over their slaves by law and society. Paul emphatically underlines this with the words at the end of verse 9. The translation in ESV (*there is no partiality with him*) does not fully bring out the forcefulness of what Paul writes. He says that with God there is no *prosōpolēpsia*, ‘no respect of persons’. In other words, so far as God is concerned, the position of the slave-owner in the legally-ordered hierarchy of owner over slave *counts for nothing*. In his discussion of slavery, to support his view of male authority, Mike relies additionally on 1 Corinthians 11:3, 1 Corinthians 14:34, and 1 Timothy 2:13-14 (2hr54-56mins). He develops his views on those texts in other videos, which we aim to respond to separately.

This objection is not well-founded. It stems from Mike's first foundational mistake – his misunderstanding of the meaning of *hupotassō*.

As we have seen, he is under the misapprehension that this word is always used in a context of submission to an actual higher authority. He misses the fact that it is also used where one person voluntarily takes a lower position under someone else.

After his resurrection, the Lord Jesus Christ said:

‘All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.’ (Matthew 28:17, ESV)

But what did he do for us? Here are his own words:

‘... whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’ (Matthew 20:27-28, ESV)

And here is Paul's description:

‘... [*Christ*] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself ...’ (Philippians 2:7-8, NRSV)³⁴

In utmost humility, Christ took the lowest position, the position of a slave, in order to serve us and become our savior. That was his voluntary submission, his voluntary taking of a far, far lower place than was his right – a place lower even than those he came to serve. He illustrated this in unforgettable fashion when he took off his outer garment, got down on the floor, and did the work of a menial slave, washing his disciples' feet (John 13:1-15).

Though Jesus's rightful place is far above his people, he voluntarily adopted the lowly and submissive position of serving his church as a slave. The church, in turn, submits itself to him, taking up its cross and following him (Mark 8:34). In this way the relationship of Christ and the church involves mutual submission.

In other words, Mike has missed the force of Paul's logic. It is in light of Christ's humble, self-sacrificial love and service to his people (5:2), that his people are to sacrificially and humbly place themselves not only below Christ but also below each other (5:21, 24, 25).

Of course, the analogy of Christ and church with husband and wife is not precise. While the mutual submission of husband and wife happen mostly at the same time, the church's submission mostly follows chronologically after Christ's taking of the lowest place. ‘We love because he first loved us’ (1 John 4:19, ESV).

But this is not a real objection, for no analogy is ever exact. And there is still a certain order in the mutual submission of husband and wife, which reflects the priority of Christ's submission in the mutual submission of Christ and church. The wife is urged to submit *because of* the

³⁴ Where NRSV has ‘slave’ (Greek, *doulos*), ESV has the softer word ‘servant’ in the main text and the plain translation ‘slave’ in a footnote.

husband's savior-like headship (5:22-23). And the example of Christ, which the husband is urged to follow, involves taking the initiative in self-giving love (5:25).

The conclusion is clear. The husband's imitation of Christ the Savior, by taking a low place of humble service to his wife, expresses in practical form the husband's side of the mutual submission required by Ephesians 5:21.

(8) The big picture and Paul's reasons for writing

The correct interpretation of Ephesians 5 is contested. To be confident that we are reading it with the grain of Scripture, and not against it, we need to review how our interpretation fits into the Christ-centered story of the Bible, and ensure that it is consistent with other parts of Scripture. We should also consider Paul's reasons for writing. We do not find those precautions adequately addressed in Mike's video.

Our reading of Ephesians 5 fits hand-in-glove with what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7.

One of the many lessons from 1 Corinthians 7 is that the coming of the Messiah demands a new perspective: new creation has begun, and human marriage is a temporary institution (see 1 Corinthians 7:28-31). While the first creation continues, marriage will still have a proper place as part of that creation, but is it now really anything more than a temporary preventive remedy for sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 7:2)?

In Ephesians, Paul uses his understanding of God's purpose for the church to give a profound answer to that question. As in 1 Corinthians 7, which he wrote just a few years earlier, he continues to hold together the first creation and new creation. As in 1 Corinthians 7, his view remains Christ-centered. The great mystery which Paul proclaims in his letter to the Ephesians is God's great plan of salvation, to bring everything and everyone into unity in the Messiah, to the glory of God (Ephesians 1:9-10; see also 3:1-11; 4:12-16; 6:19; and Colossians 1:25-27; 2:2; 4:3; 1 Timothy 3:16). The church's function is therefore to display, both now and in the age to come, the incomparable riches of God's grace and love expressed in Christ (Ephesians 2:7-10; 3:10; 3:21 – 4:1; 5:1-2).

