

# DOES GOD EXPECT WIVES TO SUBMIT TO THEIR HUSBANDS?

In an egalitarian culture, the three passages in the Bible (Col 3:18; Eph 5:22-24 and 1 Pet 3:1-2) that instruct a wife to submit to her husband tend to cause alarm. Skeptics may use these 3 passages to denounce the validity of the entire Bible. Christian couples may struggle to apply these passages.

This document seeks to establish how complex and nuanced the biblical teaching about headship and marriage are. It is hoped that skeptics will doubt their doubts about Scripture's wisdom on the matter, and that Christian couples will find some light – by steering clear of simplistic or skew understandings of these passages, and along with it, misguided applications.

Two articles are provided (written by John Dickson and Terran Williams) to help with this end.

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## **SUBMISSION IN MARRIAGE**

By John Dickson

In Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5, the apostle Paul remarks that wives are to practice 'submission' in the context of their marriages. These texts rightly raise important questions.

Our society lives in the post-feminist era. Thanks to the work of leading intellectuals of the 1960s-80s our culture has been largely liberated from the harmful, unbiblical paradigm of yesteryear in which women were regarded as inferior to men and endured restricted rights vis-à-vis the law, employment, political power and so on. Feminism, for the most part, is a social phenomenon for which we should thank God.

As with any statement in the Bible, it is important not to read our texts through the grid of modern assumptions. In a post-feminist culture, we are rightly suspicious of anything that sounds even vaguely reminiscent of the attitude with which feminism has long been in battle. Too often, however, we read the 1st century texts of the Bible through the lens of 21st century hatred of a so-called '1950s approach'. We must try to put aside such assumptions, and read the biblical texts on their own terms.

Unlike the culture in which it was composed, the Biblical framework endorses the full equality of men and women. 'Patriarchy' – in the sense of the assumed superiority of male over female – is absent from our texts and, on occasion, appears to be deliberately challenged (Gen 1:27; Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 7:3-5). The Bible is of course 'culturally-grounded' (designed to speak to the cultures in which it was first written) but it is not culturally-bound (i.e., trapped within the norms and failings of its ancient context).

The Bible does not endorse 'patriarchy'. It does teach that men have an honoured commission within marriage (Gen 3:20; 1 Cor 11:3). All of the relevant texts (Col 3:18; Eph 5:22-24; 1 Pet 3:1-2) have specifically to do with marriage. They have no relevance to women's workplace-relations, political power, business leadership, and so on. The '1950s approach' worked with an entirely sinful notion of 'leadership' as 'dominance'.

The biblical notion of a husband's 'headship' has entirely to do with service, the giving of oneself for the good of the other. Jesus is the obvious paradigm in the Bible. If husbands are to take the lead in anything, it is only in their Christ-like willingness to suffer for the good of the family (Eph 5:28-29). It's in this context that 'submission' is to be understood.

The Scriptures make clear that 'submission' is a basic attitude of the heart expected of all Christians in their relationships with one another. In Eph 5:21 Paul urges the whole church, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." This is not merely an introduction to particular relationships where 'submission' is required—wives to husbands, slaves to master, etc. Rather, as Andrew T. Lincoln shows (Ephesians. Word Biblical Commentary, vol.42, 1990, 350-371), it is a general call to Christian "mutual submission" which Paul then applies in specific ways to particular relationships: wives to

husbands, husbands to wives, etc. To 'submit' means 'to willingly yield oneself in the service of another'. It is a concept completely at odds with our world, but it is at the heart of biblical ethics. The notion derives most clearly from Jesus, who not only submitted to his Father but, on the cross, served us (Mark 10:45), yielding up his life for us (Phil 2:3-8). It is this logic that probably explains the addition "submit ... out of reverence for Christ" in Eph 5:21. There is no issue of equality at stake in the biblical challenge to submit to one another. Just as Christ's submission does not imply inferiority—to us or to the Father (Phil 2:6)—so our submission to one another says nothing about our relative status.

