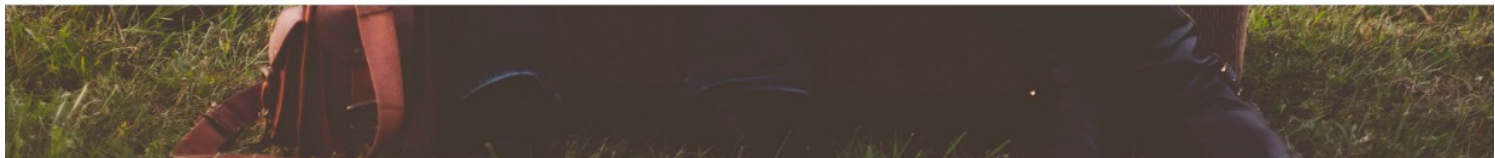


Grace FOR YOUR Marriage



BRYAN CHAPPELL



They knew their relationship was coming apart when they came to see me. Though each claimed to be trying to "do what the Bible says," love had drained from their marriage. Why was not obvious. Both had come from church families and both were well schooled in Scripture. They had even met at a Christian college. I detected nothing in their backgrounds that could account for their tension.

I asked the young man for his own explanation of their troubles. He expressed consternation. He said that he had tried to be a good husband. Because his college had emphasized following biblical family models, he had committed himself to being a spiritual leader in his home. I asked him how he expressed his leadership. This is what he said:

"In order to make sure there is no question about who is the head of our home I make sure both my wife and I let Scripture rule our actions. For instance, when I come home from work, I want to relax. Still, I try to act as the head of my home. If my wife asks for some help in the kitchen, or with the kids [he had three preschoolers, including a set of twins], I don't immediately drop my newspaper and snap to attention. To make clear who is the head of our home, I flip a coin in my mind. If it comes up heads, I help. If comes up tails, I don't. That way there's no question of who's in charge."

Now I thought I was beginning to get an idea of where some of the problems in this marriage might lie. But why? Though this man's attitude may seem extreme, the Bible does say that the husband is the 'head' of the home. Scripture give a husband a right — even a responsibility — to keep spousal roles clear. So how do we know this man's conduct was wrong?

Finding answers to this question will require us to go beyond a surface reading of Scripture. We will see that the Bible never justifies dictatorial rule by one spouse or requires the abandonment of personal dignity by another.

Access to the deeper dimensions of the Bible's instruction requires no special revelations. Hearts open to the message of Scripture will recognize that God neither commends nor commands selfishness. When the Prince of Heaven gave his life to rescue us from our sin, he taught us the glory of sacrifice. Jesus said, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39). Lives devoted to serving self cannot avoid making one's own desires the god of every action. Such gods ultimately enslave us to our own appetites and deprive us of the relationships that make our lives fulfilling.

A marriage built on the foundation of persons finding happiness by using another ignores the deepest passions God has placed in our hearts by his Spirit. We discover the happiness God intends for our lives only when we use the resources and privileges God has given us for the good of another. By exercising the sacrificial love Christ exhibited, we deepen our understanding of God's care, discovering our value even as we affirm others.' Happiness comes from giving ourselves to each other and to God.

But how does a husband "give himself" for the happiness of his wife, and how does a wife "give herself" for the happiness of her husband?

A Man's Responsibility

She steals from her family. From the outside, they appear to have an ideal home.

The house is beautiful, the couple is attractive, and the kids are sweet. Inside things are far from ideal—the wife has a gambling addiction. She has been to counselors, clinics, and pastors. Nothing helps. Periodically she breaks into her own family's bank accounts (or pawns family valuables) and gambles away the money.

Her actions have put her family on the edge of bankruptcy time and time again. The debts cannot be covered even by her husband's executive salary. The financial damage done to the family will take half a lifetime to repair. But the worst damage is not financial, it is relational. Can you imagine your own spouse stealing from you, destroying your family's security, and lying about it for months on end?

What should the husband in this marriage do? Consider first what our society tells him to do. It screams, "Get out of that marriage. You don't have to take this. You don't have to put up with her. Leave!"

