

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN MARRIAGE COLOSSIANS 3:18

### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Wendy went off to Christian college after high school. There she was exposed to ideas and issues and philosophies that she had not seriously considered before. Toward the end of her college career she began to develop a relationship with a young man from her home church, of which I was the associate pastor.

As Wendy and Steve got more serious about their relationship, they began to talk about marriage. When Wendy heard her professors talk about their views of Christian marriage, she tuned in. She heard some of them promote the idea that men and women are equal before God and that they should therefore have equal roles and responsibilities in marriage. That struck a responsive chord in Wendy.

Steve had attended a secular college and didn't have benefit of a formal Christian education. Wendy also had a strong personality. So Steve accepted the idea that there should not be one leader in their marriage, but that they should have equal roles. Just because he was going to be the husband, it didn't mean that he had the right to be the leader in the home.

After they got married, they began to get dissatisfied with our church. Wendy, especially, became unhappy as she realized that both the pastor and the associate pastor had a more traditional view of the roles of men and women in marriage. Eventually they moved to another church that had teaching more compatible with their views.

It isn't just in the secular world and in the realm of the feminist movement where the idea of equal roles in marriage is promoted. It is also promoted in many Christian institutions of higher education and in many denominations and in many local churches. There is an organization of evangelicals called Christians for Biblical Equality which promotes this viewpoint.

If we are going to be Christians who take God seriously, however, we have to follow His inspired word that He has left to us, no matter what the secular world or even other Christians are saying. The passage before us this morning addresses this issue of the proper roles of men and women in marriage. We are going to examine it carefully as we focus on the woman's role. Next week we will focus on the man's role in marriage.

We have been working our way through the New Testament book of Colossians. We have seen that the Apostle Paul was writing to a small church in the western part of Asia Minor for the purpose of warning the Christians there about false teaching to which they were being exposed. Thus in the first two chapters Paul summarizes the basics of

Christian doctrine, giving a special emphasis to the sovereignty of Christ. In Chapter 3 he talks about the implications of this theology for daily living. He describes negative behaviors that Christians should avoid and positive behaviors that they should practice. Christians are exhorted to put off the old self and put on the new self

In the rest of #3 and the in the first part of #4 the apostle describes what putting on the new self and Christian living mean for the three most important social relationships of life: marriage, parenting, and work. In each of these three pairs of relationships we are going to find that there is a leader and a responder. Each of the members of the pairs has a responsibility. Today we are going to look at the female responsibility in marriage.

I.A.

(I. THE COMMAND) First, we are going to consider THE COMMAND in v. 18 of Colossians #3. Paul writes, “**Wives, submit [or be subject] to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.**” Let’s look at THE TERM “BE SUBJECT” itself. (I.THE COMMAND A. “Be Subject”)

The Greek word which the author used was originally a military term that meant “to rank under.” In the New Testament the word was used of the relationships children are to have with parents, slaves with masters, Christians with secular authorities, Christians with church leaders, Christians with God and, as we have here, wives with husbands. The term itself, then, seems to mean “to submit to another’s authority.” Here it is stated as the responsibility that a wife has toward her husband.

In much of the ancient world the cultural understanding was that wives ought to be subject to their husbands. That was true of the Greeks and of the Jews. The new thing in Christian teaching on the subject for them was the responsibility of husbands to wives.

The situation was different in the Roman Empire in the time of Paul for Roman citizens. In Roman law the primary responsibility of women, even after marriage was to their fathers. After one year of uninterrupted living with a husband, a wife then came under the legal authority of her husband. If she did not want to do this, she could spend three nights away from her husband in a year--- maybe go back home with mom and dad for a few days--- and still remain under the legal authority of her father. Then also if this Roman citizen wife bore three children to her husband, she became legally independent of both her father and her husband.

Bible professor Jack Gibson (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, #670, p. 174) summarizes the situation: “**...the average Roman wife did not submit to her husband. Instead, she continued to submit to her father..., or if she had borne sufficient children and had been emancipated, she submitted to no one.**”

B.