Thus, the biblical exhortation, 'Wives submit to your husbands' (found in Peter and Paul), in no way implies the inferiority of the wife to the husband. It is rather a specific application of the general Scriptural command to submit to one another. The Christian wife is called upon in her relationship with her husband to give special attention to the Christian attitude of submission – regarding her husband as more important than herself. This does not mean that 'submission' is the defining stance of the wife to her husband, any more than 'obedience' (Col 3:20) is the defining stance of children to their fathers (presumably trust and love also feature).

It is also worth keeping in mind that the exhortation, "Husbands, love your wives," follows immediately after both of Paul's 'submission-texts' in the NT (Colossians 3:18-19; Ephesians 5:22-28). This provides a helpful parallel. 'Love' (the 'determination to live for the good of the other') is also a fundamental quality of Christian living expected of all those who believe in Christ. The love of Christ himself, of course, is the paradigm. Nevertheless, in these two texts the general Christian duty to love is specified in connection with husbands and their wives. The Christian husband is called upon in his relationship with his wife to give special attention to the general Christian attitude of love.

In the specific nature of these commands, the husband is told simply to love his spouse, and the wife is told simply to submit to her spouse. However, this does not mean that wives are free not to love their husbands, any more than it means husbands are free not to submit to their wives. The import of these commands is as follows: While all believers are to express the virtues of love and submission toward one another, husbands in their relationships with their wives are to pay special attention to the attitude of love, and wives in their relationships with their husbands are to pay special attention to the attitude of submission. In his instruction on this theme Peter comes close to speaking of reciprocal submission between husband and wife when he urges husbands in 1 Pet 3:7 to "pay (their wives) honour." This word honour, *timē*, is the same word used a few paragraphs earlier of our duty toward the emperor: "Fear God; honour the king."

Given the brief nature of the exhortations in Col 3:18, Eph 5:22-24 and 1 Pet 3:1-2, the question of how submission works out in practice is not for the Bible teacher to decide. There is no legislation to follow here, just a perfect model in the life of Christ ("submit

... as is fitting in the Lord"). Husbands and wives should reflect on this model as they consider together their responsibilities in the marriage.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the submission-commands of all three New Testament texts are addressed directly to wives, not husbands. It says, "Wives, submit to your husbands." Nowhere do we find, "Husbands, ensure that your wives submit to you." I take it, therefore, that it is not for the husband to work out the application of this command. It is entirely for the wife to hear God's word and seek to apply it as she sees fit. Husbands have their own domain: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25). That is quite enough to worry about.

## COLOSSIANS 3:18-19 AND FURTHER REFLECTIONS

By Terran Williams

In passages like Ephesians 5 and, it's much simpler cousin-passage, Colossians 3, the teaching about headship and submission in marriage proves to be remarkably nuanced. Let me unpack Colossians 3:18-19 to start.

*Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. (Col 3:18-19)*

Colossians highlights that one of the reasons Jesus came to this world was to undo the damaging effects of sin upon our relationships with one another – no longer treating each other with anger, malice or deception, but instead being patient, kind, forgiving and loving. In 3:18-4:1, he gives a few practical thoughts about how we should order our closest relationships – relationships in the home (between husband and wife, and between children and parents) and relationships in the workplace (between employer and employees). In some ways it is easier to love people we only see from time to time than the people we spend hours with daily. Unless Christ redeems these closest relationships, we have not been truly redeemed.

The gospel redeems marriage roles. In those days, long before the rise of feminism, it was taken for granted that a husband had authority over his wife. The only exception we know of is some pagan cults, which tried to liberate women to be free from all obligations other than in the service of its god or goddess. As a norm, men asserted their authority over their wives in a superior, intimidating and self-serving way. Stopping short of removing all authority of a man over his wife, Paul gives several ways the gospel could better inform roles in marriage...

1. He moves away from the heavy patriarchy of his day. The language of the day was, 'Wives obey your husbands.' But Paul chooses another word. Instead of 'obey' (Greek: hypakouō) he uses 'submit' (hypotassō). Paul is not asserting that the husband is smarter or more gifted than his wife, or that his wife is in any way inferior to her husband in ability, value or contribution. Think of Paul's good friends and fellow church-planters, Priscilla and Aquila. The book of Acts gives us several glimpses into the functioning of this couple. Remarkably, Priscilla's name is usually mentioned first, contradicting the writing norms of that day. Scholars say this suggests she was more dynamically gifted than her husband, and yet was not in any way suppressed by him.

