

## **The Biblical Framework for Marriage**

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For the first time in its history, Western civilization is confronted with the need to *define* the meaning of the terms “marriage” and “family.” What until now has been considered a “normal” family, made up of a father, a mother, and a number of children, has in recent years increasingly begun to be viewed as one among several options, which can no longer claim to be the only or even superior form of ordering human relationships. The Judeo-Christian view of marriage and the family with its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures has to a significant extent been replaced with a set of values that prizes human rights, self-fulfillment, and pragmatic utility on an individual or societal level. It can rightly be said that marriage and the family are *institutions under siege* in our world today, and that with marriage and the family, our very civilization is in crisis.

The current cultural crisis, however, is merely symptomatic of a deep-seated *spiritual* crisis that continues to gnaw at the foundations of our once-shared societal values. If God the Creator in fact, as the Bible teaches, instituted marriage and the family, and if there is an evil being called Satan who wages war against God’s creative purposes on this world, it should come as no surprise that the divine foundation of these institutions has come under massive attack in recent years. Ultimately, we human beings, whether we realize it or not, are involved in a *cosmic spiritual conflict* that pits God against Satan, with marriage and the family serving as a key arena in which spiritual and cultural battles are fought. If, then, the *cultural* crisis is symptomatic of an underlying *spiritual* crisis, the solution likewise must be spiritual, not merely cultural.

In the book *God, Marriage & Family*, my collaborators and I have attempted to point the way to this spiritual solution: a return to, and rebuilding of, the biblical foundation of marriage and the family.<sup>1</sup> God’s Word is not dependent on man’s approval, and the Scriptures are not

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger (with David W. Jones), *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004). The following material is adapted from Chapters 1, 3, and 8 of this book.

silent regarding the vital issues facing men and women and families today. In each of the important areas related to marriage and the family, the Bible offers satisfying instructions and wholesome remedies to the maladies afflicting our culture. The Scriptures record the *divine institution* of marriage and present a *Christian theology* of marriage and parenting. They offer insight for decision-making regarding abortion, contraception, infertility, and adoption. They offer helpful guidance for those who are single or unmarried and address the major threats to marriage and the family, homosexuality and divorce.

Time will not permit to deal with all these important topics today (though the book does). My purpose is more modest. In the few minutes I have, I want to draw our attention to three major overarching teachings regarding the *biblical framework for marriage* found in the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians.<sup>2</sup> As we study the well-known passage on marriage in Ephesians 5:21–33 in the *context of the entire epistle*, we will discover three important but often-overlooked principles that together form the biblical framework for marriage.

### **The Biblical Framework for Marriage**

Before we look at the three major principles on marriage flowing from a study of Paul's teaching in Ephesians as a whole, it will be useful to provide a brief survey of the epistle. This will help us to understand Paul's teaching on marriage within the larger context of the theology of the letter as a whole. The letter is addressed to those set apart for God (*hagioi*) and faithful in Christ Jesus (*pistoi*, Eph. 1:1). Paul opens the epistle with a lengthy section of praise to God for endowing believers with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3-14), followed by a section of thanksgiving and prayer (Eph. 1:15-23).

He reminds the recipients of the letter that they were once under Satan's control, but now have been made alive in Christ, by grace (Eph. 2:5). They have been raised and exalted *with Christ*, participating in his victory over Satan (Eph. 2:6). God's end-time plan to bring together all things in and under Christ is nowhere more evident than in his inclusion of the Gentiles in the community of believers together with believing

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<sup>2</sup> See also the interesting recent discussion of Ephesians 5 by Francis Watson, *Agape, Eros, Gender: Towards a Pauline Sexual Ethic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 183–259. Watson keenly observes that both viewing Ephesians 5 as “a legitimation of patriarchal marriage” and claiming that it “transforms patriarchal marriage by subjecting it to the criterion of love” simplify the passage by ignoring its complexities (229, n. 6), referring to Ben Witherington, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 156; and Sarah J. Tanzer, “Ephesians,” in *Searching the Scriptures*, Vol. II: *A Feminist Commentary* (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1994), 325–48, esp. 341.

Jews (Eph. 2:11-22; 3:6).<sup>3</sup> According to Paul, this is a salvation-historical “mystery” that in the past was concealed but now has been revealed by the apostle himself.<sup>4</sup>

At the close of his discussion of believers’ spiritual blessings in Christ in chapters 1-3, Paul prays for that Christ would live in their hearts by faith and that, rooted and established in love, they would know the love of Christ (Eph. 3:17, 19). The fact that the apostle begins his prayer with a reference to God “the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named” (Eph. 3:14-15) underscores the relevance of Paul’s prayer not only for believers in general but for married couples and families in particular.

By calling God the Father from whom every family *on earth* is named, the Creator is identified as the one who both established marriage and who has rightful jurisdiction over it. By linking God’s rule over families *in heaven and on earth*, his end-time purposes of uniting all things under Christ’s headship are shown to encompass earthly families as well as heavenly realities, and since Christ is shown to have supreme authority over all supernatural as well as earthly beings, the husband’s headship (affirmed in Eph. 5:23 below) by analogy connotes the exercise of authority over his wife as well.

The second half of the epistle is given to an exposition of the new life in Christ that believers are to enjoy in the unity of the “body of Christ,” the church. They are to walk in a manner worthy of their calling, give preference to one another in love, and preserve spiritual unity in peace (Eph. 4:1-3; cf. 4:4-6). God has given spiritual gifts and instituted various ministries in the church to equip believers for ministry of their own. In all this, his goal is the “perfect man” (*andra teleion*, Eph. 4:13) who speaks the truth in love and in all things grows up into him who is the head, Christ (Eph. 4:13-16).