The union of husband and wife (5:31) points to the great mystery of the union of Christ with his church (5:29-30, 32). For this reason, marriage is not only a relationship of mutual submission, as in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5. In the context of God's great plan of salvation, it also makes sense for Paul to place particular emphasis on the responsibility of the husband to care for his wife with a self-sacrificial love which reflects and portrays the love of Christ the savior for his bride, the church.

In Ephesians 5:25, husbands are told to love. That is the same teaching as is given to all (including wives) in 5:2. The teaching for wives in Ephesians 5:22, 24 is to submit. That is the same teaching as is given to all (including husbands) in 5:21.

But there is *a difference in emphasis*. To wives, Paul briefly emphasizes submission (verses 22-24). To husbands, at considerably greater length, Paul specially emphasizes love (verses 25-32). Those emphases are repeated in his concluding words to husband and wife in verse 33:

‘However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.’ (ESV)

The same difference in emphasis appears also in Colossians 3:18-19.

Why this difference?

Let’s consider again the historical and cultural context of the church in Ephesus and Colossae, which will help us to see the likely reasons for Paul’s emphases.

Human nature being what it is, we may suppose that after men became Christian believers, they would still be tempted to adhere to the cultural stereotype of the autocratic master of the household, demanding unquestioning service from others in the household, including their wives.

This supposition is supported by the additional instruction to husbands in Colossians 3:19 that they must not be harsh with their wives. It may be inferred from this instruction that husbands were behaving in this way at Colossae.

Paul’s instruction to the Colossian husbands to love and not to be harsh is in parallel with his much longer instruction to the Ephesian husbands to love and serve their wives. We may readily infer that there was a practical problem of men’s behavior which needed to be addressed in both cities by Paul’s emphasis on love.

(When discussing the Colossians passage, Mike describes Lynn Cohick’s analysis as ‘playing games with the scriptures’ (1hr22-23mins). We will say more about that below, in a postscript.)

Now, what about the wives? Given that most women were in subjection to their husbands in the prevailing pagan culture, why did Paul judge that he should emphasize to them that Christian behavior involved voluntarily ranking themselves below their husbands? Weren’t they already placed beneath their husbands by law and custom?

The social impact of the gospel provides an answer.

The relevance of social impact is particularly clear in the parallel case of slaves, who in the eyes of the law were items of property. Under the laws of the Roman Empire, subject to certain restrictions, a master was entitled even to kill slaves which he owned. But when both master and slave were converted to Christ, they became equals and brothers (Galatians 3:28-29). This brotherhood became such a powerful new reality in Christian communities that Paul had to remind slaves who had Christian owners not to be disrespectful to them, as being brothers (1 Timothy 6:1–2). It is likely that the equality of believers in Christ was embraced with similar enthusiasm by previously downtrodden wives.

Human nature being what it is, we may reasonably infer that within the fellowship of the church, where all were Christian brothers and sisters, the new-found equality of women (again, as in Galatians 3:28-29) was leading some wives to become disrespectful, thinking that humility towards their husbands was no longer appropriate. This explains Paul's judgment that he should emphasize submission by wives to their husbands.

(9) Comparison with Titus 2:4-5

The later letter to Titus provides a further example of Paul tailoring his reminders in accordance with his judgment about what needed to be said in a particular situation. His earlier contrast of emphasis (wives to submit, husbands to love) is not reproduced in that letter. Instead, he writes about wives both submitting to their husbands and loving them (2:4–5), without including any instructions specifically for husbands. And in that letter, he adds an important practical reason for wives' submission: they must be 'submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled' (2:5, ESV). Paul wants to avoid creating unnecessary barriers to the Christian message. This instruction makes obvious sense in a culture where husbands were generally expected to be in charge. The gospel would unavoidably challenge the prevailing culture, but there was nothing to be gained by provoking more opposition than was necessary. This instruction does not imply that Paul is teaching that husbands are placed by God in authority over their wives. He does not say that husbands, in regard to their wives, are exempt from the general Christian obligation of mutual submission.

(10) What is the lasting significance of Ephesians 5 for marital conduct?

Mike spends more than an hour of his video discussing his understanding of what Craig Keener wrote about Ephesians 5 in a book written in 1992.³⁵ It is not necessary to consider here the accuracy or otherwise of Mike's understanding of what Keener wrote. In our view, the discussion has moved on significantly over the last thirty years since that book was written.

However, Mike's discussion of Keener's book raises a pertinent question which as yet we have barely touched on, namely, what is the lasting significance of Ephesians 5? Are the instructions for husbands and wives intended only for the culture in which Paul wrote, or is there a transcultural element in them, which is as valid for us as for Paul's first readers?

Self-evidently, the Christian's imitation of Christ is not something for a particular time and culture only. The instructions for mutual submission and for love are therefore transcultural.

