



# Raise Your Voice

*'If she have the necessary gifts and feels herself called by the Spirit to preach, there is not a single word in the whole Book of God to restrain her, but many, very many, to urge and encourage her.'*

**Catherine Booth**



**GOD'S DESIGN FOR  
GENDER EQUITY**

A Bible study from creation  
to Jesus, and beyond.

## Chapter 5



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## Was Paul a Sexist? A Radical Remix of the Household Codes

by Ingrid Barratt



*'A wife is lower than a  
slave, for a slave at least  
can be freed.'*

St. Thomas of Aquinas

### Let's start

Paul had visited the small band of Christians living in Ephesus once before, and he had caused a riot! Ephesus was a wealthy town, occupied by the Romans. It was dedicated to the goddess Artemis. When Paul came along saying there was one God, and telling the strange story of Jesus Christ, it outraged the locals and threatened their livelihoods, since many made a living from selling idols of Artemis.

A silversmith named Demetrius called a meeting: '[Paul] says that gods made by human hands aren't really gods' he exclaimed (Acts 19:27).

Once they heard this, they were beside themselves with anger and began to shout, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' The riot went on for two hours and Paul had to flee the city.

Now Paul is writing a letter to the Ephesians from a Roman prison, describing how Christians should live their lives in order to reflect the love of Christ.

'Live your life with love, following the example of Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. He was a sacrificial offering that smelled sweet to God,' Paul says in Ephesians 5:2.

This hints at the wider theme of the letter—what it means to live a life of integrity and sacrifice modelled to us through Jesus. Paul is continuing what Jesus had begun on Earth: honouring the culture he lived in while subverting societal power structures.

### Let's read

*Ephesians 5:21–33*

*Submit to each other out of respect for Christ. For example, wives should submit to their husbands as if to the Lord. A husband is the head of his wife like Christ is head of the church, that is, the saviour of the body. So wives*

*submit to their husbands in everything like the church submits to Christ. As for husbands, love your wives just like Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. He did this to make her holy by washing her in a bath of water with the word. He did this to present himself with a splendid church, one without any sort of stain or wrinkle on her clothes, but rather one that is holy and blameless. That's how husbands ought to love their wives—in the same way as they do their own bodies. Anyone who loves his wife loves himself. No one ever hates his own body, but feeds it and takes care of it just like Christ does for the church because we are parts of his body ... as for you individually, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and wives should respect their husbands.*

## Let's discuss

- How much of this passage speaks to wives, and how much speaks to husbands? What is the emphasis of this passage?
- What would have been new, subversive or even shocking in how Paul describes the relationship between husbands and wives?
- What verse sums up the theme of this passage?

## Let's dig deeper

When I was a young woman, I started to step into my teaching ministry, despite being born and bred in a church where women were not able to preach or lead. I was asked to share at the night service of my church—this was ‘allowed’ because it wasn’t the ‘real’ Sunday morning service (ironically, this was just one of many extra-biblical rules that had to be enforced to supposedly follow what ‘the Bible says very clearly’).

I was seeing a guy from my church at the time, and asked him if he was coming to hear me speak. His response was: ‘I don’t want to be preached at by you’. I just shrugged my shoulders, ‘okay’.

Looking back, what bothers me is not so much his response (because that belongs to him), but mine. I accepted it as normal that men aren’t interested in women who lead. Men want to be in charge. I knew this because I had been absorbed in a church culture that defined male–female relationships in terms of authority and submission—based on these few verses in Ephesians.

If there is a term that is utterly misused by Christians, it’s that ‘scripture is very clear..’ We are not untainted vessels with a pure understanding of a 2000-year-old text, written in a different language, and in a completely foreign culture. When we refuse to see scripture within its context and culture, we may create injustices today. And that is exactly what has happened with this passage.

## The household codes of Rome

Here, Paul addresses not only wives and husbands, but slaves and children. He is riffing off the ‘household codes’ ingrained in Roman society. They were as well-known and accepted as road rules are to us today.