(I. A. B. WHAT IT IS NOT) In order to understand the Biblical doctrine of submission of wives to their husbands it may be helpful to consider WHAT IT IS NOT. **First**, the Bible

does not say that women generally should be subject to men. (I. B. 1. WOMEN GENERALLY SHOULD...) It does not say, for example, that women should not be supervisors in a work environment. It does not say that women should never be teachers. Our passage is talking only about the marriage relationship.

(B. WHAT BIBLICAL SUBJECTION... 1. 2. WOMEN ARE SPIRITUALLY...) **Second**, it is crucial to realize that the New Testament concept of wifely submission does not mean that women are spiritually inferior to men. In Galatians 3:28 (GALATIANS 3:28) Paul says, **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”** The apostle is clearly saying that Christian men and women have an equal standing before God.

The difficulty is that even some Christians regard the idea of submission of wives to husbands as being inherently incompatible with the notion of spiritual equality. For example, Scanzoni and Hardesty wrote a number of years ago in their book *All We're Meant to Be*, **“Many Christians thus speak of a wife’s being equal to her husband in personhood, but subordinate in function. However, this is just playing word games and is a contradiction in terms. Equality and subordination are contradictions.”**

It might seem initially like they have a point. But consider that argument more closely. What was the mission which the Son of God came to earth to accomplish? According to Hebrews #10 (HEBREWS 10 5,7), **“Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God...’”** That sounds like subjection to the authority of another, doesn't it? Yet if we conclude that this means that the Son of God is spiritually inferior to God the Father, we deny the doctrine of the Trinity, right?

Or what about Luke 2:51? (LUKE 2:51) There the Bible says that Christ as a child **“continued to be subject--- same Greek word--- to them [His parents].”** Certainly God who came in the flesh was not inferior to His two human parents. He was superior in His nature and being to Mary and Joseph. Yet He was subject to them. So clearly equality and submission are not inherently exclusive from a Biblical perspective.

(B. WHAT BIBLICAL... 3. WOMEN...) **Thirdly**, besides the fact that submission does not mean spiritual inferiority, it also does not imply that women are intellectually inferior to men. Men and women are both created in the image of God. Wives are often smarter and more talented than their husbands. My wife has areas in which she is more gifted and capable than I am. Yet the command to submit stands.

(WHAT BIBLICAL... 4. WIVES...) **Fourthly**, submission does not mean that wives are to be passive. God created Eve to be a helper corresponding to, or suitable for, Adam. The implication is that women were created as complements to men. In the marriage relationship they will have strengths where men have weaknesses and vice versa. In Proverbs #31 and Titus #3 the Bible pictures married women as being domestic managers in the home. So submission of wives to husbands does not mean passivity and no leadership.

(WHAT BIBLICAL... 5. WIVES...) **Fifthly**, submission of wives to husbands does not mean that wives should be blindly obedient. As good helpmates, wives need to give their opinions, and husbands need to listen to them. Especially in homes where the husband is not a Christian, the man might at times want his Christian wife to do things that are contrary to God's Word. In those cases the wife should obey God rather than her husband. So the command is not absolute and without exception.

C.

(I. A. B. C. WHAT IT IS) Consider then WHAT IT IS. What is the Biblical concept of submission of wives to their husbands? There is no definition provided for us in the Bible. (WIFELY SUBMISSION) I would define it as **“the responsibility of the wife to acknowledge, encourage and yield to the leadership of her husband.”**

It may not be that often that a husband and a wife disagree on a particular issue. But in a marriage where a husband and wife have an equal right to decide, how are decisions to be made on issues where two people disagree? When dad thinks that little Johnny should go to Sunshine Nursery School, and mom is convinced that Johnny should go to Toddlertime Nursery School, who should get their way?

Our passage indicates that it is dad who should be the final authority in the home. Mom has the responsibility to submit to that authority. That should involve an attitude of respect as well as an actual giving in to how dad wants to do things.

II.

Fifty years ago there was a general consensus in our culture that men in marriage should be the leaders and wives should be the submitters. That consensus has been eroded to the point where even many Christians don't buy it anymore. Traditionalists, or what I would call Biblicists, are put into the category of “right wing religious fundamentalists.” Some would even consider us to be evil.

