

Authority Relationships Among Believers

From

Journey's End, Removing "Biblical" Barriers Between Women and Their Destiny

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Over the past 20-25 years, in many evangelical circles, systems of "shepherding" or "authority and submission" were vigorously promoted. Although the extremes of this movement are self-evident and some repentance has taken place, we are still affected by the aftermath of an ideology that exalted leaders beyond their legitimate authority. This has affected teachings regarding the relations between men and women, especially married couples. We need to clarify the boundaries of legitimate authority, both so that those who would benefit from it will not be afraid to submit to godly authority and so that those called to leadership will understand the limits of their responsibilities.

Human Authority is Always Limited; Only Divine Authority is Absolute

First, we need to understand that only God has absolute authority. We can trust Him to exercise it, too! Each person and especially each believer is directly answerable to God and is under God's own watchful, loving, protective eye. No matter what mistakes a Christian makes, we can trust that "He who has begun a good work in you will perform it to the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). That should take the pressure off of parents, pastors, and teachers who watch over the souls of others. No one is liable for the sins of other people! Nor does being in a position of authority give a license to do whatever one likes. Even parents do not hold absolute authority over their children; the law sets limits they must abide by.

Secondly, we should understand that since we have been created in God's image, He has given each human being a will. We will all be judged eternally for the choices we make with the will God has given us. Therefore, we must all learn how to make wise decisions. This is done by exercising the will and receiving back the consequences of each choice, whether good or bad. In this way, we learn from experience what God approves and what He does not. Through Providence, God directs the reactions of other people and circumstances to respond appropriately to our choices in a life-long process of learning wisdom. Therefore, no capable adults should let others make their decisions for them. No one has more knowledge about or concern for your affairs than you do! And God holds you responsible for your stewardship over your own life.

The human will is neither good nor evil, but the unregenerate will is fallen, and must be re-educated according to God's Word. Our conscience is educated and sensitized by God's Word, as the Holy Spirit uses Scripture to bring conviction and repentance from sin. Thus, each Christian has the responsibility to study and apply the Bible to his or her life. We are to cooperate with God as our Teacher, growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, we should understand that in His mercy, God has given us means of correction and grace; that among these are secular authorities, our parents, and the leadership ministries of the Christian church. These are all intended for our benefit. As young children, we are to obey our parents; however as we grow into adulthood, we must increasingly think through options and learn to make our own decisions. Thus, parental authority decreases over time, as adolescents mature.

As adults, we are to obey secular authorities in everything not contradictory to God's Word. And we are to honor Christian leaders. We are to respect their authority within the church and we are to value their counsel highly, taking other factors such as

Scripture, Providence, conscience and the advice of others into account. For example, if church leaders decide that the Sunday service should start at 10:00, we should be there at 10:00, not 11:00. But if they counsel us not to marry someone we are engaged to, we must consider their counsel very carefully but make our own decision. God has given the authority to make that kind of choice to those directly affected, not to anybody else. Therefore, we must each develop good judgment.

In the church, we are all equal in that we have all received the Spirit of God. We should acknowledge this by honoring all Christians; thus we honor Christ. However, we are obviously not all equal in spiritual maturity or Christian character. Therefore, God gives us leaders who teach, preach, and model His truth for us. Their role is both supportive and corrective; supportive to our development into greater maturity and usefulness and corrective when we stray from Christ. Christian leaders are therefore admonished to pray for and love the members of their flocks; Christian followers are admonished to love and honor their leaders. But no leader is perfect or without sin, nor is any follower without the Holy Spirit. Therefore, counsel is always limited by the believer's responsibility to decide. A leader should counsel and pray for followers, but is not responsible for the choices they make. And followers should heed Godly counsel, but cannot absolve themselves of the responsibility for their actions. In everything, we are to be led by the Spirit of God speaking through the Word of God.

Among believers who are married to each other, there is greater unity and therefore greater mutual responsibility. Decisions that would ordinarily be made by an adult alone now affect others, so they must be made mutually. For example, a husband cannot unilaterally decide that he will not come home until late at night, because his wife needs his help with the children, and they need time with their father. So, husband and wife must talk it over and decide together what is the best course of action. Usually, they will work out some compromise. Nor can one parent decide to bank his or her own paycheck and not pool resources to support the family. God requires that parents provide for their children; this sort of selfishness is not an option, even if the other partner should agree to it. As husband and wife talk over and pray about decisions, Christian character and maturity develop in them both.

We err in exercising authority when we take it beyond its bounds, applying it inappropriately. Gender hierarchy proponents teach that husbands should make all the decisions and wives should go along with them. That inappropriately removes responsibility from the wife, treating her as if she were not the Christian adult she is, but a child incapable of making decisions. It also inappropriately treats the husband as if he were infallible, which he obviously is not. Likewise, proponents of the shepherding movement teach that everyone has to be "under the covering" of someone else, and that no leader can act independently. So much for Jesus Christ, Deborah, and John the Baptist! Such views are thin disguises for the desire to control others.

That is not to say that there should not be accountability, which is greatly needed. But among adults, it should occur within relationships of mutual respect. I am accountable to my husband; he is also accountable to me. As far as church matters go, we are accountable to our pastor; likewise, she is accountable to us, along with the other members of the church she planted. Children are accountable to their parents, and while the child has no power to make a parent accountable, he or she does have the protection of other adults and the law.

Jesus taught something very important about authority in His church. He taught that it is love and servanthood that produce authority, not the other way around. If we love others, we will earn credibility with them, and as we treat them well, they will trust us more. For example, because my husband demonstrates by his actions that he loves me and wants the best for me, he has great credibility with me! I naturally turn to him when I

need someone to pray or talk things over with, and I value his point of view highly, because in addition to his godly character, I know that Richard is on my side. His love gives him authority with me, just as my love gives me authority with him. But how do you think I would react if one day my husband announced that I had to do everything he wanted?! You're right, I'd react the same way you would. "Forget it, Buster!" That wouldn't demonstrate love for me, but a desire to control me. He would lose a lot of credibility in my book.

St. Paul's admonition to wives to submit to their husbands was based on legal requirements and the assumption that nobody would love them as much as their Christian husbands would, so they could safely trust in them. Unfortunately, that's not always the case, as many abused wives have experienced. First century wives had no rights and no options, so for them, submission was the only choice. It gave them an opportunity that might redeem an abusive situation as a witness to Christ. But the absolute authority Roman husbands exercised over their wives and children, even life and death, was never advocated by Jesus Christ.

Jesus was very wise when He said, "The princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them and they that are great exercise authority upon them, but it shall not be so among you. But whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister, and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant, even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:25-28)

"It shall NOT be so among you." More than a good idea, this is the Word of God.

God's Purpose: To Set Us Free to Serve Him

When God called the people of Israel out of Egypt, He said to Pharaoh through Moses, "Let my people go that they may serve Me." That is the purpose of human freedom and one reason why freedom is good.

Another reason is that only under freedom can a human being fully reflect God's image as Sovereign. Any institution or theology that limits a person's freedom to serve Christ resists God's purposes and prevents His full image from being displayed in His people.

We who live in the 21st century enjoy choices those early believers could hardly imagine. Restricting Christian women today as if this were God's ideal instead of ancient practice absolutizes first-century culture and relativizes eternal principle. This has misled many and reversed the liberating message of the Bible.

Those who fail to see that God wants His people to be free are in danger of misinterpreting Scripture for their own benefit. Human selfishness is very much alive, even in the best of born-again Christians. Using Scripture to rationalize evil is not a new phenomenon. During the Abolitionist movement to free U.S. slaves, evangelical Christians defended their practice of chattel slavery on the basis of Scripture. Believing that the sons of Ham were the ancestors of Africans thus condemned to bondage, they cited Paul's commandment that slaves should obey their masters and give them good service. Several Pauline passages were used, principally Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:22, I Timothy 6:1-2, and Titus 2:9. When the Civil War came, U.S. denominations split right down the Mason Dixon line over the interpretation of these passages.