This husband has not left. Every time his wife has stolen from him and damaged his future, he has forgiven her and taken her back. Even when she was ready to kill herself—ready to give up on her own life—he has loved her. Like the biblical prophet Hosea who took back his unfaithful wife, my friend has continued to love his wife, despite her failures.

Once I asked this young man why he had not ended this nightmare marriage. His words were simple. He said, "My children need her. But more than that they need to know their Lord. How can they know of a Father in heaven who forgives them if their father on earth will not forgive their own mother? How can my wife know the love of God if the spiritual leader in this home will not love her despite her faults?"

In Christ's name and for the spiritual good of his family, the man holds on to his marriage. There is nothing more important to him than that his children and wife are spared a hell greater than his own present pain. His priority is his family's knowing eternal grace. Thus, the husband takes precautions to keep funds from his wife that will feed her weakness. He insists on counseling. He entrusts her with responsibilities that will boost her self-image. He ensures the regular church attendance of his family. He treats his wife with respect, and he loves her.

He uses every aspect of his biblical knowledge and authority to help his wife. In these ways, he fulfills his biblical responsibility to be the head of his home even as he sacrifices himself for the good of others.

The Head of the Home

Though the situation described may seem atypical, the husband's conduct exemplifies the responsibility of men in Christian marriage. The husband looks past his own rights to consider what is right for his spouse. He then refuses to surrender his leadership role in the family, but rather uses his biblical authority to make sure the family's resources and activities serve the best interests of his wife and children.

The apostle Paul articulates this responsibility to which God calls Christian husbands through a tension evident in his classic passage on family relationships. Paul first urges all Christians to "submit to one another" (Eph. 5:21). Then, immediately following this general command for submission to one another, the apostle tells wives to "submit to husbands" because "the husband is the head of the wife" (Eph. 5:22-23).

At first glance the call for mutual submission followed by the announcement that

the man is the head of the wife, seems to echo George Orwell's infamous line in *Animal Farm* that "all animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others." How can we be in submission to one another when someone is head over the other?

What Headship Isn't

Being the "head" of a home does not mean nothing. By saying that Christ is head of the church (Eph. 5:23), the apostle Paul underscores the importance of headship. Christ's identification as our head gives significance and clarity to the word.

Ignoring Responsibility

The Bible says that as the head of his bride, the church, Christ serves as her Savior (Eph. 5:23). Jesus gave himself to make the church holy, radiant, and blameless (5:25-27). Thus, headship involves taking responsibility—even to the point of personal sacrifice—for the well-being of another. Such a definition for the head of a family grants nobility to the phrase "being a man." It also renders boyish and immature those images of manliness that idealize personal independence, family disinterest, and a "sportin' life." The Marlboro man and Michelob weekends represent true manhood about as well as a five year old in a cowboy hat resembles John Wayne.

The strength of character required to head a home for a lifetime makes masculinity defined only as taking care of self seem childish. As a child I witnessed true manhood in my father, whose job required much time on the road. His travel allowance could have provided rooms and meals that would have made my father's trips quite pleasant. But rather than take advantage of the perks, my father would drive late into the night to get home and

be at breakfast with his family. Even then his sacrifice was not done.

For many years the money saved from my father's expenses was placed into an account to provide for my younger brother whose learning disabilities limit his independence. My father took seriously his responsibility as head of the home and he sacrificed to fulfill it.

"The biblical head of a family lives selflessly."

Excusing Passivity

The biblical head of a family lives selflessly. This description repudiates modern perspectives that make headship a nasty synonym for self-seeking power. Because of Christ's agonizing efforts for us, we know that using headship as an excuse for passivity is wrong. The husband who will not lift a finger to serve his spouse may claim he is exercising the prerogatives of headship, but in reality he is abandoning his biblical responsibility.

A mother of three recently told my wife, "My husband hasn't made a decision regarding our family in two years. He makes no attempt to discipline the children—that's left to me. He never consults me about taking out-of-town work assignments. He comes and goes seemingly without any regard for my feelings or our children's needs. They don't even know him. All he does is come home from time to time and break our routine before leaving again. I don't have three children—I have four."

