

IN RESPONSE - BIBLICAL SUBMISSION, PART III

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Once again, the movement within 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. We have answered this position in part by showing that Paul's exhortations to wives and to husbands was born of the desire to correct abuses resulting from sin and the fall. Now we take an additional step and see that the submission of wives and the love of husbands are the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of husbands and wives. This being the case, both love and submission are trans-cultural. And the exhortations of Paul requiring the submission of wives and the love of husbands are also trans-cultural.

We begin by looking at the context in Ephesians within which the two exhortations in question are found.

Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her (Ephesians 5:15-25).

Beginning with verse 15, Paul gives several practical injunctions. In verse 18 he exhorts believers to "be filled with the

Spirit." And in the following verses Paul unfolds a picture of the fullness of the Spirit. That is, he describes the Spirit filled life. Be filled with the Spirit, says Paul, (1) speaking to one another..., (2) singing and making melody..., (3) always giving thanks..., and (4) being subject to one another in the fear of Christ. You should note that the literal translation of verse 21 makes it a part of this description set forth by Paul, "and *being subject* to one another in the fear of Christ" (NASV margin, emphasis added).

This means that proper submission is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Within the church this means that elders are to submit to one another. When a Session or Presbytery declares itself on a matter, each elder within the body is bound to submit to the decision of the body. That elder may disagree with the decision of the body, but he does not have the privilege to speak out in a public fashion against the decision of the body and thereby cause division within the church. This elder may record his dissent, appeal to the Session or Presbytery to reconsider its action, etc. But in the mean time, submission to the decision of the body is required by Scripture. Such submission is a manifestation of the rule of the Holy Spirit in the life of the elder.

Now Paul goes on to outline the very practical outworking of this submission born of the Spirit. And Paul zeros in on three basic institutions in dealing with Spirit manifesting submission. He speaks of marriage, the family, and the work place. First Paul deals with the relationships of husbands and wives. "Wives be subject to your own husbands in the Lord" (Ephesians 5:21). As we have noted, this submission has to do with job description. It has absolutely nothing to do with some so called innate inferiority of wives. In fact, this submission is based upon an essential equality of husbands and wives. For this reason, wives can *place themselves under* the leadership of their husbands.¹

That we are talking about a submission that involves the divine economy is confirmed in the text. "For the husband

is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church" (Ephesians 5:23). In God's economy, He has placed the husband at the head of the household. This is the husband's task before God. But it is not the prerogative of the husband to constrain submission. This is sinful behavior on the part of husbands. We note then that the exhortation to submission is given to wives. Only they are *enabled* by the Holy Spirit to carry out this command.

And so when wives are submissive to their husbands, they manifest the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This is in harmony with the fact that submissive wives are in the position of counteracting the results of sin and the fall. The natural inclination of most women outside of Christ is to resist the headship of their husbands. As we have seen, such a tendency is sinful. Submission stands opposed to this sinful inclination.²

We turn now to the exhortation given to husbands. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). This admonition also comes under the heading of submission to one another in the Lord. And as such it too is part of the picture of true spiritual submission. But to what are husbands called to submit in this text? Husbands are called to be actively submissive to the institution of marriage. The apostle Peter says, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution" (1 Peter 2:13). These are institutions ordained by God for the good of humanity. They include government, marriage, and the work place. Peter discusses each of these under the heading of submission in 1 Peter 2:13-3:7. For our purposes, it is important to see that marriage is an institution ordained by God to which husbands are required to be submissive. And when husbands are submissive to their responsibilities within marriage, they will listen to Paul's words, "Husbands, love your wives." This love is required every bit as much as the submission of wives is required.

¹ See 'In Response,' Volume 1, Number 9.

² See 'In Response,' Volume 1, Number 10.

In addition, when husbands subject themselves to the marriage institution as they should and love their wives, they actively counteract the results of sin and the fall. The tendency of most husbands outside of Christ is to either lean toward a tyrannical rule of their wives or to lean in the other direction and refuse to assume the God given responsibility of leadership. Either position is sinful! But a proper submission to the institution of marriage brings with it loving leadership. The results of the fall are in this way overturned. But if husbands are going to be the loving heads of their wives required by God, they too must be filled with the Spirit. And we see in Ephesians 5:25 that the love of husbands for their wives in submission to the institution of marriage is a manifestation of the inner working of the Spirit.

Paul goes on in this same context to speak of the submission of children within the family and the love of fathers toward their children (Ephesians 6:1-4). And Paul discusses the work place under this same heading. He exhorts slaves [employees in our society] to be submissive and masters [employers] to emulate Christ (Ephesians 6:5-9). In each of these cases we are looking at God's economy. And we see that love and submission are the outworking of the Holy Spirit within the individual's life.

This means that Paul's appeal to wives to be submissive is simply not a by-product of his culture. Rather, the wife who follows the exhortation to be submissive displays a life filled with the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit filled life is, to be sure, trans-cultural!

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