But what about the asymmetrical element in Paul's instructions for husbands and wives, where at some length he places a special emphasis on the husband's calling to give himself up in self-sacrificial service to his wife, on the analogy of Christ's self-sacrificial service to his people, coupled with a brief emphasis on the wife's respect for her husband?

Those emphases were evidently relevant in the first-century, where it would seem that the emphasis for the husband was an antidote to the husband's social and legal position as lord

³⁵ *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul.*

over the household, and the emphasis for the wife was an antidote to new-found equality being used to justify disrespect.

What about today, in more egalitarian societies?

It seems straightforward to suggest that the emphasis on respect remains relevant. But what about Paul's special emphasis on a husband's self-sacrifice? Can it still portray the extraordinary love of Christ to a watching world?

We think it can.

While husbands are not instructed to lead their wives by exercising authority, that does not leave husbands without an emphatic responsibility. For as long as this first creation continues in existence, the reality of women's lives will remain different from men's. It will continue to be women who carry the heaviest – and sometimes the most dangerous – burdens of marriage, which are pregnancy, childbearing, and the nursing of infants. Those biological burdens naturally cause them to sacrifice much of their freedom and self-sufficiency. It makes sense that husbands, who are less encumbered by those burdens, and therefore have more opportunity for selfishness, should be specially urged to sacrificially serve and care for their wives.

Christ did not wait to be loved. He first loved the church. In the same way, the husband's responsibility is not conditional on his wife obeying Paul's words in 5:2 or 5:24. He is to model the love of Christ by continually taking the initiative to step out in humble, self-sacrificial service to his wife.

In the context of the biological realities of marriage, Spirit-empowered husbands who put this into practice will be a living demonstration of the extraordinary self-giving love of Christ, who laid down his life for his body, the church.

(11) Conclusions on Ephesians 5

To understand what Paul writes in this passage, and especially to interpret his head-and-body metaphor in verse 23, we have taken the precautions that we mentioned at the start: considering the whole context, looking closely at the exact words, tracing Paul's train of thought, considering his reasons for writing, and taking a Christ-centered canonical approach. We conclude that Mike's interpretation of Ephesians 5 (and likewise of Colossians 3:18-19 and of Titus 2:5) is not correct.

His interpretation is in conflict with-

- the mutual submission described in Ephesians 5:21,
- the nature of the submission commended in Ephesians 5:22, 24 (of the same kind as in 5:21),
- Paul's own explanation of his head-body metaphor in Ephesians 5:23 ('savior of the body'),
- the first word of Ephesians 5:24 (*alla* – 'but'),

- the nature of Paul’s instructions to husbands in Ephesians 5:25-33a, which are all about humble service and say nothing about exercising authority, and
- Paul’s use of Genesis in Ephesians 5:31.

It is also in conflict with what Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 7.

God has not placed husbands in higher authority over their wives. Marriage is a relationship of mutual submission.

While both husbands and wives are called to love and respect each other, Paul’s *distinctive emphases* to wives (respect) and to husbands (love) reflect the practical situations for which he is writing.

Paul calls upon first-century Christian husbands to let go of their legal and societal privileges and voluntarily to take the lowest place of humble service to their wives, following the example of Christ’s humble service to his body, the church.

Still today, the husband should model the love of Christ by continually taking the initiative to step out in humble, self-sacrificial service to his wife.

Living humbly among pagans in 1 Peter 3:1-7

Mike offers his interpretation of 1 Peter 3:1-7 (0hr10mins to 0hr30mins). It contains multiple errors. As in the cases of 1 Corinthians 7 and of Ephesians 5, he omits precautions which would have helped him to understand it more accurately.

We therefore need to introduce the passage with some context and some attention to Peter’s choice of words. We shall see Peter does not teach that husbands have God-ordained one-way authority over their wives.

Peter’s focus in this letter is on Christian behavior among pagans. Believers are God’s people (2:9) living as exiles and foreigners in an unbelieving, pagan culture (1:1, 17; 2:11). His instructions to household slaves (2:18-25) and to wives (3:1-6) do not assume that the slaves’ owners or the wives’ husbands are believers. Peter’s overall message is summarized at 2:12:

‘Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.’ (ESV)

Peter is particularly concerned to encourage believers who are suffering, persecuted or otherwise mistreated (for example, 1:6; 2:20; 3:9, 14, 16; 4:1, 12-16, 19; 5:9-10).

In the Greek text, Peter’s language tells us that 3:1-7 is part of a larger whole which includes (at least) everything from 2:13 to 3:9. This is not apparent in most English versions, because clear English style generally requires short sentences, each with a main verb.

At 2:13 Peter commands submission. At 2:17 he issues crisp imperatives: ‘Honor [*timāō*] everyone, love the brotherhood [the family of believers], fear God, honor [*timāō*] the emperor’

(our translation). These imperatives are then followed in 2:18 – 3:7 by a series of participles describing how this submitting and honoring works out in some further practical situations.

