

LOVE AND RESPECT IN MARRIAGE

The following discussion touches briefly on some of the major principles surrounding the role relationship of husbands and wives in marriage. It is by no means exhaustive, but it can serve as a starting point for further study. As you read this material, I encourage you to look up the verses that I have cited in my discussion--please see for yourself what God says about these important principles.

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NEITHER INFERIOR NOR SUPERIOR

By God's design, man and woman are one in essence (see Genesis 2:23), and are therefore equal in dignity, value, and glory (see Gal. 3:26-29). Although God himself has assigned husbands and wives different roles within marriage, the essential unity of man and woman leaves absolutely no room for concepts of inferiority or superiority.

Christ himself vividly demonstrated this "different but equal" concept. Jesus was and is one in essence with the Father, yet Jesus was "sent" by the Father (see John 3:16) and willingly submitted to Him without protest (see Luke 22:42; John 14:31; 1 Cor. 15:28). (To submit means simply to yield, that is, not to insist on getting your own way.) The same may be said of the Holy Spirit; He is one in essence with the Father and the Son, yet He was "sent" by them (see John 14:26; 16:7) and willingly submitted. Similarly, Jesus was commended for being in submission to His parents, which certainly did not make Him inferior to them (see Luke 2:51).

By these analogies, we must conclude that having different roles or authority does not make us either inferior or superior. Therefore, it is contrary to Scripture to teach that holding authority makes a person superior, just as it is wrong to teach that being in submission implies inferiority.

BE IMITATORS OF GOD

Ephesians 5:21-33 contains explicit instructions on the husband-wife relationship. In recent years, this passage has become quite controversial, and it is frequently misunderstood and abused by both men and women. To understand it properly, it must be studied in its context. Paul begins chapter five with these words:

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 5:1-2).

Thus, the larger context of Paul's instructions on marriage is the development of what it means to be "imitators of God." As we will soon see, Jesus himself set the perfect example both of using authority properly and of being in submission. Thus, in verses

21-33, Paul is explaining how husbands and wives should follow Jesus' example, imitating God by walking in love.

It is also important to note that Paul's instructions on husband-wife relationships are immediately preceded by the command to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (v. 21). This is the general principle that should guide all Christian conduct; every believer should be willing to yield to others at appropriate times. In fact, as we will see, people in authority must often be the first to give up their needs and desires.

In addition to commending submission in general, verse 21 also introduces a series of instructions involving the authority structure of the marriage, the family, and the household. The point of verse 21 is quite simple: all of us are called both to positions of authority and positions of subordination (just as Christ himself was). Thus, Paul is teaching us that imitating God by walking in love involves respect for authority.

Finally, verse 21 reminds us that submission to God-appointed authority structures should be done "out of reverence for Christ." This echoes Jesus' teaching, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). As R. C. Sproul says, "To say you honor the kingdom of Christ while you disobey his authority structure is to be guilty not only of hypocrisy but of cosmic treason" (The Intimate Marriage, Tyndale House, 1975). God's structures are given to us in holy love, and they are perfectly designed for our good. As we respect those structures and walk with God in love, we not only receive His blessing, but also learn what it means to "be imitators of God."

HUSBANDS, LOVE YOUR WIVES

In Ephesians 5:23, Paul teaches that "the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church." In doing so, Paul is not introducing a new chauvinist concept; he is merely drawing attention to God's original design for marriage, which gave the husband authority over the wife (see Gen. 2:18; cf. 1 Cor. 11:3). This does not make a husband superior to his wife but rather gives him a different role than his wife.

Paul does much more than reaffirm God's design for marriage, however. His primary interest is to teach husbands how to carry out their responsibilities regarding their wives:

"Husbands, love [*agapao*] your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave [*paredidomi*] himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25).

By implication, Paul is reminding husbands to be on guard against their natural (sinful) inclination to abuse their authority and fail to love their wives. (As we will see later, the abuse of authority is a natural consequence of the Fall; see Gen. 3:16; cf. Mark 10:42-45.) Paul counteracts this tendency by using two strong words.

Agapao (ag-ap-ah'-oh, noun: agape) has little to do with feelings; it is a sacrificial, giving, active type of love (see John 3:16), which is described in detail in 1 Corinthians 13:1-7.

