

# Sound Living

## The Roles and Privileges of Marriage

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# A Biblical Perspective on Husbands and Wives

## Husbands

The first question I would like to ask is, "Husband, do you love your wife?"

Your responses to my question could be:

- "Oh, no. What a question!"
- "And the worst thing is you ask it right here in front of my wife."
- "Unless I can figure out how to get out of here I have to sit here thinking not only how would I answer the question but how my wife would answer it."
- "I feel a guilt-trip coming on."

My objective here is not to feel guilty; the objective is to change. And here's some good news for us husbands: If we are Christians, the Spirit of God dwells in us and His goal and energy is aimed at changing us. It is never too late because of the power of the Spirit within us.

But getting back to the question: "Husband, do you love your wife?" We'd like to respond with an impatient, let's-get-off-the-subject, "Of course I love my wife!" But tempered by our wives presence, we are more likely to say, "Ye-es, I love my wife...in my own way." Let me up the ante: "Do you love your wife as Christ loves the church?"

The question is drawn from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In the first three chapters of the book Paul writes about how we become Christians

– it is wholly by God’s grace. With chapter four he begins to write of the life-style implications of being a Christian—how does one live as a Christian. Living as a Christian is far different than living as anyone else.

Paul teaches in Ephesians 5 that living filled with the Spirit results in at least four things:

Ephesians 5:18-21 says, "*Instead, **be filled with the Spirit. Speak(ing)** to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. **Sing(ing) and mak(ing) music** in your heart to the Lord, **always giving thanks** to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. **Submit(ing) to one another** out of reverence for Christ.*"(Emphasis Added)

For Paul, it is that last result that he wishes to explain and illustrate further—what it means to be submitting to one another. He gives six examples; he talks about submission in the husband/wife relationship, in the parent/child relationship and in the employer/employee relationship.

The idea of “submitting” is a hotly debated one in our culture. I will address that later in this series. But for now, let it suffice to say the somewhat obvious: submitting to one another does not mean submitting in the same ways to one another. Children do not submit to parents in the same way that parents submit to children. Jesus does not submit to the church in the same way the church is to submit to Him.

Look at Ephesians 5:21-33:

*"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

*Wives, (submit) to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.”*

We can easily see the outline  
from which Paul writes:  
Ephesians 5:21-33

**Principle:** “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (v. 21)

**Application:** “*Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.*” (v. 22-24)

“Husbands, love your wives” (v.25-32)

**Summary:** “However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.” (v. 33)

I begin by addressing Paul's second application toward husbands. So let me ask the question again: Do you love your wife just as Christ loves the church?

The treatment of wives by their husbands 2000 years ago was tragic.

"What information we do have about women and the attitudes toward them paints an absolutely awful picture. For example one writer said that women were the worst plague that Zeus made. Another said the two best days in a woman's life are when someone marries her and when he carries her dead body to the grave.

"In (1<sup>st</sup> Century) Judaism women were not counted in the quorum needed for a synagogue.... One rabbi advised, 'Do not talk much with a woman.' Another added, 'Not even with one's wife.' By and large women were viewed as inferior and were given relatively little freedom.... Even in Rome women were in only a slightly better position than their sisters in the East.

"In a few places like Sparta and Egypt women were given greater freedom and responsibility. In most places however if they were allowed to live at birth, women were minimally educated, could not be witnesses in a court of law, could not adopt children or make a contract, could not own property or inherit, and were viewed, as both Aristotle and Josephus said, in all respects to be inferior to a man. They're seen as less intelligent, less moral and the source of sin and continual temptation."<sup>1</sup>

You can easily imagine then that Paul's words to husbands came as a surprise. For wives to submit to their husbands was normal. For husbands to love

their wives was irrelevant. We've come a long way since that time. Or have we?

For centuries men have had the upper hand in marriage. Both through physical strength and economic power they have been able to control women. The kindest term for that kind of arrangement is male chauvinism but the more accurate is misogyny—hatred of women.

Even as women have gained power in some cultures the result in the husband/wife relationship has not gotten much better. Instead of chauvinism where husbands used and abused their wives, we wound up with competition where husbands and wives use and abuse each other or with compromise. By saying that, I am not suggesting that even in America we've created an equal playing field for wives. What I am saying is that even if we did create an equal playing field, we would have only changed the problem not solved it. This is hardly what God has in mind when He speaks of submitting to each other.