Peter's instructions to wives and husbands in 3:1-7 are thus part of an extended discussion with a clear structure:

1. As slaves of God, all Christians are commanded to be subject (*hupotassō*) in every arrangement of human society, to give honor (*timaō*) to everyone, and to honor (*timaō*) the emperor (2:13–17);
2. Household slaves, *being subject* (*hupotassō*) in all reverence to their owners (2:18–20);
3. Christ's acceptance of suffering stands as an example to follow (2:21–25);
4. In the same way (*homoios*), wives *being subject* (*hupotassō*) to their husbands (even if the husbands are unbelievers), with a gentle and quiet spirit (3:1–6);
5. In the same way (*homoios*), husbands, with gentleness and *paying honor* (*timē*) to their wives (3:7);
6. All with humble love (3:8).

So, Peter's first three points are about submission. His fourth point starts with *homoios* (in the same way/likewise) and is about wives' submission.

His fifth point again starts with *homoios*, so one expects it to be about husbands' submission. But is it?

Regrettably, the water is muddied here by many English versions following a tradition of translation of 3:7 which contains an error. This is true of both the ESV and the NIV. But the traditional mistake has been untangled and corrected in some versions, including the NASB and the NET Bible. There are four parts to verse 7, which can be clearly seen if we number them. So, literally:

- '[1] the men (that is, husbands) in the same way,
- [2] dwelling with (them – the wives) according to knowledge as with a weaker vessel the female,
- [3] paying (them) honor as also co-heirs of the grace of life,
- [4] so that your prayers will not be hindered.'

Or, in the NASB:

- '[1] You husbands in the same way,
- [2] live with *your wives* in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, *since she is a woman*;
- [3] and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life,
- [4] so that your prayers will not be hindered.'

Or, in the NET Bible:

- [1] Husbands, in the same way,
- [2] treat your wives with consideration as the weaker partners
- [3] and show them honor as fellow heirs of the grace of life.
- [4] In this way nothing will hinder your prayers.'

For the husbands in verse 7, what does 'in the same way' refer back to?

It refers back to the same behavior as previously stated: the humbly submissive behavior described for household slaves (2:18-20), in imitation of the humbly submissive behavior of Christ himself, who accepted unjust suffering (2:21-25), and the humbly submissive behavior described for wives (3:1-6).

So, Peter's first point in verse 7 is that husbands should behave in a humbly submissive manner towards their wives.

His second point is that they should live with their wives in a way that is considerate of their wives' being less strong than they are.

His third point is that husbands should honor their wives. This catches attention, coming after his statement that all should honor the emperor!

According to some versions (including ESV), husbands should 'show honor to the woman as the weaker vessel', as if the showing of honor were somehow a consolation for or concession to their weakness. But that is not what Peter writes. Rather, the husbands are to pay honor to their wives as co-heirs of life from God. The paying of honor to the wife in 3:7 is not a concession to her relative physical weakness but a recognition of her high status.

To be clear, the honoring of another person may take place either in a situation where the person honored is in authority over the person who pays honor (as in 2:17d – honor the emperor) or where there is no such authority (as in 2:17a – honor everyone). An instruction to pay honor does not necessarily imply that such authority exists.

Honor was a concept of central social importance in the Mediterranean societies in which Peter lived and ministered. This is not the case in Western societies today, so it is easy for us to miss the force of what Peter writes about it. A person could gain great honor by being adopted into a high-status family. For example, Octavian's honor status rose enormously when it became known that Julius Caesar had adopted him as his son and named him as his heir. Octavian subsequently became the Emperor Augustus, and as Caesar's son styled himself 'son of god'. There was no higher honor status than this in Gentile society.

To be born into or adopted into the true God's family, and named as an heir of the true God, was even greater than this: it was the highest honor status imaginable. This is the Christian believer's position (see 1:4 'inheritance'; 1:23 'born anew'; 2:9 'a people belonging to God').³⁶

In most English versions the connection of 3:7 with 2:17 is not apparent: one would not appreciate from those versions that Peter says 'honor [*timaō*] everyone, ... honor [*timaō*] the emperor' and then 'men, give honor [*timē*] to your wives'. But the connection would have been heard by Peter's first listeners, who would therefore not have misunderstood 3:1–7 as teaching that men have a God-given status of being lords over their wives. Peter has told wives to submit to their husbands. 'In the same way' husbands are to give honor to their wives, who have the highest imaginable status of being co-heirs of God.

Thus in 3:7 Peter is instructing husbands to show their submissive conduct, like that of wives (3:1), of Christ (2:21), of household slaves (2:18) and of all believers (2:13). They are to do this by honoring their wives in view of their shared highest possible status as God's heirs in God's family. This speaks of equality between husband and wife as fellow Christians, and a voluntary giving of honor by husband to wife.

