

Monday - Colossians 3:18

There is a sense in which I address this issue with a measure of reluctance and hesitation. It isn't because I'm in doubt about what Scripture says on the subject or because I'm uncertain about my own beliefs. It has to do with the widespread misunderstandings about the nature of headship and submission.

Many think that headship and submission mean that a wife must sit passively and endure the sin or the abuse of the husband, as if submission means she has no right to stand up for what is true and good or to resist her husband's evil ways. Perhaps some of you come from families in which the husband was an insensitive bully and where it was assumed that it was the wife's "duty" to tolerate this silently. God's word does not call upon a wife to acquiesce to brutality or thievery or abuse.

Some of you may think that a husband can get away with whatever he wants in the name of headship, as if that word or concept endorses and encourages his sinful behavior, such that the wife has no recourse but to "submit" to his dictatorial and destructive ways. I utterly reject and grieve over such a terrible distortion and misapplication of these biblical concepts.

I know there are both men and women who look at someone like me or other complementarians and say to themselves, or perhaps to others, "My dad is a mean and abusive bully who belittles my mom and ignores her needs and those complementarians hold to a view that says it's ok or that there's nothing she can do but quietly 'submit' and put up with it; after all, he's the head of the house." It's hard not to be offended by such a horrible distortion of the truth. I assure you of this one thing: that is not biblical headship; that is not biblical submission.

On more than one occasion I've had women tell me horrible stories of neglect, tyranny, abuse, abandonment, and even adultery on the part of the man, the husband, and then say: "How could you possibly embrace complementarianism, a view that permits and perhaps even encourages such sinful behavior." Let it be said once and for all: I don't! Can complementarianism and the notion of male headship be perverted and distorted by selfishness

and sinful oppression? Yes. Even as egalitarianism and the denial of male headship can be perverted and distorted into a rejection of any differences between male and female.

My prayer is that if nothing else is accomplished in our study of this passage, perhaps I may be of some help in clarifying the meaning of these ideas and how they actually work within a marriage.

The verb translated "submit" (Col. 3:18; Greek, "hupotasso") carries the implication of voluntary yieldedness to a recognized authority. Biblical submission is appropriate in several relational spheres: (1) the wife to her husband (here and in Eph. 5:22-24); (2) children to their parents (Eph. 6:1); (3) believers to the elders of the church (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12); (4) citizens to the state (Rom. 13); (5) servants (employees) to their masters (employers) (1 Pt. 2:18); (6) each believer to every other believer in humble service (Eph. 5:21). So what does it mean? First, let's note what it doesn't mean.

Submission is not grounded in any supposed superiority of the husband or inferiority of the wife (this is clear from Gal. 3:28 and 1 Pt. 3:7). The concept of the wife being the "helper" (Gen. 2:18-22) of the husband in no way implies her inferiority. In fact, the Hebrew word translated "helper" is often used in the OT to refer to God as the "helper" of mankind. Surely HE is not inferior to us! Rather, this passage means that (1) the husband, even before the fall into sin, was incomplete without his wife and that (2) the husband will never reach his full potential apart from the input and support of his wife.

Submission does not mean a wife is obligated to follow should her husband lead her into sin. The biblical principle that we owe obedience to God first and foremost applies to Christian wives as well. If there must be a choice between obedience to God and obedience to the state, God is to be obeyed (Acts 5:29). The same would apply in a marriage. However, as Susan Foh has pointed out, "This qualification of the 'traditional' concept of wifely submission does not mean that the wife has an excuse to follow her 'better judgment' when she disagrees with her husband. The

wife's submission to her husband is qualified by God's commands, not her own preferences, opinions, or even expertise."

Submission does not mean the wife must suppress her creative energy or adopt a passive approach to life in general. One need only read Proverbs 31 to put this myth to rest. Note especially the emphasis in that paragraph on her initiative, creativity, tireless industry, etc. There is no biblically prescribed "personality" for wives, anymore than there is one for husbands. Husbands who exercise godly leadership can be introverts and wives who submit can be extroverts.

