

## IN RESPONSE - BIBLICAL SUBMISSION, PART II

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The movement in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America to advance the cause of women by moving the church away from the traditional understanding of the roles of men and women within the church would have us believe that Paul's exhortation to wives to be submissive to their husbands was born of cultural conditioning. Because the culture in Paul's day placed women under the authority of men, when Paul wrote, he was simply under the influence of his times. But is this true?

In answer, if I could display that there were very clear biblical and theological reasons for Paul's exhortation to submission; would this set aside the argument for cultural conditioning? When I posed this same question to a group of astute college students, they answered, "Yes!" Well, let's launch into this second argument against so called evangelical feminism.

We go to Genesis 3:16. Here we find the Word of God given to the woman in the hearing of the man. God is telling the woman the consequences of her sin. "To the woman He said, 'I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you shall bring forth children; yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.'" I am particularly interested in the words, "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." What do they mean?

Some would have us believe that a wife placing herself in submission to her husband is the natural consequence of the fall. On the other hand, that a husband is given rule over his wife is also the result of sin. But this is decidedly not the case. For one thing, if this were the meaning, the words of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 5:22, "Wives, be subject to your own husbands," would be reinforcing the results of sin. But as we shall see, just the opposite is true. These words of Paul are a corrective to the abuses of sin.

Compare Genesis 4:7, "If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." Here we find God warning Cain. Sin is out to dominate Cain's life. God puts it this

way, "Its desire is for you." These words are parallel to what God said to the woman, "Your desire shall be for your husband." Now what was the desire of sin with regard to Cain? The desire of sin was and is to dominate and control. By the same token, God tells the woman that the fruit of the fall in her life will be to desire to dominate her husband. She will use all sorts of tricks in an effort to control and manipulate him.

Again, in Genesis 4:7, God says that Cain should take a stand against sin. "But you must master [rule] it." These are the same words used by God in Genesis 3:16, "And he shall rule over you." As Cain was to master or rule over sin as it desired to dominate him, so a husband would fight back and rule over his wife as she attempted to dominate him. And so we have this startling result of sin within the first family. Instead of working together as a husband and his helper, the wife seeks to gain control. She wants to 'wear the pants in the family.' On his part, the husband puts the thumb screws on his wife and becomes a dictator. There is a struggle for power and a conflict over leadership.

Here we are given shades of modern day marital conflict. And we are given a preview of the modern feminist movement which is not content with equality but seeks dominance!

It is into this sin ridden situation that the apostle Paul speaks in Ephesians 5. This is the broad biblical context. What Paul has to say is not conditioned by his culture. What Paul has to say is brought as a corrective to extremely sinful behavior in that fallen culture. It is a corrective to the results of sin in the fall. First of all Paul says to married women, "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:22). He explains this by saying, "But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything" (Ephesians 5:24).

This concept of submission is absolutely repugnant to many women. They simply cannot find it within themselves to follow the Word of God in this regard. Why is this the case? The answer is simple. God said in the garden long ago that one of the results of

the fall within the family would be the rebellious attitude of wives regarding the concept of submission. Because of the presence of sin, wives would rather buck and challenge the headship of husbands. Their desire is for their husbands. That is, their desire is to dominate and manipulate their husbands. God said this would be the result of sin and surely God is correct. We see our own society riddled with anti-submission thinking. The apostle Paul speaks very simply and directly to this sin problem, "Wives, be subject to your own husbands."

This concept of submission is so important that Peter repeats it in a slightly different context. "In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if they are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior" (1 Peter 3:1-2). Peter is saying that the rule of submission applies in the case where a wife has been converted after the marriage has taken place. And the objective of submission is to display the life of Christ to the unbelieving husband. The hope is that God will bring the husband to saving faith in Christ as he observes his wife's Christ like behavior. This means that wives who have unbelieving husbands are not exempt from the requirement of submission.<sup>1</sup>

A word of caution is in order. We should all recognize that a husband has no right to compel his wife to act contrary to the Word of God. No husband has the right to compel his wife to enter prostitution to enhance the family income. By the same token, should a believing wife forsake the fellowship of the church simply because an unbelieving husband may push in this direction? My answer is no! The Word of God requires believers to be faithful to the means of grace. Hebrews 10:25 is

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<sup>1</sup> Please also remember that the submission we are discussing has the Trinity as its background. Women are not innately inferior to men. To the contrary, the submission we have in view is based upon an innate equality of being. See Part I of this series.

clear. Of course wisdom must be used in these matters.

But there is an obvious connection here with the sin of the husband. What is this sin? It is the desire for dictatorial power over a wife. "And he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). Hence the exhortation of Paul, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). Christ is not a cowboy driving his sheep like a bunch of cattle. Christ is a shepherd leading His sheep. In like manner husbands are not to drive their households like a herd of cattle but to lead them with love. Paul here corrects the abuse of sinful conduct. Husbands must also be prepared to literally give all for their wives. They are to love their wives as Christ loves the church. That means love to the death. This is the greatest challenge to husbands in the Bible.

What is the result of this combination of Christ like love and godly submission? It is a renewal of the harmony within the family which God originally created and which was disrupted by the fall. Here then is evidence that the concept of submission is not something imported into the Bible from the culture of Paul's time.

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