

BOOK REVIEW

LOVE AND RESPECT

by Emerson Eggerichs
(Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004)

Most conservative Christian books emphasize the Ephesians 5 motif of womanly submission and manly sacrificial love. And, indeed, that is a clear teaching of Scripture. However, unless one is speaking to a sympathetic audience, the moment the word, “submission” passes the leader’s lips, audience hostility is aroused. Correctly understood, the “submission” teaching of Paul and Peter (I Peter 3) is wholesome and freeing for wives, but nowadays a speaker will lose his audience before he has the chance to thoroughly unpack this teaching.

Eggerichs has made a brilliant little strategic adjustment. He uses the word, “respect” (from Ephesians 5:33) instead of the word “submission.” “Respect” is the other side of the coin of “submission” (if one respects another person, one finds it much easier and more palatable to submit to that person’s leadership) but there is a world of difference in the listener/reader reaction to the vocabulary. Thus the author wins a much greater audience for his message. Even husbands will find the term “respect” a more engaging term; most men don’t want their wives to simply *submit* to them, especially if the women feel theologically compelled to do so—men hunger for their wives to *respect* them, and most men accept that this respect needs to, and should, be earned.

But most couples don’t get it. The author describes the self-perpetuating dynamic of the Crazy Cycle: *Him: “I’ll love her when she respects me.” Her: “I’ll respect him when he deserves it.”* As this cycle progresses it usually spirals downward as each partner gets angrier and more determined not to reward the other’s “poor performance.” This is why half of Christian marriages are failing. Couples just keep doing the same behaviors even when the results are disastrous. His point is *Craziness happens when we keep doing the same things over and over with the same ill effect.*¹

Gary Smalley’s book, *If Only He Knew*, asserts that invariably the culprit in an unhappy marriage is the husband. Unhappy marriages are the fruit of husbands who do not know how to love their wives. Smalley teaches that if a husband will get it right about loving his wife, then her heart will be freed to respond to him and the marriage can be healed. Eggerichs’ approach is radically different. He thinks that the standard church teaching is only half of the story and that’s why it isn’t working.² He writes, *Many books on marriage stress the need for husbands to love their wives, but the unique feature about this book is the concept of wives showing unconditional respect toward husbands.*³ On the previous page he stresses that a wife must do this even though it seems counterintuitive: *Peter is not calling on wives to feel respect; he is commanding them to*

¹ Page 29.

² Page 45.

³ Page 19.

*show respectful behavior. This is not about the husband deserving respect; it is about the wife being willing to treat her husband respectfully **without conditions.***⁴

Men and women communicate in different code and thus their messages to each other are not understood. Since desire to be loved is so hard-wired into a woman's soul, she seeks to communicate in the same love-language to her husband, completely missing the point that what a husband hungers for is *respect*. A national study of four hundred men is cited that yielded seventy-four percent of the men saying ...*that if they were forced to choose, they would prefer being alone and unloved in the world rather than the alternative of feeling ...inadequate and disrespected by everyone.* Eggerichs claims that numerous men agree with this: "*I would rather live with a wife who respected me but did not love me than live with a wife who loved me but did not respect me.*"⁵

So who makes the first move to break out of the Crazy Cycle? Eggerichs' answer is: *the one who sees himself or herself as the most mature.*⁶ And when one partner makes the commitment to stop behaving in a retaliatory way and purposes to minister to the deepest need of his or her partner, the *Crazy Cycle* can be broken. That leads to the *Energizing Cycle*: his love motivates her respect and her respect motivates his love. Thus follow separate chapters for husbands and wives which unpack acronyms for each gender. C-O-U-P-L-E is for men and means **C**loseness, **O**penness, **U**nderstanding, **P**eacemaking, **L**oyalty, and **E**steem. For wives the acronym is C-H-A-I-R-S which means **C**onquest, **H**ierarchy, **A**uthority, **I**nsight, **R**elationship, and **S**exuality.⁷