Peter is not here saying that God has designed a hierarchy in which a husband is in authority over his wife.

In Peter's thought as in Paul's, husbands are not viewed as being in authority over their wives. They are called to adopt a position of humility towards them. In relation to their wives, husbands are not exempt from Christian submission. This will enable the couple to pray together as spiritual equals. Their prayers will be hindered if the husband does not behave in this way.

Having reviewed the context and Peter's choice of language, we are in a better position to identify Mike's mistakes.

First mistake:

In 3:1, Peter tells wives to be in submission to their husbands. According to Mike, Peter is thereby teaching that husbands are in authority over their wives. He infers that from Peter's use of the Greek term *hupotassō*.

But we have already shown that the usage of *hupotassō* in the New Testament is not consistently as Mike says. He wrongly ignores the possibility of voluntary submission, of ranking oneself as lower and treating the other person as higher even though they are not.

Second mistake:

Mike asks: 'How did Sarah obey?' He answers:

³⁶ See further deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (2nd ed, 2022), 11-20. Strictly speaking the Latin word which Octavian used for 'god' (*divus*) meant 'deified', the idea being that Caesar became a god when he died.

‘Well, Sarah went out with Abraham when God called him. She went with him into this promised land. I want you to understand how freaky that would have been. “We’re gonna leave the land we know. Where are we going? I don’t know exactly; it’s just a land God told me he would show me as we journey.” And Sarah goes, “OK, I will yield to that.”’

But this is speculation. It is not from the text of 1 Peter or of Genesis. It is possible that there was some such conversation. It is equally possible that there was not. We simply don’t know what discussions they had, or what sense Sarah had of what the Lord was saying.

Third mistake:

Mike refers to verse 6, where Peter writes that Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. Mike correctly notes that Peter is here referring to Genesis 18:12, which is the only time in the Bible that Sarah calls Abraham ‘lord’ (Greek, *kurios*). Then he gives his explanation of Peter’s point:

‘She casually sees Abraham as the leader for their marriage and family, enough that she can just refer to him with the pronoun lord.’ (Ohr22-23mins)³⁷

But that is a misunderstanding of the significance of Peter’s illustration.

Mike treats Genesis 18:12 as a proof-text instead of considering it in its context.

Many commentators have observed how superficially unsuitable Peter’s illustration is. The only time that Sarah calls Abraham ‘lord’, it is neither said respectfully nor to his face. She says it to herself in a muttered laugh of disbelief. Here is Genesis 18:12 in its context:

‘[9] They said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “She is in the tent.” [10] The LORD said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. [11] Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. [12] So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?”’ (ESV)

Peter is a gifted preacher (as we see in Acts 2). The illustration is a brilliant choice: wry, provocative and deeply appropriate. Its superficial unsuitability tickles readers’ interest and forces them to think. We may readily imagine Peter’s eyes twinkling as he tells Silvanus what he wants to say (1 Peter 5:12). (Compare 1 Peter 1:18 ‘perishable things such as silver or gold’ – but gold was one of the most imperishable things known!)

Peter has been emphasizing that reverent fear of God may require submission even in unfavorable circumstances (2:18, 23; 3:1). Just so, upon the visitors’ arrival, Abraham instructs Sarah to do heavy labor at the most unsuitable time of the day, when it is too hot to do anything but sit (Genesis 18:1, 6). And the larger picture is that God is calling her to submit to Abraham in marital intercourse (Genesis 18:10-12), in a situation where they are both too old to have a child and where the husband to whom she is called to submit is someone who

³⁷ ‘lord’ is not a pronoun. We guess Mike meant to say some other word.

repeatedly makes bad decisions in their marriage, especially in sexual matters (Genesis 12:11-13; 16:1-6; and afterwards 20:1-13). From Abraham's track record she has grounds for fear (compare 1 Peter 3:6). But despite her initially negative reaction, and despite all the reasons for distrusting and resisting Abraham, she submits to God's will, and the child of promise is born (18:10; 21:1-2).

This is a wonderfully encouraging illustration of submission to God, and therefore also to husband, in adverse circumstances, so that God's purpose moves forward. Wives can be Sarah's righteous daughters by following her example (Isaiah 51:1-2; 1 Peter 3:6).

Contrary to Mike's suggestion, Sarah's use of 'lord' to refer to Abraham is not casual or ordinary. It is a muttered protest. But the point of the reference lies in the story which it calls up: Sarah does go on to submit, even though the circumstances are severely unfavorable. There is nothing 'casual' about this. It should inspire first-century wives, even those who are married to unbelievers (1 Peter 3:1), to behave in the manner that Peter is urging, trusting that God's purpose will come about.³⁸

Fourth mistake:

According to the apostle Peter, one reason for wives' submission is that a gentle (*praüs*) and quiet (*hēsuchia*) spirit is pleasing to God (verse 4). Mike says that such a spirit is a general good character trait for wives and he associates it with wives' submission (0hr23mins).