This wife complains frequently to her husband about his habits. He tells her that in a few weeks he will work out a time they can talk. But he never does. He uses his headship as an excuse for passivity. His headship really means nothing but taking care of himself.

Media and feminist objectors to biblical statements about headship frequently accuse the apostles of endorsing male dictatorships. However, in my experience wives are as frequently distressed by their husbands' disinterest. Especially in troubled marriages, men often have a passive disregard for their families. In such homes the woman (typically the more verbal one) may constantly complain to the husband about what he is not doing. To keep himself from being disturbed, the man reacts to the verbal pressure by erecting a shell of nonresponsiveness or by immersing himself in interests that insulate him from home concerns. The man may even convince himself that because the Bible makes him the head of his home he has the right to be involved as little as he pleases.

“...in troubled marriages, men often have a passive disregard for their families.”

A man may also try to rationalize his passivity with the excuse that he is just being kind. He may tell himself that he is being nice by refusing to confront his wife lovingly about her critical spirit, patterns of anger or disregard for her responsibilities.

But if, in fact, he fails to act because he lacks

either the courage or energy to risk disturbing the equilibrium his passivity maintains, then he ignores the responsibilities of headship at the expense of his spouse's and marriage's spiritual health. The choice actively to disregard spiritual need can be just as destructive as passive disregard. The Bible does not permit men to be uninvolved, disinterested, intentionally deaf, or selfishly blind. Headship requires husbands actively (and graciously) to work for the physical and spiritual wellbeing of each person in the family.

A husband's passivity can lead to cycles of abuse. A common pattern in abusive marriages is long periods of male passivity interspersed with brief episodes of rage. During the periods of relative calm, the man may respond minimally to his wife's complaints. As a result, the wife may be encouraged to needle her husband more to get further cooperation, but his responsiveness often comes at a high price. Even when he complies with the wishes of his wife, the words that shame him into action may steam inside him. Like an emotional pressure cooker that appears unperturbed from the outside, he is preparing to explode. The placid exterior of the husband camouflages his mounting sense of grievance against the disruption of his personal peace.

When the explosion occurs, the man briefly asserts himself with intense aggression. He may later view the abuse as untypical of himself and, therefore, will feel guilty and apologetic. However, this sense of shame will be further reason for the husband to distance himself from home concerns. Thus, he returns to the nonresponsiveness that elicits more verbal needling from his wife and sets up the abuse cycle to repeat.

Men who have made idols of the cultural icons of swaggering independence and managerial machismo have no biblical support. They program their actions and emotions to be self-absorbed, self-contained, and nonresponsive. They define their family role by what they have a right not to do. Being a biblical head of a home demands more. Passive avoidance of whatever is bothersome, disquieting, or irksome will not suffice. Indifference to the needs of one's family is not biblical headship. Contrary to some teaching prevalent in both Christian and secular settings, God requires the active sacrifice of the head of a home. Biblical headship does not mean nothing.

Superiority

Just as wrong as underrepresenting the authority of biblical headship, is overstating it. Some husbands use their headship as justification for making slaves of their wives. A horror of my pastoral experience was a man who believed the Bible supported his right to torture his wife if she did not submit to his sexual desires. Another man made his wife log her hours of housework to make sure she did not loaf. Of such men, Kent Hughes appropriately writes:

God's Word in the hands of a religious fool can do immense harm. I have seen "couch potatoes" who order their wives and children around like the grand sultan of Morocco—adulterous misogynists with the domestic ethics of "Jabba the Hut" who cow their wives around with Bible verses about submission—insecure men whose wives do not dare go to the grocery without permission, who even tell their wives how to dress. But the fact that evil, disordered men have perverted God's Word is no reason to throw it out.

The Bible requires men to treat their wives with consideration and respect (1 Peter 3:7). Headship never grants husbands the right



to inflict arbitrary, selfish, prideful, or capricious rule on their spouses.

The apostle says, “Husbands, love your wives” (Eph. 5:25). He also defines such love: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor. 13:4–5).

