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Radical Subordination: Wives Submit to Your Husbands!

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“Wives submit to your husbands.”

Growing up, this seemed to be one of the least understood statements in the bible, right after women being admonished to be silent in church and to wear head-coverings when praying, of course. Bringing up these verses in my relatively modern, evangelical mega-church always produced vague responses and confused expressions. Usually, with a little bit of embarrassment, there was some basic acceptance that men just have to be in charge, maybe because men’s maleness somehow represents God better (that’s why the priests were always male right?), or because, in spite of all anthropological research showing the contrary, men just really are better at being in charge and women really do kind of just want to have and nurture babies (but not really of course... I mean women CEO’s are ok), or maybe it is just an arbitrary command and we follow it because God tells us to... That statement is usually made with a bit more confidence, and garners more respect from me, but I think that all these explanations represent a fundamental misunderstanding of what Paul is saying in these verses.

It is often thought that Paul is simply reinforcing the power structures and gender roles that have existed since the rise of stratification and empires, that he is telling rebellious women to remain in their place. Really what Paul is doing though, is encouraging a radical subordination that reflects Christ nature and helps them be a better witness to that nature, in their society.

In general, we don't seem to get that. It seems people think about this issue in one of these ways: A) people still view it as God's dictation on who should be in charge (how power is distributed in God's kingdom, which is ultimately oppressive to women), B) people don't know how to view it, so they uncomfortably water it down basically saying that they think women are equal in value but men should still have most of the power (or maybe they just don't really know what they mean), or C) they believe men and women should be fully equal, but that Christian women are not yet free or equal in our society so they should fight for that and try to attain it (men should help too, but can't be counted on because they benefit from the status quo). All of these views completely ignore the ethic of submission and subordination which is proclaimed in the life of Christ and Paul's writings.

Even when it stares us in the face, as in Ephesians 5 when immediately before the statement that wives should submit to their husbands Christians are called to submit to one another, and husbands are called to practice agape love towards their wives. In Colossians 3 (and this is expanded on in Ephesians as well) children are called to obey their parents, but then parents are reminded to not provoke their children. Slaves are called to obey their masters right before the masters are called to treat the slaves as brothers and sisters in Christ. Throughout scripture we are reminded that Christ humbled himself, taking on the nature of a servant, and we are to do the same.

The cross isn't simply a weapon for sacrificial killing, it represents the ultimate acquiescence to the powers of oppression and death that rule this world in order to rob them of their power. Only

instead of opposition (males tend to say “I disagree” much more readily, for example). Females may need to be asked questions, or prompted to speak in many situations. I prefer the feminine style of speech, not because I naturally use it (I do to some degree, but have also easily used masculine language), but because it gives deference to the other speaker. It doesn’t undermine the other speaker’s voice or ideas that way masculine language does. It considers others before itself. Christian men, in order to practice a dying of self, an agape-love towards females, would do well to use the feminine style more often, and to actively invite and consider females’ ideas both in private and public gatherings, especially in arenas that remain male-dominated even as they proclaim equality, such as in the emergent church conversation. We should not consider it good for women to assert their authority or voice, instead we should consider it good for us to submit to one another in Christ. Men, laying down themselves for women, and women practicing a radical submission, as Christ models for both of us.

someone with complete freedom and authority (someone within the Godhead, which is specifically Christ of course, but also us, as we partake in his divine nature), can submit to mocking and the cross without any sense of being coerced or ruled by these powers. Because the cross itself was influential in coercing people to be ruled by the empire, the fact that someone was able submit to death on the cross and rise again three days later, proving his defeat of it, we as Christians (alive in Christ, taking on his nature, and being imitators of him, with his resurrection as the first-fruits and promise of ours) are able to live knowing we are completely free of the power struggles and tools of oppression in this world.