***...even if we did create an equal playing field, we would have only changed the problem not solved it***

God's objective for us is not chauvinism or competition or even compromise. Christ-following men and women are called into husband/wife relationships modeled after the relationship of Jesus and His church. And for a husband, that is summarized in the statement, "*Husband, love your wife just as Christ loves the church.*"

What Paul does in this passage is describe both how a husband is to love his wife and the goal of a husband's love for his wife. The "how" is stated in verses 25 and 28-30:

*"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and **gave himself up for her**... In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives **as their own bodies**. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he **feeds and cares for it**, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of **his** body." (Emphasis Added)*

The "goal" is stated in verses 26 and 27:

*"To make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."*

Let's go back to the "how." How does Jesus love His church? How does He love us? In verse 25 He "gave himself up for" us. In Romans 5:8 it says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." And, Philippians 2:5-8 says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but...(took) the very nature of a servant... And...humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!"

The gods of other religions are hard taskmasters. They say that if you want a relationship with them—if you want their favor—you have to earn it. And woe is you if you don't measure up to their fickle expectations. But our God comes to us and says if

we want a relationship with Him we can't earn it, He has to. He doesn't ask us to begin by giving ourselves to Him but He begins by giving Himself for us.

Too many of us husbands act like the gods of other religions. If our wives measure up, if they will do what they are supposed to do for us, then we will respond to them. But woe to them if they don't measure up to our fickle expectations. Our response to them is measured out by how much they give to us. We've got it all wrong. We've got it backwards. Who is supposed to serve whom in a marriage? Jesus gave Himself up for us. Every move Jesus made was calculated based on His love for us. He literally gave His life to meet our need.

Husbands, whom are we supposed to "give ourselves up for"? Ourselves? Our jobs? Our children? Some of us men need to be honest that we are content with our wives as long as they support our agendas or at least don't interfere with them.

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We deceive ourselves, saying that we give ourselves up for our jobs so that we can provide for our families when the truth is that we have given ourselves up for our jobs because we like the rewards. Most of us married when we were still young-wet-behind-the-ears-hopefuls: certainly not promises. Our wives didn't marry us because they

were in love with our income or status—we didn't have either. They married us because they wanted us. Maybe after losing us to what we truly give ourselves up for, they've settled for what we could provide, but it is not what they wanted.

I'm always troubled by the number of young husbands whose lives are largely unchanged by marriage. They are still involved nearly as much in the same hobbies, sports, and other interests as before marriage. They were serving themselves before they married and they are still serving themselves after marriage – only now they expect their wives to serve them as well.

***...but if our love is based on her qualities, our love will ebb and flow as our perception of those qualities ebbs and flows.***

Another issue for us, men is what we base our love on. A husband's love for his wife, if like Christ's self-sacrificing love, is not based on his wife's attractiveness, attributes or her abilities. We may wake up some day after being married a while and finally admit to ourselves that our wives are not as attractive, or compliant, or capable as we once thought. And the tragedy is that based on such things, we might even admit to ourselves we don't feel what we used to feel. We might even say, "I'm not in love any more." All of those thoughts only reveal that love for us, all along, was only a response not an action. We are not commanded to love our wives for what they are or do. Christ loves us not because of what we are or do and in fact in

spite of what we are and do.

I know that a woman is complimented, even flattered, if we say we love her because of her intelligence, appearance, her personality, or her other virtues—and to be sure those are great benefits to us—but if our love is based on those things, our love will ebb and flow as our perception of those qualities ebbs and flows.

Many of you have read this statement by the past president of Columbia Bible College, Dr. Robertson McQuilkin:

“My dear wife, Muriel, has been in failing mental health for about eight years. So far I have been able to carry both her ever-growing needs and my leadership responsibilities at Columbia. But recently it has become apparent that Muriel is contented most of the time she is with me and almost none of the time I am away from her. It is not just discontent. She is filled with fear – even terror – that she has lost me and always goes in search of me when I leave home. Then she may be full of anger when she cannot get to me. So it is clear to me that she needs me now, full-time. Perhaps it will help you to understand if I share with you what I shared at the time of the announcement of my resignation in chapel. The decision was made in a way 42 years ago when I promised to care for Muriel in sickness and in health...till death do us part. So, as I told the students and faculty, as a man of my word, integrity has something to do with it. But so does fairness. She has cared for me fully and sacrificially all these years; if I cared for her for the next 40 years I would not be out of debt. Duty, however, can be grim and stoic. But there is more; I love Muriel. She is a

delight to me—her childlike dependence and confidence in me, her warm love, occasional flashes of wit I used to relish so, her happy spirit and tough resilience in the face of her continual distressing frustration. I do not have to care for her; I get to! It is a high honor to care for so wonderful a person.”<sup>2</sup> But I notice that McQuilkin speaks to two different aspects of his love. One is choice and the other is response.