Neither does submission entail silence. Many mistakenly think a wife is unsubmitive if she ever (1) criticizes her husband (constructive criticism that is lovingly motivated and corrective in nature is not inconsistent with godly submission); or (2) makes requests of him (in particular, that her husband and family act responsibly in private and public; submission of the wife is not an excuse for sin or sloth or sloppiness in the husband); or (3) teaches her husband (cf. Prov. 31:26; Acts 18:26; it is not inconsistent with godly submission that a wife be more intelligent or more articulate than her husband; on a personal note, I've probably learned more from my wife than from any other living soul).

Finally, submission does not mean that everything a wife does must be directly dependent upon or connected to her husband. Submission does not mean the wife can never do anything for her own benefit or for the benefit of others or that she should never become involved in activities or ministries outside the home. It simply means that nothing she does should bring harm to her husband or undermine her primary responsibility to her family.

What, then, does submission actually mean or entail? The following is by no means exhaustive, but here are a few suggestions. First, submission is the disposition to honor and affirm a husband's authority and an inclination to yield to his leadership. John Piper put it this way:

"[Submission] is an attitude that says, 'I delight for you to take the initiative in our family. I am glad when you take responsibility for

things and lead with love. I don't flourish when you are passive and I have to make sure the family works.' But the attitude of Christian submission also says, 'It grieves me when you venture into sinful acts and want to take me with you. You know I can't do that. I have no desire to resist you. On the contrary, I flourish most when I can respond creatively and joyfully to your lead; but I can't follow you into sin, as much as I love to honor your leadership in our marriage. Christ is my King.'"

Second, submission is fundamentally an attitude and act of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is clear both from Colossians 3:18 and especially Ephesians. 5:22.

Third, submission is a commitment to support one's husband in such a way that he may reach his full potential as a man of God. This may involve several things: making the home a safe place, free from the sinful influence of the world; striving to be dependable and trustworthy (Prov. 31:11-12); providing affirmation and encouragement; building loyalty to him in the children (differences of opinion about discipline should be settled in private, away from the children, lest she be seen as taking sides against her husband); and showing confidence in his decisions.

But what happens if the husband is not a Christian? Is a believing wife still obligated to submit to him? Before you read my answer, be sure to read 1 Peter 3:1-7. This passage suggests that submission does not mean she must agree with everything her husband says. 1 Peter 3:1 indicates that she is a believer and he is not. Thus she disagrees with him on the most important principle of all: God! Her interpretation of ultimate reality may well be utterly different from his.

This indicates that submission is perfectly compatible with independent thinking. The woman in this passage has heard the gospel, assessed the claims of Christ, and embraced his atoning work as her only hope. Her husband has likewise heard the gospel and "disobeyed" it. "She thought for herself and she acted. And Peter does not tell her to retreat from that commitment" (Piper).

Submission does not mean giving up all efforts to change her husband. The point of the passage is to tell a wife how she might "win" her husband to the Lord. Strangely enough, Peter envisions submission as the most effective strategy in changing the husband.

Submission does not mean putting the will of one's husband above the will of the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter in no way suggests she should abandon her commitment to Christ simply because her husband is an unbeliever. This wife is a follower of Jesus before and above being a follower of her husband.

Submission to an unbelieving husband does not mean a wife gets her personal, spiritual strength from him. When a husband's spiritual nurturing and leadership is lacking, a Christian wife is not left helpless. She is to be nurtured and strengthened by her hope in God (v. 5).

In conclusion, that the wife should submit to her husband "is fitting in the Lord" (Col. 3:18b; "in the Lord" = "for those who belong to the Lord," i.e., "as Christians," or "according to the way of Christ"). This should forever put to rest any suggestion that godly submission is inherently oppressive or offensive or contrary to the spirit and life and teachings of Jesus.

Obedying any biblical command, whether it be a wife's submission to her husband or a husband's love for his wife, is an appropriate, indeed a beautiful thing. It is "fitting" or "proper" not because it conforms to the culture of that day but because that is what God has ordained for our marital relations (Eph. 5:23-24; cf. 1 Cor. 11:3,7-9). In the final analysis, it is the Lord Jesus himself who determines what is and is not "fitting" or "proper" for his people.

