

Woman Subject To Her Husband?

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, May 9th, 2010

The idea of the Lord as “the bridegroom and husband of the church” is ingrained in our culture, mainly through the use of that expression in weddings, where generations have included it in the wording of the vows. The concept is also developed, although usually with a negative twist, in the Prophets, where Israel is described as an unfaithful wife to her husband, the Lord.

This imagery is not frivolous. It is important. Further, it is part and parcel of a bigger picture in the literal sense of the Word that appears to put women generally in a role subordinate to men. After all, if the Lord is a husband to the church and He is the head of the church, then the implication clearly seems to be that any husband is the head of his wife. And this is certainly the idea that the apostle, Paul, who was a Jew, developed in his Epistles. There we read, for example, in 1 Corinthians, “I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God... For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man” (1 Cor 11:3, 8-9). Again, and even more aggressively, we read in Ephesians, “Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body. Therefore just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything” (Eph 5:22-24).

Of course Paul was smart enough to moderate his teaching at least a little in both places by observing that even as woman was created after man and for him, since then all men are born of women, and also that husbands should love their wives “just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it” (Eph 5:25).

But since all of this derives from a literal reading of the Old Testament our purpose today is to go back to the Source, see what it really says, and try to understand its *deeper* meaning. You may be very surprised at what we find.

Our focus is in the book of Numbers, chapter 30, where we read,

“If a woman vows a vow to the Lord, and binds herself by some agreement while in her father’s house in her youth, and her father hears her vow and the agreement by which she has bound herself...” (Numbers 30:3,4)

or “...if indeed she takes a husband, while bound by her vows or by a rash utterance from her lips by which she bound herself, and her husband hears it...” (Ibid. 6,7)

Then the man - husband or father - has both a right and a duty to exercise authority over her. In short he may – in fact he must – give his approval or disapproval (“no comment” being taken as approval) for the course of action to which she has pledged herself. He can prevent her from following through an intended contract, and, by the same token, can relieve her of responsibilities unwisely entered into.

The bottom line? –

“Every vow and every binding oath to afflict her soul, her husband may confirm it, or her husband may make it void” (Numbers 30:13).

Conceivably, of course, a woman could hide her intentions from her father or her husband, and as long as the matter remained unknown to them she would be in perfect freedom to exercise her will. Obviously this also applies in the case of a widowed or divorced woman, and the chapter in Numbers makes that clear (30:9). But the teaching is that when the intentions of a young woman still in her father’s house, or a married woman become known to the man of the house then she cannot bear responsibility alone for her actions. In fact she must yield to his judgment and according to the law he may literally “lord it over” her.

Well! This certainly does raise a lot of questions. Is the Word telling us, for example, that a woman has no right to make binding contracts? Is it saying she cannot have the same legal authority over an estate as her husband? – or that she is not free in any way to do as she thinks right apart from or in spite of her husband’s counsel? In short, do these teachings really apply to us or are they just part of a long out-dated code of ancient ethics and traditions? *Is a woman forever subject to her husband or father?*

Men in their pride may find the literal sense appealing but women will naturally protest. The point, however, isn’t so much whether it is true or not but *how to understand it*. In other words, *what do the Scriptures really mean?* And here’s where the New Church, with its detailed explanation of the symbolism in the Word, comes to the rescue.

Note that the term, “man” is mentioned first in the chapter: “If a man vows a vow to the Lord” Then the term, “woman” is mentioned: “If a woman also vows a vow to the Lord... .” But through most of the chapter neither of these terms is used again. Instead, where it concerns the man we read “father,” or “husband,” and where it concerns the woman a pronoun is used to indicate either “daughter” or “wife,” and in one case the word “widow” appears. Though these may seem small details, they are important, since a specific name or title in the Word not only identifies a certain use or relationship, it actually defines the subject-matter in the spiritual sense.

A husband or father is not just a man, *he is a man in a particular relationship or use*; daughters, wives and widows also are women *in particular relationships or uses*. So what do these relationships or uses represent?

When we think of the Lord as our “heavenly Father” we think of His qualities of love – Divine Love from His Divine Goodness. *So the term, “father” in general throughout the Word signifies love*. It is similar with the term, “husband,” and again it is from the Lord Himself who is “the bridegroom and husband of the church.” This contrasts notably with the usual meaning of the term, “man,” as the male of the species, for a “man” in general represents the things of the understanding, truth or wisdom. We read,

“Man is born to be intellectual, that is, to think from the understanding, while woman is born to be voluntary, that is, to think from the will...” (HH 368).

“Everyone, whether man or woman, rejoices in understanding and will; but with the man the understanding predominates, and with the woman the will predominates, and the character is determined by that which predominates” (HH 369).

So a “man” in the general sense represents wisdom from truth while a “woman” in general represents love.