According to this passage, a loving husband should be patient and kind toward his wife. He should not envy her, boast, or be proud in comparison to her. He should not be rude, self-seeking, easily angered, and he should not keep a record of her wrongs. He should never delight in anything bad happening to her but rather should rejoice with her over good and true things. He should always protect her, always trust her (until he has clear facts to the contrary), always hope for her and with her, and always persevere in treating her right, even when she does not seem to be deserving of it.

Paradidomi (par-a-did'-o-mee) means to surrender or to yield up. It is used three times to describe Jesus' act of surrendering his life for the sake of His church (Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:2, 25). It is also used in 1 Corinthians 13:3 to describe a person surrendering his body to be burned in fire. Obviously, *paradidomi* calls for much more than minor sacrifice or adjustment in one's life; rather, it demands a complete yielding of anything and everything that is needed to secure the welfare of another. Christ held nothing back to save His church; likewise, a husband should hold nothing back to meet his wife's needs.¹

As these two words indicate, a husband has an extremely serious responsibility in marriage, which leaves no room for a self-centered abuse of authority. All that he does with regard to his wife is to be for her good, not for his own pleasure or convenience. Thus, for the sake of meeting his wife's genuine needs, a husband should be willing to surrender whatever is necessary in his career, recreation, relaxation, spending, and other areas of his life.

A husband's responsibilities are to be fulfilled unconditionally. Nowhere does the Bible indicate that a husband is released from his duties if his wife fails to live up to her responsibilities (except for adultery, which would allow but not require a divorce). Just as God took the initiative to love and save us while we were still hostile to Him (see Rom. 5:8), so must a husband love his wife and see to her needs, even if she is presently anything but loving and pleasant herself. To do so, a husband must take his eyes off his wife's deficiencies and focus them on Christ (see John 14:15), who gave us the perfect model of unconditional love (Gal. 2:20).

Paul elaborates further on the husband's role in Ephesians 5:26-33. By comparing the husband's role with that of Christ, he teaches the Christian husband that two of his chief responsibilities in marriage are to establish and protect his wife's dignity and to help and encourage her to grow spiritually (vv. 26-27). In addition, husbands are to do everything possible to protect and defend their wives from any possible harm (v. 28). Paul also reminds husbands of the intimate and inviolate bond they must form with their wives, and he instructs them that their loyalty to their wives must exceed all other loyalties in life, even that to their parents (v. 31). Finally, for emphasis, Paul closes the teaching by repeating his opening comment: "Husbands, love your wives."

There is even more that a husband must consider. Paul says that husbands should love their wives "as Christ loved the church." And how did Christ love the church? Mark 10:42-45 answers that question, and at the same time provides us with a clear job description for any person who is in authority:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant [*diakonos*] and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all [*doulos*]. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served [*diakoneo*], but to serve [*diakoneo*], and to give his life as a ransom for many (cf. Matt. 20:24-28; Luke 22:24-27).

Again, in order to get a clear understanding of what is being taught, we must look carefully at two key words, both of which emphasize a single principle, that of being a servant. A *diakonos* (dee-ak'-on-os) is a person who runs errands for others, attends to their needs, and waits on them. Note how the word is used in Matthew 23:11, Mark 9:35, John 12:26, and Romans 16:1.

A *doulos* (doo'-los) is a slave to another person, either involuntarily or voluntarily. This word is used of Christ in describing the role He took on for the sake of His church (Phil. 2:7). *Doulos* is commonly used in the New Testament when urging believers to be "servants of God" (see Acts 16:17; 1 Pet. 2:16).

The verb *diakoneo* (dee-ak-on-eh'-oh) means to be an attendant, that is, to wait upon others; it may be done in a menial fashion or as a host, friend, or teacher (such as a church deacon). The word is used to describe servants waiting upon their masters (Matt. 8:15; Luke 12:37; 17:8; 22:26, 27), angels attending to the Lord (Matt. 4:11), Christians serving Christ (John 12:26), and Christians serving one another (2 Tim. 1:18; Philem. 13; 1 Pet. 4:10). The essence of *diakoneo* is looking out for and meeting the needs of someone else (cf. Matt. 25:44; 27:55; Acts 6:2; Rom. 15:25; Heb. 6:10). Through His many acts of service, including washing His disciples' feet (John 13:1-17), and ultimately dying on the cross for all believers, Jesus demonstrated the humility and sacrifice that must often attend such service.