Tuesday - Colossians 3:19

"Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them" (Col. 3:19). Although the word for "headship" does not appear in this text, it is found in the parallel passage in Ephesians 5 and thus calls for extensive comment.

Perhaps the best place to begin, as I did with submission, is by dispelling the myths about the nature of biblical headship.

First, husbands are never commanded to rule their wives, but to love them. The Bible never says, "Husbands, take steps to insure that your wives submit to you." Nor does it say, "Husbands, exercise headship and authority over your wives." Rather, the principle of male headship is either asserted or assumed and men are commanded to love their wives as Christ loves the church.

Second, headship is never portrayed in Scripture as a means for self-satisfaction or self-exaltation. Headship is always other-oriented. I can't think of a more horrendous sin than exploiting the God-given responsibility to lovingly lead by perverting it into justification for using one's wife and family to satisfy one's lusts and thirst for power.

Third, headship is not the power of a superior over an inferior. Human nature is sinfully inclined to distort the submission of the wife into the superiority of the husband. That some, in the name of male headship, have done precisely this cannot be denied, but it must certainly be denounced. We must also remember that the abuse of headship is not sufficient justification for abandoning it. Rather, we must strive, in God's grace, to redeem it and purify it in a way that honors both Christ and one's spouse.

Fourth, headship is never to be identified with the issuing of commands, nor does it mean that the husband must make every decision in the home. Unfortunately, some men have mistakenly assumed that it undermines their authority for their wives to take the initiative in certain domestic matters. This is more an expression of masculine insecurity and fear than it is godly leadership.

So let's try to identify the essence of male headship.

First, headship is more a responsibility than a right. A “right” is something we tend to demand or insist upon as something we are owed. This can all too often make for an authoritarian and self-serving atmosphere in the home. When headship is viewed as a sacred trust in which the husband is “called” by God to lead and honor and sacrifice for his wife, the tone and mood of the home are radically improved.

Second, headship is the authority to serve. John Stott explains: "If headship means 'power' in any sense, then it is power to care, not to crush; power to serve, not to dominate; power to facilitate self-fulfillment, not to frustrate or destroy it. And in all this the standard of the husband's love is to be the cross of Christ, on which he surrendered himself even to death in his selfless love for his bride" (232).

Third, headship is the opportunity to lead. If Jesus is our example of biblical leadership, it will help to take note of how he led his disciples. Among other things, he led by teaching his disciples, by setting an example for them (John 13:15), by spending time with his disciples (Acts 4:13), and by delegating authority to them (Luke 10:1-20).

Fourth, headship is scripturally circumscribed. Husbands have never been given the authority to lead their families in ways that are contrary to the Bible. On a related note, if a wife is ever asked or told by her husband to do something that violates Scripture, she is not only free to disobey him, she is obligated to do so.

Fifth, headship does entail the responsibility to make a final decision when agreement cannot be reached. This final decision, however, may on occasion be to let his wife decide. No, contrary to what you may think, this latter option does not undermine the husband's authority.

Sixth, headship entails gentleness and sensitivity, as our text in Colossians 3:19 makes clear. Paul's exhortation not to be “harsh” or “embittered” toward one's wife has in view "friction caused by impatience and thoughtless nagging" (Moule).

Seventh, headship does not give men the right to be wrong. Simply because God has invested in the husband the authority to

lead does not give him the freedom to lead in ways that are contrary to God's Word.

Eighth, headship means “honoring” one's wife (see 1 Peter 3:7). What a powerful word! Men, pause for a moment and reflect on what you feel, do, and say when you “honor” something: whether an idea, event, your country, the flag, a person. Is that how you treat your wife?

Ninth, headship means loving and caring for one's wife as much as we love and care for ourselves (see Eph. 5:28-29).