Nowhere did Paul condemn slavery as an institution or direct Christian slaveholders to free their slaves. Some scholars believe that as a prominent Roman citizen, Paul himself may have owned slaves, including his physician, Luke. Nineteenth century slaveholders used these considerations to excuse themselves from ending slavery, even though none of them would have wanted to endure it themselves. Like conservative teachers on women today, they rationalized that their subjects benefited

from being subjugated and would only be harmed by freedom, not being capable of self-government. This allowed them the illusion that their oppressive and patronizing practices were necessary and even beneficial. These arguments grew from the assumption that the masters were superior to their servants. In their minds, “all men” didn’t include blacks – or women. As social inferiors, such were considered not fully human – not “like us” — and therefore not deserving equal treatment.

Traditionalists argued then as they do today regarding women that the Bible upheld the institutions that kept people separate and unequal. Love of wealth, power and position hardened their hearts and blinded their eyes. They could not see that for Scripture to instruct Christians not to rebel against oppressive circumstances but to be good witnesses by loving and serving their masters was not the same thing as to approve the institutions that oppressed them! Because slave-holding made them rich, they ignored the fact that the Bible also upholds the truths that all people are equally created in God's image and are answerable to Him; that Christ died for all; and that all believers are one in Christ by the indwelling Holy Spirit. These precious, eternal truths are the leaven of God's Kingdom that is raising the whole batch of dough, bringing an increase of liberty and justice to all people, as God's love spreads to all. May it complete its work quickly!

As the Abolitionists pointed out, such eternal truths transcend cultural practices, including those practiced in Bible times. The principles of submitting to those in authority and voluntarily loving and serving them are indeed timeless. But the institutions of slavery and female subjection are evil, and their immoralities and injustices rampant. To rationalize them by Biblical arguments misuses Scripture.

Eventually, enough people realized this to bring slavery to an end, despite concerted opposition from evangelical clergy. After a long and bloody war, it was on the basis of sound hermeneutics as well as an appeal to Christian conscience that the Abolitionist position finally prevailed. It might be added that if it were not for women Abolitionist preachers such as Sojourner Truth, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, Frances Willard, Laura Haviland and many others, slavery might never have ended in America. The moral courage of women preachers and others, like Harriet Beecher Stowe, who felt they could not be silent in the face of such evil, swayed the conscience of America until slavery was abolished.

We need to treat the Pauline passages on women in the same way as those on slavery. We need to see that just because Paul told wives to submit to their husbands as required under first-century law does not mean that 21st century freedoms ought to be thrown away and marriages patterned after ancient tyranny. It is both wrong and foolish to ask modern women to give up their hard-won freedoms and return to a yoke of bondage their great-grandmothers could hardly bear. And the attempts of men to conserve their advantages at women's expense need to be seen for what they are – unjust and cowardly uses of Scripture to retain power by violating the rights of those weaker than themselves.

Fair-minded people who want the best for others (the true meaning of love) ought to rejoice in the great strides women have made over 2,000 years of Christianity. Unlike those living in the first-century, women today have options. They are no longer the property of men, but citizens in their own right. Women have won the rights to gain an education, to own property, to hold a paying job and retain their income, to marry whom they wish, to use birth control, to use pain-killers during childbirth, to vote and to hold office.

These rights are precious and not to be despised. Because of them, there is no necessity to replace mutuality with a power-based form of marriage or to revert to the

anachronistic practice of excluding women from leadership and teaching ministries in the church.

Rather than absolutizing first-century culture and trying to squeeze twenty-first century women into its mold, we ought to encourage women today to use their freedom to promote the Gospel. This would follow the principle behind Paul's advice to slaves in I Corinthians 7:21 "Are you called to be a slave? Do not mind that. But if you have the opportunity to be freed, take it." His point is: if you are stuck in an oppressive institution, make the best of it. But if you have an opportunity to become free, take it, and use it for God's glory.

Restricting Christian Women Distorts the Gospel

Some today hold to the rather contorted view that although it was acceptable for women to teach and lead under the Old Covenant, New Testament Christians must hold to a stricter standard and forbid them this freedom. They acknowledge the Biblical ministries of women leaders such as Deborah and Huldah, but imagine that God wants less freedom for women under the New Covenant than the Old.

This turns the "Good News" of the Gospel into its opposite! Instead of setting women free, it increases their captivity. Rather than calling women to radical obedience to Christ in carrying out the Great Commission, it demands their acquiescence to religious and cultural restrictions. In this view, the subjection of women is more important than preaching the Gospel, Christian liberty, or the freedom of God's Holy Spirit to speak through whomsoever He will. It makes God out to be a respecter of persons and a discriminator on the basis of sex. It denies Christian women the right to "stand fast then, in the liberty with which Christ has set you free, and do not be enslaved again to a yoke of bondage."

This position is not morally tenable. It is illogical and contrary to Scripture. It commands women to ignore many Scriptures that God clearly intended for all. It brings reproach to the Gospel and the body of Christ. It drives modern women away from the Savior and the church that should be reaching out to welcome them.

It must deeply wound the heart of Jesus, Who commissioned Mary Magdalene and her companions as the first proclaimers of the Good News of His Resurrection to the (male!) disciples. Without the testimony of these women, no one would have known that Christ arose victorious from the grave early Easter Sunday morning.

"Separate but Equal": So-Called Functional Inequality

In the mid-1960's, civil rights advocates saw through the "separate but equal" position of segregationists who wanted to maintain that all people are created equal yet still keep the descendants of slaves in an inferior status to whites. I remember thinking at the time, "you're either separate or you're equal, but you can't be both!" It was obvious to me as a teenager that if people are equal, there is no reason why they should be assigned to separate stations in life. Likewise, if society insists upon doing so, it is deluding itself to suppose that it considers those it discriminates against as equals. However, this untenable position has reemerged in the "complementarian" view regarding women.

Those who wish to avoid saying that women are by nature inferior to men claim that they are inferior (or "different") only in function. Yet, that function is determined not by the women concerned, but by others; not by a woman's interests or ability to perform a given function, but by being born female. As Rebecca Merrill Groothuis has pointed out, this is internally inconsistent and self-contradictory. She writes,

“In female subordination, the criterion for who is subordinate to whom has nothing to do with . . . the abilities of individuals to perform particular functions. Rather, it is determined entirely on the basis of an innate, unchangeable aspect of a woman’s being, namely, her female sexuality. Her inferior status follows solely from her essential nature as a woman. Regardless of how traditionalists try to explain the situation, the idea that women are equal in their being, yet unequal by virtue of their being, simply makes no sense.” ¹

Logically, either women and men are equal in being and therefore ought to be equal in opportunity, or if women are to be kept unequal in opportunity by virtue of being women, they must be inferior by nature.

The False View of Female Inferiority that Underlies the Complementarian Position

This reveals an unspoken assumption of male superiority in the traditionalist position. Consider their understanding of the Creation account as necessitating a pre-Fall government by Adam over Eve (not found in the text).

Proponents of gender hierarchy say that Genesis 2 teaches that man has authority over woman because he was created before her. But why would any need for authority exist between man and woman before the Fall? Adam and Eve were both innocent and sinless, so there was no need for a human authority to bring correction or discipline. They were both created in God’s image and given God’s blessing and delegated authority over the animals and the earth, so there was no need for “dominion” authority by one human over the other. Since God had given them both joint dominion over Creation, it should be evident that they each had dominion over their own lives. They were both created as adults, so there was no need for guidance such as children require.

