

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE SUBMISSION OF WIVES

By Ashby L. Camp

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1. Not long ago, the Baptist convention issued a doctrinal statement on behalf of their denomination. They said simply that a wife should graciously submit to her husband's servant leadership. The reaction to this declaration says a great deal about where our culture is in terms of the Bible.

2. Columnist Steve Wilson decried the view on the basis that other groups don't read the Bible that way. The *Arizona Republic* denounced the view in an editorial and ran a guest column by Kathleen Parker doing the same. I was told that President Clinton's comment was that Hillary would not put up with it. A week or so later, syndicated columnist Donald Kaul wrote about it under the title "God save us from zealots." And I'm sure the airwaves were filled with people rebuking those backward Baptists.

3. Whatever you think of the Baptists, they are dead right on this. God clearly calls wives to submit to their husbands. See Eph. 5:22-24, 33; Col 3:18; Tit. 2:3-5; 1 Pet. 3:1-6.

4. Well what does this mean? What is the nature of the submission to which wives have been called?

a. Eph. 5:22-24 does not mean the wife is to submit to her husband *as though he were Christ*. Submission to Christ is expressed in unquestioning obedience because he is God. He is the holy, omnipotent, omniscient, infallible, Creator and Savior. There can be no justification for questioning his will or attempting to enlighten him.

b. Husbands, on the other hand, are limited, sinful human beings. Unlike the Lord, they can make very foolish and even sinful choices.

(1) Submission to husbands is expressed in supporting their nonsinful decisions, not because of husbands' inherent qualities (who they are) but because God has given the responsibility of leadership in the family to the husband. The wife is to submit to the husband "as to the Lord" in that, when the husband has finally chosen a course of action, the wife willingly supports and follows that choice. She does not resent it and does not seek to sabotage or undermine it.

(2) Of course, if a husband chooses a sinful course of action, the wife cannot support it. The husband's authority is from the Lord, and he has no authority to push one of Christ's disciples into sin. To follow one's husband into sin is not a submission that is "fitting in the Lord," to use the words of Col. 3:18.

c. Unlike the situation in submitting to Christ, the wife must help her husband in the discharge of his leadership responsibility. This often requires her to inform, question, advise, and correct her husband. A wife's submission to her husband does not mean she cowers silently and

occasionally utters "Oh yes great one." She is a nonleading partner and is called to use her abilities and gifts to bless her husband and the family.

d. In a healthy marriage, husbands and wives can almost always come to a consensus on what course of action should be taken, but occasionally they cannot. In those situations where a mutual decision cannot be reached, the wife is called by God to yield to her husband's decision. I think James Hurley captures very well the spirit in which such decisions should be made (*Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, p. 151):

The manner in which such decisions are handled is crucial. The husband may not be high-handed and stubborn, knowing that she will finally have to give way. That is not the model of Christ's headship. Neither may the wife be grudging and resentful. That is not the manner of our response to Christ. In the last analysis, when the two can devote no more time to individual and joint seeking of the grace of God to permit them to come to one mind or to be willing to yield to the other, an exchange along the following lines is in order:

Husband: "Not because I am inherently wiser or more righteous, nor because I am right (although I do believe I am or I would not stand firm), but because it is finally my responsibility before God, we will take the course which I believe is right. If I am being sinfully stubborn, may God forgive me and give me the grace to yield to you."

Wife: "Not because I believe you are wiser in this matter (I don't) or more righteous, nor because I accept that you are right (because I don't or I would not oppose you), but because I am a servant of God who has called me to honour your headship, I willingly yield to your decision. If I am wrong, may God show me. If you are wrong, may he give you grace to acknowledge it and to change."

5. In placing the leadership responsibility on the husband and in calling the wife to accept that leadership, God is not saying that the wife is inferior to, less worthy, or less capable than her husband. They just have different roles or functions.

a. Men and women are created equally in the image of God and together comprise mankind (Gen. 1:26-27, 5:1-2). In 1 Cor. 11:11-12 Paul points out that men and women are dependent on each other. In 1 Cor. 12:12-27, he makes clear that all who are in Christ are part of Christ's body and are equally precious; there are no second-class citizens in the kingdom. Peter describes husbands and wives are "co-heirs of the gracious gift of life" (1 Pet. 3: 7). In terms of one's standing before God, Paul says in Gal. 3:28 that there is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus.

b. Of course, feminists have sold the idea that any difference in role or function between men and women means that women are inferior to or less worthy than men, but that is not true. Consider the case of God the Father and God the Son.

