

A Biblical View of Marriage

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Part I

May 2003

Introduction

I recently read a newspaper article explaining that the Southern Baptists were having difficulty getting some of their missionaries to affirm the doctrine of wives submitting to their husbands.⁽¹⁾ Specifically the doctrinal statement that each couple was supposed to agree to reads as follows:

"The husband and wife are of equal worth before God, since both are created in God's image. The marriage relationship models the way God relates to His people. A husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation."⁽²⁾

I believe this statement is a pretty good exposition of Ephesians 5:22-33. So why the controversy? I think it's because there are so many principles embedded in these few sentences that they almost always cause confusion, if not downright dissent. In fact, some Baptist couples on the mission field who refused to affirm this doctrinal statement were being called home. This is an example of how much misunderstanding surrounds the concept of the Christ-centered relationship between husbands and wives. In a recent leadership meeting of Master Builders, we discussed at length what the needs are in today's church. We concluded that the immediate general topic of teaching for Master Builders should be, "Producing Healthy Churches." One of the basic requirements of having a healthy church is that its families must be in order biblically. This order begins between husbands and wives.

Key Scripture

The logical starting point for any discussion regarding proper Christ-centered husband and wife order is Scripture. Let's look at the key Scripture concerning marriage.

Wives, submit 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 to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After

all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church--for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. (Eph 5:22-33 NIV)

Over the years I have concluded that there is a progressive understanding of these verses as we mix spiritual maturity with life's experiences. For example, at age twenty, we are likely to read these verses with an unrealistic romantic view. By age 40, especially after several years of marriage, these concepts seem a lot more complex and harder to achieve. Sadly, many husbands and wives never get it right and just give up, settling for much less than the Lord intended for married couples. What I most often see in troubled marriages is one spouse (usually the husband) being seen and heard with the other spouse only speaking when spoken to, at least in important matters. I don't believe that is the New Testament picture of a Christian husband and wife.

Please note that this teaching is directed primarily at Christian couples with an emphasis on the husband's responsibilities.

Husband-Wife Team

Let me say right now I am absolutely convinced that God intended a husband and wife to be a team, moving in unity to serve Him. Allow me to illustrate this point by using my wife and me as an example. God has called me to be a Bible teacher, He has called Carolyn to the office of a prophet. She is also a law school graduate who practiced law for more than twenty years. Combining Carolyn's prophetic gifting with her experience, there are countless ways she helps me sharpen my teaching gift. She is of tremendous worth to our writing. Her writing skills far exceed mine. (In fact, what you are now reading she has edited several times. She is the final editor of all our writings!) Her mind is able to see the whole of a matter, while mine tends to see its details.

Once we were traveling to a conference in which I was to be a speaker. They assigned me a subject and I had prepared my speaking outline. I gave the outline to Carolyn, expecting her to make one or two suggestions. Instead, after looking it over, she told me that she thought my approach was wrong and that I should approach the subject from a far different perspective. I sat for a few minutes looking at my outline and praying about what she said. Then, on the plane, I made a new outline based on her suggestions. At the conference my presentation was very well received, thanks largely to Carolyn's input. The reality of our marriage partnership is that Carolyn had the liberty to express her true feelings about my outline.

I know many Christian husband-wife teams. Every one of them

differ in some respects, but they all have a good relationship and they work very well together. In team sports, no one player gets all the glory, the team does. That's the way it should be in husband-wife teams in the church.

The Husband's Responsibilities

Now let's look at the husband's responsibilities laid out in Ephesians 5. There has been a lot of incomplete and just plain bad teaching on these verses over the decades. Most of what has been taught has emphasized the burden on wives to submit while saying little about the responsibilities of husbands. Yet Paul sets down several quite demanding standards for the husband, too.

Let me list them.

- 1) Husbands are to love their wives *just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*
- 2) Husbands are to love their wives *as their own bodies.*
- 3) Husbands are to live a life *worthy of his wife's respect.*

In other words, husbands are to be servant leaders of their wives (and children.)

1. Love your wives

Husbands are to love their wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. This verse tells the husband *what* he must do and the *extent* to which he is to do it. It is beyond our finite understanding to know just how much Christ loves His bride, the church. He has chosen her from the masses of humanity for Himself. He stands guard over her. He holds her in high esteem. He delights in her. He would never insult, abuse, put her down, or otherwise hurt or mistreat her.

Christ's love for the church was so complete that He allowed Himself to be crucified. It was for the church that He gave up His own will, His own desires, His own wishes. In this context, how could a husband come home at the end of a work day and place his demands ahead of his wife's needs. Neither should he ignore her while pursuing his own interests hour after hour, day after day. Nor would he thrust burdens and responsibilities on her without first bearing more than his own share.