By incorporating these concepts into the Ephesians passage, we gain additional insight into a husband's role in marriage. He is to be a servant to his wife; he is to be sensitive to her needs, trying to anticipate them even before she does. He is to attend to those needs before his own, even if it costs him dearly. Obviously, this leaves no room for exerting his marital authority for his own pleasure or convenience. This is what it means to love your wife as Christ loved the church.

Paul was not the only apostle who set forth these standards. Peter included equally challenging instructions in his first epistle:

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect [Gr. - time] as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers (1 Pet. 3:7).

Like Paul's teaching in Ephesians, this passage is rich in meaning. First, Peter commands the husband to consider carefully his wife's needs and desires; to live with her "in an understanding way" (NASB); to take the initiative in discovering what is going on in her heart and life and to respond lovingly; to be sensitive to concerns and problems before they become major issues.

Second, Peter instructs husbands to treat their wives "with time" (tee-may'), which means to value, honor, or esteem them to the highest degree; to consider them as being very precious; to recognize their dignity. There is disagreement over the meaning of the phrase "weaker partner." In the light of other passages dealing with women, it cannot imply inferiority. Some expositors believe that it is intended to warn husbands to pay attention to their wives' physical and emotional limits, and not to push them beyond what they can handle. Others point out that "weaker partner" may be translated "fragile vessel," which calls to mind the difference between a delicate vase and a garbage can--the latter may be handled roughly, but not the former. A third possibility is that the passage is warning husbands to be sensitive to the God-given power imbalance in marriage. By God's design, husbands have greater authority, and wives have less. If a husband misuses his authority, it can frustrate and embitter his wife. If each of these implications is considered, this passage serves to warn a godly husband to value his wife highly, to be realistic about her capabilities and limitations, to guard against misusing his authority, and to treat her with great tenderness, sensitivity, and respect.

Third, Peter reminds husbands of the equality they share with their wives before Christ--they are fellow heirs of the gift of life. This too should compel respect and honor. Finally, Peter reminds husbands that to disregard these instructions is to sin against God himself, which will separate them from his fatherly blessings (see Ps. 66:18; cf. Isa. 59:1-2).

As these passages indicate, a husband's job is anything but easy. He must exercise his God-given authority along carefully prescribed lines. He is responsible before God for the well-being of his wife (and children), especially their spiritual well-being, and he will one day have to give an account of what he did or did not do to serve her and attend to her needs. As the leader, he is to take the initiative in setting a godly example of Christian behavior, growth, and service. (To "lead" means to go in front, not to give orders from behind!) Also, as a leader he should anticipate his wife's needs, work with her to make plans for godly growth and service and do all he can to support her as she seeks to be the person God wants her to be.

A wise husband will also value his wife's opinions and actively seek her counsel and insights (see Prov. 12:15; 20:18). He will seek to form a consensus with her on all

decisions (cf. Matt. 12:25); if she has serious reservations about a particular decision, a wise husband will carefully reconsider the issue before proceeding. The basis for his evaluation must never be, "What will be pleasing or convenient for me?" Rather, he must ask, "What will please and glorify God, and what will be best for my wife (and children)?" If he and his wife cannot agree on the answer to that question, he is the one whom God has authorized to break the tie, and he is the one whom God will hold responsible for the results.

In summary, headship in the family is anything but a license for tyranny. By comparing the husband's role to that of Christ, Paul has set the highest possible standard for men to follow, and he has clearly defined a husband's role in terms of sacrifice, service, initiative, and unconditional love. As Paul has shown, the model of the perfect husband is the Lord Jesus himself, who came "not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

WIVES, RESPECT YOUR HUSBANDS

Wives also have a serious responsibility in marriage. God has called each wife to be "a helper" [*ezer*] for her husband (Gen. 2:18). An *ezer* (ay'-zer) is one who gives help, assistance or aid to meet another person's needs. This role does not imply inferiority on the part of the one who helps, because the same word is used of God in describing His gracious assistance to those He loves (see Gen. 49:25; Ps. 33;20). In fact, a wife could not be a helper unless she had something that her husband lacked.

In Ephesians 5:22-24, 33, Paul reaffirms God's design for a wife's role in marriage and provides compelling reasons to honor it:

Wives, submit [*hupotasso*] to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits [*hupotasso*] to Christ, so also wives should submit [*hupotasso*] to their husbands in everything. . . . And the wife must respect [*phobeo*] her husband.