Paul proceeds to contrast the old self, with its independence, lack of submission to authority, rebelliousness, and bondage to passions and lusts, with the new self, which is characterized by proper submission, a

<sup>3</sup> Note that Gentiles comprise the majority of Paul’s readership in Ephesians.

<sup>4</sup> See further at Eph. 5:32 below. The usual English translation of this expression by “mystery” is somewhat misleading in that “mystery” is at best a partial cognate of the Greek term *mystērion*. In fact, in a very important sense *mystērion* conveys the very opposite sense of “mystery,” for while the English term means “something secret or unrevealed” or even “something intrinsically unknowable,” the Greek expression refers to a truth that was previously undisclosed but has now been made known (see Andreas J. Köstenberger, “The Mystery of Christ and the Church: Head and Body, ‘One Flesh,’ ” *TrinJ* 12 n.s. [1991]: 80–83). Other *mysterions* in Scripture include Christ himself (Col. 2:2; 4:3), the sanctification of believers (1 Tim. 3:16), the transformation (rapture?) of believers (1 Cor. 15:51), the current blindness of Israel (Rom. 11:25), and general lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:7).

respectful attitude toward authority, and love. Becoming a Christian is like putting off old clothes and putting on new ones (Eph. 4:22, 24; cf. Col. 3:9-10): there must be a marked, noticeable change in spirit and behavior—including behavior enacted in the context of marriage and the family.

In the context immediately preceding Paul's teaching on marital roles, the apostle exhorts believers to live lives of love in keeping with Christ's love who gave his life as a sacrifice for them (Eph. 5:1-2; cf. 5:25; John 13:34-35). Conversely, there must be no sexual immorality (*porneia*; Eph. 5:3; cf. 1 Cor. 6:15-16). As God's end-time community, the church (and hence every believer) ought to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18) in correspondence with God's filling of the Old Testament sanctuary with his spiritual presence.<sup>5</sup>

In the first instance, this Spirit-filling refers to congregational worship (and is thus corporate, rather than merely individualistic, in import; Eph. 5:19-20).<sup>6</sup> Still continuing the same sentence in the original Greek, Paul then relates Spirit-filling also to the marriage relationship (Ephesians 5:21-24). *Being properly submitted* (*hypotassō*, Eph. 5:21, 22) is thus a mark of Spirit-filling, in contrast to believers' previous life-style, which was characterized by rebellion toward authority.

Paul's twofold analogy between the headship of Christ and of the husband on the one hand and between the submission of the church and of the wife on the other in verses 23-24 makes clear that marriage in Christian teaching, rather than being an end in itself, is part of God's larger purposes in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:10). Just as Christ must rule over all heavenly powers (Eph. 1:21-22) and over the church (Eph. 4:15), he must also rule over the marital relationship (Eph. 5:21-33), the family (Eph. 6:1-4), and the workplace (Eph. 6:5-9).

Paul rounds out his discussion of marital roles with a familiar allusion to Scripture: ". . . and the two will become one flesh" (Eph. 5:31; cf. Gen. 2:24: "they"). Some believe that this reference to the creation narrative draws a connection between the marriage union and Christ's relationship with the church by way of typology, that is, a "typical" correspondence along salvation-historical lines, with Adam prefiguring Christ, Eve foreshadowing the church, and Adam and Eve's relationship

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<sup>5</sup> See Andreas J. Köstenberger, "What Does It Mean to Be Filled with the Spirit? A Biblical Investigation," *JETS* 40 (1997): 229-40 for a detailed discussion of Eph. 5:18 and related passages.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Timothy G. Gombis, "Being the Fullness of God in Christ by the Spirit: Ephesians 5:18 in its Epistolary Setting," *TynB* 53/2 (2002): 262-64, citing Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 338; Köstenberger, "What Does It Mean?" 233; and Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 63-73.

typifying the union of Christ and the church.<sup>7</sup> This is possible, though it is important to note that the apostle's focus here lies squarely on the union of Christ and the church (cf. Eph. 5:30-32) and no longer on marriage (which dominated discussion in Eph. 5:21-29).<sup>8</sup>

In any case, Paul's major point seems to be that marriage has the honor of embodying the "one-flesh" principle that later in salvation history became true spiritually also for the union of the exalted Christ with the church, which is described by Paul in terms of "head," "members," and "body." This, too, like the inclusion of Gentiles in God's salvific plan, is a *mystērion*: it was hidden in the divine wisdom in ages past but now has been given to Paul to reveal. Marriage is thus shown to be part and parcel of God's overarching salvation-historical purposes of "bringing all things together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:10 NIV).

Finally, a married couple, too, is part of that spiritual warfare that resolutely resists evil (Eph. 6:10-14) and seeks to promote God's purposes in this world (foremost the preaching of the gospel, Eph. 6:15, 19-20). Thus the marriage relationship should also be viewed in the context of Christian witness in an unbelieving environment, both directly by the husband's and the wife's living out God's purposes for the Christian couple, as well as indirectly by being part of a biblical church that actively propagates the gospel message. Not too often do we hear of marriage as a witnessing tool, but in God's plan, this is exactly what it is.

**Principle #1: Marriage Is Part of God's End-Time Purpose  
of Bringing All Things Back Together  
under One Head, Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:10)**

Now that we have surveyed the epistle to the Ephesians in its entirety, we are ready to look at the first major principle regarding marriage emerging from the book of Ephesians: Marriage is part of *God's end-time restoration of all things under the headship of Christ* (Eph. 1:10). As mentioned, in what may arguably be the key verse of Ephesians, Paul affirms God's overarching purpose for humanity (including married couples) in the age of Christ at the very outset of his epistle: "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head (*anakephalaiōsasthai*), even Christ" (Eph. 1:10 NIV).