(II. THE REASONS FOR BIBLICAL SUBMISSION) Since this view of marriage has become so counter cultural, we need to give consideration to why Christians should follow this pattern. God's views always correspond with reality. The owner's manual that He has given us always describes the best way that life is to be lived. So let's carefully consider THE REASONS that wives should submit to husbands.

A.

(A. IT IS COMMANDED BY THE BIBLE) **First**, submission of wives to their husbands is COMMANDED BY THE BIBLE. Christian egalitarians who try to argue that the Bible doesn't really teach submission of wives to husbands have a tough time doing it. Colossians 3:18 is not the only passage that teaches it. The command appears five times in the New Testament. Earlier we heard Jerry read from Ephesians #5, which has a more detailed explanation of the responsibility.

(TITUS 2:5) In Titus 2:5 Paul tells older women to encourage younger women **“to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.”** (1 PETER 3:1) In 1 Peter 3:1 the Apostle Peter writes, **“Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives...”** Thus this submission responsibility is not even dependent upon the worthiness of the husband. Clearly the New Testament teaches that wives should submit to their husbands.

B.

(II. B. IT IS PART OF THE DIVINELY INTENDED ORDER OF THINGS) A **second** reason for this relationship in marriage is that IT IS PART OF THE DIVINELY INTENDED ORDER OF THINGS. Paul says that it “is fitting in the Lord.” (EPHESIANS 5:23) In Ephesians #5 v. 23 he writes, **“For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.”** If Paul had said that the reason for this submission thing is simply that this was the customary way of doing things or that it was consistent with the culture or that it was because of tradition, then we might have more reason to question the command.

But the Apostle appeals to the created order of things. Later in Ephesians #5 he explains that marriage is a divinely intended illustration of the relationship of Christ to the church. In this relationship of Christ to the church, there is clearly one party who is responsible to lead and another who is responsible to submit. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The politically correct view of male leadership in marriage is that this is largely responsible for domestic abuse. Thus it is that the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence claims, **“Patriarchal beliefs... lie at the root of gender based violence.”**

The World Economic Forum has something called the Gender Gap Index, which measures gender equality in work, politics, health, and education. The top four countries in the world which have achieved gender equity in their measurements are Norway, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden. So if the politically correct view is right that patriarchy, or male leadership in marriage, is primarily responsible for domestic violence, we should expect that these countries should have the lowest rates of domestic violence in the world, right? According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Finland, number two on the gender equity list, has the highest rate of domestic violence in the world. Sweden, number four on the world gender equity list, is number three on the list of countries with the most domestic violence in the world. (Boston University News Service, 1/11/2021) Maybe the real problem is not following our divine manufacturer’s owner’s manual, which includes more instructions than just who should lead in marriage.

C.

(II. A. B. C. THE GREATEST PSYCHOLOGICAL NEED OF MEN IS SIGNIFICANCE.)  
The **third** reason for this Biblical command has to do with THE GREATEST

PSYCHOLOGICAL NEED OF MEN. The greatest psychological needs that we human beings have are significance and security. We want to know that our lives have significance and we want some kind of security. Generally men have a greater need for significance, and generally women have a greater need for security. That is part of the reason that Paul urges wives to submit to their husbands and husbands to love their wives.

As John Eldredge puts it, we men have “**a battle to fight, an adventure to live, and a beauty to rescue.**” (*Wild at Heart*, 2001, p. 19) We men have a built-in desire to achieve, to compete, and to conquer. Suzy, growing up in a family with only one sister, was amazed to be exposed to my family that had four sons. When we got together, she found that we played games, we competed against each other, and kidded each other mercilessly, yet without hurting feelings.

Men tend to derive self-esteem from their jobs. They desire to be successful. They want to be seen as significant. That is why a wife who submits to her husband and encourages him does much to meet his deepest psychological need--- his need for significance. When he doesn't find that respect and encouragement at home, he may look for it from his job or his hobby or from a relationship with others.