By comparing a wife's submission to her husband with the church's submission to Christ, Paul makes it clear that this is not a temporary cultural concession (cf. 1 Cor. 11:3). To argue that times have changed and that a wife should no longer submit to her husband is also to argue that the church may no longer need to submit to her Savior. This is a dangerous argument indeed!

The Bible's teaching on marital submission has been fervently attacked in recent years; therefore, it is important to look carefully at this issue to confidently determine what God has to say about it. One way to do this is to study three key words relating to the husband-wife relationship and to see how they are used elsewhere in the Bible.

Hupotasso (hoop-o-tass'-oh) is a military term meaning to rank under (literally, "under an orderly arrangement"). Thus, it means to obey, to submit, to subordinate, or to

subject oneself. *Hupotasso* is used to describe numerous biblical authority structures, including:

- Jesus to his parents (Luke 2:51)
- Jesus to his Father (1 Cor. 15:58)
- Believers to God (Rom. 10:3; Heb. 12:9; Jas. 4:7)
- The human mind to God (Rom. 8:7)
- Angels, authorities, and powers to God (1 Pet. 3:22)
- Demons to the disciples (Luke 10:17, 20)
- Christians to church leaders (1 Co. 16:16)
- Christians to one another (Eph. 5:21)
- Young men to their elders (1 Pet. 5:5)
- Wives to husbands (Eph. 5:22, 24; Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1, 5)
- Citizens to civil authorities (Rom. 13:1, 5; Tit. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13)

Phobeo (fob-eh'-o) means "to show reverential fear." This word is likewise used to describe numerous relationships found in the Bible, including:

- Herod to John the Baptist (Mark 6:20)
- People to God (Acts 10:2, 22; 13:16, 26; Col. 3:22; 1 Pet. 2:17)
- Wives to husbands (Eph. 5:33)

At this point, I will introduce a third key word. In 1 Peter 3:5-6, Peter describes the kind of woman whom God calls "holy":

The holy women of the past . . . were submissive [*hupotasso*] to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed [*hupakouo*] Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

Hupakouo (hoop-a-koo'-oh) means to listen attentively, to heed or conform to a command or authority, or to be obedient to. This word is also used in describing biblical structures of authority, including:

- Christians to the gospel (Rom. 10:16)
- Christians to the apostles' teaching (Rom. 6:17; Phil. 2:12)
- Abraham to God (Heb. 11:8)
- Sarah to Abraham (1 Pet. 3:6)
- Children to parents (Eph. 6:1; Col. 3:20)

All these authority relationships were established and blessed by God himself, and there is no indication in the Bible that He intends for any of them to change while the present world exists. Nor is there any indication that the biblical design for these

relationships is somehow deficient and in need of "improvement" (no matter how much the world tries to convince us otherwise). Furthermore, no fundamental distinctions can be drawn between these relationships that would justify changing one while leaving the others intact. Thus, to argue that wives are no longer under their husband's authority and have evolved into a "50/50" partnership (as is sometimes suggested) is also to argue that all of these relationships can, have, or should "evolve." Remember R. C. Sproul's warning of "cosmic treason"!2

Why has there been such an attack on the traditional marriage structure? Why has the word "submission" taken such a beating in recent years? One obvious reason is that husbands have often failed to love their wives as God commands. In addition, wives have recently had the opportunity to resist as never before, due to their increasing financial and legal independence. Third, our culture has changed dramatically in the past few decades. As a result, through the mass media, teachings contrary to Scripture have been given the appearance of respectability and have been zealously propagated (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-2; 2 Tim. 4:3-4). When God's word clashes with these changes, many people argue that it is the Bible that should change, not society.

There is a deeper answer to these questions, however, and to find it we must turn to the third chapter of the Bible. Verses 1-13 in Genesis 3 record man's fall into sin through rebellion against God's authority. In verses 14-19, God pronounces the consequences of this treason. Essentially, He removes the joy and blessing from what had initially been good arrangements. The serpent had always crawled on its belly, but now that form of motivation would become detestable (v. 14). Man had been created to work the earth, but that labor would now be painful and unpleasant (vv. 17-19). Woman had been created to find joy and fulfillment as a helper to her husband; verse 16 describes how the Fall distorted that design:

"Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

While the last five words bode ill, the first part of this pronouncement appears to be positive--isn't it good for a woman to desire her husband? Not in the way it is worded here. The phrase "your desire will be for" is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe an unhealthy and destructive desire to control. We see this in Genesis 4:7, where God is warning Cain against doing evil to his brother:

"But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it" (emphasis added).