This establishes *Christ* as the focal point of God's end-time program, and more particularly, *Christ as head* (Eph. 1:22), not only over the church (Eph. 1:22), but over every authority, in the present as well as the

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 429-35.

<sup>8</sup> See Köstenberger, "Mystery of Christ and the Church," 79-94.

coming age (Eph. 1:21). Clearly, Christ's headship here conveys the notion of supreme authority, not merely that of provision or nurture, as is sometimes alleged. Otherwise, it would be necessary to attribute to Paul the unlikely, if not absurd, teaching that Christ is the source of demons.<sup>9</sup> Rather, according to Paul, Christ, as the exalted Lord, is the head (*kephalē*), wielding appropriate and God-given authority, and all things are subjected to him (*hypotassō*; cf. Phil. 2:9-11).

The first important lesson for marriage from Paul's teaching in his letter to the Ephesians is therefore that the marriage relationship must be seen within the compass of God's larger salvation-historical, end-time purposes, that is, the bringing of "all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:10 NIV). This includes spiritual powers who will be fully submitted to Christ (Eph. 1:21); the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles in one salvation-historical, end-time entity, the church (Eph. 2:11-22; 3:6-13); the restoration of creation (cf. Rom. 8:18-25), which people, as divine image bearers, are currently striving to subdue (Gen. 1:28); and, most relevant for our present purposes, the restoration of the male-female marriage relationship as realized by Spirit-filled, committed Christian believers, who overcome the cursed struggle of manipulation and dominance (cf. Gen. 3:16)<sup>10</sup> in the power of Christ and relate to each other in proper submission and Christ-like love. While God's purposes are greater than marriage or male-female roles, they significantly include this relationship (see 1 Pet. 3:1-7).

### **Principle #2: The Instructions on Marriage Are Addressed to Spirit-Filled Believers (Eph. 5:18)**

The second important lesson for married couples, as briefly mentioned above, is that the instructions for wives and husbands (as well as, incidentally, those for parents/children and slaves/masters later on) are *directed to Spirit-filled believers rather than to those outside of Christ* (cf. Eph. 5:18). It should therefore surprise no one that Paul's words are

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<sup>9</sup> *Contra* Catherine Clark Kroeger, "Head," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 375-77; see the critique by Wayne Grudem, "The Meaning of kefalh/ ('Head'): An Evaluation of New Evidence, Real and Alleged," *JETS* 44 (2001): 25-65, reprinted in Wayne Grudem, ed., *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> On Gen. 3:16, see especially Susan T. Foh, "What is the Woman's Desire (Gen 3:16; 4:7)," *WTJ* 37 (1975): 376-83, who rightly interprets Gen. 3:16 in light of Gen. 4:7 where "desire" conveys a sense of attempted mastery or control. See also the scenario at the Fall (Gen 3), which is cited by Paul in 1 Tim. 2:14-15 as one of two reasons for his prohibition of women teaching or exercising authority over a man in the church (cf. 1 Tim. 2:12).

foolishness to those who do not follow the path of Christian discipleship. This does not mean, however, that Ephesians 5:21-33 contains instructions on male-female relationships that are merely private in nature. Rather, these injunctions set forth the Creator's divine ideal and abiding will for *all* married men and women, rather than merely believers in Jesus Christ.

In the section following his command for believers to be Spirit-filled that contains his instructions for husbands and wives Paul uses the format of the ancient household code. He cites models for both wives and husbands to emulate: for wives, the church in her submission to Christ (Eph. 5:24); for husbands, Christ's sacrificial love for the church, resulting in her cleansing, holiness, and purity (Eph. 5:25-28).<sup>11</sup> Later, the apostle will add a second, common-sense analogy from the nature of things, appealing to self-interest: everyone loves one's own body; in light of the one-flesh union between husbands and wives, if husbands love their wives, this is tantamount to husbands loving themselves (Eph. 5:29-30).

On the basis of Ephesians 5:21 ("submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ"), some argue that Paul does not teach the submission of wives to their husbands *only* but *also* that of husbands to their wives in an arrangement termed "mutual submission."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See esp. Timothy G. Gombis, "A Radically New Humanity: The Function of the *Haustafel* in Ephesians," *JETS* 48 (2005): 317-30, who argues that "Paul lays out a manifesto for a radically New Humanity" (330) and yet eschews the egalitarian notion of "mutual submission" (323-24).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Chapter 8 in David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), esp. 236-37, who maintains "that there is no longer any need to teach submission. In NT days it would cause a scandal if the submission of wives was omitted from moral instruction, but not it is likely to cause an equal scandal if it is included. The threefold teaching of submission did not have a Christian origin, and the number of caveats and explanations added to this teaching by NT authors suggests that they were somewhat uncomfortable with it. They attempted to Christianize it by adding that the head of the household should show respect for those submitting to him, and perhaps submit to them in return." For this reason, Instone-Brewer says that no bride should be "forced" to vow submission to her husband, but if she opts to make such a vow, her husband should likewise vow to submit to his wife. For our part, we fail to see clear textual evidence for the New Testament authors' "discomfort" with teaching wifely submission. We certainly do not advocate "forcing" wives to vow to submit to their husbands. It is clearly fallacious to say that, because the Christian teaching of submission to authorities had non-Christian origins (assuming this to be the case for the sake of argument), that it follows that this scriptural teaching is non-authoritative. Nor does it appear to be possible to extricate biblical sexual morality from the submission principle. The analogy between the headship of Christ over the church and the husband's headship over the wife in Eph. 5:23-25, too, militates against setting aside the husband's headship and wifely submission as irrelevant and inapplicable for today. For these and other reasons Instone-Brewer's reasoning and conclusions must be judged not to cohere with Scripture's own message on the subject.

