

SUBMISSION AND SLAVERY

Thoughts on difficult texts
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At the end of Colossians 3, Paul makes statements about marriage and slavery that raise questions and cause concern for some. Rather than steal sermon time with a discussion of these problems, I thought it best to prepare this short reflection, some of which I have shared with you before.

A) FEMINISM, CULTURE, AND THE BIBLE

1. Our society lives in the post-feminist era. Thanks to the work of leading intellectuals of the 1960s-80s our culture has significantly moved on 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. For this 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 feminism has battled with. Too often, however, we read the 1st-century texts of the New Testament through the lens of 21st-century aversions to a '1950s approach'. We must try to put aside these 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', that is, designed to speak to the cultures in which it was first written. But it is not culturally-bound, trapped within the norms and failings of its ancient context. How could the Word of the eternal God be 'bound' to time?!
4. The Bible does teach that men have an honoured commission *within marriage* (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' operated 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 up 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—and 'leadership' is probably not the right term—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. Strictly speaking, *to submit* (*hupotassō*) means 'to willingly yield oneself in service of another'. 'Deference' might be a better translation. It is a concept at odds with our world, but it is at the heart of biblical ethics. The Christian understanding of the term 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 “wives submit ... *out of reverence for Christ*” in Eph 5:21. There is no issue of equality at stake in the biblical challenge to submit. Just as Christ’s submission does not imply inferiority—to us or to the Father (Phil 2:6)—so a Christian’s submission to another says nothing about status.

2. Of crucial importance for understanding the *biblical* sense of the term—rather than assuming the negative connotations of the English word ‘submit’—is the observation that Paul pairs ‘submit’ with ‘respect’. In the longest and clearest passage on the topic (Eph 5:21-33), the apostle begins the paragraph by saying “wives *submit* / husbands love”, yet he wraps up the paragraph with a significant word change: “Nevertheless, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must *respect* her husband” (Eph 5:33). This concluding sentence clearly functions not as an additional set of commands for husbands and wives but as the summary and reiteration of the twin commands throughout the paragraph. The change from ‘submit’ to ‘respect’ (while maintaining the word ‘love’ for husbands) makes clear that for Paul the two terms are interchangeable and synonymous in this context. The apostle is talking about a demeanour of *deference* or *honour* toward the husband, not an acquiescing to his directives.
3. It is clear that ‘submission’ is a basic attitude of the heart *expected of all Christians* in their relationships with one another. Elsewhere, Paul urges believers to “value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” (Phil 2:3-4). In Eph 5:21, immediately before the call for wives to submit to husbands, Paul urges the *whole* church to be “*giving thanks* to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, *submitting to one another* out of reverence for Christ.” Then comes the call for wives to submit to husbands. The words “submit to one another” are not merely an instruction to certain individuals within a relationship who are called upon to submit—wives to husbands, slaves to master, etc. Rather, as Andrew T. Lincoln argues (*Ephesians. Word Biblical Commentary*, vol.42, 1990, 350-371), it is a general call to Christian “mutual submission” which Paul then applies in different ways for particular relationships: wives to husbands, husbands to wives (through sacrificial love), and so on. Paul (like Peter) does offer different pastoral instructions to wives and husbands, but it is all within the context of a spirit of *deferment* displayed by all Christians. In his instruction on this theme Peter comes very close to speaking of reciprocal submission/respecting 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” (1 Pet 2:17).
4. 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, or deferring. 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!). Wives are to hear this word to them as a pastoral challenge for the flourishing of their marriage (just as husbands are to listen to their own pastoral challenge).

5. 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. This makes impossible any interpretation of the submission-commands which leaves wives vulnerable to verbal, psychological, or physical abuse. Domestic abuse is a scourge on our society. It is repugnant to God’s word, and victims of any form of abuse should seek immediate safety and assistance.
6. 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 for a moment 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 seems to be as follows: While all believers are to express the virtues of love and submission toward one another, a husband in his relationship with his wife is to pay special attention to the attitude of love, and a wife in her relationship with her husband is to pay special attention to the attitude of submission.
7. Why, if men and women are equal, are there *different* pastoral words for wives and husbands? The assumption that equality must always entail symmetry can be questioned. Not only are men and women different from each other in real ways (even if some dispute this), marriage itself is different from every other human bond (even if some dispute this, too). Why would we think that such a unique relationship between distinct creatures requires identical or symmetrical postures? Perhaps in the wisdom of God there is something about the relational dynamic of a marriage that *flourishes* when—within the broader Christian ethic of mutual love and submission—the husband reflects deeply on how to love his wife sacrificially and the wife reflects deeply on how to respect/submit to her husband.
8. 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 in all three New Testament texts are addressed *directly to wives*, not to their 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 pastoral word and seek to apply it as she sees fit. Husbands have their own pastoral word: “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.

C) A NOTE ON SLAVERY

1. When Peter and Paul in their letters urge slaves to honour and obey their masters (1 Peter 2:18; Ephesians 6:5), they are not mandating, teaching, or even endorsing slavery as a system. Rather, they are instructing church members who happen to be slaves how to live within oppressive social structures over which churches had no control. It is analogous to the apostles' insistence that Christians honour secular rulers including the emperor (Rom 13; 1 Pet 2). Not for a moment could such commands be interpreted as a biblical endorsement of a model of government involving *godless hereditary dictatorship*!
2. Slavery was the centre of the Roman economy (along with armies) and the church was a tiny social movement with no power. You must not think 'Vatican power' when you imagine the first Christians. Peter and Paul could no sooner have called for an end to slavery than they could have demanded the replacement of the Emperor with parliamentary democracy. Christians began to have real cultural power only from about the 6th century onwards, and even then only in a scattered way. I admit that it is tragic the church did not manage to persuade society to overthrow slavery for another thousand years, but it is important to remember that, when they did (William Wilberforce, et al.), they did so against the opinion of secular business interests and government.
3. The first Christians had to do the best they could within a system in which they themselves were an oppressed minority. In this context, they did a pretty good job. In the New Testament era they urged Christian slaves to be the best slaves possible, knowing that they were really the Lord's free people (1 Corinthians 7:22). They insisted that Christian masters treat slaves as full human beings and siblings in Christ, reminding masters that they were slaves of the heavenly Master (Ephesians 6:9). Paul added that if a slave could win his freedom – 'manumission' was a difficult and costly procedure – he should definitely do so (1 Corinthians 7:21). This indicates a tacit disapproval of slavery.
4. After the New Testament era, we begin to see some innovation on the part of churches in their work against slavery. The second-century epistles of Ignatius (bishop of Antioch) indicate that churches were beginning to develop a system of raising funds to pay for local manumissions. Another Christian document called the *Shepherd of Hermas* (AD 150ish) urges wealthy believers to use their money not to purchase more fields but to buy up slaves known to be mistreated by local masters. A letter from the fifth century reveals that it was common practice for Christians under St Augustine's leadership to conduct church-sponsored raiding parties to free slaves from brutal slave-traders and then to feed and house them until they could spirit them away. This letter makes clear that even in this later period, more than a century after the first Christian emperor (Constantine), top church officials like Augustine were still battling against a massive, godless, and indifferent Roman bureaucracy, in which Christians were probably less numerous than they are in contemporary Australia. Christians may have been slow and inconsistent in their work against slavery through the centuries, but they eventually lived up to their own principles and brought the rest of the Western world with them!