- He chooses to love her out of commitment and duty.
- And he responds to her loveliness.

Christ’s love for us is the former. Jesus’ love for us is not in response to our loveliness. He loves us right through our rebellion, our indifference, or our disregard. He doesn’t withhold His love or condition His love. This is a very different way of looking at love but it is vitally important.

That may not sound very romantic but romantic feelings are not the basis of a marriage and they won’t hold it together. Oh, I hope you enjoy the feelings of romance in your marriage but I much more want you to be able to understand that those feelings are not the basis of your marriage; the basis of a Christian marriage is a choice—the choice of self-sacrificing service.

There’s a second description of how husbands are to love their wives. Look at Ephesians 5:25 and 28-30: *“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives **as their own bodies**. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he **feeds and cares for it**, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his*

*body.*" (Emphasis Added) Paul speaks very deliberately and precisely to the point that we become part of Christ upon conversion. We are brought into union with Him.

The connection—the union—is so strong it is spoken

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of as becoming one with Him, of being in Him, of Him being in us. We are now so inseparably connected that we are described as His body. Ephesians 5:30 says, "*for we are members of his body.*" It is that kind of connection, that oneness, that union of two becoming one, that is pointed out in verse 31:

*"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."*

God designed marriage so that a mystical union takes place. Paul's argument is not just that we husbands are to treat our wives like we would treat our own bodies but that we would treat our wives as our own bodies. A husband and wife have become so much one new entity that how a husband treats his wife is in fact how he is treating himself.

We know how careful we are about taking care of ourselves. Years ago I apparently cracked a rib while sliding head first into a lake off a water slide.

- For those three months, I have protected that side of my body as if my life depended on it.
- For over two months I couldn't lie on that side

and couldn't bend in certain ways.

- I moved in and out of the car in a very deliberate way.
- When my son would jump on me I would involuntarily move to protect that side.

Paul is saying that as carefully as we would protect, care for and feed our own bodies so we protect, care for and feed our wives – because we (a husband and wife) are in fact one new entity. I know I haven't given a lot of illustrations for how to do this but I wanted to spend this time giving men a whole new orientation from which to think about their relationship with their wife. Husband love your wife just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, loving her as his own body, caring for and feeding her.

## **A Husband's Goal**

Lastly, I want to talk about the goal of a husband's love. Look again at Ephesians 5:25-27:

*"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless."* I am not going to press for a one-to-one correspondence between this description of Christ's goal for the church and what ought to be our goal for our wives but neither can we say Paul just got carried away describing the Christ/church relationship and say it has nothing to do with describing a husband's relationship with his wife.

Paul is describing how a Christian husband's love for his wife is modeled on Christ's love for the church. It

is not only self-sacrificing but its goal is her spiritual welfare. Jesus gave Himself up for us not as a martyr but to produce a specific result. He lived and died to bring us to glory. He intercedes for us now to protect us to that end. He has given His Spirit and spiritual gifts to help us grow.

The Scriptures make it clear that Jesus didn't just do

***the beauty the Lord is describing is not physical but moral and spiritual as indicated by "holy and blameless"—you will perfectly reflect the character of God***

His thing on earth and then quit once He got back to heaven. Neither is He preoccupied with other things – He is preoccupied, absorbed, with our spiritual welfare and us. And, His intention is to so work in us that over time, by His active grace, we will be changed.<sup>2</sup> II Corinthians 3:18 says, *"And we...are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory..."*

To what end? Paul says God's purpose is in verse 27: *"To present her (the church – us) to himself as a radiant church, without stain, wrinkle or blemish, but holy and blameless."*

Here He is looking forward to that day when Jesus comes again and our salvation is completed—when we are finally and fully transformed, recreated in the image of God. Without *"stain, wrinkle, or blemish"* is clearly language of physical beauty (drawn most likely from Ezekiel 16), but the beauty the Lord is describing is not physical but moral and spiritual as indicated by *"holy and blameless"*—you will perfectly

reflect the character of God; the fruit of the Spirit will be natural.

And how does Jesus do that? Here He specifically mentions, "*Cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.*" It is the gospel, the Word of God, that the Spirit of God uses to transform us. But elsewhere the Scripture teaches that Jesus and the Spirit are constantly praying for us as well.

- "*Because Jesus lives forever... he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*" (Hebrews 7:25)
- "*The Spirit himself intercedes for us...*" (Romans 8:26)

Husbands, for what purpose are we to love our wives as Christ loved the church by giving Himself up for it? To be God's primary human instrument in bringing her to maturity in the faith.