Admittedly, this is what Ephesians 5:21 read by itself might suggest, but we must not stop reading at Ephesians 5:21 but glean from the following verses what is Paul's definition of "submitting to one another." It is clear that the answer is that *wives are to submit to their husbands* who are called the "head" of their wives as Christ is the head of the church (Eph. 5:22-24) while *husbands are to love their wives with the sacrificial love of Christ* (Eph. 5:25-30). This runs counter to the notion of "mutual submission" within the context of an identity of gender roles.<sup>13</sup>

A comparison with Ephesians 1:22 and 4:15 confirms that "*headship*" entails, *not merely nurture* (though it does that, see Eph. 5:29), *but also a position of authority*. This authoritative position of the man is a function, not of intrinsic merit or worth on his part, but of God's sovereign creative will. Hence the husband's leadership, as well as the wife's submission, is to be exercised within the orbit of grace rather than legalism or coercion. It should also be noted that in the abbreviated Colossian parallel, "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord" (Col. 3:18) sums up the entirety of Paul's counsel to Christian wives with regard to their marital disposition (no word about "mutual submission" here).<sup>14</sup>

The fact that wives are called to recognize and respect proper authority over them is not unique to them. Men, too, must submit to Christ, local church leadership and discipline, the civil authorities, and their employers. Nevertheless, as mentioned, this does not alter the fact that there is a sense in which wives are called to submit to their husbands that is *non-reciprocal* (cf. 1 Pet. 3:1-6 in the context of 1 Pet. 2:13, 18). Husbands' exercise of authority, in turn, must not be an arbitrary or

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<sup>13</sup> See Wayne Grudem, "The Myth of Mutual Submission as an Interpretation of Ephesians 5:21," in Grudem, ed., *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, 221-31, who suggests that the force of the Greek term *allēlois* is "some to others" (*contra* Roger R. Nicole, "The Wisdom of Marriage," *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke* [ed. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000], 290; Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 839, et al.). Rather than speaking of "mutual submission," it may be more appropriate to speak of "mutual humility" (note the shift from submission to humility in 1 Pet. 5:5-6). See also Daniel Doriani, "The Historical Novelty of Egalitarian Interpretations of Ephesians 5:21-22," *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, 203-19; and Wayne Walden, "Ephesians 5:21: A Translation Note," *ResQ* 45/4 (2003): 254, who points out that the pronoun *allēlōn* is not so much reciprocal or mutual as it shows "random or distributive activity within the group" (Walden provides the examples of people trampling one another [Luke 12:1]; envying one another [Gal. 5:26]; and killing one another [Rev. 6:4], which hardly should be understood in a mutual sense). Hence Eph. 5:21 does not call for "mutual submission" of husband and wife, but calls on wives to submit to their husbands and for husbands to love their wives.

<sup>14</sup> In that context, husbands' love is further defined as not being harsh with one's wife (cf. 1 Pet. 3:7).



abusive one, but should be motivated by love.<sup>15</sup> Again, Peter's teaching is found to cohere with that of Paul: "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life" (1 Pet. 3:7).

It must also be pointed out that it is thus manifestly *not* true that female submission is *merely a result of the Fall*.<sup>16</sup> For in the present passage, it is Christian women—in whom Christ's redemptive purposes are to be realized—who are nonetheless enjoined to submit to their husbands. In his other writings, Paul (with reference to Gen. 2:18, 20) stresses that it is not the man who was made for woman, but the woman for the man (1 Cor. 11:9), so that "the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man" (1 Cor. 11:3). Hence the united tenor of New Testament teaching, including several of Paul's epistles, confirms that the husband's headship and the wife's submission are part of God's original design for marriage rather than a negative consequence of the Fall.

Nor is it true that the restored pattern for marriage in Christ *transcends* that of submission and authority. This understanding is not borne out by the New Testament, be it here or elsewhere. To the contrary, Paul's argument in 1 Timothy 2:9-15 "turns to the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis for scriptural support of an understanding of the authority structure, the order of creation, which exists between men and women. . . . Adam and Eve are called into service as normative examples of how men and women should interrelate and what can happen if the proper authority structure is adhered to [or not adhered to] by subsequent peoples."<sup>17</sup>

In fact, in one his later writings (significantly, addressed to the Ephesian context) Paul refutes as heretical the understanding (as advocated by some in his day) that "the resurrection has already taken place" (2 Tim. 2:18), that is, that the future has so invaded the present that believers' present lives no longer need to heed principles built into the fabric of creation by the Creator. Contrary to the false teachers, God's created order continues to provide the framework for human relationships (cf. 1 Tim. 4:3). While subverted by the Fall, this order is not to be set aside by Christians. Rather, it is God's redemptive purpose

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Hawthorne, "Marriage and Divorce," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 596.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: A Biblical Perspective* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 28. Also, "Men, Women, and Biblical Equality," the statement of evangelical egalitarian beliefs states, "The Bible teaches that woman and man were created for full and equal partnership. . . . The rulership of Adam over Eve resulted from the Fall and was therefore not a part of the original created order" (pars. 1 and 4).

