

#257 "Submission and Headship in Marriage"

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The reality is that the only Being Who has never subjected Himself and will never subject Himself is God the Father. Even Jesus the Son is subject to the Father in that He came to earth to do the Father's will and not His own (Luke 22:42). 1 Corinthians 15:28 says, "When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all." There is an authority hierarchy within the Godhead. The point being, if submission is not a "dirty" word for Jesus, then it shouldn't be for us either. Servants are told to be subject to their earthly authorities just as we as employees must submit to our respective authorities (1 Peter 2:18). All citizens, including believers, are told to be subject to earthly rulers and authorities (Romans 13:1, 1 Peter 2:13), for this is God's will and way. This does not mean that we obey an authority that tells us to do something wrong, for there is a higher authority in Jesus that stands in judgment over all earthly authorities. All things, including angels and earthly powers are ultimately subject to Jesus (1 Peter 3:22, Hebrews 2:8, Philippians 3:21, 1 Corinthians 15:27). Younger men are told to be subject to older men, reflecting the proper way for younger people to treat their elders (1 Peter 5:5). Again, this does not mean that a teenager must do whatever an older person says, for Jesus is the higher authority always. Christians are told to be subject to Christ and God (James 4:7, Hebrews 12:9, Ephesians 1:22), for we are to obey Him and keep His commands. Children are to obey their parents in the Lord reflecting a level of subjection (Ephesians 6:1-3). Even Jesus subjected Himself as a twelve-year-old boy to His parents authority (Luke 2:51). Demons are subject to Christians (Luke 10:17) because of Christ in us. Even angels have a hierarchical place, for Christians will one day judge them (1 Corinthians 6:3, Hebrews 1:14). The church is subject to its leadership, namely the pastors and other elders (1 Corinthians 16:15-16). Yet, at the same time, all Christians are subject to one another (Ephesians 5:21), for we are all of the same spiritual status ultimately as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. So submission is clearly a Biblical theme that cannot just be ignored, and we can use the whole counsel of God to inform us as to how submission in marriage is to work.

The immediate conclusion many draw when they hear submission or subjection in relation to marriage is that it implies lesser humanity, diminished dignity, and reduced equality. But since all of those things regarding women are unbiblical, we can flee from any teaching that infers this kind of belief or behavior. Some use submission to argue that the wife must obey her husband's every whim, trusting God to correct where he has gone wrong. The reality is much different, for a husband who enjoys a relationship of superiority and dominion over his wife is operating not in Christ's paradigm but in the way of fallen, cursed mankind, a way pleasing to the devil (Genesis 3:16). The wife is not the husband's doormat, and there are times when wives need to speak up and exhort their husbands respectfully in the Lord, for the marriage is about pushing onward and upward towards the heavenly goal together as one. Jesus prayed in John 17:21 that all believers would be united as one just as He and His Father are One. Despite the authority hierarchy within the Godhead, there was still unity, equality, oneness, and shared responsibility. It had nothing to do with Jesus being bossed around, but it had everything to do with He

and His Father being on the same page, accomplishing the same goals, united in spirit, and perfected in love. This sort of “togetherness” is God’s will for Christian marriages. Submission and headship properly understood must always be interpreted in light of the fact that we are all one in Christ and that we are to be one as He and the Father are One. There is no room for trying to gain a selfish advantage over the other or for allowing or enabling that kind of treatment to take place.

We must not forget that Ephesians 5:21, which speaks of mutual submission between believers, precedes Ephesians 5:22, which speaks of the wife being subject to her husband as to the Lord. Every believer is to submit to one another, first and foremost, meaning that we are all to look out for the interests of others and not merely our own and to put others’ welfare ahead of our own (Philippians 2:3-4). Marriage is not to be victimization by a tyrant but each partner seeking out how to best love, serve, and encourage the other. This is why the command is for wives to be subject “as to the Lord.” The Lord is not a cruel slavemaster or one who keeps things back from us. No, He loves us as His own, we are His friends, and He tells us all that the Father has told Him (John 15:5). We are in the loop with God’s plan and heart, and it is our greatest joy. In God’s prescriptive ideal for marriage, husband and wife seek God’s will together. In God’s design, the husband actually likes his wife and respects her input and ability to know and seek God for herself. Jesus submitted to God as final authority, but it was not an authoritarian relationship. As the church, we submit to Christ’s authority, but it is also not an authoritarian relationship. Rather, Christ lives in us and our lives are hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3). There is oneness, a doing of life together, and seeing one whole (Galatians 5:22) where there used to be two separate parts. So the idea of submission in marriage must be understood in the context of oneness, togetherness, putting the interests of others ahead of our own, and as the most intimate and deepest of friendships.