The only matter in which it could be argued legitimately that a need for authority existed was in Adam’s functional authority as teacher, since it was to him before Eve’s formation that God spoke the command not to eat the forbidden fruit, which she needed to learn. In this Adam obviously failed, since Eve’s quotation in Genesis 3:3 expands upon God’s Word. Although God’s command was simple, consisting of less than two verses, Adam did not succeed in conveying it accurately to Eve, nor did he make any attempt to correct her when she misquoted it to the serpent in Genesis 3:3. The man’s first attempt at serving as a teacher failed miserably. So on what basis does the belief rest that men are by nature better able to teach than women?

Since Adam failed as a teacher, if all men take after Adam and all women after Eve (an assumption that has never been proved to my knowledge), men are NOT by nature more fit to be teachers of God’s Word than women.

But we do not suppose that gender has any impact upon pedagogy. The ability to teach is based entirely upon the possession of knowledge superior to the student’s and the competence to communicate that knowledge. This functional authority was Adam’s simply because he received God’s commandment first, not because of his gender. The same would have applied to Eve, had she been in Adam’s position.

¹ Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, “Logical and Theological Problems with Gender Hierarchy”, Priscilla Papers 14:2, Spring 2000, pp. 3-5.

Therefore, no inherent need for authority existed between Adam as male and Eve as female. If it is nevertheless argued that God gave Adam authority over Eve before the Fall, the only remaining basis for that authority must be some inferiority of woman to man which requires that she be governed by him. While traditionalists today do not like to admit it, this unspoken assumption underlies their thinking.

True Functional Authority

True functional authority is based on the ability of a person to perform some function. It is recognized and accepted by those who benefit from the person's greater ability. Genuine functional authority is appropriate, just and beneficial. It is not absolute, but accountable to those served, and it lasts only as long as the situation requiring it lasts. But the subordination of women is not. It is absolute, unending, without accountability, and independent of any real need. To the extent that men and women differ by nature, they may be better suited to different functions, but it is wrong to restrict members of one sex (but not the other!) from achieving the best they are capable of in whatever functions they fulfill. The hypocrisy of the traditionalist rationale becomes clear when all the privileges and opportunities are reserved for men, while all the obligations and limitations are placed upon women. "Separate but equal" is just as much a lie today as it was 50 years ago!

The Blessings of Equality

The Preamble to the U.S. Declaration of Independence states, "We believe these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." I agree with the Founding Fathers' statement. Ever since a small child, I have known that all people are fundamentally equal. No one had to tell me this; it was obvious. We all have our own mind, will, feelings, hopes and dreams. We all bleed when cut, feel pain when injured, and grieve when we suffer loss. We have similar needs, desires, hopes and fears. Whatever our age, race, gender, educational level or any other difference, in essence, we are all equal, because we all share one human nature. The Bible calls it being created in the image of God. Note that Genesis 1:27 specifically includes both man and woman as created in His image: "God created man(kind) in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

In Christ, the bond of equality is even greater, because it is grounded in Jesus Himself. We Christians are equals because we are equally in Jesus Christ by virtue of being born again of His Holy Spirit. He has broken down the walls that divided us by joining us all to Himself. We still live in our bodies, but our true, eternal life is in Christ. Therefore, we are no longer simply individuals, but members of one another. That is why reconciliation and unity are so important. Our judgments and divisions wound each other and our Lord. They bring God's judgment on us, because by walking in unrepentance and unforgiveness, we fail to discern the body of Christ. We can only be free by abiding in love, treating others as Jesus would.

Paul writes, "henceforth know we no one after the flesh, but after the spirit." (II Corinthians 5:16, AV) And "there is no Jew or Greek; there is no slave or free; there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28) To force one group in the Body of Christ to a subordinate or inferior status is to divide Christ's body along natural lines, violating the truth of our spiritual unity. It also denies our equality in Christ and oppresses those He died to set free.

The Husband as Spiritual Mediator for the Wife

“Complementarians” today exhort husbands to act as “priest of the home.” This concept is not found in the New Testament. You won’t find it in a concordance! The Old Testament patriarchs built altars to God, and the Roman *pater familia* was responsible to lead his household in worshipping his pagan deities, but the New Testament includes women in the priesthood of all believers. I Peter 2:9 states that all Christians “are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, that you should show forth the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Peter adds, “As living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (I Peter 2:5). According to this verse, since Christian women are “living stones” built into God’s house, they are also members of God’s “holy priesthood.” Since Christians know God personally, they have no need for others to act as mediators on their behalf.

A husband does not mediate Christ’s life, love or power to his wife; she receives them directly from God. And the husband does not represent his wife before God. When she prays, she prays in the name of Jesus, not her husband! A husband is only responsible to utilize his higher social status, freedom from childbearing, and greater physical strength on his wife’s behalf and to love and support her in such a way that she can thrive. God calls him to lay down his prerogatives in order to serve her. But he is in no way a mediator between her and her God.

For either partner to try to control the other’s spiritual life would be an exercise in frustration and futility. That is why it is so important that Christians marry “in the Lord;” that is, to another committed Christian, and that they walk together as partners in love, prayer, service and faith. But each believer is responsible for his or her own walk before God.

The converse of a husband’s supposed “priesthood” over his wife is her supposed ability to reform or convert her husband by submitting to him. This, too, is fallacious. Influence is important, but not absolute. We can pray for others, encourage them, share Scripture and witness to them, but the state of their soul is between them and God alone. A husband’s spiritual condition is not within his wife’s power, and therefore it is not her responsibility. Her submission cannot effect his salvation; he must decide for himself whether or not to serve God.

Nor can a Christian wife improve her husband’s character by submitting to his every whim. Indeed, this may make things worse, for it is not good for any person to have his or her way all the time. She needs to set him a godly example, and sometimes that means setting healthy limits. That is why Biblical submission is mutual, not unilateral, and voluntary, not enforced.

Hearing from God

The modern view that a husband is the “spiritual head” of his wife and that she can only hear from God through him is fallacious. Scripture teaches that each believer has a direct, personal relationship and full access to God and that husband and wife are heirs together of the grace of life.

The Bible attests that believing women hear directly from God and are expected to obey His voice. Many examples could be cited. God directed the strategy for winning Israel’s freedom through the prophet and judge Deborah, who listened to God’s voice and conveyed His commandments to her general, Barak (Judges 4:4-5:31). An angel appeared to Samson’s mother and gave her instructions concerning his birth and

upbringing (Judges 13:3-24). The Bible shows that she had greater wisdom and spiritual understanding than her husband in this matter (v. 22-23).

The angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary and instructed her concerning the birth of Jesus Christ. God commanded the widow of Zarephath to sustain Elijah (I Kings 17:9). And God's prophetesses such as Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Anna, Elizabeth, and Mary heard and obeyed His voice, speaking God's word to His people.

God did not approach these women through their husbands or fathers, but directly. He spoke to them and commissioned them as individuals. Every one of these women's lives and ministries proves that the traditionalist position is wrong.

The idea that married women can only hear from God through their husbands is not only heterodox, it is also illogical. It supposes that a Christian woman can hear from God as long as she is single and may pray about whom she is to marry and what work God wants her to do, but as soon as she says her wedding vows she suddenly becomes spiritually deaf. Or even worse, it assumes that a woman can never receive direction from God, even though the Bible contains clear examples of women who did, as cited above. To suppose that Christian women can't hear from God also denies the Holy Spirit His lordship. Even a child can hear from God. Samuel did! God will speak to anyone who will listen. And wives sometimes hear more clearly than their husbands. Sarah did in Genesis 21:12, Samson's mother did in Judges 13:22-23, and Abigail did in I Samuel 25:3.