2. Submission should be chosen not imposed. Paul puts the word 'submit' in the middle voice, which means that it is a submission that is freely chosen. A husband is not to insist on his authority. It is something the wife freely and willingly grants him. She recognizes that, though they are equal in value and dignity, God pulls out a unique contribution from each. If the marriage is a team of equals, his role is captaincy of the team. Hers is to partner with him, bringing all her contribution and strength to bear, so that the marriage team will be all and accomplish all it is meant to.

3. Wives are to work out the influence of Christ in their marriages. The key clause is 'as is fitting in the Lord'. The very way that she relates to her husband must reflect the influence of Christ upon her life, not the prevailing norms of the culture. Paul does not explain what

this means, but leaves it to each woman to work out. We can only guess some ways that this was applied. Perhaps one wife had previously deemed herself inferior to her husband, but in Christ she finds a sense of equal value to Christ, of equal importance in the mission of God. Perhaps another wife once found her ultimate identity in her husband, but then the gospel challenged her to find her identity in Christ, and bring to her marriage a sense of wholeness rather than a neediness or loss of self.

4. Husbands are to love their wives. In those days, little advice was given to men about how they should treat their wives. Wives were seen as a man's property. In a court of law, for example, a woman's perspective was inadmissible, since he was always right. With this in mind, Paul's telling men how to treat their wives was countercultural in itself! Not only this, but Paul tells men to love their wives. In Ephesians 5, Paul explains that men are to model their love for their wives on Jesus who lay down his life in sacrificial love for his church, working for her radiance. Husbands are to deny themselves as they seek to bless, serve and love their wives. Wives do not exist for the benefit of the husband. If anything, the opposite is true. This is why one of the measures of a husband's spiritual maturity is the flourishing of his wife.

5. Husbands are to be gentle with their wives. Because of their superior strength and oft-louder voices, men in their sinfulness have tended to intimidate and bully their wives. But not in a gospel-influenced home! He must speak tenderly, be sensitive to her needs, and receptive to her words and perspectives. This will help wives who may fear being diminished in the process of trusting her husband's authority to relax into her vital contributing role.

Further reflections draw out even further nuance and complexity.

1) The command to submit to any earthly authority is not absolute. If a husband were to lead his wife to sin for example, or if he was abusive or not mentally sound, she should not submit.

2) Paul addressed a sinfully chauvinistic culture, not our modern egalitarian one. Colossians 3 and Ephesians 5 were written to others in a very different context to ours. We are left to guess what Paul may have written to our context. Perhaps the question we must ask is, as Paul seemed to, what difference does the Gospel make to today's common problem areas in marriages?

3) The husband's headship is to be defined, counterbalanced and framed by mutual love and submission. In fact, in Ephesians 5:21, Paul highlights mutual submission as the grounding principle for marriage. And in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul's most detailed treatment of marriage, he specifies exactly the same conditions, opportunities, rights, and obligations for the woman as for the man in over 10 distinct issues about marriage. In each, he addresses men and women as equals. He uses symmetrically-balanced wording to reinforce this mutuality:

- Paul affirms that husband and wife mutually possess each other (v2).
- They have mutual conjugal rights (v3).
- They have mutual authority over the other's body (v4).
- They have mutual sexual obligations (v. 5).
- Both are told not to separate or divorce (v10-13).

- Both consecrate the other and sanctify their children (v14).
- Both have freedom if deserted (v15).
- Both have a potentially saving influence on the other (v16).
- Both are free to marry (v28).
- Both may focus on Christ as single (v32, 34) or on pleasing the other in marriage (vv. 33–34a and 34c).

Amazingly, Paul states here that ‘the husband does not have authority over his own body, but his wife does’ (7:4). In these verses, against the strong Patriarchal background of the ancient world, Paul offers a paradigm-shattering vision of marriage as a relationship in which the partners are bonded together in submission to one another.