John Piper has written, "God made man to be a sharer. God created us not to be cul-de-sacs of his bounty but conduits. No man is complete unless he is conducting grace (like electricity) between God and another person."<sup>3</sup> Jesus finds His joy and His glory in making us what He created us to be. Husbands find their greatest joy and glory not in selfish living but in enabling their wives to be all God created them to be. That is servant-leadership.

According to God's word, the relationship of a husband and wife is stronger than that between a parent and a child. Nowhere in the Bible is the parent/child relationship described as "one flesh" or

“one body.” Men, God will hold us responsible for the spiritual welfare of our wives more than for anyone else.

Be responsible to take initiative spiritually—get your family to church, encourage her spiritual growth by encouraging her participation in ministry and study of God’s word. Better yet, read and respond to God’s word together in personal time or in a small group. Encourage and help her develop her God-given abilities. Pray for her. Pray with her. If your wife won’t pray with you or doesn’t want to read the Bible with you it may well be because she doesn’t yet believe you have changed your whole orientation toward her. If she still perceives that your attitude is that she exists to serve you, she won’t be very interested in you using the Bible to bludgeon her into greater service.

***Be responsible to take initiative spiritually—get your family to church, encourage her spiritual growth by encouraging her participation in ministry and study of God’s word.***

Does your wife believe you love her? Not just that you find her attractive or useful but that you love her? Does she have reason to believe you love her just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her...and that you love her as your own body—that your desire is to feed and care for her, just as Christ does the church?

The then Prime Minister of Great Britain, Sir Winston Churchill was asked, “If you could not be who you are, who would you like to be?” He was asked the

question at a formal dinner attended by many important people. Churchill was sitting next to his wife Clemmie, as he called her, and as he rose, he took her hand and responded, "If I could not be who I am, I would most like to be... Lady Churchill's second husband."<sup>4</sup> If you said that of your relationship with your wife, would she believe you?

Are there some of us husbands who need to change the way we think about marriage? What would it look like if you loved your wife just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her? Are there some of us husbands who need to change the way we think about the purpose of our marriages? What would it look like if your purpose in marriage was your wife's spiritual welfare? Some of us have abdicated spiritual responsibility for our wives and families for too long.

Husbands, will we begin praying for and even with our wives? Husbands, will we begin reading God's word and discussing it with our wives? Maybe you have a wife who has paid more attention to her spiritual growth than you have and you'll be embarrassed by what you don't know. I'm sympathetic to the problem but I'm not sympathetic to your solution of doing nothing, which only makes the matter worse.

Christian husbands, it's time to act.

## **Wives**

*"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy..." (Ephesians 5:21-26,33)*

Paul begins to address the role and privileges of wives by stating one aspect of a wife's responsibility in the marriage relationship. God's instruction is, "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord." There it is. I mentioned the "s" word—"submit." That word has conjured up such negative ideas and actions that I must digress for a minute on a very important matter in this regard.

Wives, hear me clearly—this word and this text give no warrant for abuse of any kind. The problem is not in the word or in its definition but in a gross misuse of the word or more likely in total disregard for God's teaching on husband/wife relationships. And there is no biblical text that even suggests that a wife must remain in an abusive situation. And 94% of physical abuse in marriages is the husband against the wife.<sup>1</sup> If your husband is physically abusive, get yourself and your children out now! When I mention, "get out" I am not necessarily saying divorce, though it may come to that. I am talking about protecting yourself and your children now.

Do verbal and emotional abuses qualify as reasons to leave? If by verbal or emotional abuse you mean

that a husband got angry and raised his voice, I doubt that qualifies. But if you mean, as one wife complained and her husband admitted, that he stands over her in a threatening posture and yells non-stop, shouting obscenities, yes, I personally think that qualifies. Where is the line between those two extremes? I don't know but I think you do and when the line is crossed, get out and get help.

Many Christian young adults, as they anticipate marriage, are quite thoughtful about the marriage relationship. So many have experienced divorce in their childhood, or know others who have, that there is a fear of marriage—a fear that they won't do it right. For both young men and young women there is a great desire to not repeat the mistakes of their parents' generation. These young Christians want a marriage that is healthy, growing, and lasting. For many of these Christian young people, marriage is presented only in two forms: They can choose the old-fashioned, hierarchical, patriarchal, husband-dominant, wife-subservient pattern of the past with all of its abuses OR they can choose the new total equality of a mutually submissive relationship where husband and wife are co-regents in the state of matrimony. And of course they would choose the latter.

