

“God’s New Community”  
Husbands and Wives – Part 2  
Ephesians 5:21-24  
December 7, 2003  
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Ephesians 5:21-26,33 “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...”

For the past several weeks we have been studying the NT book of Ephesians.

When we came to the end of chapter 5, particularly verses 22-33, I chose to take them out of order.

And so two weeks ago I preached from verses 25-32 on the role of the husband in marriage – “Husband, Love Your Wife.”

I’m certain it was quite apparent why I preached that sermon first.

I was hoping that I was wrong about my post-tribulation rapture view and that Jesus would come before I had to preach verses 22-24.

No, that was not the reason. I contend that the sin of husbands not loving their wives as Christ loves the church is the primary cause of the sad state of marriage even among Christians.

And thus the correction begins there and if corrected there, will be the primary impetus to a truly new day in marriage.

I hope that most of you heard that earlier message.

If you did not, I implore you to order a copy or listen to it or read it on our web site.

I think this message today cannot be heard rightly without the earlier message as a foundation.

But having said the **primary** corrective is to be made by husbands, God knows that women are as capable of selfish sinning as men and therefore God gives instruction to wives as well as to husbands.

Today's message is on 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 I said it. I said 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 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. (Alsdurf,29)

If your husband is physically abusive, get yourself and your children out now!

When I say, "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.

Now back to the main issue: 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 we have already read or they read: Colossians 3:18-19 "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

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

1 Peter 3:1&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..."

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 said earlier, this word triggers all kinds of negative feelings: As if "submit" meant "unfair," "unequal," "controlled," "loss of self," "subservient," "doormat," or even "abused."

Let's first of all 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" (TDNT, VIII, 39-41)

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. (Bilezekian, Beyond Sex Roles, 154)

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."

and 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.” (Grootius, 158)

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.

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, a church member are not a lesser persons 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:

Mark 10:42-45 ““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.

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”. (Bilezekian, *Beyond Sex Roles*, 154)

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 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 said 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 the 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 “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.” (Bilezekian, 161)

He and some 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...” (Grootius, Good News..., 151)

But Dr. Wayne Grudem, formerly of our own 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”. (Grudem in Recovering..., Appendix 1, 426)

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

Colossians 2:9-10 “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.”

Clearly the word “head” denotes rank and authority.

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

Colossians 1:15-18 “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...”

NIV commentary: “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.

And we find in them a third option that is neither the old husband-dominant, wife-subservient chauvinism nor the new egalitarianism.

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 whole other sermon to discuss 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 some things it **doesn’t** mean:

- 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. (TDNT VIII 40)

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.” (O’Brien, 411-12)

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.” (Foh, 186)

- When the text says, “submit... as to the Lord”, it **doesn’t** mean that 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 (O’Brien, 412)
- 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.

- 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.

- Another thing that this “submission” is not is, 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.

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 DISPOSITION 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. “ (Piper/Grudem, Discovering..., 61)

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 be silent when her husbands 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.” (Susan Foh, 186)

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 is **not** loving 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 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.”

I’d like you to hear from a woman I met only recently.

In her story I think you will hear an excellent illustration of what this text is talking about and how it works in everyday life.

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(This testimony can be heard on [www.sgc.org](http://www.sgc.org))

## Conclusion

Wives, do some of you resist your husband's leadership?

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?

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.

\* Most recommended resources:

Resources:

Bilezekian, Gilbert, Beyond Sex Roles, Baker

\*Dillow, Linda Creative Counterpart

Foh, Susan, Women and the Word of God, Presbyterian and Reformed,

Groothuis, Rebecca, Good New for Women, Baker,

\*Piper, John and Grudem, Wayne, Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, Crossway, (**See especially Appendix 1** on the meaning of "kephale/head")

Commentaries on Ephesians:

\*O'Brien, Peter T. The Letter to the Ephesians - **see especially 398-416**

Hughes, Kent

Stott, John R.W.

Other comments:

Both of these messages on the husband/wife relationship (Nov 23 and Dec 7, 2003) flow 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 has 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”, etc. 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. Just last week my 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).” (Susan Foh, *Women and the Word of God*, 34)

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.

Christian “feminists didn't get their concept of equality from the Bible... Elizabeth Elliott Leitch has said, ‘Ideas such as equality, social justice and human rights regarded in our times as unarguable imperatives may in the end prove to be pseudo-Christian and provincially Western in their definition. We prostrate ourselves before these idols, muttering the required mumbo-jumbo of the sociologists without ever suspecting that we have surrendered to secularism.’ Ironically, the biblical feminists derive the idea of equality from our culture.” (Foh, 43)