It is important for all believers to be open to God's voice and to evaluate what they hear on the basis of Scripture and the discernment of other mature believers. I John 2:20-24 and 4:1-3 and I Corinthians 14:27-29 show that this is a group process. No individual has a right to claim to hear God's voice and demand obedience from others without submitting the message for confirmation. In Christian marriages, wives and husbands should seek the Lord's direction together and come to agreement before they act. If they love one another, they will not wish to force their decisions upon their beloved or ignore their mate's viewpoint. In a multitude of counsel there is wisdom, but those who think they can go it alone deceive themselves. A man would be foolish to think that his gender qualifies him to hear from God, especially for others. I'd rather trust in the Bible, the Holy Spirit and godly counsel than in someone's gender, wouldn't you?

Submission in Marriage

What Does It Mean to Submit?

The original, Greek word translated "submit" (*hupotasso*, sometimes erroneously translated "obey" in English) means to defer to someone respectfully. To quote the Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, the middle or passive voices, which are always used in NT marriage contexts, mean a "voluntary yielding in love." These grammatical voices are used to convey a reflexive sense; one submits oneself to another. This is a matter of self-control. Thus, it is clear that God intends Christian submission to be a voluntary action a wife takes. As such, it is under her discretion, as she follows the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament never uses the active voice of *hupotasso*, "to bring into subjection," in relation to marriage. Nowhere in Scripture are husbands allowed to bring their wives into subjection. Christians are to bring evil into subjection, not other Christians!

Obedience? Or Submission?

In ancient societies, a wife was obligated to obey her husband. The law required this and gave husbands absolute authority over their wives. Roman men acted as judge, jury and executioner over their entire households, who were obligated to give unquestioning obedience. The majority of women were married off as child servants to much older men. This relationship resembled servitude more than modern marriage (in fact, most women were slaves). So, their obedience was two-fold; as servants and as wives. But submission is a different matter. It means being willing to defer to another person out of love. Thus, it is a Christian virtue.

The Greek words to “obey” (*hupakouo*) and to “obey a ruler” (*peitharcho*) are not used in any New Testament command for wives! Nor is a husband ever described as “ruler,” *archon*, but “head,” *kephale*, which means source of life, as Jesus Christ is the source of life for His bride, the church. Wives are encouraged to submit to their husbands in the same manner that Christians submit to Jesus Christ – not out of legalistic obligation, but out of a relationship of love and trust.

This means that the New Testament makes a very basic, radical change in the relationship between husband and wife from what was culturally obligatory at that time. It does not command a wife to obey her husband, but to submit to him. Law is replaced by love.

Does Biblical Submission Necessarily Include Obedience?

The assumption has been made by traditionalists that by submitting to their husbands, wives must necessarily obey them. It is true that submission and obedience are often brought together in Scripture, as in the following passages:

Hebrews 13:17 “Obey those who have the rule over you and submit yourselves, for they watch over your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.” This verse combines submission and obedience. However, it contains two very important conditions; first, that such obedience is to be given to those who are given rulership and second, that these must give an account for the souls of believers in their care. But nowhere does Scripture give rulership to husbands, although secular first-century law did. Nor does Scripture anywhere hold husbands accountable for the spiritual condition of their wives. So, on two counts, this verse cannot be applied to the marriage relationship.

I Peter 3:1-6 “Likewise, you wives, be in subjection to your own husbands . . . for after this manner in the old days the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection to their own husbands, even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are as long as you do well and are not afraid with any amazement.”

Peter gives Sarah as an example of a wife who honored and obeyed her husband. Yet, in his admonition to Christian wives, Peter does not say they are Sarah’s daughters if they obey their husbands, but if they “do well and are not afraid with any amazement.” Sarah did what was right by obeying her husband, since that was the cultural requirement of her society. Christian women in similar societies, such as first-century Rome, were to do likewise to the extent that their husbands continued to demand obedience. But the principle behind Peter’s point is not obedience to man, but following God. He encouraged Christian women to exercise faith by doing what was right without being afraid to trust God.

In that context, submission would often involve obedience until the husbands adjusted to the spiritual elevation of their wives by Christ. But once you recognize someone as your spiritual equal, you can hardly demand that they obey you unless some other condition, such as servitude or minority status, requires it. The presence of

the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of God in their life will demonstrate an equality that will eventually permeate the relationship. As joint-heirs in Christ, Christian wives will necessarily rise to equal partnership with their husbands as they mature and develop in faith and the knowledge of the Word of God.

Humility and submission are Christian virtues, which adorn any believer who cultivates them. But my advice is not to marry a man who demands your obedience in a society that does not require it. That man has a lot of sanctification to learn before he could become a good husband!

Peter implicitly recognizes this by directing Christian husbands to honor their wives instead of taking advantage of their relative weakness and to recognize them as joint-heirs of the grace of life. He warns them that their prayers will be hindered if they do not, and bids them all to be in agreement, compassionate, loving, sympathetic and courteous. This necessarily involves mutual respect and submission.

Mutual Submission

Whether motivated by cultural considerations or theological reasons, Paul presents wifely submission within the context of mutual love and respect between husband and wife. Rather than being absolute, wifely submission appears in the New Testament context as an application of the broader Biblical principles of submission to authority and mutual submission among believers.

This is illustrated in Ephesians 5:1-33. Here, mutual submission is enjoined as one way for Christians to walk in love and be filled with the Spirit, and Christian marriage is presented in parallel to the church's relationship to Christ. Husbands are exhorted to love their wives as Christ loved the church, and wives are exhorted to be subject to their own husbands as the church is subject to Christ.

Of course, the big difference is that unlike Christ, husbands are human; neither sinless, always loving, nor uniformly acting in the best interests of their wives. This is why the commandment is not absolute, and why Paul spends so much more time addressing husbands than wives. I believe it is also his reason for addressing the wives; they had to exercise judgment in keeping this commandment. Modern women need to do the same. Culturally, it was a wife's duty to obey her husband's every whim, but as Christians, those Paul addressed should be subject "as to the Lord." This cannot mean that Paul thought wives should obey their husbands as if they were gods, since they obviously are not, but that their submission should come under Jesus' Lordship and leading. If Paul had thought husbands were on a level parallel to Christ, he would not have had to constantly exhort them to love their wives unselfishly and sacrificially!

It has always puzzled me that some modern evangelicals teach that Christian wives ought to obey their husbands as if they were Jesus Christ Himself. Hardly a realistic or safe proposal! Rather, Paul's statement should be understood to mean that a Christian woman's submission to her husband is not merely acquiescence to secular law, but a voluntary act of love in which she honors Jesus Christ. He alone is Lord, and must come above every earthly master. Legalists who require women to obey their husbands or fathers without question are setting them up for tyranny!

Submission as a Love Response

If we consider how the church is subject to Christ, we see that it is out of gratitude, love and a desire for union with Him that we voluntarily seek and follow His leading. It is not out of legalistic fear, but out of a love relationship that we voluntarily submit ourselves to Him. And Jesus does not impose Himself upon us, but respecting our will, waits to hear and answer our prayers. In this way, He guides us and we respond. Thus, His interventions in our lives come as responses to our petitions, to help us. We receive them gladly, for they fulfill our desires and requests. This builds our faith, trust and mutual intimacy with the Lord, Who, though all-powerful, desires love, not servility, from His bride. Within the mutual love relationship of marriage, this is how the submission of wives to their physically stronger and more powerful husbands should also occur.