It is noteworthy that the Greek word Paul used in Scripture for the husband for "love" is *agape*. Agape is that self-sacrificing, other-centered love we see described in 1 Corinthians 13. 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. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. . . (v 4-8 NIV)

2. Husbands Are to Love Their Wives as Their Own Bodies

Paul went on to say that husbands are to love their wives as they do their own bodies. Everyone takes very good care of his own body. In fact, most men I know go to great effort to care for their bodies. We give our bodies food and clothes. We see to it that we do not expose our bodies to extreme temperatures. We see to it that our bodies get adequate sleep and rest. In fact, we try hard

to make provision for every need of our bodies, do we not? Paul tells husbands that they are to take this same care of their wives.

3. Worthy of Respect

In Paul's instruction to the wives, he wrote, ". . . and the wife must respect her husband." (v 33) First let me say that I believe that the position of a husband deserves respect. But this is a general respect for the office or status of husband. However, in order for anyone to have the real respect of others, he or she must earn that respect, thereby being worthy of it. Such worthiness is based on personal integrity. As a young boy I remember visiting in people's homes and businesses with my father. Without exception people in the community treated him with great respect. Although I didn't understand the principles behind that respect, I recognized the high esteem which my father enjoyed among the people of our small community. As I grew older I came to understand that my father had earned this respect because he was a man of integrity. Integrity is one of the most valuable possessions any man or woman can have.

Although Scripture requires the wife to respect her husband, he must *live and practice* integrity in every area of his life if she is truly to respect him. In other words, he must earn that kind of respect. It is hard to respect one who lies, cheats, sleeps around, steals, gets drunk, is abusive, lazy, ignores his wife and/or children, and so forth. Conversely, it is easy to respect one who does none of these things and always does what is right. We must develop this kind of integrity by a lifestyle of always doing what is right—even if no one will ever know. There are four levels of integrity.

Level one - One will commit offenses without regard to punishment or consequences.

Level two - One will not commit offenses for fear of punishment or consequences.

Level three - One will not commit offenses in order to gain/maintain the approval and favor of others.

Level four - One will not commit offenses simply because it's wrong to do so.

As Christians, Scripture calls us to live at level four integrity. Scripture requires us to do the right thing because, and only because, it is the right thing to do. Some time ago there was a story in the news about a very poor immigrant to America who lived in Los Angeles. While walking one day he saw a package in the street. He picked up the package and opened it. Inside was more than \$200,000 in cash! No one saw him, no one knew he had the money. But what did he do? He called the police and gave the package to them. It turned out that the package had fallen out of a bank transport truck. It astounded the news media that this poor man gave the money back. They asked him why he did it. He answered, "It was the right thing to do." That man may have been very poor, but he walked in the highest level of integrity. He did the right thing simply because it was the right thing to do. That man has the respect of everyone who read about him. He *earned* that respect. In like manner, a husband must earn his family's respect. He cannot simply demand it.

Wives Responsibilities

"Wives, submit to your husband as to the Lord." ". . . and the wife must respect her husband." (Eph 5:22,33 NIV) When Carolyn and I teach on this subject, we often hear wives say, in effect, "It would be a joy and pleasure to submit to a husband who loved me as Christ loved the church, gave himself for me, and loved me as much as he loved himself!" Herein lies the problem: *most husbands try to demand submission from their wives without fulfilling any of the requirements mandated by Scripture.* It seems to me that this is the classic case in which one can't have it both ways. A husband cannot demand that his wife submit to him when he doesn't do his God-mandated part. Oh, she might submit outwardly, but the marriage will eventually get into trouble.

Now what about the command that a wife respect her husband. In most marriages the wife respects her husband at the beginning of the marriage. But again, I think that if husbands fail to walk in the kind of love and integrity Ephesians 5 requires, that respect falters. Conversely I know of no woman who would resist submitting to a husband who lived up to his Ephesians 5 responsibilities and walked in level four integrity. I firmly believe that the biblical requirement for wives to submit isn't a one-way street, it runs both ways. (See also 1 Pet 3, Col 3:18,19.)

Real Life Factors That Complicate a Husband/Wife Relationship

Personality Types

Without getting too deeply into psychology, it is helpful to have an understanding of different personality types. For our purposes, I will lay out two basic personality types, type "A" and type "B."

1. Type "A"

People with type A personalities are forceful. They are born with basic leadership skills and will usually step forward to lead when no one else will. They have high energy. Persuading them to alter their course isn't easy. They usually have strong opinions on most any topic of discussion. They are demanding on themselves as well as others. They don't wait for events to take their course, they cause things to happen. Type A people are most comfortable when they are in control.

I have observed that if the type A has been properly parented and taught as a young person, and they submitted to that parental authority, they become very effective in whatever they set out to do in life. If, on the other hand, they received improper parenting/discipline as a youngster, or were rebellious, they may become quite unmanageable and sometimes destructive as adults, both to themselves and others.

2. Type "B"

People with type B personalities are not very forceful. The type B will seldom step forward to take a leadership position, or he will do so reluctantly. The type B is more of a follower than a leader. He or she has a more easy-going personality. They are just as happy watching others lead, speak or make decisions. (We can observe these principles in the animal world. Among farm animals there is an order of dominance. Even chickens

have a "pecking order"!)