So far, so good. But Mike's idea is that this quality is specific to wives, who should submit to their husbands. He misses that exactly the same attitude is taught to men in Scripture.

Peter's statement is about a proper *Christlike* attitude. Yes, he is applying it to women in verse 4, but Peter's view is that it should be equally true of men, and that it was true of Jesus himself. In the same letter, see 2:23; 3:7-9, 15-16 (*praütēs*). Jesus and Paul agree with him: in other parts of the New Testament, see Matthew 5:5 (*praüs*); 11:29 (*praüs*); 21:5 (*praüs*); Galatians 5:23 (*praütēs*); 1 Thessalonians 4:11 (*hēsuchazō*); 2 Thessalonians 3:12 (*hēsuchia*); 1 Timothy 2:2-3 (*hēsuchia*); and Titus 3:2 (*praütēs*).

Mike flies in the face of Peter's own view and of all these other scriptures when he sees the gentle and quiet spirit of verse 4 as confirming a distinctive one-way submission by wives.

Fifth mistake:

As we have seen above, Peter's instruction to husbands starts with a word meaning 'Likewise' or 'In the same way' (*homoios*). Mike reads it out (0hr24mins), but misses its significance. That is because he neither pays close attention to Peter's exact words in the Greek text nor properly examines the context of the excerpt which he is reading. This is his biggest mistake in his handling of 1 Peter 3:1-7.

³⁸ Peter expects his readers to know the Genesis story. If they don't, the letter-carrier will relate it to them.

As we have noted, Peter's first point in verse 7 is that husbands should behave in a humbly submissive manner towards their wives.

Sixth mistake:

Peter refers to the wife as the 'weaker vessel'. Mike gives some practical examples which show that he understands this as a reference to women's lesser muscle strength (on average) than men's (0hr25-26mins).

We affirm that interpretation. The word 'vessel' translates *skeuos*, which means a container, and which can therefore be used to refer to the human body (1 Thessalonians 4:4, ESV, NIV, NRSV), particularly as a container of eternal treasure (2 Corinthians 4:7). Peter has just described the very precious and lasting treasure of wives' gentle spirit in verse 4. The phrase 'weaker vessel' therefore refers to the weaker female body which contains that treasure and not, as some have argued, to the relative weakness of women's social position in marriage or society.³⁹

Peter has told wives to behave with a gentle spirit. 'In the same way' husbands should also be gentle, using their physical strength to serve their wives with kindness, not to coerce or mistreat them.

But Mike then takes the idea of a 'vessel' too far. He goes on to say that women are precious and delicate, like fine china. That goes beyond the point that Peter is making here. It is a cultural construct. While on average women have less muscle strength than men, in some other qualities women on average are stronger than men – for example, in stamina, in endurance of pain, in endurance of cold temperatures, in endurance of famine, and in resistance to infection.⁴⁰

Seventh mistake:

Mike does not pay sufficiently close attention to the reasons which Peter gives for wives' submission. It is important to notice not only those reasons but also the reasons that Peter could have given but *does not* give. This is the second biggest of Mike's mistakes in his reading of 1 Peter 3.

Peter was writing within Hellenic culture (1:1). As we have noted, it was taken for granted as a general rule that wives were under the commanding authority of their husbands. There would ordinarily be no question about whether wives should submit; they would have no choice but to do so. We therefore need to ask why Peter judged that he should instruct Christian wives to submit to their husbands.

An obvious answer is that Christian teaching mandated that women be treated differently from the way they were generally treated in wider society. In line with the example of Jesus, women

³⁹ For further reasoning, see *Men and Women in Christ*, 107 (under the heading '*Translation issues and Peter's three points for husbands*').

⁴⁰ If any reader is interested to know more about these biological phenomena, we suggest an online search of the question 'in what ways are women stronger than men?'

were treated as of equal worth with men, and as equal recipients of God's grace and promises and of spiritual gifts. We see this directly or indirectly over and over again in the pages of the New Testament.⁴¹ Over time this was a major factor in the growth of the gospel across the Greek and Roman world.⁴² Because of this new perspective, Christian wives might conclude that submission to husbands was no longer appropriate. Peter agrees with the starting point (women's equality), as he makes clear in 3:7, but he disagrees with the conclusion. Despite the equality of women with men, he still urges submission of wives to husbands.

In order to understand Peter's viewpoint accurately, we need to note the three reasons which he gives for wives' submission, and two reasons that he does not give.