Paul evidently saw the husband-wife relationship as redemptive for the woman, not restrictive, for he bids husbands to love their wives in the same way Christ loved the Church, by dying to give her life. A husband can hardly obey this commandment without respecting and giving consideration to his wife above his own wishes. Thus, although he may not call it that, his love for her will necessarily include submitting to her. If our marriage relationships are to grow "in the Lord," they will necessarily include mutual love, respect, submission and accountability.

Putting Submission Into Context

It is astounding, but I have heard the idea preached that the New Testament does not teach wives to love their husbands or husbands to submit to their wives! This results from misunderstanding the authors' intentions and a too narrow application of their words.

We must remember that the New Testament letters were not written as treatises on how Christians should live in the future, but as instructions to specific people and circumstances in the first century. As letters, the New Testament epistles are not exhaustive, but brief. Much was assumed rather than stated, just as we would do in writing a letter today. So it is inappropriate to take the absence of a thought to mean that the Bible teaches against it or the presence of a thought to mean that the Bible enjoins it for all times and circumstances. We must carefully investigate the background and context to discern the authors' intentions so as to apply what they wrote to our own circumstances in an appropriate way.

Biblical commands that believers love and submit to one another apply to all, the married and unmarried. General principles such as these should not be denied by a narrow reading of passages written to address specific conditions, but should be incorporated into all Christian relationships, including our marriages.

In his epistles to the Ephesians and Timothy, Paul was correcting first-century problems; specifically, the lack of love and consideration toward wives by ancient husbands and the servile attitude of women to men. Thus, he bids husbands to love and serve their wives sacrificially and wives to submit to their husbands as a voluntary act of love. Both of these directives were designed to move first-century marriage out of pagan legalism into Christian love and grace.

In encouraging wives to respect their husbands and husbands to love their wives sacrificially, Paul illustrates one way that Christians are to practice mutual submission. I do not believe he intended to make a law out of this, but to help Christian couples make Christ the center of their relationship. Paul took the sting out of the secular law for wives, added to it his own commands for husbands, and made mutual love and submission matters of faith and obedience to Christ.

Why Unilateral Submission is Not Biblical

One-way submission and absolute authority over others are not God's command or ideal for anyone. They could not be, for they contradict our Lord's own words in Matthew 20:25-28, Matthew 23:1-12, Mark 10:42-45, Luke 22:25-27 and John 13:12-17 and 34-35. In all these passages, Jesus made it clear that no Christian is to seek to rule another person, but that those who are ambitious ought rather to humble themselves in loving service. He modeled this by wearing the attire of a slave and washing His disciples' feet. By doing so, Jesus showed His disciples how completely He was willing to lay down His prerogatives and even His life for us. Then, He carried that commitment out by going to the Cross to be crucified for our forgiveness and rebirth. That astounding love won our hearts and eternal devotion. When Christians love the way Jesus did, for the benefit of those they serve, the recipients respond with willing gratitude.

I believe that this was the basis for Paul's words to Christian husbands as to how to treat their wives in Ephesians 5:23-33. He wanted them to love their wives as their own bodies, in stark contrast to first century norms for husbands, who were not expected either to love or be faithful to their wives. In this way, Christian husbands would model and promote redemption for women, and Christian wives would benefit from their husbands' care. Through Christ, a relationship formerly based on power would be transformed into one based on mutual love and respect. It is a shame that many today have turned these verses around to mean the opposite of what Paul intended and promote the opposite effect.

The Bible lifts up mutual love and respect among all people, in whatever human relationships they may find themselves. Obviously, this will be played out differently according to the freedom or lack of it enjoyed by the parties involved. But we must lay down our carnal desires to enjoy advantages over others if we are to follow Christ.

Ten Commandments? Or Just One for Women?

Unfortunately, some today have taken authority and submission to extremes. Those who extend gender hierarchy this far say that a Christian wife's sole duty is to obey her husband and that God will hold him, not her, responsible for the decisions he makes and the actions he directs her to do. Unbelievably, they counsel wives to submit to their husbands, even when they require them to things that are wrong. The devil must love it!

Fortunately, most wives are too smart to fall for this, and most couples who attempt it are led only into stupidity, but this kind of thinking is dangerous. After the Holocaust, lackeys who gave the excuse "I was just following orders" were not exonerated from their crimes by the courts at Nuremberg. Neither will Christian wives be allowed similar excuses at the last Judgement! We need to fear God and obey His commandments. No human being has a right to come in between a Christian and his or her conscience. And we cannot absolve ourselves of responsibility for what we do by blaming others, any more than Adam did.

All people are directly accountable to God, and will be judged by Him. For a wife blindly to obey her husband, even when he tells her to do what is wrong, would make him a higher authority in her life than God Himself. That is idolatrous, and a clear violation of Scripture.

The Bible says, "Every man will die for his own sin" (II Chronicles 25:3-5). St. Paul wrote, "for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive the things done in the body, whether good or evil." (II Corinthians 5:10) This means you!

Scripture proves that God holds married women accountable as individuals for their actions. When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, God confronted and punished

them both. When Ananias and Sapphira conspired to lie to the apostles, they were both struck dead. Sapphira was not excused because she submissively obeyed her husband's wishes! The fact that she knew about his actions and failed to confront him that they were wrong was evidence of collusion, not innocence.

How “Traditional Family Values” Are Misused to Justify Abuse

North American evangelicalism has exalted the “traditional family” in recent years, assuming that the husband-breadwinner, wife-homemaker dichotomy is not only Biblical but the ideal pattern of Christian marriage. Certainly, there are advantages in such role division in the early years of marriage, when the wife typically experiences pregnancy, nursing and the intense needs of young children for their mother. However, full-time mothering becomes less necessary as the children grow older and leave the home for school during the day. Like men, women need meaningful work, whether within or outside the home. A woman with no work routine or career goals needs self-discipline to find meaningful purpose in the volunteer sector if she is not to descend into the abyss of idleness, boredom and depression. Once the youngest child is in school, an idle mother may turn to alcohol, unnecessary spending, or addiction to TV soap operas to fill in her time. And without her contribution to the family income, economic pressure may force the father to work many hours of overtime, absenting himself from the family and wearing himself out.

This is negative for all concerned; the husband, who experiences increased stress to support the family single-handedly; the wife, who experiences uselessness, isolation and depression, and the children, who lose time with their father and a happy, fulfilled mother they can respect.

Such a husband may resent and disdain his “parasitic” wife, who is not functioning as a full partner. If he is a professional, his career development, in contrast to her stagnation, will drive the couple further apart, leaving them with less and less in common. He may well find more stimulating company among the women in his professional life than with his own wife; this may lead to adultery and the eventual abandonment of his family.

Worse, he may use the family setting, where he feels justified by religious teaching to rule over a subservient wife and children, to vent his frustrations and assert his “rights” to dominate his wife and children.

“Traditional” Sex Role Hierarchy Is Associated with Domestic Violence and Incest

Studies of highly religious homes in which abuse and incest take place show that father perpetrators rigidly uphold “old fashioned” values, emphasize the subordination of women, and isolate the family unit. They often blame their sexual sin on their daughter/victims. The mothers, fearing conflict with the husband and censure by the religious community, often ignore the incest. Dependent on the fathers economically and emotionally, such wives avoid confronting their abusive husbands, thus allowing the incest to continue.² Thus, the imbalance and inequality of “traditional” marriages can be dangerous.