From the context of Genesis 3:1-13, where God is pronouncing curses rather than blessings, we can see that the desire mentioned here is not benevolent and healthy; rather it is a compelling urge to control, to dominate, and to master. That is the effect the Fall has had on wives--the joy and blessing they would have derived from submission within the authority structure of marriage (established by God before the

Fall; Gen. 2:18) has been replaced by an innate desire to control and dominate their husbands. This is why wives so easily chafe under authority, even when husbands exercise it in a legitimate way--as a result of the Fall, submission has become distasteful, not just in marriage, but in all authority structures (just ask your children!). This is why Scripture repeatedly reminds and exhorts those under authority (citizens, members of churches, wives, and children) to overcome their tendency to rebel against it.

Genesis 3:16 also teaches that the Fall has tarnished the husband's use of authority and the blessing he was meant to derive from it. Instead of the loving leadership contemplated in the creation design (see Gen. 2:18-25), the husband would be inclined to shirk his responsibilities and abuse his authority. In addition, he would no longer naturally accept the counsel and advice his wife gives to him as his helper. This is why men easily resent their wives' questions and advice, even when it is offered with a pure heart and in a respectful way--as a result of the Fall, the responsibility of leadership has become distorted and burdensome. This is why the Scriptures repeatedly warn those in authority not to abuse their role or to neglect their duties.

As discouraging as this news is, there is a bright side to the picture. Since God established the marriage structure before the Fall and designed it to be good, with His help we can still redeem much of the joy and blessing He intended it to produce. Through faith in Christ, individually and as married couples we can become "new creations" (2 Cor. 5:17). By God's grace, husbands and wives can be "renewed in knowledge in the image of [their] Creator" (Col. 3:10) and make great progress at learning how to fulfill their roles properly and thus recapture much of the joy and blessing that marriage was designed to produce. When husbands learn to love their wives in the way God intended and wives learn to respect their husbands in the way God intended, marriage becomes a place of marvelous joy, peace, security and fulfillment.

We saw earlier how husbands should love their wives. We will now look at what it means for wives to respect and submit to their husbands. First, as indicated in Ephesians 5:22, God wants wives to submit to their husbands "as to the Lord." Out of love and reverence for Christ, a wife should respect and cooperate with her husband as he seeks to lead their family in service to God. As his helper, she should be as diligent about seeing to his needs as he should be to hers. This help and cooperation should be done wholeheartedly and without grumbling, just as it would be given to Christ himself. Thus, rather than suppressing her gifts and talents, a wife should be using them to their fullest, for the benefit of God, her husband, and her children. Doing so will not only bring her personal fulfillment; normally, it will also encourage her husband to love, praise, and serve her more diligently as well (see Prov. 31:10-31).

There are many situations where a husband is selfish, unreasonable, and hypocritical. This alone does not release a wife from her responsibility to respect and submit to him.

One of the Bible's most explicit teachings on respect for authority occurs in Matthew 23:1-3, which says:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So, you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."

This passage warns us not to confuse position with personality. Even if we do not care for the way someone in authority behaves, that alone does not justify disobedience. (Imagine throwing a traffic ticket back in the face of a rude policeman--you would soon be answering to an even higher authority!) When God places people in a position of authority, He expects us to obey them unless there is a valid reason not to do so.

There is a time, however, when a wife may properly refuse to submit to her husband. The phrase "submit . . . in everything" (v. 24) must be read in the context of the entire Bible. God himself has established all legitimate forms of authority (Rom. 13:1), and he delegates to certain people specific areas of authority (e.g., government over civil relationships, parents over children). Since God himself cannot sin, he has not delegated to anyone the authority to command someone else to sin. Thus, if a husband instructs his wife to do something that contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture, she may properly refuse to obey, saying, "God has not given you authority to command me to do that" (see Acts 4:19-20; 5:27-32). Although such obedience to God may result in unpleasant worldly consequences, God himself will ultimately judge anyone who abuses his authority in this way (see 2 Sam. 12:9-14; cf. Dan. 3:1-30).³