At the end of the movie “Saving Private Ryan,” (PROJECTOR ON--- SAVING PRIVATE RYAN), Ryan visits the cemetery in Normandy and stops at the grave site of the captain who died saving his life decades earlier in WW II. (SAVING PRIVATE RYAN 2) It is to his wife that he looks for affirmation as he says, with tears in his eyes, “**Tell me I have lived a good life. Tell me that I have been a good man.**” Husbands need affirmation from their wives.

D.

A **fourth** reason for this responsibility for women in marriage is that CHILDREN LEARN ABOUT OBEDIENCE AND RESPECT FROM OBSERVING THEIR PARENTS. (II. B. C. D. CHILDREN LEARN ABOUT...) At least some Christian psychologists tell us that children learn about authority largely by observing their father. Children learn about obedience and respect to a great extent by observing their mother's interaction with their father, when there is a two parent home involved. When there is no father around, kids will learn about authority by observing how mom relates to other authorities in her life--- bosses, parents, church leaders, and civil leaders. When a mom is submissive to dad (or other legitimate authorities) in an appropriate way, the parent will tend to have children who are obedient and respectful toward legitimate authority.

As a youth pastor I saw this principle especially evident among the youth with whom I worked. The kids who were the most disrespectful and rebellious tended to come from families where mom was not submissive and respectful to dad, and where dad was not taking the lead in the family, or where there was no dad in the family.

E.

The **fourth** reason for a Christian woman's responsibility in marriage is that SCIENCE PROVIDES EVIDENCE FOR THE NEED FOR ROLE DIFFERENTIATION IN MARRIAGE. (II. C.D.E. SCIENCE PROVIDES EVIDENCE...) We live in a scientific age, and we want scientific evidence for the beliefs and views that people hold. A truly scientific approach will produce results that correspond with reality, and the Bible is based upon reality.

Though it may be politically incorrect, scientists have made the shocking discovery that there are physical differences between men and women. These differences go beyond the fact that women can bear and nurture children, and men cannot. Scientists have discovered that men generally have greater physical strength than women do. Women usually have voices with a higher pitch. Men have more physical energy and durability. Women generally live longer. Men and women have different hormones. The hormone testosterone causes men to be more aggressive than women. As feminist psychologists Maccoby and Jacklin note in their book *Psychology of Sex Differences* (1974), **"Males are more aggressive than females in all human societies for which evidence is available."**

Scientists have discovered not only that there are physical differences between men and women but also that there are psychological differences that have to do with gender. A researcher by the name of Von Hildebrand argues, **"...we find in women a unity of personality by the fact that heart, intellect and temperament are much more interwoven; whereas in man there is a specific capacity to emancipate himself with his intellect from [his feelings]."** (*Man and Woman*, p. 36)

This means that women tend to be more subjective in their mode of thinking, while men tend to be more objective. As a result women have a greater natural ability usually to sympathize and empathize with other people. They tend to think more intuitively, while men tend to think more concretely. One way that this difference is reflected is in the love relationship between a man and a woman. A woman needs to be romanced, whereas a man can quickly be aroused.

Then also in this psychological arena men tend to be goal-oriented, and women tend to be personal need-oriented. Women think a lot about personal relationships. Men tend to think about jobs and tasks. Men generally need to accomplish. Women need to nurture. (Cf. "The New Sex Scorecard," *Psychology Today*, August, 2003; *The Psychology of Sex Differences*, Jacklin and Maccoby, 1974; *His Brain, Her Brain*, Larrimore, 2008)

Anthropologists have studied cultures and societies down through history, and they have discovered at least four results from these physical and psychological gender differences. (ANTHROPOLOGICAL FINDINGS... 1. THERE IS...) They have found first that there is always a sexual division of labor. Men tend to do certain tasks, and women tend to do other tasks. (ANTHRO 1. 2. WOMEN TEND...) Second, women tend to manage the home and rear young children. Men have primary responsibility for government. (ANTHRO... 3. THERE ARE...) Third, there are always cultural

expressions of the differences between men and women. (ANTHRO.,, 4. THERE IS...) And fourth, there is always some form of female subordination to the males.

