

Submission & Rebellion

In the past 50 years we have been told that everything the church taught for nearly 2000 years about husband-wife relationships has been wrong. People who claim to be experts in the field now tell us that, yes, the husband must love his wife and not be cruel and harsh to her; but no, the wife does not have to submit to her husband.

Indeed (we are told), this whole idea about submitting was just a cultural matter. The only reason the apostles Peter and Paul gave the command was so that the women would fit better with the other women in society. (The apostles forgot to tell us that this was the reason, but we should overlook this small detail.) Submission was a culturally acceptable practice, and the apostles did not want to encourage the women to do something that would go against that acceptable practice. Today, however, things have changed (so we are told) and women no longer have to obey that archaic practice. After all, submission wasn't God's eternally binding command, as much as it was an instruction to help women fit into society better.

Well, let's see how this works. In the New Testament, there are commands for the husband and commands for the wife. The husband is instructed to not be cruel and harsh, but to love his wife - following Christ's example of how he loves the church. On the other hand, the wife is told to not be rebellious and mouthy (suggested by 1 Peter), but to be submissive and respectful to her husband - in the same way that the church is to respond to Christ.

Apparently, it would seem, when husbands started following Jesus, they were rather stupid and set in their ways, and kept on acting like the typical unsaved husband of that day, cruel and harsh. So the apostles had to instruct them to love their wives. In contrast, we would be led to think that the wives were smart and progressive, and were liberating themselves from their old ways of submission. However (again we are led to believe) this newly found freedom would not be accepted in their society; so the apostles had to warn the wives to go back to their old ways of submitting to their husbands. They would have to wait 1900 more years before society would change enough that they would be able to stop submitting to their husbands and be free.

But now that magical moment has arrived! The husband still has to follow the example of Christ and the church; but the wife doesn't - in fact, she *shouldn't!*

Now let's look at what *really* happened. In our example, we will feature a husband-wife situation in Corinth, one in which both have become followers of Jesus.

It's really no secret. This may seem amazing to people today, but sinful human nature has not changed. Before they started following Jesus, the men tended to act like unsaved men and the women tended to act like unsaved women. Those who were raised in a totally ungodly society (such as Corinth) had very little understanding of how a follower of Jesus should live. The apostles had to teach them.

So what were they like before they were saved? The men tended to be cruel and harsh, and the women tended to be rebellious and mouthy. When they became saved, they did not know how to be different, until the apostles explained to them what it meant to follow Jesus. After all, there was nothing in their background to tell them what a Christian was to be like. They weren't like the Jews, who had the Old Testament to instruct them (even though most of the Jews were unsaved and tended to ignore what it said). This is why the apostles had to tell the husbands to love their wives and the wives to submit to their husbands. (Many of the Jews would also need this reminder.)

Today, many churchgoing people who want to encourage rebellion among wives portray "submission" as a situation in which the husband can do anything he wants and make any kind of unreasonable demand of his wife, while the wife has to meekly surrender to his every whim. They treat the concept of submission as though it were a tool, like a baseball bat, that the husband can use to beat his wife over the head. They characterize the wife as "slaving away" at chores, and being permitted to do only mundane activities, and the husband as doing whatever he pleases, having fun and doing all the interesting things. They tell us that this is what happens when a wife submits to her husband. He has a glorious and exciting life; she remains locked in the kitchen, "barefoot and pregnant" (a phrase they often make use of).

Have you ever noticed that, when these people give such examples, the actions they attribute to the husband are actions that the Scriptures say are the conduct of an *unsaved* person - a man who *doesn't* love and cherish his wife? They don't tell you this part, but act as though this conduct is the natural "fruit" of a wife submitting to her husband. This is downright dishonest! Yet to describe the situation differently would expose the evil of what these people are promoting. A more accurate (and honest) description of what the Bible promotes would be "a husband loving and cherishing his wife, and the wife submitting to his love and caring leadership." But that would not reinforce the rebellion these people are trying to justify. (It also goes against what most people practice - partly to the credit of these false teachers, who have distorted the teachings of Scripture.)

God's ways are always right; but we live in an age of rebellion and disregard for Scripture. Men do not want to love and cherish their wives; wives do not want to respect and submit to their husbands. It's as simple as that. This type of conduct is described by Scripture as the conduct of *unsaved* people.

If either husband or wife chooses to disregard God's commands, there will be less harmony in the family. The remedy for the husband being cruel and harsh is *not* for the wife to become rebellious and mouthy. Nor is the remedy for the wife being rebellious and mouthy for the husband to become cruel and harsh. God requires *both* of them to repent - which means changing not only their ways, but their attitudes toward each other.

