



Complement of Love

The Handmaid's Tale, a current TV series adaptation of the same-titled book, pictures Gilead, a totalitarian society that withdrew from the United States following an internal war. In Gilead's hierarchical regime, husbands, called "captains," are high in authority, lording over low-level wives. Women are brutally subjugated. By law, females are not permitted to work, own property, handle money, or read. The husbands make harsh demands, enforce strict rules, live by a double standard—all while quoting Scripture to the wives as proof texts for behaving inhumanely.

In one cruel scene, a wife and a handmaid contrive to submit documents to the government, crafted by using their pre-Gilead political and editorial experience, without the husband's approval. Discovering what they have done, the husband becomes furious, opens his Bible to Ephesians 5, and reads aloud to them, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands as unto the Lord. For the husband is head of the

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wife." He then removes his belt and repeatedly whips his wife, forcing the handmaid to watch. The captain's bruising and battering of his wife are meant to teach her and the handmaid a lesson: they are to never intrude into his domain or initiate an action without his permission.

This literary caricature of the marital relationship may be easily dismissed by Christians because of its extreme graphic nature. Yet the plotline forces us to ask, How do we as Christian husbands and wives interpret and implement the teachings of the Scriptures in our marriages?

For husbands, the option of pulling rank and ordering obedience from the wife can be a convenient default. If the wife questions the reasoning behind the demands, the husband may reply with a stern voice, "Because I'm the head of this household!" or "Because I said so!" and tack on an implied or spoken threat to the wife for her lack of obedience.

Pursuing Oneness

Based upon our own experience and that of countless other couples who have shared their stories with us during our decades of ministry, this domineering approach will not

“For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:30–32).

achieve the desired result of true oneness (Eph. 5:31–32). In the short term, the husband may achieve his desired outcome. The wife may outwardly comply, but inwardly a sore is festering. Sooner or later, the resentment will erupt, and bitterness will overflow.

It is no simple challenge for a man and woman who are distinct individuals to come together in marriage and genuinely achieve the ideal of oneness that they promise in their wedding vows. As a couple, we began our wedded life with the benefit of being raised in Christian homes in which our parents modeled healthy marriages. Yet as we pulled away from our wedding reception in our VW Beetle, we immediately discovered that we approached life on vastly different terms. Even during our honeymoon, we became acutely aware that the process of becoming one in our function as a couple would be a long-term project. The day-to-day process of fitting together that began on our wedding day has become a lifelong quest for us. At times, when we stubbornly dug in our heels and refused to pursue oneness, our commitment to each other was tested.

Progressing in Oneness

The progress of becoming one hasn't always been forward. For one thing, we each entered marriage practically as only children. (Daria's brothers are 20+ years older.) Our backgrounds were different. Daria grew up in the small town of Bucyrus, Ohio; John is from Philadelphia. Daria's parents were dedicated Christians, but she knew nothing of life in a pastor's home. John descended from eight generations of pastors. Daria went to Bowling Green State University and was a little sis for a fraternity. John attended Baptist Bible College and spent his summers ministering on a gospel team. Daria likes to talk about the problems they experience as a couple. John would rather not talk about them. We won't bore you with more details. Our story is not alone. If you are married, you and your spouse can relate.

The question remains, how do two people grow in oneness in marriage? We would like to suggest an alternative approach that ironically appeals to the same Ephesians 5 passage that the “captain” used when whipping his wife. Rather than legitimizing a misogynist form of conduct, this approach epitomizes the standard of the infinite love relationship between Christ and the church. As we approach our 43rd anniversary, we are learning how to achieve true oneness in our marriage relationship. We are growing to understand and implement the Scriptural specifics of marital love. While we do not quote chapter and verse when relating to each other, we base the way we view and treat each other on the soundness of theological

truths. The following underlying Scriptural principles are part of our marital DNA.

We recognize that we are both made in the image of God.

As such, we honor each other with dignity and respect. Neither of us considers the other as subpar. Unlike animals or inanimate objects, we inherently have God's divine imprint in our being. We approach our daily routines and roles with the understanding that neither of us is superior to the other. We try to honor each other as God's image bearer even during heated discussions. Hurling insults and debasing one's character are not fitting behaviors toward one who has God's imprint. As an extension of our marriage, we strive to give a high level of respect toward other human beings, believers and unbelievers. We are all made in the image of God.

We realize that God has given us unlimited resources that we can creatively use.

God has blessed us with unique roles, skill sets, and special interests. We recognize that according to God's creation mandate in Genesis 1, He wants us to take His creation and develop it. Instead of centering on perceived deficiencies in one another, we attempt to imaginatively maximize the resources God has entrusted to us. As His stewards, we aim to work hard and be organized and productive in our daily responsibilities. Since God made us as creative beings, we prompt and support each other in growing in knowledge, developing our skills, exploring new ideas, and most of all in seeking godly wisdom. When we are both striving to use God's resources in the best way possible, our marriage becomes happier and stronger.