Tenth, and finally, headship means loving and caring for one's wife as much as Christ loves and cares for us (see Col. 3:19; Eph. 5:25-27). Christ's love for us is unconditional (Romans 8:39), eternal (Romans 8:39), unselfish (Phil. 2:6-7), and sacrificial (Eph. 5:25), among countless other characteristics. John Stott put it best:

"Christ 'loved' the church and 'gave himself' for her, in order to 'cleanse' her, 'sanctify' her, and ultimately 'present' her to himself in full splendour and without any defect. In other words, his love and self-sacrifice were not an idle display, but purposive. And his purpose was not to impose an alien identity upon the church, but to free her from the spots and wrinkles which mar her beauty and to display her in her true glory. The Christian husband is to have a similar concern. His headship will never be used to suppress his wife. He longs to see her liberated from everything which spoils her true feminine identity and growing towards that 'glory', that perfection of fulfilled personhood which will be the final destiny of all those whom Christ redeems. To this end Christ gave himself. To this end too the husband gives himself in love" (Stott).

Wednesday - Colossians 3:20-21

Although his comments are brief, Paul cared deeply for the welfare of the family and the relational dynamics that governed it. Having addressed both husbands and wives (Col. 3:18-19), he now turns his attention to the parent/child relationship. “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord [literally, ‘this is pleasing in the Lord’]. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged” (Colossians 3:20-21).

To the children, Paul says: “obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord” (Col. 3:20). Given the fact that Paul addresses these “children” directly indicates that they are old enough to understand and respond to his exhortation. And one can only assume that they are young enough to still be living at home and are under the authority and oversight of their parents. Paul appears to have the Christian family in view, for he says that such obedience is well pleasing “in” (not “to”) the Lord; i.e., “in that sphere in which the Christian now lives, that is, in the new fellowship of those who own Christ as Lord” (O’Brien, 225).

When Paul says their responsibility extends to “all things” he’s reminding us that children are not the judges of what they should or should not obey in terms of parental precepts. In the parallel passage in Ephesians Paul declares that obedience to one’s parents “is right” (Eph. 6:1). He doesn’t contemplate the situation where parental orders may be contrary to Scripture, but as is true with the submission of the wife, the law of Christ must take precedence.

There is something to learn from the fact that disobedience to one’s parents is included among the pagan vices that indicates a refusal to acknowledge and honor God (Romans 1:30). Paul also mentions disobedience to one’s parents as a mark of the last days when wickedness will abound (2 Timothy 3:2). Needless to say, this is no small or insignificant matter!

But parents beware: the obedience your children must render to you in no way excuses or justifies insensitivity, brutality, or an overbearing authoritarianism that crushes their spirit. “Fathers,”

says Paul, “do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged” (Col. 3:21). Although “fathers” are here singled out as being primarily responsible for discipline (but note that this Greek word means “parents” in Hebrews 11:23), in homes where there is no father (due to divorce or death) the mother assumes that role. Of course, she also must be a partner with her husband and the two of them, ideally, of one mind when it comes to establishing the moral and spiritual guidelines by which the family will be shaped.

To “provoke” or “exasperate” refers to the result of undue severity in the exercise of discipline. Firmness is necessary, but should always be tempered with purity of motive and a loving spirit, lest “they become discouraged” (the NASV says, “that they may not lose heart”).

This is crucial: an overly obsessive and exacting posture in parenting leads to emotional and spiritual irritation in the child. An inflexible, judgmental, and demanding temperament creates despondency in a child’s heart. Faced daily with this harshness, children often simply give up, convinced that nothing they ever do will be quite right or good enough to please their parents. When it comes to motivating your children, the threat of punishment, while often necessary, is less successful than the promise of reward.

Although his prose is a bit dated, John Eadie’s comments are deserving of our attention: “If children . . . never please their father, if they are teased and irritated by perpetual censure, if they are kept apart by uniform sternness, if other children around them are continually held up as immeasurably their superiors, if their best efforts can only moderate the parental frown, but never are greeted with the parental smile, then their spirit is broken, and they are discouraged” (261).