(1) Jesus is God; he is one in nature, being, and essence with God the Father. So the Son is not inferior to or less worthy than the Father, yet he is functionally subordinate to the Father;

he willingly submits to the Father's authority. This is made explicit in 1 Cor. 11:3, 15:27-28 (see also, Jn. 14:28), but it also is demonstrated by a number of facts:

(a) He was sent by the Father (Mat. 10:40, 15:24, 21:3-7; Mk. 9:37, 12:6; Lk. 4:43, 9:48, 10:16, 20:13; Jn. 3:34, 4:34, 5:23, 5:30, 5:36-38, 6:29, 6:38-39, 6:44, 6:57, 7:16, 7:28-29, 7:33, 8:16, 8:18, 8:26, 8:29, 8:42, 9:41, 10:36, 11:42, 12:44-45, 12:49, 13:20, 14:24, 15:21, 16:5, 17:3, 17:8, 17:18, 17:21, 17:23, 17:25, 20:21; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 3:2; 1 Jn. 4:9-10, 4:14).

(b) He spoke the words of the Father (Jn. 7:16, 8:26-28, 8:38-40, 12:49-50, 14:24, 15:15).

(c) He came to do the Father's will (Jn. 4:34, 5:19, 6:38, 14:30; Heb. 10:5-9).

(d) He revealed the Father (Jn. 1:18, 12:45, 14:7-9, 17:6, 17:26; Heb. 1:1-4).

(e) He seeks to please, glorify, and honor the Father (Jn. 5:30, 8:29, 14:13, 17:1-5).

(f) He judges only as he hears from the Father (Jn. 5:30).

(2) If Jesus, being in very nature God, can submit to the Father's authority, then certainly a wife can submit to her husband's leadership without denying her equal dignity or value. She is acting like Christ! That parallel is specifically drawn in 1 Cor. 11:3.

6. Why did God place the leadership responsibility exclusively on the husband (and the men in the spiritual family) rather than letting the wife lead where she is the more (or equally) capable partner?

a. One answer is that God made Adam before he made Eve and that he made Eve from Adam. Paul mentions both of these facts in discussing the submission of women in the church, God's spiritual family (1 Cor. 11:7-10; 1 Tim. 2:11-13). We would like for God to have explained how Adam's being created first translates into male leadership, but unfortunately for us, the notion of the "firstborn" being the leader required no explanation in the first century.

b. Another answer is that God established the headship role of the husband in relation to his wife to reflect the ultimate or archetypal headship role of Christ in relation to the church. That seems to be the thrust of Eph. 5:31-32.

c. But these answers just raise the deeper question of why God made man first instead of making woman first or making them at the same time from the dust of the ground or why Christ incarnated as a male rather than a female (in which case the woman would presumably have been the head of the family to reflect Christ's relationship to the church). Ultimately the answer is that God is sovereign (Ps. 103:19; 1 Tim. 6:15) and that he chose to do it that way.

(1) One could just as well ask why God gave the tribe of Levi the exclusive responsibility to care for the Tabernacle, or why he gave the family of Aaron the exclusive

responsibility of serving as priests. Why limit these roles to people who happen to be born in a certain lineage rather than allowing everyone equal access to the roles?

(2) And that is precisely what led to Korah's rebellion in Numbers 16. Korah, a Levite, and 250 community leaders opposed Moses and Aaron on the basis that they should have equal access to God. All Israel was holy, so no one family line should be exalted to the priestly function. It was a challenge to God's right to choose select groups for specific roles. And, as you know, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were swallowed by the earth, and the 250 community leaders were incinerated by God.

7. The spirit of Korah is alive and well in those who deny the leadership role of men in the family and the church. As is usually the case, they have masked their rebellion with claims of insight and enlightenment, but it is still rebellion.

a. They say that male leadership was not part of God's original creation but was introduced in Gen. 3:16 as part of the curse brought on by sin. From that premise, they argue that redemption in Christ reverses the curse and reinstates the woman to co-leadership with man.

(1) The problem is that the premise is faulty; male leadership was indeed part of God's original creation. This is indicated by several facts.

(a) Adam was created first, which Paul cites in 1 Tim. 2:13 as a basis for male leadership in the church. This is consistent with the Old Testament pattern of "primogeniture," the idea that the firstborn in any generation in a human family has leadership in the family.

(b) Eve was created from Adam and to be Adam's helper. Paul cites those facts in 1 Cor. 11:7-9 in justifying differing roles for women.

(c) Adam named Eve "woman" before the fall (Gen. 2:23), just as he called all the living creatures by their names (Gen. 2: 19-20).