The problem they encounter however is reconciling that definition of marriage with the Bible. Because they are Christians desiring to obey Christ, they are willing to hear what He has to say about the marriage relationship. And they read the text in Ephesians 5 or they read:

*"Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord."*(Colossians 3:18-19)

*"Train the younger women to love their husbands and children and to be subject to their husbands..."(Titus 2:4-5)*

*"Wives...be submissive to your husbands... For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right..."(1 Peter 3:1,5)*

There's that word "submit" again, used over and over in the context of marriage. We can't imagine going back to the old husband-dominant, wife subservient relationship of the past and yet here's this word, "submit." As I mentioned earlier, this word triggers all kinds of negative feelings: as if "submit" meant "unfair," "unequal," "controlled," "loss of self," "subservient," "doormat," or even "abused."

***To submit is to yield to or defer to someone of higher rank or authority.***

First of all, let's be certain of what the word "submit" does mean. The word is used many, many times in the Bible. The word means, "to place under" and has to do with order and rank. "Originally it is a hierarchical term which stresses the relation to superiors"<sup>2</sup> To submit is to yield to or defer to someone of higher rank or authority.

Even those who refuse to use the word to describe

the marriage relationship confess that the word means this sense of rank and order.<sup>3</sup> For those of us who dislike the word, that doesn't help does it? But when we stop and think about it, it is our culture that sees "submission" as so negative, not the Bible. In spite of our natural rebellion against authority of any kind we know that God teaches:

- **We are to be submissive to God's authority**  
James 4:7 - *"Submit yourselves, then, to God."*
- **We are to be submissive to the authority of government**  
Romans 13:1 - *"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities."*
- **We are to be submissive to the leaders of the church,**  
Hebrews 13:17 - *"Obey your leaders and submit to their authority."*
- **We are to be submissive to the authority of our parents**  
Ephesians 6:1 - *"Children, obey your parents in the Lord."*

It is obvious that according to the Bible, "submit" is not an evil word.

But, some might argue, in all of those uses of submit there is no gender distinction. It is the same for both males and females.

- Both men and women are to submit to government.
- Both boys and girls are to submit to parents.

What about in marriage? If a wife submits to her husband doesn't that make her unequal? One author

writes, "The doctrine of male authority denies a wife the status of full adulthood - even if the husband rules with a very light and generous hand."<sup>4</sup> This author suggests that to be fully adult one cannot have any authority over him or her. I ask then if Christ's authority over us reduces our adulthood? Does the government's authority over me reduce my adulthood? Of course it does not. To suggest that submission denies adulthood is just wrong. If wives are to submit to their husbands, does that make them unequal to their husbands as persons? It is suggested that less authority implies being less a person.

***Inequality in this sense becomes a problem only if we define authority as the world does instead of the way God does***

We have a knee-jerk reaction to authority and inequality but not if we stop and think about it. A child, an employee, a citizen, or a church member is not a lesser person because they are under authority. Jesus is not unequal to God because He is under the Father's authority. So in what way are we unequal if we are under authority? Is it that we have less power, less control?

Inequality in this sense becomes a problem only if we define authority as the world does instead of the way God does. Most of us naturally think of authority in terms of privilege—if we have authority we are more likely to get what we want. But Jesus defined authority quite differently. In Mark 10:42-45, Jesus says, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their

*high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve..."*

So if we define authority not in terms of privilege but in terms of responsibility and service as Jesus did we realize that the one who is more likely to get what he wants and needs is the one who is being served, the one who is not equal in authority, the one who submits. Inequality becomes a moot point when we see authority and submission from God's point of view.

## **What about Mutual Submission?**

Even if we admit that the word "submit" means to place yourself under someone, and even if we admit that such submission is not necessarily bad, doesn't the text say that we are to submit to one another, to be mutually submissive—and wouldn't that mean husbands are to be submissive just as wives are to be submissive? Ephesians 5:21 says, "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*" There are some who suggest that adding the words "one another" changes the meaning of "submit" entirely so that submit means merely "making themselves available to each other."<sup>5</sup> And thus husbands are to submit to their wives and wives are to submit to their husbands—total equality of submission.

There are two major problems with changing the meaning of "submit." One is that such a definition of submission doesn't work with the other two

examples of submission in the text—parent/child and master/servant.

The second problem is the word “submit” itself; nowhere in Scripture or elsewhere can you find that

***And likewise in the husband/wife relationship there remains an order, a rank, but with a whole different definition, purpose and practice than the world gives to those words***

word “submit” being used of husbands submitting to their wives. The word implies rank and as much as we rebel against the idea, we can’t get around it. And again the idea of rank or authority only bothers us if we use the world’s definition of privilege rather than God’s definition of service. Thus when Ephesians 5:21 says “*submit to one another*” it does not command an end to all order or rank in human relationships.