Parents, let me highlight one critically important principle mentioned by Eadie. One of the worst things we as parents can do is constantly talk about how beautiful, competent, successful, and smart other kids are without being as complimentary of our own. If we are always quick to laud others without praising, affirming,

and expressing our heartfelt pride in our own children, they can easily become disheartened and discouraged.

Parenting is undoubtedly the most difficult, yet rewarding, endeavor any of us will ever experience. We need the wisdom of the Word and the patience of Job and the kindness of Christ and the authority of the Father and the power of the Spirit, and, well, just about all the help we can get!

Thursday - Colossians 3:22-4:1

“Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven” (Col. 3:22-4:1).

I believe, like you (I trust), that “all Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Timothy 3:16a). Although Paul originally had in mind the Old Testament when he wrote this to young Timothy, his statement surely extends to all Scripture, inclusive of the New Testament and his own writings (see 2 Peter 3:15-16).

But how can a passage giving instructions to slaves and masters be “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 1:16b)? What can this passage possibly say to us in the twenty-first century when slavery no longer exists in the U.S. and everyone (well, most everyone) acknowledges that it is a moral reproach? Are there ethical ideals that can be gleaned from Paul’s instructions to slaves and masters in the first century that are relevant, even binding, on us in the twenty-first? In other words, once we’ve conceded that Paul is addressing a situation that no longer obtains in our society, are there moral principles in his counsel that we might discern in the text and apply to circumstances that bear some degree of resemblance to the slave-master relationship?

There’s no easy answer to that question. When I first preached this passage Colossians several years ago I rather naively transferred Paul’s counsel concerning ancient “slaves” to modern “employees” and his counsel for ancient “masters” to modern “employers”. But the correspondence between the two is far from exact, making application in this instance a more difficult task than interpretation. Still, there appear to be certain principles in

Paul's instruction that apply to a number of contexts today, the workplace being one.

But before I go any further, we need to address a sticky issue. Many have argued that it is inconsistent to insist upon the "submission" of the wife to the "headship" of the husband (Colossians 3:18) while setting aside the slave/master relationship as antiquated and morally intolerable. In other words, is not the argument for why wives should submit to husbands the same as the argument for why slaves should submit to masters? If we insist on the abolition of the latter, should we not also insist on the abolition of the former? Craig Keener, for example, contends that "modern writers who argue that Paul's charge to wives to submit to their husbands 'as to Christ' is binding on all cultures must come to grips with the fact that Paul even more plainly tells slaves to 'obey' their masters 'as they would Christ' (Eph. 6:5). If one is binding in all cultures, so is the other" ("Paul, Women and Wives," 184).

There are several reasons why we can (and should) insist on the abolition of slavery while retaining the submission of wives to their husbands.

First, Scripture is known to regulate undesirable relationships without condoning them as permanent ideals (see Mt. 19:8; 1 Cor. 6:1-8). Paul's recommendation for how slaves and masters relate to each other does not assume the goodness of the institution.

Wayne Grudem ("Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth") explains: "The Bible does not approve or command slavery any more than it approves or commands persecution of Christians. When the author of Hebrews commends his readers by saying, 'You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one' (Hebrews 10:34), that does not mean the Bible supports the plundering of Christians' property, or that it commands theft. It only means that if Christians have their property taken through persecution, they should still rejoice because of their heavenly treasure, which cannot be stolen. Similarly, when the Bible tells slaves to be submissive to their masters, it does not mean that the

Bible supports or commands slavery, but only that it tells people who are slaves how they should respond" (341).

Second, the institution of slavery is not grounded in creation but is a distortion resulting from the fall. Marriage and male headship, on the other hand, are part of the original created order that antedates the fall. As Grudem has noted, "people who abolished slavery, based on an appeal to biblical principles . . . were abolishing something evil that God did not create. But Christians who oppose male headship in marriage and the church are attempting to abolish something good, something that God did create. The examples are simply not parallel" (340).

Third, on several occasions in the New Testament the seeds for the dissolution of slavery are sown. This is especially seen in Paul's words to Philemon (vv. 12-16; cf. also Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2). Nothing in the New Testament, however, suggests that the same was envisioned for the relationship between husbands and wives.