But is a man more important than a woman? – Of course not. He has a certain critical role to play, and this does involve certain initiatives, but, we read, “... in marriages in the heavens there is no predominance; for the will of the wife is also the husband’s will, and the understanding of the husband is also the wife’s understanding, since each loves to will and think as the other, that is, mutually and reciprocally. Thus they are conjoined into one” (HH 369).

This is the ideal. As such it reflects in outward form an ideal on the inner spiritual plane with every individual, namely that the will and understanding should be one. But of course, it’s not always so; there are times when we do not understand the good that we will, and we do not will what we understand to be true. So the two faculties of our minds do not operate in complete harmony. Then one tends to – in fact one has to – dominate over the other, the only question is which one over which other? This is the situation represented in the 30th chapter of Numbers: – when the husband or father does not sanction or agree with what his wife or daughter proposes then he may overrule her, and if he does overrule her “then none of her vows nor her agreements by which she has bound herself shall stand.” (v.5)

Now pay close attention. Because of the familiar teachings about a “man” signifying the understanding and a “woman” the will a thoughtful New Church person might suppose what we have here is a simple illustration of the well-known teaching that we must submit the impulses of the native will to the judgment and authority of an informed, conscientious understanding. And that is often, if not always, a good idea. The native will, corrupt as it is from hereditary and acquired evils, needs the discipline of truth from the Word as received and applied by the rational understanding which in that case predominates over the will and indeed subordinates and even subjugates the desires of the will to maintain order. There is only one problem with this interpretation: it is not true to the letter of the account which speaks of fathers, husbands, wives and daughters, NOT just “men” and “women.” And contrary to the appearance *in these relationships men represent love; and wives and daughters represent wisdom.*

This is because the word, father, carries with it the connotation of origins or beginnings, and the word, husband, at least in a traditional household, also suggests a leadership role in providing for his wife, whereas the word, daughter, signifies a form of dependence, and the word, wife, again, traditionally, a nurturing, sustaining quality given what has been provided. And here’s the thing. Love is the origin of everything; wisdom is what gives it form and expression. Love is like the sun itself or fire, wisdom is the light from that fire. Therefore the quality of the wisdom, how it appears and acts, is determined by the state of love from which it springs or with which it is connected. As “a wish is father to the thought” so a good love, a love of the Lord or the neighbour, is father to the truth of faith that is represented by a daughter in the Word (“the daughter of Zion,” for instance, which is the church), and that faith is and will be confirmed or rejected by the good of love that inspires it.

*So what we really have here in the book of Numbers is just the reverse of what we might expect! Rather than teaching us to hold the will in subjugation to the understanding, it is teaching us that a wise person, one who would follow the spirit of the law, must submit his ideas of truth – his understanding and his thought – to the test of whether they agree with a good and loving will! For in the end, truth really is just a form of good – ultimately Divine good – made visible to the understanding. And as a man is “married to his ideas,” so the good of love is married to the truth of faith, co-operating with it to produce all its works, *but the good of love always has the last word*:*

“Every vow and every binding oath to afflict her soul, her husband may confirm it, or her husband may make it void.” (Numbers 30:13)

Spiritually understood, a vow is “a confirmation in one’s self and conviction that (a thing) is so” (AE 340:24). And spiritually, hearing is obedience, or “faith in the will” (AC 3869). So in the Word when a husband or father “hears” the “vow” of his wife or daughter, there is a representation of the will hearing the testimony of faith so as to confirm or deny it. Inwardly, spiritually speaking, this has nothing to do with women’s rights. Every man must do this and every woman must do it, married or not. Indeed, sooner or later we must come to realize that there are within the household of the mind of each one of us ideas and thoughts that are young girls and wives in relation to the loves that lead and guide them. Likewise there are husbands and fathers within, affections and loves with which the ideas of the thought must be conjoined and by which they must be confirmed. Not everything in the mind is harmonious by nature. The Lord said, “A man’s foes will be those of his own household” (Micah 7:6, Matt 10:36). But if the impetuous and often frivolous thoughts that assert themselves into our consciousness can be controlled and even subordinated to the deeper spiritual loves that are from the Lord, then a true harmony can develop and a true peace result.

This is why the two great commandments are so important, and why it is said, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:40). And what are these about? – not understanding, not believing, not doing this or that, but loving the Lord with all our hearts, and loving the neighbor as ourselves. From these everything else flows, including respect, understanding, faith, good judgment and all sorts of good works. It is in this sense that a husband or father rules, not in the literal sense: not in this culture and not in heaven, either, because a literal husband and wife *together* in the Lord’s plan make up the church, and the church among both men and women receives love from its heavenly husband and Father through the truths of His Word.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 15:1-9
Children’s Talk on Traditions and the Fourth Commandment (for Mothers’ Day)

Numbers 30
Arcana Caelestia #2173 or #4837: 2-3, selections