Anthropologist Sherry Ortner claims, **“I would flatly assert that we find women subordinate to men in every known society. The search for a genuinely egalitarian, let alone matriarchal, culture has proved fruitless.”** (*Woman, Culture and Society*, Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974) A few people might actually expect that with all of the human experience that we have to look at down through history about how human societies function best that we would learn that there is some wisdom involved in having men serve as leaders in marriage and the family. But that isn't politically correct today. Even many Christians have bought into the notion that egalitarian marriages are the way to go. Meanwhile, as the cultural leaders try to force men and women into roles that they were not created to fill, our culture declines, and families fall apart. (PROJECTOR OFF)

F.

The **final** reason that I see for why God wants wives to be subject to their husbands is that THE BIBLICAL MODEL PROVIDES THE GREATEST FULFILLMENT IN MARRIAGE. (II. D. E. F. THE BIBLICAL MODEL...) The Bible is like an owner's manual. It tells us how to get the best performance out of our marriage. We need to follow that owner's manual, because its author is the one who put us together. He knows what He is doing. If we want to get the smoothest ride out of marriage, if want to avoid breakdowns, we better follow His instructions.

Years ago feminist Gloria Steinem declared in a speech, **“For the sake of those who wish to live in equal partnership, we have to abolish and reform the institution of legal marriage.”** (IWY Conference, Houston, 1977) She also said that **“marriage was the model for slavery law in this country.”** (*The Telegraph*, 11/7/2001) Thus Gloria Steinem never chose to get married--- until the year 2000.

(GLORIA STEINEM) At age 66 she finally succumbed to the institution of marriage and tied the knot with a wealthy South African businessman by the name of David Bale, the father of actor Christian Bale. Unfortunately he died of cancer three years later. This marriage struck me as evidence that Gloria Steinem is made in the image of God and that marriage is a divine institution that even those who resist and deny God have difficulty opposing.

III.

I would like for us finally to consider a few brief APPLICATIONS (III. THE APPLICATIONS) from this principle of submission of wives to husbands in marriage.

In 2008 Christian physician Walt Larrimore and his wife came out with a book entitled *His Brain, Her Brain* (HIS BRAIN, HER BRAIN) in which they summarize the most recent findings of neurology in terms of gender differences and what the practical significance of those findings are to men and women in marriage. In the area of



submission of wives to husbands Larrimore says that wives have three important responsibilities toward their husbands.

(III. THE APPLICATIONS A. RESPECT HIS JUDGMENT) First, respect his judgment. A wife may not always agree with his judgment. But she needs to show respect toward him for it.

(III. A. B. RESPECT HIS ABILITY) Second, respect his ability. Appreciate him for the work that he does. Admire him for the talents and contributions that he makes to the home. We men have sensitive egos. We need to be regarded as significant by our wives.

(III. A. B. C. RESPECT HIM IN PUBLIC) Third, respect him in public. Don't criticize him or demean him or make fun of him in public. That is a bad thing to do. Respect him. The reverse is also true for men in regard to their wives.

The opinion makers in our world would have you ladies believe that true fulfillment in life comes from having a career and from establishing yourself as an independent woman. But it is not true. True fulfillment will come first and foremost by establishing a relationship of dependence upon the Lord. For those of you who women who are married it will also mean establishing a relationship with your husband in which you are submissive to his authority. (PROJECTOR OFF)

A Christian woman in southern California showed unusual insight into the parallel passage in Ephesians #5. She wrote this about it to her pastor (Ray Stedman of Peninsula Bible Church): **"I realize that my submission to my husband is not my gift to him, to be received gratefully on his part, and to be returned in kind. Nor is it to be a subtle form of blackmail. (See how submissive I was in this circumstance, Lord? Now what about some results?) In fact, if I were submitting to him as unto the Lord, I wouldn't care what the results were--- that's his business. Actually, a woman is never more free to be herself than when she is most joyfully submissive to her husband's authority. What a relief to be free to be what I was made for."**

I pray that you married women might also find that freedom and fulfillment from responding as God would have you to respond.