- Parents don’t cease being in charge of and responsible for their children (though they should do it as Christ would).
- Masters don’t cease being masters (though they are clearly instructed to do it as Christ would).
- And Christ Himself doesn’t cease to be Lord just because He humbles Himself and serves us.
- And likewise in the husband/wife relationship there remains an order, a rank, but with a whole different definition, purpose and practice than the world gives to those words.

Earlier I wrote that thoughtful Christian young adults are trying to draw their view of marriage from the

Bible rather than from culture and so seem to have only two choices open to them: Either the old husband-dominant, wife-subservient broken system of the past or a new egalitarian, mutually submissive, relationship of the future. But as I also mentioned earlier their only problem with choosing the latter is Scripture. They not only run into the word "submit" as in "wives submit to your husbands" but then they read the rationale: *"For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body..."*

Many of the Biblical uses of the word we translate "head" refer to the literal head of the physical body as in Matthew 6:17: *"When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face..."* Many other times the word is used metaphorically. Matthew 10:25 says, *"If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!"* And in our text, Paul is clearly using the word metaphorically. The question is what does such a usage mean.

One author, rejecting any kind of rank or order in marriage, writes, "The New Testament contains no text where Christ's headship to the church connotes a relationship of authority. Likewise the New Testament contains no text where a husband's headship to his wife connotes a relationship of authority."<sup>6</sup> He and others go on to suggest that the word "head" means "source" not authority. "The place to start in understanding the biblical meaning of the husband's headship is with the fact that in the Greek language of New Testament times, "head" did not necessarily serve as a metaphor for "chief executive" (as it normally does today)...Another

metaphorical meaning for "head" was "source" or "origin" as in the head of a river..."<sup>7</sup>

But Dr. Wayne Grudem, formerly of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, did exhaustive research on the word "head" and wrote the following:

"The evidence to support the claim that 'head' can mean 'source' is surprisingly weak and in fact unpersuasive. All the articles and commentaries (that choose "source" as the definition) depend on only two examples of 'head' in ancient literature...both of which come from 400 years before the time of the New Testament. A new search of 2,336 examples of "head" from a wide range of ancient Greek literature produced no convincing examples where "head" meant "source." All the major lexicons that specialize in the New Testament period give the meaning "authority over," whereas none give the meaning "source."<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to trying to find a new meaning for the word "head," look at the ways the Bible uses it:

*"For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the **head** over every power and authority."* (Colossians 2:9-10) Clearly the word "head" denotes rank and authority.

*"And God (subjected) placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be **head** over everything for the church..."* (Ephesians 1:22)

*"He is the image of the invisible God...And he is the **head** of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the*

*supremacy...*"(Colossians 1:15-18)

In the NIV commentary it says, "To be the 'head' of the church is to be its sovereign ruler. In the (word 'head') there may also be the suggestion that Christ is the source of the church's life, but this is not its primary significance. Christ, and no other person, is the chief and leader of the church. It is he who guides and governs it." To try to take the idea of "rank" out of the word "head" is to deny the word its usual meaning. And there is no support for an unusual meaning in this context especially when you have the word "submit" used with it. No, we cannot get around the meanings of these words. But we can find in them a third option that is neither the old husband-dominant, wife-subservient chauvinism nor the new egalitarianism.

## **A New Option**

We are left with an "ordered equality" in the husband/wife relationship or as others would describe the third way - "complementarity": a husband and a wife, each bringing personhood, value, intelligence, gifting, and wisdom while maintaining the order that God ordained from creation. It would be a separate sermon to discuss

***"complementarity": a husband and a wife, each bringing personhood, value, intelligence, gifting, and wisdom while maintaining the order that God ordained from creation***

what "headship" in the husband/wife relationship means but that is not Paul's purpose here. Suffice it

to say that such “headship” is modeled after the servant-leadership of Jesus. And Paul does explain that as a husband loving his wife as Christ does the church and gave himself for her. But in verses 22-24, Paul is not describing the husband’s duties; he is describing the wife’s. So what does it mean for a wife to submit to her husband as the “head”?