The flipside of the coin in marriage, namely headship, must also be rightly understood. The husband is the final authority in the home, meaning that ultimately he is responsible for the spiritual course and direction of the family. God has given him that stewardship, and he must lead his wife and his children in the ways of the Lord. He is called to be loving, selfless, sacrificial, and servant-hearted. Helping out around the home is not beneath him but a joy for him, and being affectionate toward his wife is the delight of his life. He does everything he can to make sure his family is protected and provided for, physically, emotionally, financially, and spiritually. A godly husband empowers his wife and frees her to be all that she can be in the Lord. He helps her recognize her God-given gifts, and he helps facilitate opportunities for her to use those gifts. The husband is the head of the wife (Ephesians 5:23) just as Christ is the head of the church, for He loved the church so much that He gave Himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25). So the Bible is clear that headship is best manifested and described as a willingness to give up one’s life for another out of great love, care, and compassion. That is true servant-leadership, which Christ modeled throughout His entire life and ministry, and ultimately on the cross (John 15:13). As believers we submit to Christ because we are sure of His love, and this should be how it is for Christian wives as well (Ephesians 5:24). Leading in the home means that the husband does all that he can to help facilitate the sanctification of his wife just as Christ’s purpose is for His church (Ephesians 5:25-28). Husbands must love their wives as if they are literally part of their own bodies (Ephesians 5:28). It is not one versus the other or even one alongside of the other. Rather, it is both together

submitting together to Jesus Christ. Union in marriage is a becoming of one flesh (Ephesians 5:31), two as one, linked in mind, perfectly loving each other, united in spirit, and intent on one purpose (Philippians 2:2).

Ephesians 5:33 says, "Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband." So the husband's predominant need is that his wife respects him, and the wife's greatest need is that her husband loves her (1 Peter 3:7). She craves attention and affection, and he just wants to know that he is doing a good job of taking care of his family and meeting needs as best as he can. He wants to be acknowledged and appreciated for doing so. What he doesn't need is being talked down to, bossed around, or being unappreciated. He might think that he doesn't need compliments, but he really does. As he confidently and gently leads, the wife can be free to journey with him in life and make decisions along with him. It is two as one, not one with a marriage assistant. Marriage is about two together each meeting the distinct needs of the other so that the whole operates supernaturally and wonderfully to the glory of God Who designed the whole concept. So if the wife respects her husband and the husband repeatedly and continuously assures his wife of his love for her in all of the ways that she desires, the marriage will be unified. Truth be told, the wife really wants to be loved by someone she respects, not by someone she doesn't respect. How can she respect someone who holds her back, doesn't listen to her, bosses her around, or demeans her? That is not Biblical headship and submission. Show me a marriage where the wife knows she is valued, where her beauty is appreciated, where the wife respects her husband, and where the husband makes his wife melt with his affectionate touch, and I will show you what God had in mind all along.

The doctrine of submission in marriage is not a blight on the Bible such that we should just ignore those parts of Scripture. The reality is that the world tends to two extremes of male chauvinism or radical feminism, two manifestations of selfishness and power-grabbing. The Bible brings equality and balance to the picture, allowing women to be women and teaching men how to treat women rightly. The Bible actually restores women's dignity, freeing them to pursue their gifts and talents, to educate themselves, to work outside the home if they desire (Proverbs 31:16), and to pursue their dreams and ambitions. They do not have to submit to men everywhere as if they are second-class citizens. The Bible says only that they are not to become a pastor or elder (Titus 1:5-6) and teach over men in the church (1 Timothy 2:11-12), and it says that they are to be workers at home (Titus 2:5), meaning that they don't sacrifice their relationship with their husband and the caring of their children for the sake of pursuing a career.

Sex, romance, intimacy, love, affection, and marriage are all God's ideas, and they can only be best enjoyed when done His way, according to Biblical headship and submission. His way is for the husband to lovingly lead and for the wife to respectfully join her heart to her husband such that they both seek Christ together. Then, marriage can bring maximum enjoyment. As Solomon wisely said, "Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 9:9). It is sad that God has to give us a command to enjoy our spouses, but He does, knowing that marriage takes work. But if we continue to grow as husbands and wives, we will realize just how much happiness we can bring to one another.