When couples execute the *Energizing Cycle* well, it will result in the *Rewarded Cycle*, in other words, *it works*. In the early stages it may not look like it is working, but this fear calls for a deliberate trust in God to bless the obedience. In fact, even if it never works, even when a partner feels hopeless, he or she needs to ...*catch the truth that what they do matters to God; nothing is wasted.*⁸ Persisting with faith in God despite contra-indicators is a huge step of faith and the absence of that rugged faith is devastating the church. Eggerichs concludes ... *we don't have a "marriage crisis" in the Christian community; we have a crisis of faith.*⁹

Now the downsides of the book. Toward the end of the book there is a case described of a woman married to a man who had been serially adulterous. After twenty months of counseling which transformed the prodigal husband into a loving, godly man, she could not bring herself to respect him. Then, in a burst of insight born out of reading some Eggerichs materials, she found freedom in understanding that *I didn't have to respect him based on his behavior but on who he is as a man, made in the image of God.*¹⁰ I submit that a person wins respect based on behavior, not just because he exists as a human being. This woman may choose to treat her husband with respect even if she doesn't feel it, but

⁴ Page 18.

⁵ Page 49.

⁶ Page 75.

⁷ Page 116.

⁸ Page 272.

⁹ Page 276.

¹⁰ Pages 288-289.

true respect *is* earned; it is not an existential right. Further, even Jesus acknowledged the legitimacy of divorce in such cases (Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9). “Love and Respect” is not the solution to every marriage crisis.

Another Pollyanna passage addresses the case of a very “not nice” spouse: *Yes, your spouse may be harsh, unloving, or disrespectful a lot of the time, but just remembering that your spouse is really a person of goodwill can put you on the road to the Rewarded Cycle.*¹¹ This is unwarranted “pretend” language. Not every spouse is “really a person of goodwill.” This is a sinful world and there are spouses who are “really persons of ill will.” Pretending may lead to disastrous results, such as chronically abused wives and enabler wives who lack the courage to intercept cycles of child abuse by their husbands.

One further criticism: Problem-solving books tend to load-up with success stories of people who follow the speaker’s/author’s advice and thereby experience glowing success. This book is heavily loaded with affirming testimonials and stories. Doubtless many of the stories are authentically in the success-column. However, equally doubtlessly, some of the success stories will or have ended up in the loss-column after a “honeymoon season.” Conspicuously absent are stories of spouses who tried hard to apply these principles (*Bless their hearts for trying—God smiles on them!*) but found their partners unresponsive or suffered the dissolution of their marriages. That side of the anecdotal evidence also needs to be heard. Without the acknowledgement and analysis of the failures, readers who do try hard and fail may well be left with a lingering sense of guilt and inadequacy: *It worked for everybody else—What’s wrong with me?!*

Finally, I closed the book with an uncomfortable feeling that Eggerichs turns the screws down harder on wives than he does husbands. I suspect that more men like this book than do women. In his introduction Eggerichs stresses, *For many couples, respect is, indeed, the missing piece of the puzzle.* I assume that what he means by that statement is that the major cause of evangelical marital discord is clueless wives. I confess that this may well be my own distorted opinion. Maybe what has been offered by the church in my lifetime has been unbalanced against men (*man bad; woman good*) and I’m not over it yet. What do you think? I’d love to hear your thoughts...

Overall, I found the book to be biblically faithful and helpful. I am comfortable recommending it to couples. I’ve heard many reports of marriage blessing from my friends who have read and applied the book. The emphasis on *respect vs. submission* is a powerful and welcome cultural adaptation of the message. But the book does need to be read with discretion. Husbands, particularly, need to guard against turning the pages with a growing spirit of triumphalism (*Finally someone is telling women what **they** are doing wrong!*)

Timothy G. Walton
Alderwood Community Church
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Email: <tim.walton@amcc.org>

¹¹ Page 290.