Paul wrote, ". . . wives should submit to their husbands *in everything.*" (Eph 5:24 NIV, emphasis added.) Yet God made each of us just as we are. He knows us better than we know ourselves. Now suppose in a marriage the wife is type A and the husband is type B. She will naturally begin to take the leadership of the household and her type B husband will most often let her. When this happens it's hard to find the right Christ-centered balance. On the other hand, a type A husband with a type B wife will also have difficulties getting the team concept right, and so on.

When there is a dominant personality, be it the husband or the wife, the lesser mate often resents his spouse's domination. This is especially true when the fruit of the Holy Spirit and Christ-like attributes are missing in the domineering mate. The type B spouse, whether husband or wife, is likely to do at least some of the following:

1) He or she will often just give in on everything. He would rather give in and live with the situation rather than fight to get his way. This pattern then becomes a lifestyle for him in the marriage. He simply doesn't want the strife or the fight to exert his opinions and will on his strong spouse.

2) He or she will sometimes resort to manipulation to have his way. He will create situations in which he cleverly manipulates his spouse into doing his will. Manipulation is never a healthy way to relate to someone else, especially a spouse.

3) He or she will become an angry person. At first this anger is hidden, but as time goes by it will express itself in many ways. For example, he may 1) always be late, 2) cooperate only minimally, 3) be grumpy or unpleasant, 4) perform his responsibilities poorly, 5) withdraw sexually, 6) do things that irritate his spouse, and so forth.

All of these types of behavior may be either conscious or subconscious.

For the reader who identifies with the above, or part of it, such behavior is neither Christ-like nor scriptural. I counsel you to prayerfully seek the Lord and His word about how to correct *your* behavior. Remember, you really have no control over your spouse's behavior. You are only responsible before God for how *you* act.

The very first step in correcting any of these problems in a marriage is to get your own heart right with God. Here is how Paul put it, "And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, *once your obedience is complete.*" (2 Cor 10:6 NIV, emphasis added.) So, God says you are to first deal with your anger, resentment, manipulation, or whatever. Confess it as sin and repent. Once this is done, you are then free to ask God to begin working on your spouse.

In the larger picture, God is conforming us to the image of Christ. (See Eph. 4:13.) He will use every marriage problem as a tool to conform each of us to Christ's image if we allow it.

Baggage from Early Life

Another of life's realities that affect every marriage is the experiences we have had before marriage. Years ago I saw a movie that delivered a powerful message. The father in the movie was a military man who ran his family like a military unit. He was always barking orders, commanding the children to do this or that, bullying his wife, and generally behaving like a tyrant. The early scenes showed a young boy who hated his father and the way he treated the family. But the final scene of the movie showed the son, now a young family man, *doing the very same thing* to his family that his father had done to him! Travelers carry baggage. We are all travelers in life and we all carry baggage. By that I mean old habits, thoughts, and ideas of how we are to act and think, and what we are to do in given situations. Often the things we learned when we were younger are right and proper. For example, if our parents were loving and considerate of one another, then that was a positive model of behavior between husband and wife.

But many of us learned improper or wrong thinking and behavior patterns which are often very harmful to a marriage. Serious and detrimental baggage can come from having a very dominant mother/father, the bad habits of either, an alcoholic mother/father, or a parent who favored one child over another. The list is endless, but all such experiences produce, at a minimum, a way of thinking that we carry with us into our marriage relationship. For example, my parents raised me on a farm. On a farm the men plow the fields, tend to the animals, build barns, repair the equipment, etc. while the women cook, take care of the children, wash clothes, and such. As a result I came into marriage assuming that all outdoor work was mine and all indoor work was my wife's responsibility--that included cooking, house cleaning, tending the children, washing clothes, etc. There is only one problem with that thinking (baggage). I no longer live on a farm! I have no fields to plow, no animals to tend, no barns to build or repair. So, does that mean that when I get home from my job, I get to sit around and do nothing while my wife cooks, takes care of the children, and washes clothes into the night? Absolutely not! Part of my loving and serving my wife is to help her in the work that she has to do.

We need to get rid of this baggage. But to do so, we need God's help. First we must ask Him to help us identify our baggage. After we have prayerfully let the Holy Spirit identify these areas of our thinking and behavior, we need to ask Him to help us get rid of it. Paul said, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." (Phil 4:13 NIV) That means if we try, with Christ's help, we can rid ourselves of our past wrong thinking and habits. If you do this, I can promise you that your marriage will improve.

In Part II of this teaching we will examine how a marriage should work in both the spiritual and natural realm, some tools to use to resolve problems areas between husbands and wives, and a spiritual checklist for husbands.

1. *The Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 2003, article entitled "Baptists Tell Missionaries to Affirm New Creed."
2. Taken from *The Baptist Faith and Message*, Article XVIII, Southern Baptist Convention.

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