Nowhere does Scripture define love as taking advantage of others. The command for husbands to love their wives should rule out any definition of headship that encourages using or harming others. Paul writes that husbands should love their wives “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). Jesus’ sacrificial ministry—the washing of feet, the giving up of heavenly glory, the suffering on a cross—demonstrates that Biblical headship never permits using one’s position for selfish benefit.

What Headship Is

Defining headship by saying what it isn’t does not answer all our questions. What does the Bible mean when it says that the husband is the head of the wife?

Possessing Authority to Lead

The head of a home possesses the most authority in the family. This conclusion is difficult to sidestep when we simply read the Bible without modern prejudices. Paul instructs wives: “submit to your husbands” (Eph. 5:22). Then he gives the reason for this submission: “the husband is the head of the wife” (v. 23). Next, he offers an example of submission: “the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church,” and “as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands” (vv. 23–24).

“Nowhere does Scripture define love as taking advantage of others.”

Finally, Paul indicates the extent of the husband’s authority: “wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (v. 24).

Clearly the apostle wants the husband to have primary authority (see Titus 2:5; 1 Cor. 11:3–10). The husband’s authority, however, does not grant him a right to arbitrary, capricious, or selfish control. Headship has strings attached. The apostle says that just as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22–23). This comparison limits the authority of a husband as well as legitimizing it.

The right to exercise family authority exists only to the extent it reflects Christ’s nature and purposes. This does not mean that a wife must only honor the authority of a husband who is a Christian (see 1 Peter 3:1). God bases his marriage instructions on the way he created us, and his standards do not disappear because our marriages are faulty. Rather, right ordering of our relationships is one way God brings his beauty into scarred lives. Headship—even flawed headship—is designed to fulfill God’s purposes and should be honored. However, when a husband uses his position to counter the purposes of God, then the man has no biblical authority for his actions. The husband who demands that his wife stay in a corner while he abuses their children betrays his biblical authority. Headship that transgresses God’s purposes loses God’s approval.

A wife has no obligation to submit to her husband when he demands that she disobey God. When Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord in everything, the apostle is not teaching that husbands are divine. The command to submit “as to the Lord” (Eph. 5:22) reminds women that they are ultimately accountable to him. The Bible similarly urges us to work as though we are serving the Lord (Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:23). In so honoring employers, we do not pretend they are gods, nor should we obey them if they order us to break God’s law. In the same way, a wife who submits to her husband’s authority honors God, but not if by obeying the man, she disobeys God. The wife should submit to her husband “in everything” that God’s Word approves.

Husband and wife bear mutual responsibility to obey God. Neither can say that he or she has a right to disregard God’s standards because of what the other has commanded or neglected. Great harm results when anyone forgets these basic principles. Far into his adult years, a friend I will call Joshua bears the scars of parents who neglected these principles. Joshua’s father worked the late shift as a New York taxi driver. Though he rarely woke from his daytime sleep, the father would occasionally assert his “spiritual authority” when he came home drunk. In those predawn hours, the father would awaken his wife and children with beatings in order to “preach the Bible” to them in the living room. To this day, Joshua reports that his mother defends his father’s actions because, “He is the head of the home, and the Bible says we must submit to his wishes.”

I have no ready answer for what this long-suffering wife should have done. What I see in her son, however, is a lifetime of turmoil resulting from the perverted definition of headship that a husband portrayed and a wife defended. Having been taught

that headship included the right to abuse, Joshua became an abuser of his own wife and children. The cowering of his children finally awakened him to what Scripture really teaches. The Bible never sanctions the actions of a bully in the name of headship. God never approves abuse nor requires submission to it.

Headship receives biblical support only when governed by godly purposes and practices.¹² The responsibilities God places on husbands yields a definition of headship far from the dictatorial rule or disengaged privilege some men want the Bible to justify. Biblical headship is the conscientious and loving use of the authority God grants a husband to ensure that all in his home honor God and experience his blessings.