Romans believed that societal order was maintained through strict hierarchies, beginning with the family. *Pater familias*—or the oldest free male—had supreme authority over everyone in his household. This included slaves, women and children, who were considered the male’s possessions.

According to historians, early Roman laws ‘made women subject to the power of their husbands and gave husbands the power to execute their wives under socially condoned circumstances.’ Records show that a man beat his wife to death for drinking too much wine, and he was considered an ‘excellent example’<sup>31</sup>.

These household codes had been formalised by Aristotle, who wrote to men about how they should manage their possessions. He was mainly concerned with slaves—but mentions women and children toward the end of *Politics*.<sup>32</sup> Aristotle actually acknowledged concerns that ‘slavery is a violation of nature’. But for him the answer was simple: ‘some should rule and others be ruled ... from the hour of birth, some are marked out for subjection, and others for rule’.

Men were born to rule, while slaves and women were born to be ruled over. It was that simple.

### A radical remix

Paul reflects these codes in his letter to the Ephesians, but creates what Rachel Held Evans calls a ‘radical Christian remix’.<sup>33</sup>

Aristotle wrote to, and was only interested in, men who had authority. But here, Paul directly addresses those who are ‘ruled over’: women, children and slaves.<sup>34</sup> This in itself is a radical act that acknowledges them as fully human, reflecting the image of God. If you had always been spoken about as a possession, imagine how it would feel to be spoken to as a person.

To understand what Paul was really saying, we need to ask: what does Paul say that is old, and what does he say that is new? What is the same as widely-held cultural patterns and what is different—perhaps startlingly different?<sup>35</sup>

Paul begins his own version of the household codes with an alarming statement: ‘Submit to each other out of respect for Christ’.

What was new and shocking and radical about this passage was not that women should submit to their husbands. That was simply stating how things were. Like, give way at intersections when driving.

The radical new kingdom vision was that men were to treat wives as more

than possessions. In fact, they were to consider their wives, to be kind to and cherish their wives—they were to love their wives. And even more shocking, they were to build a mutual relationship together.

But even this is missing the point. The real emphasis of this passage is not on men and women at all. Paul’s point is that our relationships are made to reflect the sacrificial love of Jesus in our own lives.

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Imagine being a man growing up in the world of *pater familias* and hearing these words for the first time. Give myself up for her? Men were the supreme authority and society revolved around their needs. But here, Paul is laying the foundations for men to let go of their privilege and status, and for women, slaves and children to be lifted up.

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In fact, this was a lived reality for Paul. His life came crashing down when he had a life-changing revelation of Jesus, and he gave up his supreme status as both an educated Roman male and Jewish pharisee. But that’s how deeply a revelation of Jesus transforms us. We are no longer the centre. We are simply ‘little Christs’, recognising the spark of Christ in others.

So, rather than placing men at the 'sovereign centre', Paul places Jesus in the centre. Far from being a sexist, Paul made himself less in order to lift others up—a new way of being that was modelled to us by Christ.

'It is a model that, rather than reinforcing hierarchal relationships, should point us in the opposite direction—to radical humility and servanthood of Jesus,' says Held Evans.

### What is submission?

Up until the third century, women in the early church were in the vast majority. But in 313AD, Christianity was legalised and accepted by Rome. For the first time, men began to outnumber women in the church—Roman men, with a Roman worldview. Scholars argue that it was during this transition that the status of women began to diminish in the church.<sup>36</sup>

The belief that men, by virtue of their birth, hold authority—and that women are born to be in submission to them—has more in common with Aristotle's teachings than Jesus' kingdom. But Christianity has since sanctified the household hierarchy. And Paul did indeed tell women to submit to their husbands, so are we just trying to gloss over this by seeing the passage as a 'radical remix'?

