

# Biblical Submission within Marriage

By Rebecca Merrill Groothuis

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## What we have been told the Bible teaches versus what the Bible really teaches

*1. The man is the head of the home, which means he is to run the home, and other family members are required to submit to his God-ordained leadership.*

Response: The New Testament says that the man (or husband) is the head of the woman (or wife), not that the man is the head of the home. Moreover, when Paul says this (in two NT passages), he does not use “head” to mean the “boss,” or chief executive, whom underlings must obey. In modern English, “head” is used metaphorically primarily to refer to the person in charge, but in ancient Greek it was also used as a metaphorical reference to “origin” or “source of life.” We need to interpret this term in its cultural context, not according to some cultural pretext of our own.

In 1 Corinthians 11:3, the man is referred to as the head of the woman in the sense that the woman originated from him; this meaning for “head” is followed through in the rest of Paul’s argument in this passage (see verses 8 and 11).

In Ephesians 5:21-33, Paul refers to the husband as the head of the wife in the sense that the husband is to give life to his wife by loving her and laying down his own life for her sake, even as Christ did for his body, the church. There is no mention in this passage of authority—either of Christ’s spiritual authority over the church or the civil authority that the husband had over his wife in ancient Greco-Roman society. An understanding of the head as the supplier of life to the body is clearly the sense in which Paul speaks of Christ as the head of the church in Ephesians 4:15-16 and Colossians 2:19.

*2. Men are to exercise authority over their wives; that is, they have the biblical responsibility to direct the actions of their wives and the right to expect their wives to comply.*

Response: Despite the many exhortations that church leaders repeatedly issue to Christian men to take leadership over their wives, nowhere does the Bible tell men to rule their wives. Even though the Bible was originally written to people living in a society in which men were legally and culturally obligated to govern their wives and the other members of their households, not once does the Bible encourage men to do this. Rather, unlike the “household codes” common in Greco-Roman society (wherein the various members of households—fathers, mothers, children, slaves, etc.—were assigned their roles and responsibilities), the NT versions of these household codes emphasize that men should love and respect their wives and omit altogether any reference to men ruling their wives.

*3. Men are to have the final authority over their children as well as their wives.*

Response: Nowhere does the Bible say that the father’s authority over the children is to be any greater than the mother’s. Rather, children are commanded to obey both their parents equally; no distinction is made between the authority of the father and

the authority of the mother (see Lev. 19:3, Deut. 5:16, 21:18-21, Eph. 6:1, Col. 3:20).

*4. Men are to be the spiritual leaders of their homes; that is, they are to make the final determination as to what God's will is for the various family members.*

Response: The Bible teaches that men and women image God equally (Genesis 1:26-27), that in Christ there is no distinction between male and female (Galatians 3:26-28), that all believers are priests unto God (1 Peter 2:5,9), and there is no mediator between God and humans except our high priest, Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). Throughout the Bible, God speaks directly to both men and women, and God speaks through both male and female prophets. There is no theological or biblical reason to argue that women are any less spiritually called or equipped than men to discern God's will or understand God's Word.

Even those who teach male authority in the home assure us that women and men are spiritually equal before God; for indeed, this is the clear biblical message. Yet these advocates of male leadership contradict the Bible's teaching on the spiritual equality of men and women when they insist that a man is to hear from and obey God directly, while a woman is to hear from and obey God by hearing from and obeying her husband.

First Peter 3:1-7 is one of the NT passages used to support the traditionalist teaching that a wife must submit to her husband's spiritual authority. Yet Peter is not telling women to submit to the spiritual authority of their husbands, for he is addressing women who have rebelled against their husbands' spiritual authority by rejecting their husbands' religions and converting to Christianity. Peter concludes the passage by reminding Christian husbands that they must respect their wives as equal heirs of God's gracious gift of life. Even though male domination continued in society at that time, there was no place for the spiritual rule of the male in the Christian religion.

*5. The husband is spiritually responsible for his wife and accountable to God for her spiritual condition.*

Response: If a man has the spiritual right and responsibility to tell his wife what God wants her to do, then it follows that he is responsible for her spiritual life and directly accountable to God for any wrong spiritual direction he may give her.