We see ourselves not united by chance but divinely appointed as complements.

Together we form a stronger potential to achieve than either of us could attain alone. Marriage provides an operational partnership that is meant to be missional, accomplishing something quantifiable and valuable. The process of writing is an example of bringing our strengths together. John is a well-versed theologian; Daria is an experienced educator. John tends to express thoughts in more technical terms. Daria is more conversational. In writing this article, John hammers out a beginning draft, and off we go into the back and forth of developing and refining each other's thoughts into a meaningful text (or at least we hope.)

Every marriage partner has individual strengths that can be aligned to make a beautiful whole. The process of melding can get easily derailed if we allow the difference in our strengths to become irritations. Earlier in our marriage, we became frustrated and disappointed as we noticed weak areas in each other. It takes God-given grace, patient understanding, and personal discipline to recognize the skills each partner brings to the table and to combine those skills to achieve much as a cooperative whole.

We engage in active parenting (now grandparenting). God has given us a family to enjoy and nurture. Parenting is a united venture. When our children were growing up, we both assumed responsibility for their spiritual, cognitive, and emotional development. We flexed with parenting chores according to each other's schedule. When the children were preschoolers, we both worked on our masters' degrees in addition to serving as pastor and wife of a growing church. No parenting task was beneath John, even during the era of cloth diapers. No act of administering discipline was delayed by Daria—just ask our kids. We took seriously the responsibility to raise our family according to the precepts of God's Word.

We believe God made us to enjoy fellowship with Him and with each other. We have individually and together made a daily walk with God a priority in which we listen to Him through His Word and talk to Him in prayer. For the last several years we have read through the Bible using the Bible App YouVersion daily devotionals. We read the same passage and devotional individually and often share thoughts and pray together. We often do this early in the morning as we're walking our two-mile route in a nearby mall. Communing with God together has solidified our oneness with Christ and with each other.

To have a healthy relationship with God, we must acknowledge our sin as individuals and seek His forgiveness. As marriage partners, we must also be quick to acknowledge our wrongdoing toward each other and ask for forgiveness. Sin causes devastating effects in our relationship with God and with one another. Our hearts must ask, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139:23–24).

As husband and wife, we enjoy being together. We have learned to value each other's interests. John goes to the opera, and Daria watches baseball. Daria watches action movies, and sometimes John will watch an Emily Brontë story. Our world expands because we share knowledge about each other's pursuits. We appreciate the intimacy of experiencing life as husband and wife who are also best friends.

We recognize that the complexities of life require wisdom from above. Marriage is a complex institution. We have grown beyond a naïveté that sees easy, black-and-white solutions to inevitable problems that crop up in marriage and life. Our conduct is a fruit-bearing outgrowth of God's grace rather than a demanded behavioral conformity to the law. Our life in Christ enables us to progressively become more like Him. The local church instructs and encourages us in growing toward the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. We have made a concerted effort to obtain God's wisdom through His Word and in prayer and to embed it in the lives of our children.

It is within this theological framework that we understand and accept the roles and responsibilities of Ephesians 5:22–33.

Daria: Even though I am a strong-minded, independent thinker, I find it easy to follow John's lead in our marriage. I know that he is totally committed to me, just as Christ is totally committed to the church. I am secure in John's love, just as I am secure in Christ's love. John appreciates my perspective and abilities and seeks my input. He truly brings me into his life as a partner. Oneness in marriage takes both partners working toward the goal of melding their lives. It is a process that begins at "I do" and continues until "death do us part." Sometimes the work of becoming one in marriage is difficult and disappointing. Don't give up. The companionship and joy that happen as you unite your lives is well worth the effort.

John: As husband, I am to function as head and to love Daria. The entire book of Ephesians serves as a tutorial on Christ's love and leadership of the church. He chose, blessed, gave Himself for, provided for, secured, graced, united, empowered, entrusted, and committed forever to His Bride. He determined the values for the relationship. He called on His Bride to contribute to the growth of the church. The profound implications of all that Christ does for His Bride and the way in which He does it provide the robust template I am to follow in my marriage to Daria. As my complement, she has character, perspectives, and competencies that as a "head" I must discover and tap to maximize our God-assigned potential as a couple. Daria deserves at the end of the day to be able to say, "I am married to a truly Christlike man." That responsibility humbles me and causes me to stretch forward to reach the goal of likeness to Christ.

We are learning together the wisdom of Solomon, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone? Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Eccles. 4:9–12). **B**o

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