In reality, most clashes over authority do not involve commandments to sin; rather, they usually arise over questions of expediency, when a wife's idea of what is best clashes with her husband's idea of what is best. In such cases, a wife certainly has the right--in fact the responsibility as her husband's helper--to speak her mind in a constructive manner and to be as persuasive as possible in presenting her concerns, opinions, and advice. In doing so, she should avoid nagging and arguing, which will only entrench most men. She should try to discern the real issues and needs in the situation and offer creative ways to meet them. The more graciously and wisely she speaks, the more likely she is to be heard (see Eph. 4:29; Col. 4:6). If doing this does not bring about an agreement between her and her husband, however, and if his decision will not require her to sin, she should submit to his authority and responsibility to lead the family. If his decision is wrong, he is the one who will eventually answer to God for it.

Many women will outwardly submit in such situations, but inwardly they do it grudgingly and with resentment, which hardly qualifies as submission "as to the Lord." Certainly, there will be some decisions that a wife so strongly opposes that she cannot, in good conscience before God, actively support them. Mere disagreement or disapproval, however, do not justify a lack of support. Thus, "out of reverence for

Christ," a wife should make every effort possible to get behind her husband's decisions and to wholeheartedly support his efforts to accomplish legitimate goals, even when they aren't the goals she prefers (see Jesus' example in Luke 22:42). This kind of support is certainly what she would like from him when her preferences prevail, and he is not overly enthused about them (see Matt. 7:12).

Unfortunately, there are some husbands who persistently abuse their authority, either by neglecting their wives, failing to meet their needs, or by physically or emotionally mistreating them. To protect wives from such abuse, God has instituted two forms of authority over husbands. First, in Matthew 18:15-20, God has established a procedure whereby a wife may confront a Christian husband who is behaving sinfully. Such confrontation begins at a personal level and may ultimately involve the authorities of the church if the husband does not repent. If this procedure were used more often, many husbands would choose to change their behavior.

If a husband refuses to heed the discipline of the church, and if his conduct violates civil laws (e.g., wife or child abuse), a wife may legitimately turn to the civil authorities and ask them to intervene. As Romans 13 indicates, civil authorities are instituted by God to punish those who do wrong, and a wife may certainly turn to them in appropriate cases.

Although these authorities may help to change a difficult marriage, there are some situations that cannot be resolved by church discipline or civil intervention (e.g., when no crime is being committed, when a husband does not attend or respect a church, or when the church refuses to get involved). In such cases, a wife may seek assistance from another person who has authority or persuasion regarding her husband, such as an employer, a relative, or a close friend. When no such help is available, a wife may be stuck, for a while, with a self-centered husband who uses his authority to indulge himself. As the Bible teaches, however, abuse of authority alone does not justify divorce.⁴ In 1 Peter 3:1-6, Peter addresses wives who are married to difficult husbands. When he says, "Wives in the same way be submissive to your husbands" (emphasis added), he is referring to the mistreatment described in chapter 2, verses 13-25. Thus, he is encouraging wives in difficult situations to follow Christ's example of reverent submission:

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." [i.e., he did not deserve such treatment.] When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly (1 Pet. 2:21-23).

This passage sets forth the foundation for godly submission, especially in difficult circumstances; that foundation is confidence in the sovereignty of God. Jesus submitted to the Father and endured unjust treatment because He trusted that God was ultimately

in control of everything that would happen to Him. Jesus knew that God would eventually judge those who did wrong (v. 23; cf. Prov. 16:5; Rom. 12:19), and that He would use even painful events to advance His kingdom and bless others (see Acts 2:22-24).

A wife living with a difficult husband can have the same kind of confidence. God promises to work everything in her life for her good, which primarily involves conforming her to the likeness of Christ (see Rom. 8:28-29). Although she may have to endure an unpleasant and disappointing relationship with her husband for a time, God will support, strengthen and encourage her in His own perfect way (see Ps. 37; 1 Cor. 10:13). Knowing that God is more powerful than her stubborn husband, a wife can trust that God will ultimately deal with all injustice. She can also have confidence that through her situation God will help her to grow (see Acts 5:41; Phil. 1:29; 3:10; Heb. 12:1-13; Jas. 1:2-4); to bring encouragement to others (2 Cor. 1:6); and, perhaps, to play a role in bringing about dramatic changes in her husband (see 1 Pet. 3:15-16), "for nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). Obviously, God can do the same thing for a husband who is married to a difficult wife.