First of all, let’s look at some things it doesn’t mean:

1. It does not mean that a husband is to make his wife submit. The word “submit” is used in the middle voice and it is used of Christ submitting Himself to the Father and of others voluntarily putting themselves under someone else.<sup>9</sup> Peter O’Brien wrote, “Paul’s admonition to wives is an appeal to free and responsible persons which can only be heeded voluntarily, never by the elimination of or breaking of the human will, much less by means of a servile submissiveness.”<sup>10</sup> Susan Foh wrote, “Wives are to submit themselves; their submission is voluntary, self-imposed. It is part of their obedience to the Lord; the Lord is the one who commands it, not the husband.”<sup>11</sup>
2. When the text says, “*submit...as to the Lord,*” it doesn’t mean she is to submit to her husband as if he is her Lord. He is not her Lord, only Jesus is. The point is that when a wife submits to her husband she is doing it as unto the Lord; she is doing it for the Lord’s sake and at His command—it is a way she serves the Lord.<sup>12</sup>
3. When the text says in verse 23, “*For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he*

*is the Savior,*” this is not that the husband is his wife’s savior. Christ is being discussed at this point in the sentence, not the husband. But it does set up what will be discussed later when the husband’s love for his wife is to be like Christ’s love for the church in that He gave Himself for her and so husbands are to give themselves for their wives – not as saviors but as servant-leaders.

4. And when the text says in verse 24, *“wives should submit to their husbands in everything”* it does not mean without reservation. This text is not addressing the limits of “everything” as does Acts 5:29 and other passages. “In everything” would mean in all areas of life, not necessarily in every single circumstance. He means that husbands and wives are to operate as a unit, not merely as autonomous individuals.
5. Another thing that this “submission” is not is, that it is not related to everyday roles or tasks. There is nothing in a husband’s headship and a wife’s submission that dictates who takes out the trash and who changes diapers or who does laundry and who fixes the car. Division of labor in a household will occur quite naturally; God does not determine it.

## **Submission**

So what does it mean to “submit” to the husband as “head”? Pastor and scholar, John Piper and Wayne Grudem have described it this way: “The Biblical reality of a wife’s submission...can be seen best if we define submission not in terms of specific behaviors, but as a DISPOSTION to yield to her husband’s

authority and an INCLINATION to follow his leadership. This is important to do because no submission of one human being to another is absolute. The husband does not replace Christ as the woman's supreme authority. She must never follow her husband's leadership into sin... But even when a Christian wife may have to stand with Christ against the sinful will of her husband, she can still have a spirit of submission - a disposition to yield. <sup>13</sup>

Susan Foh wrote, "The Christian wife has the responsibility to grow in Christ, to know doctrine, to be able to speak the truth in love. That is, she is not to be ignorant, nor to rely on her husband's knowledge and/or experience as a substitute for her own. In addition, she is not to be silent when her husband's sins, (Matthew 18:15), but she is to teach and admonish him (Colossians 3:16). However, she is to do all these things with a submissive heart. Her submission manifests itself in humility, patience, and eagerness to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:2-3) (and) also in reverence for her husband as the head. The Christian wife is neither passive nor mindless. She does not pretend her husband is always right, or hide her own talents or intelligence. She is to use her gifts for the up-building of the body of Christ, which includes her husband." <sup>14</sup>

Notice that the text does not say husbands love your wives if they are submissive or wives love your husbands if they are loving. Neither husbands or wives can opt out of obedience, claiming the disobedience of the other. Any husband who waits

for his wife to submit before he loves her as Christ loves the church does not love her as Christ loves the church. Any wife who waits for her husband to love her as Christ loves the church before she submits is not submitting as to the Lord.

The best definition I know of a wife's submission and

***A wife's submission is "a DISPOSTION to yield to her husband's authority and an INCLINATION to follow his leadership."***

one that captures the attitude that must be present is the one just given: "a DISPOSTION to yield to her husband's authority and an INCLINATION to follow his leadership." Wives, do you need to realign your definitions and then actions with God's definitions of authority and submission? Have you borrowed the world's definitions and values of self, personhood, rights, autonomy, independence, power, and privilege to the point that you live in a relationship of competition or at best compromise rather than a submissive spirit? Ask God to show you where you do not trust Him. God is not asking you to give up your personhood, your personality, or your potential. He's asking you to trust Him more than you trust yourself.

## **Last Thoughts**

This series on the husband/wife relationship flows out of a pastoral concern. Like some of you, I deal almost weekly with the tragic consequences of divorce. And you don't have to be a social scientist to see that the most devastating effects are not short-term but long-term. The most damaging effects are not seen for years or maybe not even until the next generation. Divorce is epidemic in our culture and even in our evangelical sub-culture. There is clear evidence that the old system of authoritarian and selfish husbands failed. And when women got enough economic and legal power to protect themselves they got out. And the number of divorces rose dramatically.