A Woman’s Responsibility

When Fergie married Prince Andrew, we marveled at the days of pageantry surrounding the royal wedding, but the moment most replayed on televisions around the world came as they said their vows. Fergie was supposed to say, “I promise to love, honor, and obey . . .” She did say the phrase, but with a sideways glance at the Prince that said much more. Her smirk clearly articulated the new Duchess’s thought: “You gotta be kidding. Nobody really believes those old-fashioned words about wifely submission anymore, and you had better not!”

She repeated the vows, but with a toss of her head Fergie as clearly tossed away the content of those words. In hindsight, her careless lip service to traditions she did not really intend to honor became a sad metaphor for the royal marriage. But it is not merely royalty to whom the metaphor applies.

If we listen past the lip service we pay to the official positions of our churches, political parties, or family traditions, we also hear



questions about the responsibilities of women in marriage. It does not matter whether the intelligent women women in marriage. A campus minister at Vanderbilt University put it this way: "It does matter whether the intelligent women on this campus are liberal feminists or conservative traditionalists; if you can get them to talk honestly about their deepest concerns, most will say that they constantly wonder if their personal choices are correct. Deep down they are desperate for a credible authority to help them decide what women are supposed to be."

Sadly, our churches have not been able to settle the issue. For example, some church leaders urge women to leave abusive husbands. Others tell women to submit to husbands guilty of the same offenses, saying the abuse is a result of wives not being submissive enough. I hear confusion among my own relatives as women, deeply desirous of honoring Scripture, have cried out in emotional exhaustion and spiritual agony, "I know that the Bible says to submit but I can't continue to live this way. I have tried but I can't keep on. I just can't."

From palaces to campuses to churches to our homes the questions echo: How really is a wife supposed to love, honor, and obey? Flip answers that do not consider the challenges of our times, the dignity of each person, and the authority of God's Word will not suffice.

So, what is a Christian wife to do? The plain answer of Scripture is that a Christian wife is to submit. The Bible says, "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22).² However, neither mouthing ancient dogma nor mindlessly shouting, "Submit," at modern women will settle today's concerns. The true duty, dignity, and beauty God intends for wives unfolds only as we consider the significance of his intentions for

Dealing with Abuse

Know Your Rights

The Bible does not require a woman to remain in an abusive marriage. Jesus allows divorce on the basis of adultery (Matthew 5:32) and the Apostle Paul also identifies willful and irremediable desertion as a form of unfaithfulness that may serve as grounds (I Corinthians 7:15). It is my understanding of these scriptures that severe emotional and physical abuse are included as forms of unfaithfulness to the marriage covenant that provide grounds for separation or dissolution of a marriage (I Corinthians 7:10-11).

Know Your Lord

God's allowance for divorce in the face of marital unfaithfulness (in all its forms) does not require those who have been sinned against to separate. All Christians are representatives of their Savior. Where Christ's grace is better represented by forgiveness and perseverance, then a person sinned against may choose to remain in a difficult marriage for the sake of showing Christ's reconciling love to a sinful spouse – or to children and the watching world. Christ may call us to temporal sacrificial and service for the sake of sharing eternal love.

Know Your Limits

Whether to endure or end a difficult marriage should never be decided alone. Those who are in difficult marriages may be the least ready to determine what they should do. Sin and selfishness can tempt one to label as "abuse" human fault and weakness that are not truly threats to any who, for Christ's sake, are willing to consider the needs of others higher than their own (Phil. 2:3-4). However, abuse can also create a skewed reality in the mind of a victim

causing her (or him) to accept or excuse mistreatment. Selfishness inflates accusations of abuse; but true abuse also robs its victims of perspective and objectivity. So, no one should try to handle abuse without talking to a pastor, church officer, counselor or other mature believers.

Know Your Resources

If you are in immediate danger call the police and/or get out of the situation. Paul teaches that the civil authorities are instruments of God's purpose to restrain evil (Rom. 13:4). Additionally, the God who sanctifies life requires us to defend our lives and our children. Separation may be needed for an extended time both for safety and to allow effective counseling of all parties. Responsible church authorities should be told of abuse so that they can protect victims (and correct abusers) by providing family intervention, counseling, prayer, support and, if needed, safety and church discipline. The yellow pages and the internet will also provide numerous confidential social services for families with abuse problems.