In this passage, Peter's *second reason* is that a gentle (*praūs*) and quiet (*hēsuchia*) spirit is pleasing to God (3:4), and his *third reason* is the example of holy women of the past, in particular Sarah (3:5-6). We have already considered those reasons.

We have yet to consider Peter's *first reason* for wives' submission. It is in 3:1. It is evangelistic. He recognizes that he is addressing some wives whose husbands are not believers. Society's expectation at this time is that a wife should follow her husband's religion.⁴³ Thus the gospel has already subverted the authority of these husbands. Peter gives wise counsel to avoid further inflaming the situation and to commend the gospel to husbands by means of their wives' pure, reverent and otherwise submissive conduct (verses 1-2). This is a particular example of his concern in this letter for witness to outsiders (see also 2:12; 3:15-16). (As we have seen, Paul has a similar concern in mind in Titus 2:5.)

When Mike discusses the view of egalitarian scholar Peter Davids on 1 Peter 3:1-7, he says that Davids portrays evangelism as the *only* reason for wives' submission (0hr56mins; 1hr4mins). But Davids does not say that; 'primary' does not mean 'only'.⁴⁴

Significantly, there are two further reasons which the apostle Peter could have given for wives' submission, if he had thought they were good reasons.

First, he does not rely directly on a cultural reason. He does not say that wives should submit because in Hellenic society husbands have authority over their wives, so that wives must live accordingly. He could hardly do so, given that the wives who are married to unbelievers have

⁴¹ Examples include Acts 2:17-18; 16:13-15; Romans 16:1-16; 1 Corinthians 7:3-5; 11:11-12; 12:1-11; Galatians 3:26-29.

⁴² Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (1996), 95–128.

⁴³ Compare Plutarch, *Moralia*, 'Advice to Bride and Groom', 19.

⁴⁴ *Discovering Biblical Equality* (3rd edn), 230. Mike also states that Peter Davids views the family as a human construct, so that any commands about submission are culturally conditioned (0hr57mins). That is a severe misunderstanding of what Davids writes. What we understand Davids to be saying is that the particular shapes of family life in particular cultures are human constructs (231-232). We asked Davids about this. He confirmed: 'The idea that the family is a social construct is far from my mind. No, the family is a divine creation as seen in Gen 2 and is the basis of society, but the form of the family is shaped by a given society, for better or for worse.' Mike would do well to issue corrections.

already challenged their husbands' culturally derived authority by rejecting their husbands' religion and becoming obedient to the gospel.

Second, he does not give a reason based on a concept of God's creation order for men and women. He does not say that God's design is for husbands to be in a position of authority over their wives. That would have been an obvious reason to give for wives' submission if Peter had believed it to be true.

When Mike insists on his interpretation, that Peter is endorsing a God-given unilateral authority of husband over wife, Mike is adding to Scripture a reason which Peter does not give.

Besides, 1 Peter 3:7 is not a call to Christian husbands to exercise authority over their wives. When we study Peter's exact words and analyze them in the context of his train of thought, this is certain, beyond any doubt. If the husband seeks to exercise authority over his wife, rather than humbly honoring her as a co-heir of God, their prayers will be hindered.

We conclude that Peter's view of marriage is fully consistent with the equality and mutual submission that we saw in Paul's letters, in 1 Corinthians 7 and in Ephesians 5.

Conclusions and application

The question in the title of Mike's Part 9 video is: Have We Misunderstood "Wives Submit"? Our response is that Mike has misunderstood 'wives submit'.

He unwittingly mis-handles and misinterprets 1 Corinthians 7, Ephesians 5, Colossians 3:18-19, Titus 2:5, and 1 Peter 3:1-7.

Paul and Peter teach equality and mutual submission in Christian marriage.

If we are to be obedient to the Lord, those of us who are married will put that vision into practice in our own marriages.

In the previous video, Mike indicated his sincerely held belief that 'church history totally supports headship implying authority' (Part 8, 1hr34mins). He reaffirms that belief in the present video:

'If something [Paul teaching equal authority in marriage in 1 Corinthians 7] has never been viewed in church history, has never had a significant following throughout church history, you gotta wonder why nobody noticed that.' (0hr54-55mins).

But in fact, they did notice. The full equality and mutuality of husband and wife remained understood for some time after the New Testament period, until traditional patriarchy largely recaptured the Christian imagination.

About 145 years after Paul wrote to the Corinthians, Tertullian urged that Paul's vision of marriage be put into practice.

Tertullian was a scholar and theologian who grew up in Carthage, in North Africa. He wrote in both Latin and Greek. He is sometimes called ‘the Father of Latin Christianity’. (It is mainly his Latin works that have survived.)