Scripture talks a lot about the fruit (or consequences) of one's conduct. It so happens that in this matter (as always) Scripture proves true. Those who as a family obey God tend to have a family characterized by harmony and cooperation and love. Those who as a family are unwilling to obey God tend to have a family characterized by disharmony and confusion, anger and violence, abuse and rebellion, with each member trying to do as he pleases. Should we be surprised that such families tend to be characterized by so much divorce and immorality?

So how should we respond to those who encourage women to rebel against their husbands? To be fair, we would have to include in this question those who encourage men to be cruel and harsh to their wives. Like any evil teaching, we must oppose it - maintaining a balance, by opposing the sins of *both* husbands and wives. And we must promote what Scripture teaches - also maintaining a balance, by teaching the commands God gives to *both* husbands and wives.

We live in an evil day, no different from what it was like in evil Corinth. The instructions God gave to the Corinthians are just as applicable to us as it was to them. The types of activities people do in today's society may be different from what they did in Corinthian society; but the sinful nature remains unchanged. The *solution* for our sinful condition is also unchanged.

QUESTIONS

*** *What if the husband is a Christian and continues to mistreat his wife?***

Listen to Scripture, not the husband. A new Christian might not have yet learned how to live as a follower of Jesus; but once he learns, he will repent and choose to obey God's commands. If he is unwilling to repent, he is not a Christian - and the same is true for the wife who claims to be a Christian, but who is unwilling to repent.

*** *Nobody is perfect; so how can you describe a Christian family in this way?***

It is true that nobody is perfect (until after the resurrection). But those who are followers of Jesus will strive toward perfection; and they will have a repentant attitude when they fail to do these things. To whatever degree husbands and wives both do these things, there will be harmony and peace.

*** *What if the husband is unsaved?***

When asking this question, don't forget the other issue: What if the wife is unsaved? Other Scriptures deal more with these issues; and the instructions found there do not contradict those given for this issue. Also, there is an overriding command that is applicable to all: We must obey God rather than people, if there is a conflict between the commands of people and those of God.

*** *What if the wife is smarter than her husband?***

Based on averages, this probably won't be true in *half* of the husband-wife situations. But even when it is this way, intellectual capability (or lack thereof) is not the basis for God's command. (God gives each person gifts, and God requires people to use those gifts to work *together*, not *against* each other.) The New Testament gives us *two* reasons for these commands concerning husbands and wives; and *neither* reason has to do with intellectual capabilities. One reason is because God has designed marriage to be a reflection of the relationship that is to exist between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22-33). The other reason goes all the way back to the nature of creation and how sin came into the world (Genesis 1-3). People may not like it, but both of these reasons are found in the text of Scripture.

*** *But doesn't the passage in Ephesians start with the command to submit to "one another" (Ephesians 5:21)?***

The apostle is talking to a *group* of people, not to two individuals by themselves. The rest of the chapter (and part of the next) defines what he means by the "one another" - that *some* within the group are to submit to *others* within the group. In each case, he also gives instructions to those who are to be submitted *to* (i.e., those who are to lead) - and for a harmonious relationship, those instructions are just as binding and just as necessary as are the "submission" commands. (Another example of "one another" being applied to a group is found in Revelation 6:4, where we read that people will kill "one another." It means *some* within the group will kill *others* within the group, not that two people will take turns killing each other!)

*** *If these things are true, why don't I see anyone in the church practicing them? They live no different than anyone else!***

Listen to Scripture, not the "church-goers." Jesus warned us that false teachers would arise, and that people who *claimed* to be Christians would depart from the faith (Matthew 24:4-5, 10-13, 24-25). The apostle Paul warned us that people would depart from the faith in the "last days" (2 Timothy 3:1-5) - and apparently, based on what we see in churches, we live in those days. People who obey Scripture in this matter may be few and far between, but they *do* exist. And as stated in a previous answer: A new Christian might not have yet learned how to live as a follower of Jesus; but once he learns, he will repent and choose to obey God's commands. If he is unwilling to repent, he is not a Christian - and the same is true for the wife who claims to be a Christian, but who is unwilling to repent.

LIST OF VERSES

The following list includes only those passages that emphasize husband-wife relationships. There are many additional passages that focus on the other types of relationships that a person may be in.

In most (if not all) of the passages that deal with authority structures, Scripture instructs those *under* authority before instructing those who *are* the authorities. In some instances, such as when addressing the issue of civil authority, the instructions may focus only on the response of those who are *under* authority.

Ephesians 5:22-33

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church-- for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." [Quote of Genesis 2:24.] This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Colossians 3:18-19

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

Titus 2:3-5

Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.

1 Peter 3:1-7

Wives, in the same way be submissive to your husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. They were submissive to their own husbands, like Sarah, who obeyed Abraham and called him her master. You are her daughters if you do what is right and do not give way to fear.

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.