(d) God named the human race "man," rather than "woman" or some gender-neutral term. Gen. 5:2 specifies that God named the human race "man" at the time he created them. This says something, just as the woman taking the man's last name when she marries signifies his headship in the family.

(e) God came first to Adam after the fall and called him to account, even though Eve had sinned first. This was before any curse was meted out. It seems God thought of Adam as the leader, the one primarily responsible for what happened in the family.

(f) According to Eph. 5:31-32, the one flesh relationship of a man and woman in marriage was from the beginning (Gen. 2:24) a reflection of Christ's relationship with the church.

(g) Paul speaks of man being the head of woman in the same sentence in which he speaks of Christ being the head of man and God being the head of Christ (1 Cor. 11:3) . If

male headship was an aberration, a distortion resulting from sin, it is hard to believe Paul would have mentioned it with the divine headships without distinguishing it.

(2) Gen. 3:16 most probably means that the woman in her fallen nature will desire to dominate her husband (Gen. 4:7), contrary to God's created order, and that this desire generally will go unsatisfied.

(a) To the extent that sinful nature holds sway, the woman will be unhappy with the nonleading role God has assigned to her. Further, if "rule" implies leading with harshness or a domineering spirit, then part of the corruption produced by sin is that man in his fallen nature will tend to abuse his leadership role.

(b) Those in Christ are called to redeem the sinful distortions of headship and submission, to restore the creation order of wives submitting to their husbands and husbands being servant leaders (Eph. 5:22-33; Col. 3:18-19; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1-7).

b. They say that Eph. 5:21 means husbands also are to submit to their wives, and thus neither has a distinctive leadership role. That is false.

(1) Even if Paul meant that wives are to submit to husbands and husbands are to submit to wives, he clearly did not mean that husbands and wives are to submit to each other in the same way. Remember that the relationship between Christ and the church is the pattern for the relationship between the husband and wife. Christ does not submit to the church in the sense of yielding to its authority or following its lead, which is how the church submits to him. Christ can only be said to "submit" to the church in the sense of submitting himself to suffer for the good of the church.

(2) It is more likely, however, that Eph. 5:21 does not mean husbands are to submit to wives. Rather, "submit to one another" probably means that some in the group are to submit to others in the group, the particulars being given in the following verses. The word "one another" does not always mean "everyone to everyone"; sometimes it means "some to others." For example:

(a) Rev. 6:4 says "men slay *one another*," meaning that some men kill others, not that those being killed also kill those who are killing them.

(b) Lk. 2:15 reports that "the shepherds said to *one another*, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.'" That means that some of the shepherds suggested this to the others, not that each said the same thing to the other.

(c) Lk. 12: 1 tells of a crowd that was so large that "they were trampling on *one another*." That means that some in the crowd trampled on others in the crowd, not that each person who was trampled on also trampled on the one who trampled on him.

(d) If 1 Cor. 11:33 is correctly translated "when you come together to eat, wait for *one another*," it means that those who are ready early are to wait for those who are late, not that those who are waited on also wait on those who waited on them.

c. They say that the principle of male leadership in Scripture is merely a reflection of ancient culture, but that is false. It clearly is transcultural. It is tied to the creation event, to the relationship of the Father and the Son, and to the relationship of Christ and the church.

d. They claim that the Bible endorses the institution and practice of slavery and that we now know slavery in any form is morally unacceptable. From this they conclude that the Bible's endorsement of social institutions and relationships cannot be considered authoritative. In other words, if the Bible was wrong about slavery, we have no reason to believe it was right about marriage or other social relations. There are a couple of things wrong with this.

(1) *If* the Bible actually endorsed some form of slavery, the correct conclusion would be that that form of slavery is not immoral, not that the Bible is wrong. The Bible is the word of God; whence do we derive a standard by which to judge it? Once one says the Bible is not authoritative regarding social institutions and relationships, what is left of its authority? It would, for example, no longer speak authoritatively about the relationship of parents and children.

(2) *But*, the Bible does not endorse or approve of the practice of slavery; it simply tolerates it.

(a) Unlike marriage and parent-child relationships, Scripture nowhere suggests that slavery was ordained or instituted by God; it was a product of sinful humanity. This is evident from the fact Paul in 1 Cor. 7:21 urges, "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so." He would never give such advice to spouses or to parents and children. In this regard, it is probably more than coincidental that, from all indications, neither Jesus nor the Apostles owned slaves.