He considers the meaning of 1 Corinthians 7:39 (marriage ‘in the Lord’) and expounds it with allusions to other scriptures, including Ephesians 5:31 (‘two in one flesh’).⁴⁵ He writes a beautiful description of Christian marriage, showing true mutuality, wholly free of even a hint of male ascendancy in authority. This can warm our hearts, feed our souls and bless our marriages:

What kind of yoke is that of two believers, of one hope, one desire, one discipline, one and the same service? Both brethren, both fellow servants, no difference of spirit or of flesh; nay, truly ‘two in one flesh’. Where the flesh is one, one is the spirit too. Together they pray, together prostrate themselves, together perform their fasts; mutually teaching, mutually exhorting, mutually sustaining. Equally both found in the Church of God; equally at the banquet of God; equally in straits, in persecutions, in refreshments. Between the two echo psalms and hymns; and they mutually challenge each other which shall better chant to their Lord. Such things when Christ sees and hears, He joys. To these He sends his own peace These are the things which that utterance of the apostle [1 Corinthians 7:39] has, beneath its brevity, left to be understood by us.⁴⁶

Especially in the past fifty years, more and more believers across the world have been rediscovering the beauty and goodness of a Christian marriage that is a truly equal partnership, as taught by Paul in his letters and as described by Tertullian in his exposition.

‘Such things when Christ sees and hears, He joys.’

Postscript: ‘Playing games with the scriptures’

In Colossians 3:18-19, Paul writes:

‘[18] Wives, submit (*hupotassō*) to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. [19] Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.’ (ESV)

⁴⁵ The other allusions are to Ephesians 4:4; 1 Corinthians 12:5; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:16.

⁴⁶ Tertullian, *To His Wife* 2.8 (written about 200). Text available at

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0404.htm> (public domain). Tertullian is making an intentional contrast between the mutual equality lived out in a Christian marriage in both partners’ obedient service to the Lord and the difficulties of a Christian woman in an unequal marriage to an unbeliever: ‘how can she serve two lords – the Lord, and her husband – a Gentile, to boot?’ (*To His Wife* 2.3, see further 2.4). Tertullian was less of a misogynist than is often suggested. See the nuanced discussion in Donna-Marie Cooper’s 2012 PhD thesis: ‘Was Tertullian a Misogynist? A re-examination of this charge based on a rhetorical analysis of Tertullian’s work.’

<https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/10124/CooperD.pdf?sequence=2>

Lynn Cohick writes about this text in *Discovering Biblical Equality* (195). She correctly observes that the verb 'submit' is in the middle or passive voice. So, Paul's instruction to wives is that they choose to submit to their husbands. She adds:

'There is no talk about the husband's authority or a female's inferior ontological status. Instead, Paul points to Christ, whose word is to dwell deeply within each believer's thankful heart.'

Mike quotes these sentences from Cohick and says:

'No talk of the husband's authority? Now this is a trick. ... It has the word "submit" and it says "husbands don't be harsh" ... but it doesn't have the word "authority", and therefore there's no talk of the husband's authority? But this is playing games with the scriptures.'
(1hr23mins)

He says that both the word 'submit' and the instruction not to be harsh *imply* the husband's authority over the wife. He says it is 'just weird' to hand-wave it away.

Paul wrote Colossians and Ephesians around the same time. The verses that lead up to Colossians 3:18-19 have many similarities with those that lead up to the Ephesians 5 passage which we have closely studied above. Colossians 3:18-19 is a shorter version of what Paul says at more length in Ephesians 5:21-33. As such, it would be wrong to read the word *hupotassō* in Colossians in a different sense from the sense that we understand from Ephesians.

What we see here is not Cohick playing a trick, or playing games with the scriptures, or being weird, but Mike's foundational misunderstanding of *hupotassō*. Mike believes that this word always implies the actual authority of the person submitted to. As we have seen, that is not correct. It is used both in situations where a person has actual higher authority and in situations where there is voluntary submission to an equal (or even to a person who is lower in authority). In the Ephesians passage, it is plainly used in the latter sense. So also here.

The instruction to husbands not to be harsh presupposes their power to be harsh. That was a fact of life in first-century societies. It remains a fact of life today, because of men's greater muscle-strength. When Paul instructs husbands not to be harsh, that does not demonstrate that Paul is endorsing the unequal authority of husbands.

In fairness to Lynn Cohick, Mike would do well to issue a correction of his unjustified remarks about the nature of her analysis of Colossians 3:18-19.

Mike goes on to ask:

'Where in Colossians does it say that the husband's role was merely and only given to him by a culture and not established in the created order? It doesn't say that. This is presuming your conclusion.'
(1hr25mins)

We would respectfully turn Mike's question around, and invite Mike to consider this:

'Where in Colossians does it say that the husband's authority over his wife was established by God in the created order?'

The answer to this question is: 'Nowhere'.

<https://terranwilliams.com/what-winger-presently-gets-wrong-have-we-misunderstood-wives-submit/>