Fourth, no permanent moral command is used with reference to the institution of slavery in Paul's writings. He is obviously adapting to a temporary and ultimately repugnant social construct, but such is not the case with his instruction to husbands and wives which is consistently grounded not in culture but in creation (see 1 Corinthians 11:8-12; 1 Timothy 2:13-14) or in the relationship of Christ to the Church (see Ephesians 5:22-33).

Fifth, and finally, Paul explicitly envisions and endorses the possibility of a slave obtaining freedom (1 Cor. 7:21). He never says anything comparable to this with regard to wives and submission to their husbands.

Friday - Colossians 2:18-19 (Final Word on Marriage)

Is marriage suppose to be only forgiving and forbearing? Focusing on forgiving and forbearing might give the impression that none of our sinful traits or annoying idiosyncrasies ever changes. So all we can do is forgive and forbear. I want to show that God gives grace not only to forgive and to forbear, but also to change so that less forgiving and forbearing are needed. That too is a gift of grace. Grace is not just power to return good for evil, but also power to do less evil. Even power to be less bothersome.

The emphasis on forgiveness and forbearance has to come first, because I believe it is the essential rock-solid foundation on which the call for change can be heard with hope and security rather than fear and a sense of being threatened. Only when a wife or husband feels that the other is totally committed to them—even if he or she doesn't change—can the call for change feel like grace rather than an ultimatum.

But now I am emphasizing that marriage should not be—and, God willing, need not be—a static stretch of time inhabited by changeless personalities in durable conflict. Even that is better than divorce in God's eyes, and has a glory of its own. But it is not the best picture of Christ and the church. The durability tells the truth about Christ and the church. The unwillingness to change does not.

In Christ's relationship to the church, he is clearly seeking the transformation of his bride into something morally and spiritually beautiful. This implies that the husband, who is to love like Christ, bears a unique responsibility for the moral and spiritual growth of his wife—which means that over time she will change.

If a husband is loving and wise, this will feel to a humble wife like she is being served, not humiliated. Christ died to purify his bride. Moreover, Christ not only died to sanctify his bride, he goes on speaking to her in his word with a view to applying his sacrifice to her for her transformation. Similarly, the wise and loving husband seeks to speak in a way that brings his wife more and more into conformity to Christ.

Submission, as I have already argued, does not mean that a wife cannot seek the transformation of her husband, even while respecting him as her head—her leader, protector, and provider. There are several reasons I say this. One is that prayer is something that the church does toward God through Christ with a view to asking him to do things a certain way. If we are sick, we ask him for healing. If we are hungry, we ask for our daily bread. If we are lost, we ask for direction. And so on. Since we believe in the absolute sovereignty of Christ to govern all things, this means that we look at the present situation that he has ordained, and we ask him to change it.

This is only an analogy to what the wife does toward her husband. We never “confront” Jesus with his imperfection and seek his change. He has no imperfections. But we do seek from him changes in the situation he has brought about. That is what petitionary prayer is. So wives, on this analogy, will ask their husbands that some things be changed in the way he is doing things.

But the main reason we can say that wives, as well as husbands, should seek their husbands' transformation is that husbands are only similar to Christ in the relationship with their wives. They are not Christ. And one of the main differences is that husbands need to change and Christ doesn't. When Paul says, “The husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church” (Ephesians 5:23), the word *as* does not mean that husbands are identical to Christ in authority or perfection or wisdom or grace or any other way. They are not “equal to” Christ; They are “as” Christ. They are, unlike Christ, sinful and finite and fallible. They need to change.

Wives are not only submissive wives. They are also loving sisters. There is a unique way for a submissive wife to be a caring sister toward her imperfect brother-husband. She will, from time to time, follow Galatians 6:1 in his case: “If anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.” She will do that for him.

Both of them will obey Matthew 18:15 as necessary, and will do so in the unique demeanor and context called for by headship and submission: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.”

So from these and other observations that could be made from the New Testament, I hope it is clear that marriage is not merely forgiving and forbearing. It is also confronting—in loving and wise ways formed by the calling of headship and submission.