<sup>17</sup> Larry J. Kreitzer, "Adam and Christ," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 10.

in Christ to counteract the effects of sin in human relationships (and other spheres) by believers' new life in the Spirit. Only in heaven will people no longer be given in marriage but be like angels (Matt. 22:30 and parallels). Currently, they still marry, have children, and are to fulfill the cultural mandate of subduing and cultivating the earth in keeping with the male-female roles established at creation.

Before we move on to the third and final principle for marriage derived from Paul's teaching in Ephesians, three practical observations related to submission emerge. First, while some may view submitting to one's husband's authority as something negative, a more accurate way of looking at marital roles is to understand that wives are called to *follow their husband's loving leadership* in their marriage. This leadership and submission is to take place in the context of a true partnership, in which the husband genuinely values his wife's companionship and counsel and the wife sincerely values her husband's leadership. It is one of the unfortunate legacies of radical feminism that many tend to view male-female relationships in adversarial terms. This is contrary to God's desire and design and to the biblical message.

Second, there is a *difference between traditional and biblical marriage*. Traditional marriage may be understood as the type of division of labor by which women are responsible for cooking, cleaning, doing the laundry, and so on, while men are at work earning the family income. While Scripture does specify work outside the home as men's primary sphere and the home as the center of women's activity (e.g., Gen. 3:16-19; Prov. 31:10-31 [though the woman's reach is not *limited* to the home]; 1 Tim. 2:15; 5:10, 14), the Bible is not a law book and does not seek to legislate the exact division of labor husband and wife ought to observe.<sup>18</sup> Hence within the biblical parameters outlined above, there remains room for the individual couple to work out their own distinctive and specific arrangement. This may vary from couple to couple and ought to be considered a part of Christian freedom. For example, some women may be more gifted in the area of finances than men. There

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<sup>18</sup> When we talk about the God-ordained "primary sphere" and "center" of men's and women's activity, we do not advocate or condone a husband's neglect of his wife and family or seek to confine a woman to the home as may be the case in traditional arrangements. Nor do we seek to take away from the man's and woman's joint responsibility to rule the earth for God. We are merely reflecting the biblical teaching in passages such as Gen. 3:16-19 that seem to draw a distinction regarding the man's and the woman's primary spheres of activity, indicating distinct yet complementary roles. Rather than pitting the husband's work outside the home against his devotion to marriage and family, it should rather be viewed within the larger context of his fulfilling his responsibility to provide for his family. As to the woman, her role in childbearing already indicates that, biologically, her role centers on children and family in a way that is distinctive and unique.

seems to be no good reason why women cannot be in charge of keeping family finances if the couple is agreed as long as the husband retains ultimate responsibility over this area. Conversely, some men may enjoy cooking. Again, there seems to be no good reason why in certain families men could not do most of the cooking as long as the couple is agreed. Problems may only arise if the pattern were to be so completely reversed that a given husband is focusing primarily or exclusively on the domestic sphere while the wife is part of the labor force. However, even this may not be problematic if for a *limited* time a couple, say, while the husband is pursuing an education, agrees on this type of arrangement.

Third, *improper caricatures* of the biblical teaching of wifely submission and the husband's loving leadership (which includes the proper exercise of authority) must be *rejected* as either deliberate or unwitting attempts to discredit such a model as unworthy of a woman's human dignity or our modern, "enlightened" times. The kind of submission Scripture is talking about is not akin to *slavery* where one person owns another. It is not *subservience* where one person is doing the bidding of another without intelligent input or interaction. It is not even truly *hierarchical*, since this conjures up notions of a military-style, top-down chain of command in which the soldier is asked to obey, no-questions-asked, the orders of his superior. None of these labels constitute an accurate description of Scripture with regard to the roles of men and women nor do they fairly represent the understanding of gender roles advocated in this lecture.

Rather, the biblical model for marriage is that of loving complementarity, where the husband and the wife are partners who value and respect each other and where the husband's loving leadership is met with the wife's intelligent response. If Christ chooses to submit to God the Father while being equal in worth and personhood, there seems to be no good reason why God could not have designed the husband-and-wife relationship in such a way that the wife is called to submit to the man while likewise being equal in worth and personhood. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Cor. 11:3).

### **Principle #3: Marriage Is Part of Spiritual Warfare (Eph. 6:10–18)**

Finally, third, not only is marriage part of *God's end-time purposes in Christ* (Eph. 1:10) and part of the *Spirit's operation* (Eph. 5:18), it is also part of one other important larger reality that is often overlooked, namely that of *spiritual warfare* (Eph. 6:10-18). This means that marriage ought not to be viewed merely on a horizontal, human plane but understood as

involving spiritual attacks that require husbands and wives to “put on the full armor of God” in order to withstand those attacks.

Indeed, marriage and the family are not exempt from the cosmic conflict that is raging between God and his angels on the one hand and Satan and his demons on the other. Because marriage and the family are not merely a human convention or cultural custom but a divine institution, it should be expected that Satan, who seeks to rob God of his glory, would attack marriage. For this reason, too, we must treat marriage and the family not merely in the context of the current cultural crisis but also within the framework of the perennial cosmic conflict that requires a spiritual perspective and skilled engagement of the enemy in spiritual warfare.