This does not mean that the husband does not exercise some kind of leadership role in the marriage, only that, whatever a husband’s headship and a wife’s submission mean, mutuality must be upheld and protected, or else power is being misused.

3) This does not deny that in many (most?) cases, the woman is the more naturally gifted leader. In such a case, the woman should use her gifting to build up her husband and ‘steer’ him towards greater responsibility for the family. (As someone put it, he might be the head, but every head rests on a neck with turning power.) Many (most?) men would love to abdicate responsibility – the gifted wife should not let him have his way, but use her powers of influence to put more on his shoulders.

4) If men are not always naturally better leaders, why would God make him the head? We can speculate at best about psychological benefits: I know of so many men who come alive when they are tasked with providing spiritual leadership for their family, for example, and so many wives who come alive when their husband assumes this responsibility. To be fair, these points are debatable and vary from couple to couple. One might not even agree that headship means in the least, ‘providing spiritual leadership for the family.’ The decisive answer we have is theological. What we know for sure is that, in Ephesians 5, God plans that every marriage is a picture of Christ and the church, where Christ takes the initiative to lay down his life for the church’s flourishing. In the final analysis of Ephesians 5, God has chosen marriage as a picture of the Gospel – when a man fails to take initiative, or actively work for his wife’s thriving, even at cost to himself, the marriage is a poor picture of the Gospel.

5) The practicalities of headship and submission are not given. Rather Paul speaks about the spirit with which spouses should relate to one another. Each couple must work out the implications for themselves of how the husband’s captaincy and wife’s collaboration works out. This teaching does not necessarily land in the traditional marriage roles of the 1950s.

Let me quote Tim Keller at this point: ‘What does this leadership actually look like concretely? I want you to know, not only is it not here in this text, but I have looked through the Bible and details are not given. People ask, “What does it mean?” Does it mean the husband makes all the decisions? No, it doesn’t say that in the Bible. Does it mean the husband makes most of or handles the money? No, it doesn’t say that. Where are the details? The Bible is a book given to us to authoritatively guide us, regardless of what century we live in, regardless of what culture we live in. And therefore, the Bible says two Spirit-filled people entering into marriage—each (because of what the gospel

has done) seeking to outdo the other person in self-giving love, in service, each one saying “What you need to thrive is more important than my emotional fulfillment”—those two people are going to fight over pleasing the other person, and those two people have to work out for themselves in agreement what that means. The Bible doesn’t say it has got to be like this and this. Each couple needs to figure it out for themselves.’

Underlining Keller’s claim that the husband does not necessarily make the decisions, is the story in Genesis 21 where Abraham is trying to make a substantial decision and God tells him, ‘Listen to what Sarah tells you’ (v12).

6) Finally, an analogy that may (or may not) be helpful...

Marriage is like partner-dancing. There is passion, intimacy, communication and intimate teamwork involved. Individual dance is all about you where the dancer basically says, “Look at me.” In contrast, dancing with a partner is more about the connection that two people share in the dance. Partner dancing is about “us” or “you and me”. It requires the setting aside of ego.

As in partner dancing, so in marriage, the man leads and the woman follows. In the movie, *Take the Lead*, Antonia Banderas is trying to teach a girl to tango - and she objects, saying 'Who do you think you are to lead? I am a strong person.' He responds, 'It is the strength of a man to lead, and it is the strength of a woman to follow.'

That gets at an essence in marriage as put forward by Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3. The man doesn't demand or drag or yank. He simply invites a woman to move with him. He himself moves with the music – as she does. The music is the rhythm of God's grace and direction. In this sense, he follows God before he leads his wife.

And she follows because she wants to. She does not lean on him in clinginess - her weight is still over her own feet. She moves with him, in partnership but not in subservience. She chooses to trust him, and to submit herself to his lead. And it’s not just him she follows – she can hear the music too.

And though he sets the direction, he opens up the possibility for her expression. She adds colour and surprise twirls to the dance. She is the prettier one. Not only that, though he leads, yet she is free to alert him to the possibility of a new movement - she does this graciously of course, lest the dance is spoilt and the synergy is quelled.