To quote some experts: “Helfer and Kempe (1968) in their book The Battered Child report that the assault rate on children of parents who subscribe to the belief of

² Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace*, pp. 170-171.

male dominance is 136 percent higher than for couples not committed to male dominance.”³

“The connection between abuse and the Bible appears to have at least two dimensions, especially within the various strands of the Christian tradition. First, many men who abuse their wives appear to feel that the alleged biblical teaching of ‘male headship’ is warrant, at least in some degree, for their behavior. Second, many abused women, especially those who have been taught the biblical principles of male headship and female submission, have understood the abuse they have received as either God’s rightful punishment for their sins or God’s will for their lives, even if it involves suffering unjustly.”⁴

Further, “. . . some research indicates that the religious right promotes attitudes toward women that allow for a tolerance of sexual abuse in our society today (Hull & Burke, 1991) . . . many of the traditional (not necessarily scriptural) values taught regarding marriage and the family correlate with many of the characteristics of the incestuous family.”⁵

These characteristics include an autocratic, patriarchal or dictatorial father and/or an overdependent, oppressed and depressed mother.⁶ For the woman, “. . . belief in a traditional, gender-based, dominance-submission model of family life and church were correlated inversely with personal self-esteem,”⁷ which is essential for wives to set healthy boundaries in their marriages and to protect their daughters.

Is “Traditional” Gender Hierarchy Biblical?

“Traditional” marriage is not necessarily the Biblical pattern. The ideal woman described in Proverbs 31 is more than a homemaker. She is also manager of home-based industry and farming; a businesswoman who deals in land transactions and trade and who supervises workers. Deborah, apparently a married woman, was Israel’s Judge and Commander-in-Chief; a prophetess and governmental and military leader. Paul’s fellow worker Priscilla was a tent-maker as well as a Christian pastor/teacher, along with her husband. Lydia, the first European convert to Christianity and leader of her house-church, traded in expensive, purple-dyed cloth. Scripture nowhere suggests that these women gave up their work when they became Christians.

This is not to denigrate the vital work of young mothers in caring for their children, but to encourage Christian couples to be flexible so they can adjust to the changing needs of their individual and family situations. We also need to encourage mutual respect, accountability and responsibility between Christian couples in order to safeguard their relationships. I believe this is the Biblical way for woman to function as man’s “help-meet” that is, his equal partner, who completes and complements him fully. I also believe it is the best way to build healthy, happy marriages and families.

³ Carolyn Holderread Heggen, “Religious Beliefs and Abuse” in *Women, Abuse and the Bible; How Scripture Can Be used to Hurt or Heal*, edited by Catherine Clark Kroeger, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), p. 17.

⁴ David H. Scholar, “The Evangelical Debate Over Biblical ‘Headship’” in Kroeger, p. 29.

⁵ Jackie M. Hudson, “Characteristics of the Incestuous Family”, in Kroeger, p. 72

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

⁷ Holderread Haggan, p. 17.

Belief in Gender Hierarchy Produces Extremes

The doctrine of unilateral submission easily becomes extreme. Believing that this “principle” is absolute, some gender hierarchy proponents tell wives to submit to their husbands even when they are abusive. This only makes things worse! Submission to wrongdoing does not correct it, but excuses and enables it. Accepting abusive behavior tempts a man to escalate the abuse. Typically, abusive husbands become more violent when their wives are overly submissive. Such imbalance in marriage is unhealthy and can be dangerous.

The traditionalist distortion of the marital relationship among Christians gives satan a tremendous opening to bring deception and abuse into such a marriage. If the wife neglects her responsibility to bring necessary balance, accountability and correction to her husband, she is not being the help he needs. And if the husband absolves himself of accountability to his wife and ignores her rights and her counsel, he will assume greater authority than he should, look down on her, and may abuse the relationship.

This is a setup for disaster! It leaves the wife helpless to defend herself and full of false guilt when her husband wrongs her. This is even more the case for daughters, who are often threatened by their authoritarian fathers. It can develop into emotional, spiritual and physical abuse. It's no wonder that with such beliefs, domestic violence is so high among religious fundamentalists of all faiths.

No Christian is perfect; we all have a selfish, fallen, sinful nature. We all need one another to help us see our blind spots, correct our excesses, and bring a different perspective to our thinking. This is one of the great advantages of Christian marriage; "if one falls down, the other will lift him up, but woe to him who falls alone." (Ecc. 4:9-10)

To create an imbalance of power by giving total authority to one person over another without redress or accountability destroys true partnership and provides unlimited opportunity for the carnal nature. Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely. We wouldn't allow such a power imbalance in government; why would we suppose it might work any better in marriage? A man doesn't lose his carnal nature when he puts on a wedding ring!

Imbalances of power are always dangerous, but this kind is especially so because it results in a spiritual disenfranchisement of Christian women. It cuts the husband off from the Holy Spirit's voice speaking through his wife, leaving him deluded that his opinion is the only one to consider, and opening him to deception. It builds inequality into the marriage union, undermining the wife's confidence and development, and leaving her vulnerable to abuse from her husband. It also contradicts a number of very important Scriptures.

Paul writes in I Timothy 2:5, “there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.” To elevate anyone else to the position of being a mediator between another human being and God is to usurp a place that belongs to Jesus Christ alone. This is how cults develop. Leaders who insist that they know better than other adults what is good for them or what God wants from them are deceived. They are usurping authority God never intended them to have. If they use guilt, isolation and intimidation to enforce their “authority” over others, they are also potentially dangerous.

Love and mutual submission are Biblical duties of both men and women, husbands and wives. Nowhere does the Bible give husbands the right to demand submission from their wives; this is always left up to the women as a voluntary action under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. But this fact has been conveniently ignored by men who wish to excuse their desire to dominate others and remain free from accountability to those most vulnerable to them. This neither honors Christ nor demonstrates godly leadership.

A Balanced Marriage Is a Happy Marriage

The basics of a happy marriage are the same as for any good relationship: mutual esteem, affection, and respect. The more a couple share their lives together through positive interactions and activities, the happier they will be. Understanding will grow and with it, the wonderful feeling of loving and being loved. Each spouse must accept and affirm the needs of the other and be willing to work together to build a mutually satisfactory life. This requires give and take, compromise and teamwork. A couple's marriage will grow as their friendship grows. But division along gender lines separates and alienates.

Contrary to some evangelical teaching, marriage is not a military hierarchy, but a permanent love affair! Husband and wife cannot be united if the wife is diminished and the husband exalted at her expense. True love cannot flourish within a relationship of inequality and injustice. No woman who is treated like a child can avoid hidden resentment building up against her husband. And no husband who controls his wife can truly love and respect her.

Studies have shown that the happiest marriages are the most egalitarian in practice. Fortunately, many traditionalists practice much more equality in their marriages than they say they believe in. But we should be honest enough to speak up for what we truly believe is right.

Dr. John Gottman, a marriage therapist, has studied married couples scientifically. He set up a laboratory to monitor conversations and the physical reactions of couples during ordinary interactions and arguments. He found that most women accept their husband's influence, but that many men resist influence from their wives. He writes,

"In our long-term study of 130 newlywed couples, now in its eighth year, we have found that . . . men who allow their wives to influence them have happier marriages and are less likely to divorce . . . Statistically speaking, when a man is not willing to share power with his partner, there is an 81 percent chance that his marriage will self-destruct."⁸ And, ". . . the happiest, most stable marriages in the long run were those where the husband treated his wife with respect . . . When the couple disagreed, these husbands actively searched for common ground rather than insisting on getting their own way."⁹

However, men who reject their wives' viewpoints or use criticism, contempt, defensiveness or the silent treatment, undermine the foundations of their marriages. A man who behaves this way asserts his independence, implying that his wife and their marriage do not matter to him. Such behavior shows lack of respect for his wife's viewpoint and indifference to her feelings. This leaves her with no room for compromise and no hope for improving the relationship. To continue the marriage on his terms, she would have to accept an intolerable level of domination.