Clearly, spiritual warfare surrounding marriage and the family is a reality, and awareness of this conflict as well as skill in engaging in it is imperative. Yet while there is a plethora of materials on marriage and the family, as well as a considerable body of literature on spiritual warfare,<sup>19</sup> rarely are those issues treated jointly. I am aware of no current volume on marriage and the family that provides even the most cursory treatment of spiritual warfare.<sup>20</sup> Regularly, the focus is on fulfilling one’s partner’s needs in marriage, improving one’s communication skills, or resolving marital conflict. From reading any of these books, one would never know that spiritual warfare is a vital issue in marriage and the family. Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

Spiritual warfare has been a part of married life and childrearing from the beginning. The foundational biblical narrative in Genesis 3 recounts

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<sup>19</sup> See especially Clinton E. Arnold, *Three Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) and *Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul’s Letters* (Leicester/Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992); Sydney H. T. Page, *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study of Satan and Demons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); and the articles on “Elements/Elemental Spirits of the World,” “Power,” and “Principalities and Powers,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 229–33, 723–25, and 746–52. See also the helpful survey entry by David Beck, “Spiritual Warfare,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education* (ed. Michael J. Anthony; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 660–62.

<sup>20</sup> The only partial exception is Evelyn Christenson, *What Happens When We Pray for Our Families* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Family Publishers, 1992). There is no discussion of spiritual warfare in such popular books on marriage as Gary Chapman’s *The Five Love Languages* (Chicago: Northfield, 1995), Larry Crabb’s *The Marriage Builder* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), Kay Arthur’s *A Marriage Without Regrets* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2000), Willard Hartley’s *His Needs, Her Needs* (Ada, MI: Revell, 1990), *The Language of Love* by Gary Smalley and John Trent (Pomona, CA: Focus on the Family, 1988), and Laura Walker’s *Dated Jekyll, Married Hyde* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997). There is nothing in best-selling books on parenting such as *Relational Parenting* by Ross Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 2000), *Raising Heaven-bound Kids in a Hell-bent World* by Eastman Curtis (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), *Children at Risk* by James Dobson and Gary Bauer (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), or *The Gift of Honor* by Gary Smalley and John Trent (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987).

how the tempter, Satan, prevailed upon the first woman to violate God's commandment and how her husband followed her into sin. Ever since, marriage has resembled more a struggle for control and conscious and unconscious efforts at mutual manipulation than an Edenic paradise. The first known instance of sibling rivalry issued in Cain killing his brother Abel out of envy and jealousy. The rest of the Old Testament chronicles a whole series of ways in which sin has affected marital and family relationship ever since the Fall.<sup>21</sup>

The message of the New Testament is no different. Arguably the most important treatment of spiritual warfare, Ephesians 6:10-20, is preceded by extended treatments of marriage (Eph. 5:21-33) and childrearing (Eph. 6:1-4). These passages, in turn, are preceded by sections on believers' spiritual blessings in Christ (Eph. 1:3-14), on them having been made alive in Christ (Eph. 2:1-10) and now being one in Christ with other believers (Eph. 2:11-22; 4:1-16), and on living as children of light, putting off the old sin nature and putting on the new nature, "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:17-5:20, esp. 4:20-24). Unfortunately, these sections are regularly compartmentalized. In Paul's thinking, however, it is precisely in people's relationships with one another, be it at work or at home, among Christians or between believers and unbelievers, that spiritual warfare manifests itself and conscious dealing with it becomes a necessity.

In fact, Ephesians 6:10-20 is "a crucial element to which the rest of the epistle has been pointing."<sup>22</sup> In the structure of the entire epistle, the practical teaching in Ephesians 4-6 is predicated upon the doctrinal instruction in Ephesians 1-3. For this reason every believer must have a thorough grasp of what it means to be chosen in Christ to be holy and blameless (Eph. 1:4, 11); to have been predestined to be adopted as God's son or daughter in Christ by God's pleasure and for the praise of his glorious grace (Eph. 1:5-6, 11); to have redemption through his blood and the forgiveness of sins (Eph. 1:7); and to have been sealed with the Holy Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance in Christ (Eph. 1:13-14). Believers must understand that their conversion entails turning away from sin, so that they no longer carry out the bidding of their sinful nature, and turning to God and serving him in the power of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:1-10). They must understand their unity in Christ with other believers (Eph. 2:11-22; 4:1-16) and confront sin in their own lives as they count their old sinful nature dead in Christ and themselves alive in their risen Lord (Eph. 4:17-5:20).

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<sup>21</sup> For an example from the life of David, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, "Marriage and Family in the New Testament," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (ed. Ken M. Campbell; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 279.

<sup>22</sup> O'Brien, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 457.

In the more immediate context of Ephesians 6:10-18, the main command governing Paul's treatment of marriage and the family in Ephesians 5:21-6:4 is "Be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18).<sup>23</sup> The warfare passage in Ephesians 6:10-18 then seamlessly picks up where Ephesians 5:18 left off, calling on believers to take up the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17) and to pray in the Spirit (Eph. 6:18), always remembering that their "struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12).<sup>24</sup> Hence it is vital to look at the biblical teaching on marriage and the family on the one hand and on spiritual warfare on the other in an integrated way. In living out their Christian faith in their marriages and families, believers must recognize that their sinful nature will lead them to rebel against God's plan unless aided by the Holy Spirit and that the devil will seek to use their sinful tendencies and inclinations to lead them astray.

What is the key element in spiritual warfare? According to Scripture, it is human minds. "But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your *minds* may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3). "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every *thought* to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:3-5). Just as Satan reasoned with Eve as to why she should disobey God in the Garden, it is people's thought life that is the arena in which our spiritual battles are won or lost.<sup>25</sup>

For this reason believers ought to saturate their minds with scriptural teaching regarding their new position in Christ. As mentioned, the first three chapters of Ephesians are replete with references to the spiritual blessings given to believers in Christ (Eph. 1:3), including their election (Eph. 1:4, 11); predestination and adoption (Eph. 1:5, 11); redemption and forgiveness of sins (Eph. 1:7); and reception of the Holy Spirit (Eph.