Slowly, over the past 40 years we have seen the old marriage system replaced. The heralds of a new way told us that if we replaced the old marriage system of dominating husbands with a new one where there were no leaders or followers, no gender-based role distinctions, we would see a new day of loving and lasting marriages. They convinced some that the great evil of the old system was its hierarchy. If we would eliminate any sense of leadership, headship, rank, or inequality of any kind, we would solve the problem. But all we got was that instead of one selfish person in the marriage, we now have two selfish people in the marriage. Marriage for them is entered into not as a means of serving but of getting. Self-fulfillment is the goal and if marriage will help me get what I want then I'll get married and when it gets in the way, I'll get out. We went from one autonomous self-centered person dominating the marriage to two autonomous self-centered people competing in the marriage. And we

have more divorce than ever before.

The great evil of the old system was not hierarchy, leadership, headship, rank, or differences in role. The great evil in the old chauvinistic system and in the new egalitarianism is a self-centeredness that competes instead of complements. The solution is not to reinterpret the Bible but to understand it. As an old sage said of Christianity, so we can say of the Bible's instruction on marriage, the problem is not that biblical instruction on the husband/wife relationship has been tried and found wanting but that it has been largely untried.

I know that in our libertarian culture there are "trigger" words that we react to emotionally more than logically: "fair," "equal," "control," "submit," "hierarchy," "over" or "under," and others. But for the Christian who has yielded his or her life to Christ these words take on new connotations. We readily admit that yielding to Christ is essential. But we say, "It is one thing to yield to submit myself to Christ but I won't yield or submit to anyone else." And then we stop and think that God commands us to do that very thing in several ways: We are to submit to the governing authorities, we are to submit to our masters/employers, and we are to submit to our parents.

Most Christians will readily acknowledge those relationships (governor/citizen, parent/child, employer/employee) but when we add the next one, "wives submit to your husbands," the resistance is fierce. But this resistance does not make sense Biblically. There must be another explanation. I suggest three, ever so briefly:

1. All of us, regardless of gender or age, resist authority. One time my then five-year-old son wanted to know if he beat me in a game of caroms could he be the boss of me for an hour. The young children in our family have been heard to say to each other, "You're not the boss of me!" There is in human nature, and I add, "sinful" human nature, a resistance to submit to any authority. It is also a major issue that keeps people from becoming Christians.
2. The second explanation is a whole culture that has made total autonomy a right to be demanded. Human rights, civil rights, children's rights, patients' rights. The problem is not in the corrective that each of these has brought to extremely unjust situations. The problem is in elevating rights above all other values so that rights become more important than responsibility and autonomy becomes more important than authority.
3. The third explanation is the most important for men to hear. The third explanation for the resistance to submission in marriage in our culture is very simply, sinful men and particularly sinful husbands. If wives believed their husbands loved them and put their wives' and families' interest ahead of their own, even marginally as Christ loves the church, they would be much more willing to submit.

We all have difficulty submitting even to a perfect, loving God, how much harder for a wife to submit to a sinful, selfish husband. "Equality of personhood does not necessarily imply the equality of rights. One

can be equal (to another) in one respect and not equal in other (respects)."<sup>15</sup> Equality and equal rights are the concepts out of which the feminist re-interpretations of the Bible have come. They arise not from a reading of Scripture but from a reaction to the unfairness of male/female relationships as practiced by too many. Equality doesn't seem to be a major biblical theme. Said more pointedly, rights are not what the Scriptures speak to but rather to responsibilities. Look again at Ephesians 5:21-33

*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.*

Husbands, love your wives. Wives, have a disposition to yield and an inclination to follow your husband's leadership.

### **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Alsdurf, p. 29

<sup>2</sup> TDNT, VIII, p. 39-41

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert Bilezekian, *Beyond Sex Roles*, p. 154

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Groothius, *Good News for Women*, p. 158

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert Bilezekian, *Beyond Sex Roles*, p. 154

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.161

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Groothius, *Good News for Women*, p. 151

<sup>8</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Appendix 1, p. 426

<sup>9</sup> TDNT VIII 40

<sup>10</sup> O'Brien, 411-12

<sup>11</sup> Susan Foh, *Women and the Word of God*, p. 186

<sup>12</sup> Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, p. 412

<sup>13</sup> Piper/Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, p 61

<sup>14</sup> Susan Foh, *Women and the Word of God*, p. 186

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 34

**Recommended resources for a wide range of evangelical views on the subject:**

1. Gilbert Bilezekian, *Beyond Sex Roles*
2. Linda Dillow, *Creative Counterpart*
3. Susan Foh, *Women and the Word of God*
4. Rebecca Groothuis, *Good News for Women*
5. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (See especially Appendix 1 on the meaning of “kephale/head”)
6. Commentaries on Ephesians:  
O’Brien, Peter T. *The Letter to the Ephesians*  
(See especially p. 398-416)