Dr. Gottman relates an interesting conversation with a Mormon bishop, Dana Kehr, whose religion holds to a very patriarchal view of marriage in which the husband is supposed to make all the decisions for the family. But in this case, the bishop and his wife had a strong, mutually respectful marriage. He reported, "I wouldn't think about

⁸ John M. Gottman, Ph.D. and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work; A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert.* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), p. 100.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 101.

making a decision she disagreed with. That would be very disrespectful. We talk and talk about it till we both agree, and *then* I make the decision.”¹⁰ Most egalitarians would call that mutuality, not patriarchy. So, if you’re a traditionalist, you can still have a happy marriage – if, like the Kehrs, you practice mutual respect and shared decision-making.

One reason for this, according to Dr. Gottman’s observations, is that wives whose husbands do not resist their influence are happier and thus more constructive when disagreeing. They rightly perceive that their husbands are open to their concerns, so can voice them more gently. “Because she’s not angered, frustrated or humiliated by her husband, she is apt to begin difficult discussions without being critical or contemptuous.”¹¹ This makes it easier for the husband to avoid being defensive, so that they can resolve their differences more easily and quickly.

And that’s not all: “Research shows that a husband who can accept influence from his wife also tends to be an outstanding father. He is familiar with his children’s world and knows all about their friends and their fears. Because he is not afraid of emotions, he teaches his children to respect their own feelings—and themselves.”²¹

Who Should Make the Final Decision?

Although traditionalists assume that when couples deadlock the husband should make the final decision, the Bible does not actually say this. Again, it is an assumption based on a patriarchal mind-set, derived from a particular interpretation of “head” as meaning authority. The Biblical model is compromise and agreement between husband and wife.

The longest New Testament passage on marriage is found, not in Ephesians, but in I Corinthians chapter 7. In stark contrast to the legal positions and social expectations of the first century, here the rights and responsibilities of man and woman are upheld as equal. Although marriages were arranged by parents, who often espoused their pre-pubescent daughters to much older men, Paul recognizes the rights of both men and women to remain unmarried. Although ancient societies did not expect husbands to be faithful to their wives (while women were secluded to ensure their chastity), Paul held both equally responsible to remain faithful within marriage. And, most surprising of all, he assumes that either a husband or a wife could exercise the right to leave a partner. In addition, he gives to the wife as well as to the husband authority over her spouse’s body. Since men’s sexual rights were foundational in ancient marriages, depriving husbands of autonomy in this area was tantamount to smashing the entire structure of male-domination within marriage.³¹

It may come as a surprise, but the only New Testament passage giving instructions as to how a Christian couple should make a decision teaches mutuality. In I Corinthians 7:3-5, Paul counsels complete reciprocity between husband and wife; they should decide a matter “by consent” or “by agreement.” Evidently, Paul did not think that a stalemate was proper or inevitable for a Christian couple. Neither should we. Rather, we should either defer to the most greatly affected party or seek common ground for a compromise.

As Judy L. Brown puts it, “if a marriage is not a game or a competition, then it does not require a tie-breaker. What the church needs to show the world in its marriages

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 103.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 105.

¹² Ibid., p. 110.

¹³ See “The New Testament View of Marriage” in Brown, Judy L., *Women Ministers According to Scripture*, (Springfield, MO: Morris Publishing, 1996), p. 202.

is not a hierarchy that makes unity impossible, but a unity that makes hierarchy unnecessary." ⁴₁

Husbands who insist on maintaining a power imbalance over their wives undermine the foundation of a happy marriage, which is a solid friendship. And the greater the power imbalance, the worse the results. Gilbert Bilezikian cites a summary article by David Kipnis in *Psychology Today*: "To the extent that power holders (husbands or wives, politicians or executives) believe that they control another person's behavior, that person is likely to be devalued." Further, "dominance and power are negatively associated with feelings of affection" and "people who unilaterally controlled decision-making had a less satisfactory relationship than those who shared power." ⁵₁ And according to the 1999 Barna survey, Southern Baptists, who emphasize wives submitting to husbands, had a 16% *higher* divorce rate than mainline Christians or even unbelievers! Contrary to the insistence of sex-role traditionalists, following their dictates will hurt, not help Christian marriages.

The Supposed Spiritual Superiority of Men

I've often wondered why some Christian men believe they are spiritually superior to women. I don't see evidence to support this and wonder what standards of measurement they are using. Who make up the majority of committed church members? Who are the more humble, loving servants of others? Who are more compassionate and show more mercy? Who spend more time in prayer, Bible study and charitable works? Who do most of the work of the church? Who give more sacrificially of their time and finances? Who are more sensitive to conscience and to the Holy Spirit? Who generally live up to a higher moral standard? I don't believe I'm being biased when I tell you that in my observation, it is Christian women. And I don't see them trying to prevent Christian men from using their gifts to the fullest. On the contrary, Christian women often express a desire to see more men take leadership. In honor preferring one another, they are often willing to give up opportunities for leadership in order to give men a chance. On this basis, I believe that the idea that men are spiritually superior to women is a myth.

According to the 2000 Barna survey of 4,755 adults living in the U.S., half women and half men, nearly 80% of the women and just 63% of men described themselves as "spiritual." The women were found to be:

- 100% more likely to be involved in discipleship
- 56% more likely to serve in a church leadership position (other than as a pastor)
- 46% more likely to disciple others
- 39% more likely to have a regular devotional time
- 29% more likely to read the Bible
- 29% more likely to share their faith with others
- 23% more likely to donate financially to a church
- 16% more likely to pray

¹⁴ Brown, pp. 205-6.

¹⁵ David Kipnis, "The View from the Top," *Psychology Today*, vol. 18, no. 12, pp. 30-36 quoted in Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says About a Woman's Place in Church and Family*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), 1985, p.p. 305-306.

On the basis of this survey, which is said to have a 95% confidence rate, Barna describes women as the “spiritual heavy weights.”⁶₁

Traditionalists have historically charged women with being inferior to men spiritually, intellectually and emotionally. They view women as more emotional, less rational, beings than men, incapable of leadership and government.

A fair examination of the evidence reveals that these charges are false. What fuels 90% of murders, virtually all rapes, and the vast majority of crimes of incest, pornography, war, violence and genocide? The passions of men, not women.

Men who considered themselves Christians initiated the Crusades, the Inquisition, the witch-burnings and the Holocaust. They whipped up irrational fears and hatreds to fuel their causes, justifying atrocities with the meanest of stereotypes and prejudices.

Men without the counsel of women enacted all this dreadful history. This sorry record shows that no Scripture was truer than God’s statement that it is “NOT GOOD” for the man to be alone! Yet, traditionalists would have men make unilateral decisions without taking seriously the counsel God gives them through women. This demonstrates a mistaken trust in the flesh and disdain for the “help” God gave to man in woman and his need of her. It rejects the voice of the Holy Spirit through woman believers and the multitude of counsel, in which is wisdom. God created us male and female to work together; the record shows that men need women to bring balance and restraint to their aggressive tendencies.

If we judge by the standards of the New Testament, the church’s true leaders are not those who consider themselves superior to others, pontificate behind pulpits, or shut people out of decision-making processes. Rather, true leaders are those who, like Christ, love, serve, and empower others by their example as well as by their words and actions.

To suppose that men by virtue of their gender ought to be regarded as leaders denies all of this. It exalts the flesh above the Spirit, regards natural power as greater than spiritual, and turns God’s kingdom upside down. It brings the Holy Spirit captive to the domination of men.

Let’s let God be God and acknowledge His sovereign right to distribute spiritual gifts and callings to whomever He chooses for the good of the church and the world. Let’s be open to God’s voice and have the humility to recognize and honor those He has chosen, whether male or female, black or white, Jew or Gentile. And let’s follow those who demonstrate that they are leaders by their godly lives.