Apart from an Old Testament passage (Numbers 30:3-15) which states that, under some circumstances, a husband or father has the option of exercising this sort of authority over and responsibility for his wife or daughter, there is nothing in the Bible that stipulates such an arrangement. Even in the OT, God spoke directly to women; God did not set things up such that a word of knowledge or direction normally came to a woman through her husband. The new covenant in Christ, whereby there is "neither male nor female," does away completely with any sort of male priesthood or spiritual chain of command within marriage. When Ananias and Sapphira sinned before God in the early church, each was questioned and punished separately for each one's sin. Ananias did not take responsibility for his wife; she stood alone before God, responsible for her own wrongdoing. Nor was Sapphira punished for her husband's sin, as sometimes happened with families in the OT. Each one, alone, was accountable directly to God (see Acts 5:1-11).

*6. The man is the priest of the home and the representative of God to his family.*

Response: If the man serves as the spiritual authority on God's will for the family, he effectively represents God to his family. As the "priest" of the home, he also represents his wife and children before God, taking responsibility for the state of their spiritual health.

We really need to question this doctrine. Where does the Bible say that under the new covenant the tasks of discerning the will of God and taking responsibility for the spiritual condition of other believers is a uniquely male calling? Where, for that matter, do we find in Scripture any reason for anyone to take spiritual responsibility for anyone else? Do we not all stand directly accountable to God as individuals? Are not all believers priests unto God, with only one mediator between us and God, namely, Christ Jesus? If Christ is a female believer's Lord and Savior in the same way that he is a male believer's, then why should a woman need a man to stand in the place of Christ for her?

Where in the two priesthoods of the new covenant—i.e., the priesthood of all believers and the high priesthood of Christ—can we find room to insert a third priesthood, a priesthood of Christian manhood? How can such a priesthood not ultimately detract from the priestly ministries of all believers or presume upon the unique mediatorial ministry of Christ?

*7. The husband is the wife's "spiritual covering."*

Response: This seems to be a figurative way of alluding to the notion that a husband is spiritually responsible for his wife. Evidently the phrase is taken from an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 that sees the woman's head covering as a symbol of her husband's spiritual authority over her—an interpretation that imports cultural assumptions into the text rather than looking solely to the text itself for its intended meaning. The text does not say that the woman's head covering is a symbol of her husband's authority over her. This notion is added to the text, not taken from the text.

*8. The man's spiritual leadership in the home is to be a "servant leadership."*

Response: If women and men are equally capable of discerning and implementing God's will, then a woman does not need a man to exercise spiritual authority over her. Describing such an arrangement as a service to the wife is, therefore, inaccurate and inappropriate. By all means, let's have husbands who are servants to their wives, and wives who are servants to their husbands. But let us not think we have justified and sanctified a husband's spiritual governance of his wife by casting it in terms of "servanthood." One is not a servant of another person unless one does for that person what she needs to have done for her. Unless women are spiritually deficient with respect to men, they do not need a man to mediate their relationship with God in any sense, however mild or benevolent that mediation may appear to be. Women, no less than men, need to grow into spiritual maturity by learning to discern and obey God's will through the leading of the Holy Spirit in their own lives. To deprive a woman of this opportunity is not to serve her.

*9. Somebody has to make the final decision, and that person is the man.*

Response: This argument is based on cultural assumptions, not on biblical teaching. Nowhere does the Bible say that whenever two or more are gathered together, one person must be in charge.

Both logic and experience testify that it is by no means necessary for a marriage relationship to have one partner in charge of the other. A major part of learning how to be loving and mature human beings is learning how to come to agreement and reach consensus without resorting to the issuing and obeying of authoritative edicts. Perhaps only in a bad marriage, in which the spouses care little for one other and each strives to get the better of the other, is it impossible for decisions to be made mutually. But even in such a situation, legislating a chain of command is no solution. For it is precisely in a marriage where love is either absent or severely defective that the husband's unilateral authority over the wife is most likely to devolve into the husband's abuse of the wife.

In a relationship characterized by mutual love, respect, and submission, there can be no place for a chain of command. Marriages that are healthy, loving, and mutually beneficial do not function along lines of a command-obey relationship—even when the spouses claim to hold to such roles in theory. In good marriages that are theoretically hierarchical, the man's right to command and the woman's obligation to obey recedes into an administrative technicality. The man never does pull rank and assert his will over his wife, because he does not want to; and he does not want to because he loves her as he loves himself.

In marriages of mutual submission, husband and wife make no decision that affects them both until both are agreed upon it. Often this means waiting (if, as is usually the case, it is possible to wait); sometimes it means that the partner most affected by the decision, or most knowledgeable about the matter being decided upon, will be regarded by the other partner as the "authority" on the subject. Whatever their approach, if husband and wife are as concerned about the other's welfare as they are about their own, mutually beneficial decisions will be made amicably, without anyone pulling rank or feeling threatened in any way. A husband and wife are much more likely to know and do God's will if they wait until God speaks to both of them, rather than if they simply do what one of them believes to be God's will.