Know Your Status

You are not alone. Experts say abuse is present in almost 20 percent of marriages, and this includes many Christian marriages. Both women (85% of the time) and men can suffer from domestic violence. Shame, false guilt and fear are the most common reasons that spouses do not seek help for abuse that damages them, their families – and their abuser. Willingness to confront abuse for the sake of the purposes God intends to promote in our life and family come with the confidence that we are eternally loved by God and eternally secure in his care. Refusing to accept abuse in our lives and families is biblical. Jesus will not forsake you because you take steps to confront an abuser and end abuse.

Submission Does Not Mean Nothing

We can neither ignore nor trivialize God's desire for women to submit to their husbands. The apostle Paul first uses a compelling expression and a clarifying example to demonstrate a wife's submission has both earthly and eternal significance. Then, the apostle extends the responsibility so far as to make it impossible to circumvent or dismiss it.

The Scope of the Apostle's Words

A Compelling Expression

Despite our culture's aversion to anybody submitting to anybody, we cannot sidestep Paul's encompassing words about wives' submission. He underscores the importance of the responsibility with a compelling expression. Wives are to submit to their husbands "as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22). This phrasing does not mean that a wife should treat her husband as though he were God. We are not to make idols of anything or anyone. Rather, the words indicate that a woman's submission is motivated not so much by a husband's deserving as by love for God's purposes. She renders the service the Bible requires as to God himself (with all appropriate devotion and joy), rather than measuring what she owes another human (whose failings may make her service seem unfair and onerous). As a woman submits to her husband, she looks over his shoulder to see the Lord who is saying, "You are ultimately doing this not for him but for me."

Submission motivated by love for the Savior who suffered for us can help a woman whose friends or inclinations encourage her to base her actions (or nonactions) on her husband's worthiness. Such false encouragers whisper, "Why should you serve a person like that if he treats you so poorly or is so unappealing?"

The Bible, on the contrary, encourages us to serve one another not because others deserve our service but because God deserves our devotion. The fact that God is using us for his purposes explains the necessity of our service, provides the motive for our obedience, and underscores the importance of it.

For more than thirty years after she committed herself to living for her Savior, the wife of a police captain in our town prayed for her husband. In the early years of her marriage, she confesses, she tried to preach him into a commitment to Christ. He responded to none of her arguments or ploys. She ultimately resolved merely to love him despite his grizzled manner and occasional mocking of her faith.

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For many years, she cared for her husband with the "gentle and quiet spirit" that the apostle Peter advises for the wives of non-Christians (1 Peter 3:4). Finally, the hardened police captain did respond. Now he too serves the Savior.

Once I asked this wife what had kept her living sacrificially for him. Unspoken between us was also the question of how she had continued to live for his good when he had made her life painful. She responded simply, “When I became a Christian, I fell in love with Jesus. My love for him made me want to do what he wanted for my husband.”

When a wife submits to her husband “as to the Lord,” heaven’s purposes compel her, even when human rewards seem remote. Through this heavenly perspective, the apostle makes it clear that a wife’s responsibility is not removed because her husband is difficult. Wives are to prioritize their lives so as to serve the purposes God has for their husbands.

A Clarifying Example

The apostle supplies an example to clarify the nature of a wife’s submission to her husband. He says that as the church submits to Christ, so wives should submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:24). As the church could not fulfill its purposes without submitting to the will of the Lord, women cannot fulfill God’s intentions if they do not submit to their husbands. A woman disobeys God when she ignores, undermines, or counters the proper authority of her husband. At the same time, the apostle’s example frees the wife from submission to ungodly demands since the church’s submission to Christ never includes participation in evil.

Churches sometimes err by teaching women they must do whatever a husband wants regardless of its moral consequences. Because a wife is to submit to her husband as the church submits to Christ, she remains spiritually responsible for her actions. A husband has no right to require of his wife what is contrary to God, and she has no obligation to obey what forces her,

him, or their family against God’s will. Submission is an act of worship whose primary purpose is to honor God. The requirement to submit to one’s husband never takes precedence over the requirement to submit to God. Respectful but firm resistance of a spouse requiring disobedience to God is required by God.

