

How do we deal with a troubling Bible passage?

- Today's reading from Ephesians gives us a perfect example: "For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church...Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands." (Eph 5:23)
- Probably crazy to preach about it...not above joking—Husbands: aren't our wives subject to us in many ways?
- Think of how much they put up with from us...

But this isn't a quote from a talk-show host or somebody's blog, it's the Bible! What do we do with it?

- Ignore it ("We don't believe that anymore.")
- Argue with it (other Scripture, e.g. Gal 3:23)
- Try to learn from it (searching for a nugget)

We're not biblical literalists—but we're not secular humanists either

- Balance: Bible has authority, continues to speak to us
- How do we sort out eternal wisdom from culture-bound advice?
- Both in this passage—What do we embrace and what pass over?
- Interpretation not a four-letter word—everyone does it (e.g. earth 6000 years old)

Bible's treatment of marriage a mixed bag (high points)

- Garden of Eden story quoted in Ephesians: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24)
- Nothing directly said about marriage—really more about sex...
- Later in Genesis story of Jacob's family—there were marriages there, but not what we see as ordinary ones (loved Rachel)

New Testament Jesus didn't say much about marriage

- He condemned adultery and criticized hard-heartedness, as well as saying that discipleship is the heart of family
- In his authentic letters Paul was not exactly encouraging about marriage: "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion." (1 Cor 7:8)

The Letter to the Ephesians came a bit later, as the community of the church became better established

- Chapter 5's guiding principle is for the believers to "Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." (Eph 5:2)
- It's obvious that the statements about women being subject to their husbands came out of a patriarchal culture with a different understanding of gender roles than we have today
- But the fact that this advice was given at all suggests a valuable insight: that marriages matter to far more people than the two people directly involved

And if we dig deeper, there's something that looks like an eternal truth in this passage: husbands and wives are urged to "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." (repeat)

- First of all, this says that marriage is a way of responding to the gift of God's love in Jesus Christ (heart of Christian theology)
- Second, it assumes mutuality in marriage as the building block of community—respect for differences not in vogue today...
- The central question becomes not who's in charge, but whether spouses genuinely love and care for each other—I'm sure we can all agree on the importance of that!

It's good to remember that the Bible is not really a book, but a library—a collection of epic narratives and moral exhortations and poetry and stories of Jesus and advisory letters and visions of the apocalypse

- Any sentence beginning with the phrase, "The Bible says..." should be carefully scrutinized—without doubt the sources have been distilled to arrive at a conclusion
- Interpretation is not a problem in itself—it's essential if we're going to gain access to the eternal wisdom we seek
- The key is to avoid making our conclusions first and then interpreting the Bible to reinforce our views (regardless of traditional/progressive, liberal/conservative, red/blue...)
- Our challenge is to come to the Scriptures with open hearts and curious minds, and to listen carefully to other points of view, hoping that we'll learn and grow in the process