*10. Wives must obey their husbands.*

Response: In the NT, slaves are told to obey their masters and children their parents, but wives are not told to obey their husbands; rather, they are told to submit to their husbands. In Ephesians 5:21-33, the most extended NT passage on the marriage relationship, the wife's submission is presented as one aspect of the mutual submission that should exist between all believers in Christ. We tend to assume that when the Bible says, "wives, submit," it necessarily means submit to authority; yet in the Ephesians passage authority is not the issue, but rather self-sacrificing love and mutual respect. Here husbands and wives are told to let their relationship imitate the relationship of Christ and the church in the sense that the church submits to the life-giving, self-sacrificing love of Christ for the church.

*11. "Wives, submit to your husbands" means that all wives are required to submit unilaterally to their husbands' spiritual authority over them.*

Response: The submission urged upon Christian women today is not the sort of submission that was exhorted of women in the New Testament. Depending on the particular text, women's submission in the NT was either an expression of one aspect of

the mutual submission that exists between equals in Christ (e.g., Eph. 5:21-33), or a social subordination that followed from what women were able and expected to do in the patriarchal cultures of NT times (e.g., 1 Peter 3:1-6, Titus 2:5). Unlike the traditionalist-defined submission of women today, the NT submission of women was not a universal, unilateral submission to the husband's spiritual authority.

In Ephesians 5:21-33, the wife's submission is mutual, not unilateral; authority is not at issue in this text, but rather the outworking of mutual submission in the marriage relationship. The wife is to respect her husband and submit to him in the same way that all believers are to submit to one another. Paul's description of the husband's self-sacrificial love for his wife indicates that this is not a one-sided submission of wife to husband, but a reciprocal relationship. (If laying down one's own life for another doesn't qualify as a description of submissiveness, nothing does.)

When Peter exhorts women to be submissive to their husbands (1 Peter 3:1-6), it is clearly within the context of all believers being submissive to the social authority structures of that time; thus the wife's submission in this text is not universal but culturally specific. Because husbands held civil authority over their wives, wives were to submit to that authority insofar as it did not entail disobedience to God. Similarly, slaves were to submit to their masters' authority and all believers to the governing authorities. There is no indication here, or anywhere else in the NT, that women must submit to their husband's spiritual authority.

Peter follows his words to wives with the exhortation that husbands are, "in the same way," to be considerate of their wives. Even in a passage dealing with obedience to civil authorities, the element of mutuality and reciprocity within marriage is brought into the picture.

Moreover, Peter's admonitions here are clearly tailored for the cultural situation of the believers to whom he was writing, and thus cannot be used to justify a biblically-mandated authority of husbands over wives for all time and every culture. As with any text in Scripture, the principle governing the text remains universally true; but its application is often culturally specific. Certainly Christians should submit to those in authority over them, as long as it does not entail disobedience to God. But the universal truth of this principle does not require that, in order to be obedient to God's Word, we reinstitute today the authority structures of ancient societies.

*12. Although women are to be subordinate to the spiritual authority of men, this does not mean women are spiritually inferior to men. It is a matter of function, not being.*

Response: Traditionalists have to assert this disclaimer, and assert it repeatedly, because everything about their gender agenda seems clearly to assume and imply that women are essentially inferior to men. The doctrine of gender hierarchy—as currently expressed—relies heavily on the assumption that women's subordination to men does not violate the fundamental biblical equality of women with men.

Yet a careful examination of the subordination that traditionalists prescribe for women shows that it unavoidably entails an inferiority not merely of function but also of being. Thus the traditionalist teaching is internally incoherent; it contradicts itself. This being the case, women's equality and women's subordination cannot both be true; and,

since the Bible does not contradict itself, neither can they both be biblical. We must determine which doctrine the Bible consistently and unequivocally teaches, and which we have brought to the Bible from our own preconceptions. Are men and women equally called and equipped to discern God's will and interpret God's Word, or are these ministries an especially male calling that women are inadequately equipped to handle?

In view of all the ways in which popular traditionalist teaching distorts, contradicts, and adds to what the Bible actually says, we would do well to embrace a truly biblical understanding of gender equality and forsake all notions of gender hierarchy (with their implications and assumptions of male superiority and female inferiority).

(For more on the concepts and biblical texts discussed here, see *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality*, by Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Baker, 1997).)

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