This freedom is the context for Paul’s discussion on men and women’s roles in the church. Often, Christians look to the epistles for easy answers on how to live morally. Like the rich man, who hopes he’s secured eternal life by following the ten commandments, we miss the whole purpose of the Paul’s guidance about men and women when we enforce rules without an understanding of the purpose and underlying ethic that supports his teaching. This is the problem I’ve seen most in discussions on gender in the church. I’ve rarely heard pastors or teachers address the verses within the context of the entire passage it is situated in, let alone look at its role and purpose within a distinctly Christ-like worldview.

What is more frustrating to me though, is the way I’ve seen Christians who disagree with the traditional view ignore Paul’s teaching in this area and essentially use the critiques and perspectives of secular feminists, orientated in a worldview in which economic and coercive power define who is equal and free or not. I think that perspective is useful and important for Christians to understand, but we can not use it to develop morality or to combat inequality within the church. We are called to be imitators of Christ, and Christ turned the powers of this world on it’s head, making the first, last and choosing to forsake his power in order to lay down his life. He subordinated himself to the powers, allowing them to

kill him on the cross, but doing this also gave him the opportunity to show the superficiality of these kinds of power, their ultimate inability to direct history.

From this perspective, Paul's teaching makes perfect sense. It is orientated in the kind of freedom that makes battling the gendered powers on their terms ridiculous. Just as slaves are encouraged to submit to their masters, fully free women are encouraged to be silent in church, or to submit to their husbands, for the sake of their witness to the gospel in that culture. Men, on the other hand, are encouraged to lay down their lives for their wives, loving them as Christ loved us (who remember, made himself nothing, taking on the nature of a servant). This is something unheard of in that culture, and also reflects the same ethic of radical subordinancy the women are called to live in.

So what do we do with this? I'm not really asking this question rhetorically, because I've had a hard time answering it. In fact, as a female, this part of this essay is hard to write. I'm not particularly good at laying down my rights and life for those around me, and I'd guess that if I ever marry I will naturally be the more outspoken and domineering one in the relationship. As such, I'm tempted to continue to proclaim the radical beauty of submission and ignore the need for change in the church in regards to the way we view women and their roles. I'm even tempted to say women should accept submission with joy, as a unique way of being Christ-like, but again that doesn't address hundreds of years of church-sponsored oppression (and besides, as I've said above, I barely submit, let alone know what it might mean to do so joyfully!). Ultimately, I find it a bit ironic that I, after affirming my own position of submission, would then be telling men how to behave, but here I go anyway...

I think the practical application of Paul's teaching is ultimately an equalizer, but in the opposite direction that feminists often propose. Instead of women gaining power, men are called to ultimately give up their power. Instead of women being brought up to the

status as also "in charge," men are called to voluntarily consider women as themselves, and thus give up their life and position for the sake of women. This doesn't directly challenge the status quo. That is, men are not told that they don't have authority, but it subverts it because men no longer have the means of coercion that would "put women in their place." Basically Christian males should be the feminists in the most explicit way, not so much Christian females.

I think both complementarianism and egalitarianism get at this, but fall short in different ways. Complementarians make the mistake of believing that somehow men and women are so fundamentally different that female submission and male dominance are somehow "natural." Egalitarians make the mistake of ignoring the ethic of submission in an attempt to make co-masters.

I will finish this up by giving one very small, practical example of how Christian males could begin to truly love their wives and sisters in a radical way, a way that literally reflects a "dying to self" for the sake of women. It would be interesting, if, as a small step forward, men began to be more careful of the way they speak to women and in the presence of women. Many sociological studies have shown that men tend to use more domineering language. They tend to interrupt more, to neglect to qualify statements (instead stating their opinions as facts) and to generally talk more than women (obviously all men do not do this, and some women do... I'd probably fall in the later category for example). This may not seem actively violent or coercive, but it arises from a history of violence and oppression against women and is thus a way our society tries to rob women of their dignity while maintaining male power at the expense of female freedom. I call this a true "dying to self," because it is the way males often learn to speak, a manner of speaking that our society values, and probably seems very natural and integral to their identity.

On the other hand, females are taught deference. They learn to qualify their statements, not to interrupt, and to seek agreement