

# *Submission in Marriage*

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The issue of the husbands and wives' relationship in marriage, particularly in contemporary society, is a complicated one for husbands and wives, for pastors, and for Christian counselors to understand.

On the one hand there are the biblical passages that clearly state that wives are to submit to their husbands, and those passages do not have an expiration date at the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, because of our fallen nature, this concept has sometimes been taken to sinful extremes as a way to justify men making self-centered decisions for their wives or children based on what they believe is in their (the husband's) best interest.

In an even more extreme version of this view, an occasional Christian teacher or evangelist has taken the position that this means a wife is to submit to her husband, even when he tells her to participate in some questionable (or even unbiblical) practice. I think all of us who are led by the Holy Spirit realize there is something distinctly out of sync with Scripture's teaching whenever anyone endorses either of those positions.

On the other hand, there are difficulties with the arguments that take an extreme egalitarian position. There are just too many passages that *do* speak of wives submitting to their husbands, and these arguments for this submission are not rooted in the fact that submission was a command caused by the Fall, and that now that redemption has come, they no longer apply. The men and women to whom the commands to submit were given in Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, and 1 Peter 3 were Christian believers who had experienced redemption through Christ. If we believe that God so guided the biblical authors that what they wrote accurately depicted His will for us, then apparently submission is a command that still applies to us even *after* the salvation we have in Christ.

Also, commands for wives to submit are not rooted in arguments based on cultural situations when women did not have an opportunity to receive an education comparable to their husbands.' Commands for wives to submit are consistently based on one of two reasons, either the Creation story itself (*before* the Fall) or in the New Testament model that wives are to submit to their husbands even as the church submits to Christ (see Eph. 5:22-23; Col. 3:18; 1 Cor. 11:3-9; 1 Pet. 3:1-7). Therefore to be true to the Bible's teaching we cannot interpret submission in a way that allows men to use it to justify making self-centered decisions for their families, nor can we just act as if those commands for wives to submit to their husbands' leadership have no continuing relevance for how we as Christians are to live today.

So how is submission to be understood within a cultural context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Based on Ephesians 5:21-33 I believe God teaches that *mutual submission* is the biblical (and also the healthiest) way for husbands and wives to relate within marriage. In Ephesians 5:21, which is Paul's introduction to his discussion of submission he says "Submit *to one another* out of reverence for Christ" (emphasis added). Then after three verses (22-24) which describe how women are to submit to the leadership of the husband, in the following *eight* verses (verses 25-33a) Paul describes how the husband is to submit to his wife by being sensitive and responsive to her needs and wants (and also the needs of his children) in the way he leads (see also 1 Pet. 3:7). This rules out any insensitive or self-centered leadership decisions, as

well as any decisions that would lead the family in a questionable or unbiblical way. *The fact Paul spends 8 verses (verses 25 through 33) instructing men on how and why they are to submit to the needs of their wives versus 3 verses describing women submitting to their husbands indicates that commands about submission also apply to husbands.*

But it is also true that God also says that wives are also to submit to the leadership of their husbands (Eph. 5:22-24, 33b; Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1-6). These verses were given to Christian women; if we are committed to being obedient to God's Word we cannot just ignore these passages because they do not seem politically correct or are personally unappealing.

Dr. Craig Blomberg, a highly respected theological scholar who for many years has taught at Denver Seminary, has written what I believe is an excellent biblical discussion of this issue. It is included in a book called *Two Views of Women in Ministry*. Although husband-wife relations are not the main focus of that book, Blomberg explains why he thinks they are related. I believe his comments are so excellent that I am including them at length below. Please read them prayerfully and see whether you believe they represent a biblically-balanced view:

### **Colossians 3:18–19 and Ephesians 5:21–33**

These two passages appear as part of Christian *Haustafeln*, or domestic codes. We have numerous similar examples of Jewish, Greek, and Roman discussions of the proper roles of various family members. When we recall that slaves were included as part of an extended family, it is clear that Paul is adopting (and adapting) this established literary form in addressing instructions to wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters.

The Colossians passage is quite brief, commanding wives to submit to their husbands, “as is fitting in the Lord” (3:18). At the very least, this comparative clause implies that submission is an appropriate behavior for Christian wives, but it probably also implies, “only that degree of subjection to the husband which is ‘fitting in the Lord’ is to be countenanced.” Paul does not call for wives to follow their husbands in ungodly behavior or in nonChristian belief. (Thus the *en panti* in Eph. 5:24 [*en panti* are the Greek words translated “in everything”] cannot mean literally “in every single request,” but is a broader generalization like “in every area of life.”)

Yet what would have stood out most against the other ethical systems of Paul's day is nothing in verse 18 but all of verse 19: “Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.” No authoritarian Roman *patria potestas* [the Roman belief that men had almost unlimited power over those in their households] should be allowed in the Christian community!

The Ephesians text expands in considerable detail. The specific commands to wives and husbands are introduced by the overarching command to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21), which in turn is one of several participial clauses defining what it means to be filled with the Spirit (v. 18). Here, even more clearly than in

the previous epistolary passages treated, Paul grounds his commands not merely in creation but in re-creation. The wife submits, just “as the church submits to Christ” (v. 24). And, again far more counterculturally, the husband loves his wife, “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (v. 25). It is not merely a creation ordinance (as in 1 Tim. 2:13), not merely a vestige of post-fall patriarchy; it is a Christian responsibility—grounded in Jesus’ sacrificial atonement for the sins of humanity—for husbands to exercise loving leadership to which wives should want to submit.

The same debated (*kephale* “head”) reappears here, as in 1 Corinthians 11:3, but when paired with the verb for submission, there should be no debate that a hierarchy of authority is being established. The husband has at least some kind of leadership role. At the same time, it is probably significant that Paul commands children and slaves to “obey” the authorities over them (Eph. 6:1, 5), yet never uses this term for wives (despite countless Christian marriage ceremonies). *Commanding and obeying do not foster healthy relationships among voluntary adult partnerships like marriage* [emphasis added]. What is needed, rather, is “love” and “respect” (5:33).<sup>154</sup> What is more, Paul radically redefines the authority husbands and fathers retain. Their authority is not one of privilege but of responsibility. They are to be as concerned for their wives’ well-being as Christ was for lost humans. Husbands must give of themselves sacrificially to serve their wives’ best interests (vv. 25–30).

There is scarcely any support here for the common complementarian claim [the complementarian view that there is a distinct power hierarchy between husbands and wives] that the husband ultimately makes the decisions for the family, usually those that are in his best interest, trusting that God will beautifully work things out for his wife (and children) in the process. If anything, Paul’s model is that the husband chooses what is in his wife’s best interest, even if it comes at great cost to himself and his aspirations!

(2010-02-23). *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (Counterpoints: Bible and Theology) (Kindle Locations 3127-3133). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.