The Comprehensive Extent

Finally, lest we assume these standards apply only to some narrow slice of life, the apostle states the comprehensive extent of his instruction. He says that “wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (Eph. 5:24). As already noted, these words do not mean that women should submit to ungodly demands. However, the apostle makes it clear that submission responsibilities do not expire after church. They do not apply only to a certain category of decisions or only when the submission is easy. The Bible requires a wife to respect the authority God gives her husband in every dimension of their relationship (vv. 24, 33).

When the careers of a husband and wife conflict, when dramatically different views about child rearing or money management divide couples, and when our culture says no one’s will should have priority over another’s, it may be extremely difficult for a woman to submit to the authority of her husband. The Bible does not belittle this difficulty. Neither does it annul a husband’s authority. Should our minds object that the Bible’s writers simply did not anticipate the nature of modern society, we should remember that God gave these instructions when the sophisticates of Greek and Roman society were also blurring distinctions of men and women.

When the home is functioning biblically, the husband will consult and honor his

wife's input into family decisions. Caring compromise characterizes the home where husband and wife are seeking to honor God and each other. The Bible tells husbands to be considerate of their wives and to treat them with respect—the same word used to describe how we are to honor kings.³ However, even when this regard is not given, the Bible instructs wives to respect their husbands' decisions that do not demand disobedience to God.

When a wife loses respect for her husband, the marriage quickly weakens. Early in our marriage Kathy enjoyed spending summer evenings with friends gathered on a neighbor's porch swing. The evenings were full of laughter and teasing, but after a few weeks Kathy stopped joining the others. The wives delighted in exchanging tales of the stupidities and eccentricities of their mates. Kathy said she felt increasingly out of place (even though her husband's foibles could have provided her a rich supply of anecdotes) because she did not feel she could honor Scripture and participate in the ridicule. Kathy said, "I can't make fun of you in someone else's home, and respect you in our home."

My wife's honesty about how difficult it is to maintain respect for a spouse in one arena of life when it does not exist in another helps explain the apostle's encompassing words. He says there should be no aspect of life and no time of life when a woman refuses to submit to the biblical authority of her husband. So long he is not using his authority to impose something contrary to God's Word, the wife is to submit to her husband "in everything." These words are truly comprehensive!

The Scope of Scripture's Witness

Though the apostle Paul's instruction is comprehensive, we might choose to disregard his words if they seemed to be excep-

tional. If these words about a wife's submission were merely an isolated reference in an obscure verse, then it might be better to downplay what seems so sure to offend so many. But, the requirement for wives to submit to husbands is not limited to one obscure verse.

At least three times in the Ephesians passage, Paul instructs wives to subject themselves to their husbands' authority (Eph. 5:22-24, 33). The apostle repeats this instruction in five of his epistles—1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Timothy, and Titus. Such teaching is not Paul's alone. The apostle Peter also tells wives, "be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives" (1 Peter 3:1).

The New Testament writers assure readers that these marriage standards are not unique to the apostolic age. Peter commends the submission of wives to the authority of their husbands in his era because "the holy women of the past who put their hope in God . . . were submissive to their own husbands" (v. 5). Peter ties the requirement of a submissive spirit to Israel's earliest history. He encourages wives to be "like Sarah" who two thousand years previously had "obeyed Abraham and called him her master" (v. 6). Paul goes back even farther by relating his instruction to the husband/wife relationships established at creation (Eph. 5:31; 1 Cor. 11:7-10).

Scripture's instruction for wives to submit to their husbands is sweeping and consistent. Far from being limited to an obscure reference, the concept appears across Paul's letters, reappears in other New Testament writing, finds precedent in Israel's origins, and receives its design at humanity's creation.

Submission Does Mean Something

We cannot sweep aside instruction that receives such frequent and far-reaching attention in God's Word. But we still have to know what submission means. The original word is a combination of Greek terms that in rough translation would mean, "to arrange under." In the 'street talk' of ancient times submission only conveyed the idea of subservience, but that is not what the Bible means.