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<sup>23</sup> See Köstenberger, "What Does It Mean?"

<sup>24</sup> On Eph. 6:10-20 in the context of the letter of Ephesians as a whole, see especially the writings of Peter T. O'Brien: *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 109-31; *Letter to the Ephesians*, 456-90, especially 457-60; and Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A biblical theology of mission* (NSBT; Leicester/Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 196-98.

<sup>25</sup> See, similarly, Beck, "Spiritual Warfare," 661, who identifies four critical issues: (1) underestimating the enemy; (2) identifying the enemy; (3) the nature of the weapons; and (4) the objective of the warfare.

1:13–14). While prior to their conversion they used to gratify the cravings of their sinful nature (Eph. 2:3), believers were raised up with Christ and transferred with him to the heavenly realms (Eph. 2:6). Their salvation is by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8). On the basis of this understanding of their new position in Christ, and only on this basis, believers will be able to deal effectively with the various temptations and struggles with which they are confronted in their marriages and families.

Several New Testament passages teach that the devil's efforts to destroy marriages and to subvert family life did not stop at the Fall but continue to this very day. While three particular infractions are singled out, doubtless others could be added. A first area of vulnerability Satan will seek to attack is that of susceptibility to *sexual temptation*.<sup>26</sup> In 1 Corinthians 7:5, Paul counsels believers not to abstain from sexual relations, "except by mutual consent and for a time" for the purpose of prayer, but then to come together again, so Satan may not tempt them because of their lack of self-control. This would seem to indicate that the sexual component of the marriage relationship is very much a regular target of Satan's attack and must be carefully guarded by the married couple.<sup>27</sup>

A second area of weakness that Satan will target in order to cause people to stumble is that of *unresolved anger*. As Paul writes in Ephesians 4:26-27, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." While not limited to marriage, this pronouncement certainly includes the marriage relationship, cautioning believers not to allow broken relationships to render them vulnerable to the devil. Related injunctions pertaining to childrearing are found in Paul's epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians where fathers are enjoined not to provoke their children to anger lest they become discouraged (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21).

Thirdly, Satan will seek to disrupt marriages by sowing the seeds of *marital conflict* through the *husband's insensitivity* to his wife. The apostle Paul tells husbands to love their wives and not to be harsh with them (Col. 3:19). Peter writes similarly, "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (1 Pet. 3:7). According to Peter, the husband's insensitivity toward his wife may be the potential cause for

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<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of biblical principles for dealing with sexual temptation see Köstenberger, *God, Marriage & Family*, 188-91.

<sup>27</sup> On the background to 1 Corinthians 7 and for an exposition of verse 5, see especially Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 266-83.

spiritual disruption in marriage, and marital discord, in turn, becomes a hindrance to united, answerable prayer.<sup>28</sup>

Whether it is the couple's sex life, unresolved conflict, inconsiderateness toward one's wife, or some other area, the New Testament makes clear that all are part of spiritual warfare, and husbands and wives must take the necessary precautions in order not to lose in the spiritual war that rages concerning their marriage. What is more, it is important to realize that the enemy is not only an external one (i.e., the devil), but that our first ancestors allowed the enemy inside, as it were, by succumbing to the devil's lure and rebelling against the Creator. Thus the devil is now able to use the world at large which is separated from God as well as our inborn, innate sinful nature to reinforce the power sin has over us (1 John 2:15-17). The only way this power can be consistently and effectively overcome is for a believer to recognize himself or herself as a new creature in Christ and to live under the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit (1 John 4:4).

How, then, are we to fight in this spiritual war in which we are engaged? At least three important lessons emerge from the biblical teaching on spiritual warfare discussed above. First, an *awareness of the fact that there is a battle* is imperative for success. Anyone who, in the case of war, fails to realize that he is engaged in conflict will no doubt be an early casualty owing to his failure to properly protect himself. It is the same in the realm of marriage. Arguably, divorce rates are skyrocketing, not primarily because of the lack of good intentions, the unavailability of resources and instruction on how to conduct a strong biblical marriage, or even the lack of love, but because many, unbelievers and believers alike, inadequately recognize that spiritual warfare is a certain reality that calls for a concerted, deliberately planned response.

Second, it is essential to *know one's spiritual enemy*. This enemy is not one's marriage partner. Nor is it one's children. It is Satan, the enemy of our souls, who employs a variety of strategies, methods, and schemes (cf. 2 Cor. 10:4; Eph. 6:11; 1 Pet. 5:8-9), including that of exploiting and inciting our sin nature and the sinful aspects of the godless world around us. While the devil is highly intelligent, he nonetheless remains a creature. Thus he is neither omniscient nor omnipresent; God and Satan are not evenly matched. The devil can, and in fact, does miscalculate—the most striking instance being the cross, when what Satan thought

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<sup>28</sup> The question of whether it is only the husband's prayers (probably the immediate focus) or the couples' prayers (the necessary implication) that are hindered need not concern us here (see the relevant commentary literature; e.g., P. H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 123, n. 20). In the end, it is clearly the prayers of the entire couple that are negatively affected by the husband's insensitivity toward his wife.



would be his greatest triumph was turned into his final defeat three days later when Jesus rose from the dead. Satan specifically targets people's areas of weakness and greatest vulnerability, and every individual must be prepared for this in order not to be caught off guard. Yet like Paul, so believers today will find that God's grace is more than sufficient for every challenge they face in the power of Christ, as long as they are diligent to "put on the full armor of God."