¹⁶ Barna Research Group, Ltd., Ventura, CA: “Women are the Backbone of the Christian Congregations in America”, www.barna.org, March 6, 2000.

How Gender Hierarchy Deceives Men

You may have noticed, as I have over the many years of my Christian life, that the Accuser uses the same tricks over and over again to deceive us. One of these tricks is finger pointing. Satan will try to get us to “point the finger” at someone else, blaming them for the very sin he incites in us. He will try to make us believe the exact opposite of the truth by instigating us to judge someone else. You can discern this by a spirit of blame and the lack of love and humility. Thus, I have learned to listen very carefully to any accusations spoken in anger, because the exact opposite is almost always the case.

This applies to gender relations. Men who assume that women are more easily deceived than they are may falsely believe that they are qualified to direct women’s gospel work. Such men do not consider carefully enough what God is telling them through women’s words and works. Satan thus tricks them both into pride and into making poor decisions. As pride grows and mistakes lead to attempts at self-justification, such men typically distance themselves further from the godly counsel of women. Relying on their own judgments, they become isolated and estranged from those who should be their partners. Looking down on women, they become motivated by selfishness and a lack of love. This can produce unkind, hurtful actions and words that contradict God’s commandments and harm His work.

I Corinthians 13:4 tells us, “Love is patient; love is kind and is not jealous.”¹⁷ To restrict another person from the freedom and activities men wish for themselves is both unkind and selfish. For men to take over Christian work begun by women and shut them out of leadership exhibits jealousy. This not only hurts women; most of all, it hurts the cause of Christ.

To hurt women hurts Jesus Christ! Men who suppose that they do God’s will by taking control of women’s work delude themselves. They may presume that women are “more easily deceived” than themselves, but in fact, such men are the deceived ones! Instead of furthering the Gospel work, they play directly into the hands of the Enemy, who uses them to destroy it.

Another commonly believed lie is that men are inherently qualified to lead women spiritually. If you think about it, this idea is pretty silly, because it relies on a natural condition (gender) for a spiritual ability. And in my experience, the men who think this way are immature Christians, usually much less mature than their Christian wives. The more mature men know better; they have lived with their wives long enough to appreciate their spiritual help and guidance. And they have given up competition in favor of partnership. But husbands who swallow the idea that they are automatically qualified and responsible to provide spiritual leadership may try to make it a project. Failing to improve their wives’ spiritual lives, which after all are up to each individual, they may then feel guilty and inadequate. So, Satan gets another advantage, instilling condemnation and tempting such husbands to try to compensate for their “failure as men.” I’m not sure why the wives humor this; it would be kinder to let them off the hook. Perhaps they are grateful for ANY interest in spiritual matters on the part of such men.

Then, there are the husbands who actually try to make all the decisions themselves. This can lead to the breakup of a marriage, because it is so alienating to a woman to be dominated, treated like a child, and robbed of all control over matters affecting her life. No one wants to live with a phony, and a man who pretends to know better than his wife at all times is kidding himself! Such behavior, even when well meaning, is evidence of a lack of sense. Scripture says that two are better than one; so how could one (man) be superior to a couple working together?

¹⁷ New American Standard translation

This is an example of how Satan's lies asserting gender hierarchy trick people into abandoning Biblical equality for a rigid sex role model. Instead, we should consider the teachings we hear and test them against reality and the Word of God. Let's not think of ourselves more highly than we ought, but think with sober judgment. That will bring us to humility and true spiritual growth, as we help and encourage one another. God's design for marriage is teamwork, not military orders!

What About Submission as God's Design for Marriage?

Biblical submission among Christians should be a give and take matter within relationships of mutual responsibility, accountability, love and trust. However, traditionalists distort the doctrine of submission, making it one-sided. While the Bible commands all believers to be submissive to one another, traditionalists reserve submission for women where gender relations are concerned. Rather than observing the strides Paul made towards equality of husband and wife as directional for the church's future, traditionalists interpret passages urging wives to submit to their husbands as establishing a permanent gender hierarchy as God's ideal for marriage.

I think that gender-hierarchy proponents see things backward. Realizing how oppressive ancient Roman society was, we should expect the New Testament to reflect that culture. Within that framework, those teachings and practices which move in the direction of liberty stand out, showing God's desire for His church. But traditionalists ignore the many New Testament advances toward freedom in Christian relationships while holding its authoritarianism as normative. You've undoubtedly heard many sermons emphasizing authority and submission, but have you ever heard one on Jesus' radical respect for women, or the bombshell St. Paul dropped when he told Roman husbands that their wives had authority over their husbands' bodies? Yet, within the social and historical context of the New Testament documents, such passages stand out starkly.

Like the legal relationships between parents and children, owners and slaves, and subjects to Roman authority, first-century marriage was a natural arrangement within society, not a model or ideal. But traditionalists suppose that the necessities of life under Roman law establish some ideal standard for Christian marriages. They are looking in the wrong place!

Back to the Garden

God's design for marriage must be found at His establishment of marriage in Eden, not at the Fall or in the particular, fallen social contexts of Jewish patriarchy or the Roman Empire. The hermeneutical principle of first reference holds that the a Biblical truth is defined in the context where it is first introduced and that this establishes its meaning for all other references. Thus, God's ideal for marriage is found in Paradise.

That Eden must be our model is clear not only from the principle of first reference, but also from our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. When questioned about marriage in Matthew 19:3-12, Jesus said, "Have ye not read that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female. . . " and " . . . in the beginning, it was not so," quoting Genesis 1:27 and 2:25. These two verses in Genesis start and finish the account of God's creation of man and woman and His bringing them together in the first marriage. There, God created male and female in His image to be one and blessed them together, giving them joint dominion over His creation.

Jesus pointed His questioners back to God's original model for marriage when He instituted it in Eden. He explained that the Mosaic laws allowing divorce were concessions given only because of the hardness of fallen men's hearts toward their

wives. Thus, the New Testament and our Lord Himself teach us that God's plan for marriage is the love, unity and equality of Adam and Eve before the Fall. On the other hand, the first reference to gender hierarchy does not occur until after the Fall. This shows that it is a result of sin. The rule of husband over wife is part of the fallen condition of humanity from which Christ came to redeem us.

Our Lord never encouraged the ambitions of His disciples to rule over others, but taught and modeled a self-sacrificing servant love that inverted power-based relationships. This was the model for Paul's directive for husbands to love their wives as their own bodies and to lay down their lives for them as Christ did for His bride, the church. Nowhere has Christ tried to hold His bride back, but calls us to follow in His footsteps as His ambassadors, teaching His Word and doing His works, empowered by His mighty Spirit. He even said we would do greater works than His own! Following Christ's example puts an end to male dominance, freeing women to be all that Jesus has created and redeemed them to be. Just as Jesus sacrificed His life to lift us from sin, so Paul bids Christian husbands to lay down their advantages for the benefit and progress of their wives.

Submission in modern marriage is not about law, but love. No longer subject to a legal system of marital inequality, we are free to relate to one another in mutual submission, respect and consideration. This happens as we are led by the Holy Spirit, out of love for Christ and one another. As husband and wife practice mutual submission "in honor preferring one another," we will grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible teaches that Christians are not under obligation to keep the Law, but are free in Christ to follow the Spirit. Nevertheless, we are to defer personal liberty for the sake of love by honoring and serving all those in authority according to the culture of the day.

This means that if you, a man, have a woman supervisor at work, you should respect her and follow her direction, just as you would a male supervisor. Your sexuality is not at issue here; your attitude is. She earned her position by working hard for the company; if you don't agree with their having promoted her, you should find another job rather than be begrudging in your service. That would be a poor reflection upon Christ.