The biblical contexts convince commentators to interpret submission as "a disposition to yield," "voluntary yielding in love," or "notto exercise authority over." To these technical ideas can be added the colloquial commentary that biblical submission means that "a wife should follow her husband's lead, but it does not mean that she should be her husband's shadow." Though the specific definitions vary a little, submission includes actions, since it involves obedience (1 Peter 3:5-6), and it includes attitudes, since it involves respect (Eph. 5:33). Such word studies help, but we do not really know what God expects of wives until we examine the contexts in which the apostles use the term submit.

To Complete Another

We understand what biblical submission means by the purposes it fulfills. Paul discloses these purposes using words from Genesis: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." (Eph. 5:31-32). These ancient words remind us that marriage commits two people to a union that forms their mutual completeness. A marriage will never fulfill God's purposes if either person abandons care for the fulfillment of the other. Thus, a wife's responsibility involves pouring herself into the completion of her husband.



Sacrificing one's self to make a relationship (and those in it) whole defines the essence of biblical submission. The subtleties and complexities of any marriage make it impossible to simplify such submission to a few rules for home etiquette. Paul says the ways in which two become one is "a profound mystery." It is past our explaining (and yet so obvious to us) that God has made those of us not gifted for celibacy never quite whole—in personal development or spiritual maturity without the one who completes us in marital oneness.

The connection of personal wholeness to marital completion becomes evident as we look at another individual (or even at ourselves) after a few years of marriage. We observe: That person has so matured, so leveled out, or become so much less self-absorbed since marrying so and so. At least that is what we see if the marriage is functioning well. If the marriage is going poorly, we typically recognize that the individual's self-absorption, immaturity, or character flaws are even more prominent.

If you are dishonest with the one God intends to know you most intimately and mature you most profoundly, you sacrifice spiritual development that is needed to safeguard you in other areas of life. A person engaged in an extramarital affair not only damages the oneness of the marriage but stunts his or her own character development. Lack of consideration for one's spouse (in habits, conversation, or faithfulness) almost always creates an individual whom others see as self-centered and ruthless. Seeking their own advantage, neighbors and coworkers may laugh at the jokes and cater to the interests of such an individual but they know better than to trust a person who does not honor the trust of marriage.

When the oneness that God intends for marriage does not occur, we become less than

whole. The abuse or neglect of that union damages both persons (see Gen. 2:20–24; Eph. 5:31).

Knowledge of how our lives affect each other helps shape our understanding of the mutual responsibilities of marriage. To the husband, Scripture gives authority for bibli-

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cal headship designed to lead a family in godly paths. To the wife, God commits supportive care of the husband so that he can carry out these duties. At creation God described these responsibilities. Eve was to be Adam's "helper"—"a help meet (i.e., suitable or compatible) for him" say the historic translations (Gen. 2:18; 1 Cor. 11:8–9). Far from being demeaning, the "helper" term refers to God himself elsewhere in Scripture. Thus the helper language reminds us that a wife fulfills heavenly purposes in her home.

God intends for each wife to complement her husband so that together they fulfill God's expectations for their lives more than either could separately. Each has responsibility for the other so that the family unit is whole and healthy before God. Elisabeth Elliot captures this purpose well:

The first woman was made specifically for the first man, a helper, to meet, respond to, surrender to, and complement him. God made her from the man, out of his very bone, and then he

brought her to the man. When Adam named Eve, he accepted responsibility to “husband” her—to provide for her, to cherish her, to protect her.

Each of us bears God’s image but in a marriage, we do not fulfill the potential of that image without the spousal oneness of God’s design. The wife’s complementary gifts help refine the spiritual character of her husband, even as God uses the man to lead all members of the family (including the wife) to honor Christ. The wife fulfills a redemptive purpose in the home, enabling each person more fully to know and be what the Savior desires. She does this by submitting herself in love to the good of another and, in doing so, reflects Christ’s sacrifice. As his image bearer, she becomes his chief representative to her spouse. Like her husband, the wife lives for another and, thus, represents Christ in and for the home.

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