

The Dark Side of Wives Submitting to Husbands

During a past ministry trip to Hungary, I heard a painfully familiar story. Through a translator, a tearful young woman living near Budapest explained that her Christian husband was angrily demanding her absolute submission. This included, among other things, that she clean their house according to his strict standards and that she engage in sexual acts with him that made her feel uncomfortable and dirty.

This lady was not demanding her rights or trying to be disrespectful. She was a godly, humble woman who obviously wanted to please the Lord. But she had been beaten to a pulp emotionally, and she was receiving little help from her pastor—who was either unwilling or unprepared to confront wife abuse.

I've heard so many sickening versions of this scenario. In Kenya, several women told me their AIDS-infected husbands often raped them—and then their pastors told them they must submit to this treatment. In some parts of India, even some pastors believe it is acceptable to beat their wives if they argue with them or show any form of disrespect. And in some conservative churches in the United States, women are told that obedience to God is measured by their wifely submission—even if their husbands are addicted to alcohol or pornography or if they are involved in adulterous affairs.

This distortion of biblical teaching has plunged countless Christian women into depression and emotional trauma. I'm not sure which is worse: the harsh words they hear from their husbands or the perverse way the Bible is wielded as a leather belt to justify domestic abuse. Here are three truths we must uncover in order to solve this problem:

1. Marriage is not a hierarchy. Traditionalists assume that a Christian marriage is defined as a dominant husband who makes all family decisions while the wife graciously obeys without input. Yet Scripture actually portrays marriage as a loving partnership and refers to the wife as a “fellow heir of the grace of life” (1 Peter 3:7, NASB). And the apostle Paul taught that in the realm of sexuality, husbands and wives share equal authority over each other’s bodies (1 Cor. 7:4). In other words, submission in this most intimate part of a marriage covenant is mutual, and this same mutuality is the key to any happy marriage; it fosters respect, communication and an enduring bond.

2. Headship is not a license to control. Traditionalists also cite Ephesians 5:23 to remind wives that their husbands are their “heads”—and they believe this term requires some type of dictatorial control in marriage. Yet the Greek word used in this passage, *kephale*, does not have anything to do with heavy-handed authority, and it cannot be used to enforce male domination. Neither does it imply male superiority. The word can either mean “source” (as in the source of a river) or “one who leads into battle” (as a protector).

Neither original definition of this word gives room for abuse. Headship, in its essence, is not about who’s the boss. Rather, it refers to the Genesis account of Eve being taken from Adam’s side. The husband is the “source” of the wife because she originated from him, and she is intimately connected to him in a mystical union that is unlike any other human relationship.

3. Men who abuse their wives are out of fellowship with God. First Peter 3:7 is clear: “You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so your prayers will not be hindered.” Wife abuse is no trivial sin. Any man who berates his wife, treats her as inferior or engages in abusive

behavior (including hitting, kicking, raping, cursing at or threatening punishment) will jeopardize his fellowship with the Lord. He will feel frustrated and convicted until he repents.

(And in the same way, I believe pastors who silently support abusive husbands by refusing to confront the behavior—or by telling women to submit to the pain—participate in this sin and could find their own prayers hindered.)

Truly Christian marriages, according to the apostle Paul, involve a tender, servant-hearted and unselfish husband who (1) loves his wife “just as Christ also loved the church”; (2) loves her as his own body; and (3) loves her as himself (see Eph. 5:25, 28 and 33). He stands alongside his wife in faithfulness, and she joyfully respects her husband because he can be trusted. And the two become one.

If we are to uphold this golden standard, we must confront abuse, shelter its victims and provide the tough love and counseling necessary to heal troubled relationships. And we have no business telling women to stay in marriages that actually could put them or their children in danger.

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