Third and finally, *spiritual battles must be fought by the use of proper weapons*. As mentioned, some lose a spiritual conflict in which they are engaged because they fail to realize that a battle is in fact raging and their involvement is not optional but essential. Yet others may realize they are in a war but fail to use proper spiritual weapons (or protective gear, as it were). Once again, such persons will soon become casualties. In the context of Christian marriages, as well as in parenting, it is imperative that believers, in order to overcome a spiritual enemy—be it their own sinfulness or evil supernatural opposition—put on the "full armor of God" (Eph. 6:10-18):

- *Truth*: Like all believers, spouses must "put off falsehood and speak truthfully" to one another (Eph. 4:25), yet they must speak "the truth *in love*" and hence "in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (Eph. 4:15). In their speech they must make every effort to "not let any unwholesome talk" come out of their mouths, "but only what is helpful" for *building each other up* "according to their needs" (Eph. 4:29).
- *Righteousness*: Righteousness is both one's right standing with God in and through Christ (e.g., Rom. 5:1, 9; 2 Cor. 5:21) and one's dealings with God and one's fellow human beings with integrity (e.g., Ps. 15). For this reason it is only marriages where both spouses are *Christians* that can truly and consistently live out God's will for marriage (Eph. 5:18; cf. Rom. 8:9).
- *Peace*: As believers, the husband and the wife have been given the peace of Christ in the Holy Spirit (John 14:27; 16:33). They know that they have been eternally forgiven and that they are sons and daughters of God (John 1:12; 1 John 3:1); being at peace with God (Rom. 5:1), they can be at peace with each other and act as peacemakers in the world around them (Matt. 5:9; 2 Cor. 5:17-18).
- *Faith*: As all believers, husband and wife must follow the Lord Jesus Christ in discipleship and learn to trust him to meet all their needs and overcome all challenges and adversity. Their overriding concern should not be material needs but the extension of God's rule in the world (Matt. 6:25-34). Faith in God also entails trusting God with one's

husband or wife and God the Holy Spirit's continued transforming work in their lives.

- *Salvation*: Because a married couple is secure in their assurance of salvation and eternal destiny, they can truly love each other unconditionally and selflessly; the husband can provide responsible, loving leadership without abusing his authority, and the wife can trust and submit graciously to God's leading of her through her husband (Eph. 5:21-33).
- *The Word of God*: Because there is no lasting foundation for our lives other than God's Word (cf. Matt. 7:24-27; Heb. 4:12-13; 1 Pet. 1:23-25), a married couple must be committed to "remain in God's word" (John 8:31; 15:4, 7) through regular personal and joint study of Scripture and faithful attendance of and participation in a local church where the Word of God is preached (1 Tim. 4:2).
- *Prayer*: Regular joint prayer is essential for marriage partners at all times to "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Husband and wife ought to make a habit of bringing their thanksgiving and requests before God and trust him to act on their behalf (Phil. 4:6-7; 1 Pet. 5:7). In exceptional circumstances a couple may even choose to refrain from sexual relations for a time for the purpose of concerted prayer (1 Cor. 7:5).

What is more, while it is the responsibility of every individual believer, couple, and family to wage spiritual warfare in keeping with biblical principles, one must not forget the larger context of the local church, which provides a sphere of mutual support and accountability, if necessary even including church discipline. As Christians are engaged in spiritual conflict, they must embrace the truth that there is in fact a spiritual battle raging; they must strive to know their enemy, the devil, who incites human sin nature to resist God; and they must fight using proper, spiritual weapons. As the apostle Paul writes, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. . . . Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand" (Eph. 6:12-13).

Spiritual warfare is the all-encompassing, ruling reality for the marital relationship. Those who ignore it do so at their own peril. Just as the devil attacks those with potential for church leadership, he seeks to subvert human marriages, because they have the greatest potential for displaying to the world the nature of the relationship between Christ and his church (Eph. 5:31-32). If believers want to show the world by their marriages what a glorious and good God they have, they must, for God's sake as well as their own, engage in spiritual warfare, and they must do

so by using spiritual weapons. Then, and only then, will Christian marriages reflect the image and design of the Creator. For in the end, it is God's glory, not merely human fulfillment and satisfaction, that is the proper goal of Christian marriages.<sup>29</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Our study of Paul's teaching on marriage in the context of his letter to the Ephesians as a whole has yielded three important principles. First, marriage is part of God's larger end-time purpose of bringing all things back together under one head, Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:10). Second, Paul's instructions on marriage are addressed to Spirit-filled believers (Eph. 5:18). Third, marriage is part of spiritual warfare and requires husband and wife to put on the "full armor of God" (Eph. 6:10-18).

An understanding of marriage in this full-orbed biblical sense will go a long way toward strengthening our marriages. What we lack is not so much good intentions or good advice, but a proper biblical framework that sets marriage in its larger God-intended purpose. Marriage is a divine institution, and Scripture provides a very clear picture of the way in which God designed marriage. In our marriages, let us come together under our head, Jesus Christ, let us be filled with the Spirit, and let us resolutely resist Satan in the "full armor of God."

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<sup>29</sup> There are many excellent ministries aimed at strengthening Christian marriages and families. Among the best are Focus on the Family (<http://www.family.org>), FamilyLife (<http://www.familylife.com>), Family Dynamics (<http://www.familydynamics.net>) and the "Kingdom Family Initiative," which is part of the "Empowering Kingdom Growth" movement in the Southern Baptist Convention (<http://www.sbc.net/ekg/default.asp>; see especially the seven pillars of a kingdom family at <http://www.sbc.net/ekg/EKG-7pillars.asp>). Another organization that includes promoting biblical principles for marriage and family is the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (<http://www.cbmw.org>).