

SUBMISSION IN MARRIAGE: THOUGHTS ON DIFFICULT TEXTS

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

A) PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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).
4. 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.

B) 'SUBMISSION' AS A CHRISTIAN VIRTUE APPLIED TO MARRIAGE

1. 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.

2. 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).
3. 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.
4. 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.”
5. 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.