The Greek word used for 'submission' is *hypotasso*. 'First and foremost it means to behave in a responsible manner, to show respect and common courtesy,' writes Michele Guinness. It can also mean 'to unite one person with another' or 'to remain in another's sphere of influence'.<sup>37</sup>

What it does not mean, Guinness argues, is that a husband should make the decisions, or rule over his wife. In fact, that would contradict Paul's overarching theme of 'submit to one another'. Whereas *hypotasso* seems in harmony with this wider theme of united and mutual influence.

Another difficult word that comes to us courtesy of the Roman world

view is the concept of 'headship'. When we think of 'headship' we tend to think of a Roman-style hierarchy that looks like a ladder—with the most important at the top, and everyone else lower down the rungs.

But Guinness—a Christian theologian who was brought up in the Jewish faith—says that a Jewish understanding is much more interconnected, and looks more like a circle. The word 'headship' is *kephale*, which means 'source'—as in, the source of life, or of a river. In this image, God is the source of man, man is the source of woman, and woman's source connects back to God. There is no beginning or end to this relationship.

It is a circle, not a ladder.<sup>38</sup>

### Tea or riots?

The teachings of Paul can be summarised as a vision of what the world will look like when people of faith transform it. 'God, through the gospel, puts people right so that through them he can put the world right,' says N.T. Wright<sup>39</sup>—this is what a new creation looks like.

Yet, Wright also quotes a bishop who said, 'Everywhere St. Paul went there was a riot; everywhere I go they serve tea!'

It's a failing of our Christian culture that we have become gatekeepers of the status quo. Our faith is meant to be a dynamic story that changes the world around us.

Jesus ushered in a new way of being—a new kingdom—when he challenged male privilege and called women as disciples. Paul took up the mantle by creating a path that allows us to transcend our culture, even as we live within it.

And Jesus himself said, 'you will do even greater things than this' (John 14:12). Could this include going even further in lifting up and honouring women?

We get to run with the vision passed down to us from Jesus, as we join a great cloud of witnesses before and beyond. Scripture is very clear (yep, I said it!). Through Jesus, we will see God's kingdom come, captives set free, the oppressed given a voice and justice rolling through the Earth.

## Let's discuss

- Imagine yourself in the room when Paul's letter is read out for the first time. Who are you? What does this passage mean to you?
- How is the kingdom of Jesus being birthed, as Paul describes new ways to live within our relationships?
- What does mutual submission/*hypotasso* in your relationships look like?
- Think about the ways in which you have power and privilege—what would it look like to extend 'mutual submission' to those with less power?

## Final thought

*'Perhaps we could push beyond these legalistic gender roles if we spent less time worrying about "acting like men" and "acting like women," and more time acting like Jesus.'*

Rachel Held Evans

## No longer slaves

One of the problems with this passage in Ephesians 5:21–33 is that we have a tendency to bring two opposite interpretations to the same text. Many in the church see Paul's instructions to wives as set in stone, but at the same time see his instructions to slaves as pointing towards change.

If we are to take scripture seriously, we have to be consistent in our interpretation—otherwise we are doing the very thing 'liberals' get accused of: handpicking bits of scripture to suit us.

Just as Paul addressed women, he addresses slaves—as human beings with agency, not as possessions: 'Serve your owners enthusiastically, as though you were serving the Lord.' (5:7)

And to masters, he says: 'As for masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Stop threatening them, because you know that both you and your slaves have a master in heaven.' (5:9)

What is new and startling here? Paul tells slaves to serve their owners well. But it's what he says to masters that's shocking: treat your slaves you as you expect to be treated. More importantly, he turns upside down the concept of male as master, by asserting that God is master of all. Paul is again de-centering men, and putting God in the centre of all our relationships.

Throughout Ephesians, Paul is making a way for Christians to change how we treat each other and how we uphold the *imago dei* in all humans.

We often see this passage as the beginning of the end of slavery.

So, why do we not see it as the beginning of the end of patriarchy?