(b) The Bible does not assume the goodness of slavery but takes slavery as a fact of life and regulates people's involvement in it. In fact, the seeds for slavery's dissolution were sown in Phlmn. 16 ("no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother"), Eph. 6:9 ("Masters do not threaten [your slaves]"), Col. 4:1 ("Masters, provide your slaves what is right and fair"), and 1 Tim. 6:1-2 (masters are "brothers"). Where these seeds of equality came to full flower, the very institution of slavery would no longer be slavery. Also, Jesus' teaching about mercy and forgiving debts (e.g., Mat. 6:12, 18:23-34) implies the inappropriateness of debt-slavery.

(c) The fact God allowed Christians in the first century to own slaves does not necessarily mean there was nothing wrong with first-century slavery.

(1) It could be like divorce. God, through Moses, permitted divorce, despite the fact it was contrary to his ideal for mankind. He did it as a concession to the hardness of men's hearts (Mat. 19:3-9). Perhaps first-century society had gotten so deformed that God did not insist on the abandonment of slavery at that time.

(2) That would not mean that such a concession must exist under different social conditions or for any kind of slavery, such as the slavery that existed in early America. Slavery in the first century was a very different institution.

[a] S. Scott Bartchy states in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6:66-70 (paragraphs are not continuous in original):

Central features that distinguish 1st century slavery from that later practiced in the New World are the following: racial factors played no role; education was greatly encouraged (some slaves were better educated than their owners) and enhanced a slave's value; many slaves carried out sensitive and highly responsible social functions; slaves could own property (including other slaves!); their religious and cultural traditions were the same as those of the freeborn; no laws prohibited public assembly of slaves; and (perhaps above all) the majority of urban and domestic slaves could legitimately anticipate being emancipated by the age of 30.

It must also be stressed that, despite the neat legal separation between owners and slaves, in none of the relevant cultures did persons in slavery constitute a social or economic class. Slaves' individual honor, social status, and economic opportunities were entirely dependent on the status of their respective owners, and they developed no recognizable consciousness of being a group or of suffering a common plight. For this reason, any such call as "slaves of the world unite!" would have fallen on completely deaf ears. (From p. 69: "The great slave rebellions, all of which were led primarily by prisoners of war between 140-70 B.C.E., never sought to abrogate slavery. Rather, these rebels sought either escape or to turn the tables by enslaving the owners.")

Furthermore, by no means were those in slavery regularly to be found at the bottom of the social-economic pyramid. Rather, in that place were those free and impoverished persons who had to look for work each day without any certainty of finding it (day laborers), some of whom eventually sold themselves into slavery to gain some job security.

Large numbers of people sold themselves into slavery for various reasons, e.g., to pay debts, to climb socially (Roman citizenship was conventionally bestowed on a slave released by a Roman owner), to obtain special jobs, and above all to enter a life that was more secure and less strenuous than existence as a poor, freeborn person.

Slaves were used for "an enormous variety of functions in enormously different circumstances," some of which when compared to New World slavery seem astonishingly responsible: "doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, bailiffs, overseers, secretaries, and sea-captains."

Since slaves represented a substantial investment by their owners . . . , they could at least expect to receive enough food to keep them alive and working. Manumission could mean the end of that security. Epictetus [a first-century philosopher], himself an ex-slave, took pleasure in pointing out that the slave who thinks only of gaining

his freedom may be reduced, when he is manumitted, to "slavery much more severe than before."

For many, self-sale into slavery with anticipation of manumission was regarded as the most direct means to be integrated into Greek and Roman society. For many this was the quickest way to climb socially and financially. As such, in stark contrast to New World slavery, Greco-Roman slavery functioned as a process rather than a permanent condition, as a temporary phase of life by means of which an outsider obtained "a place within a society that has no natural obligations of kinship or guest-friendship towards him."

[b] Andrew Lincoln writes in his commentary (WBC) on Ephesians (p. 418):

Many slaves in the Greco-Roman world enjoyed more favorable living conditions than many free laborers. Contrary to the supposition that everyone was trying to avoid slavery at all costs, it is clear that some people actually sold themselves into slavery in order to climb socially, to obtain particular employment open only to slaves, and to enjoy a better standard of living than they had experienced as free persons. Being a slave had the benefit of providing a certain personal and social security.

[c] James D. G. Dunn states (*The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 699):

[S]lavery was an established fact of life in the ancient world. As many as one-third of the inhabitants of most large urban centres were slaves. The economies of the ancient world could not have functioned without slavery. Consequently, a responsible challenge to the practice of slavery would have required a complete reworking of the economic system and a complete rethinking of social structures, which was scarcely thinkable at the time, except in idealistic or anarchic terms.