Fortunately, even difficult people and unhappy marriages can change dramatically with God's help. The principles He has established for marriage generally produce positive results when they are applied faithfully and wholeheartedly. Husbands who love their wives "as Christ loved the church" will usually see their wives grow to be more loving, trusting, and respectful. Wives who help their husbands and submit to them "as to the Lord" will usually see their husbands become more selfless, thoughtful, and considerate leaders. For this reason, each spouse should make it his or her goal to behave in a way that will make the other's task easier. With God's help, this process can turn into a wonderful spiral (not always according to our schedule or free from setbacks, however!). As both husband and wife seek to imitate God by walking in love in their relationship, they can capture the joy, intimacy, fulfillment, and security that marriage is meant to produce.

FINAL NOTE: READ YOUR OWN MAIL

Now that you have read both your spouse's job description and your own, you need to keep your focus in the right place. It would be natural for you to dwell on the ways your spouse is not living up to his or her responsibilities. But when husbands focus on the "submission passages" and wives focus on the "gave himself up" passages, they are reading each other's mail; God meant these passages primarily for the persons to whom they are addressed. Therefore, pay attention to the passages addressed to you and work to get some "logs" out of your own eye. As you do so, your spouse may see your progress and begin to change as well. With time, you will hopefully be able to encourage and help each other in carrying out Paul's excellent instructions:

"Each one of you must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." Ephesians 5:33

ENDNOTES

1. The tough question, of course, is how does one distinguish a mere desire from a legitimate need? Food, shelter, clothing, and quality time together are genuine needs, but we often disagree about how much should be invested in each of these areas. One way to answer this question is to ask yourselves more specific questions, such as these: Does the Bible define this as a need? Will this promote my spouse's well-being? Will this be good for my spouse? Will this help my spouse carry out his or her responsibilities at home, at work, or at church? Will this help my spouse serve God? Will this help my spouse to be more comfortable and effective in serving other people? Will this help my spouse to grow? Although these are subjective questions, they provide a starting point for prayer and discussion. If you cannot agree on an answer, each person should try to accommodate the other's opinions (see Eph. 5:21). If a deadlock occurs, it is wise to seek more objective advice from another person or couple.

2. The master-slave relationship, which is also described by these key words, has legitimately changed, as the New Testament writers implied that it should (see 1 Cor. 7:20-22; Philem. 14-16). Unlike all the other authority structures described in the Bible, slavery was not established by God, nor was it ever given his approval or blessing.

Some have argued that both Ephesians 5:21 ("submit to one another") and Galatians 3:28 ("there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus") implicitly teach that wives are no longer under the authority of their husbands. This interpretation cannot be true, for in other letters Paul explicitly affirms the wife's responsibility to submit to her husband. Moreover, Paul is not the only writer to affirm the traditional marriage structure; Peter supported it just as strongly (see 1 Pet. 3:1-7). Instead of destroying the traditional structure of marriage, Galatians 3:26-29 teaches a spiritual equality--that men and women are united to Christ personally through their individual responses to the gospel, that they have complete equality within their union with Christ, and that they will inherit the same reward by trusting in Him. As was discussed earlier, Ephesians 5:21 sets forth the general principle of submission to others; this general principle does not cancel the specific principle that immediately follows it.

3. When a husband wants to do something that is sinful or unwise, a wife should try to find a way to dissuade him from his course, both for his sake and the family's. Like Daniel, she should strive to discern her husband's underlying purpose or desire and try to offer creative alternatives on how to meet it in a legitimate way (see Dan. 1:1-16; 2:1-24).

4. Many churches have different theological positions on what constitutes legitimate grounds for divorce. For centuries, some churches believe that divorce is never biblically permissible. Other churches believe it is permissible when the other spouse has been sexually involved with a person outside the marriage (Matt. 5:31-32) or when an unbelieving spouse abandons a marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-16). In recent years, a growing number of pastors and theologians have concluded that continued use of pornography or ongoing patterns of emotional, spiritual, physical or financial neglect or abuse may also constitute biblically legitimate grounds for divorce. I agree with this conclusion. To see articles across this spectrum of positions, see rw360.org/articles-divorce.

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