



Catalog No. 1753  
Colossians 3:18  
19th Message  
Bernard Bell and  
Sharon Coleman  
June 24, 2012

# “HEADSHIP AND SUBMISSION”: SHOULD WE SUBMIT TO IT?

SERIES: *THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH*  
*LIVING RESURRECTION IN RELATIONSHIPS #3*

## Headship and Submission (Bernard Bell)

We continue our series looking at the household codes in Colossians, Paul’s instructions on how to live in Christian community in reciprocal pairs of relationships: wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters (3:18-4:1). We will spend the next five weeks on the first relationship pair, looking not only at wives and husbands per se, but at some very controversial topics which have generated heated debate and caused much pain: headship and submission, divorce, sexuality and singleness. We need to walk wisely and carefully through this troubled ground.

Today we start with wives. I have no experience as a wife, but shortly we will hear from one who does: Sharon Coleman, our pastor of women. My task is to introduce her by talking about headship and submission—in only 20 minutes. Some may cry foul, charging a conflict of interest for a man to talk about headship and submission prior to a woman talking about being a wife!

Our text for today is Colossians 3:18,

**Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.**  
(NIV)

There it is, the dreaded “s” word: “submit.” There is no escaping this word. In three other places wives are told to submit to their husbands:

**Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord... [A]s the church submits to Christ, so wives are to submit to their husbands in everything.** (Eph 5:22, 24)

[T]each the older women...then they can urge the younger women...to be subject to their husbands. (Tit 2:3-5)

**Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands... [T]he holy women of the past who put their hope in God...submitted themselves to their own husbands.** (1 Pet 3:1, 5)

Likewise, there is no avoiding the word “head.” Twice the husband is described as the head of the wife:

**I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.** (1 Cor 11:3)

[T]he husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. (Eph 5:23)

These words are firmly there in Scripture, so we have to reckon with them. How do we go about thinking of headship and submission in a responsible manner? We start by recognizing that we are the people of the risen Christ, filled with his Spirit. John has entitled this series, “Living Resurrection in Relationships.” This chapter of Colossians begins, “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ” (Col 3:1). We are called to follow Christ in death and resurrection: death to the old self, and putting on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of our Creator (3:10). Paul urges the Colossians, “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly” (3:16). This gospel message of Christ must inform our thinking, our behavior, our relationships. It must form the bedrock for our thinking about headship and submission.

If only it were so easy! But Christians who are fully committed to the Biblical message have very different understandings of headship

and submission. Twenty-five years ago American evangelicals organized themselves into two camps:

On one side the complementarian position: though men and women are equal before God, they have different and complementary roles within families and within the church. In both arenas male headship is the norm, and certain roles within the church are excluded to women.

On the other side the egalitarian position: men and women are equal not only in value but also in gifting and ability. No role within the church is denied a woman simply because she is a woman.

These terms “complementarian” and “egalitarian” are relative ones. Complementarians uphold the full equality of women in Christ. Egalitarians recognize that redeemed humanity is still differentiated into male and female, but propose “complementarity without hierarchy.” But the terms have stuck as labels and are here to stay.

Both sides are evangelical, and believe they uphold the Biblical position. Both sides have people whom I highly respect. Among our guest preachers have been people who land on different sides. PBCC has no formal position on this matter. We are fortunate that it has not been a hot-button issue. Personally, I find that I am in the fuzzy middle. What I will present is my own personal understanding of the issue, but in broad outline the pastors and elders are on the same page.

## I. Headship

What does it mean for man to be head of the woman, for the husband to be head of the wife? Complementarians understand the word in terms of authority structures. As “head” the man is the leader, with authority over the woman, a status conferred on the man even in the original creation, in the garden of Eden. Egalitarians dislike the word “head” and its connotations of leadership, so they argue that the Greek word *kephalē* means “source” or “origin.” Woman was created from man, but there is no hierarchy, either in the garden, or in Christian relationships today.

I disagree with both sides! In both places where Paul describes the man as head of the woman his argument depends on the word meaning “head,” but this has nothing at all to do with authority.

### 1.1 The Head Loves the Body (Ephesians 5)

In Ephesians 5 Paul calls wives to submit because of headship:

**Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do 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.**  
(Eph 5:22-24)

It is true that God has appointed Christ as Head over the church, as King over his kingdom. He is our Lord. But authority is not the aspect of Christ’s headship which Paul highlights here. At the center of this chi-

astic structure lies the statement that Christ is Savior of his body. That is what Christ's headship looks like. What, then, does it mean for man to be the head? Three times Paul tells the man to love his wife:

**Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. (5:25)**

**In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. (5:28)**

**[E]ach one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself. (5:33)**

How is he to love his wife? As the head loves the body, for which he gives two examples: how Christ loves the church and how the man loves his own body. That is what it means to be the head! The head loves the body, even to the extent of self-sacrifice.

### 1.2 The Head's Glory (1 Corinthians 11)

The other place where Paul describes the man as head of the woman is 1 Cor 11,

**[T]he head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. (1 Cor 11:3)**

Paul uses the word "head" nine times in verse 3-10. His argument is completely lost if we translate the word any other way than "head." Paul continues,

**Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head... a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. (1 Cor 11:4-7)**

The whole extended passage (11:3-16) is full of the language of honor and shame. Laying aside the vexed issue of the nature of the head covering itself, Paul's point is that how we comport ourselves conveys honor or shame on our head: on ourselves, on our husband, on Christ, and on God. Here the issue is not what it means to be the head, but what it means to have a head. We act in such a manner as to convey honor not shame on our head, so that we are the head's glory! The head beams with approval on the one who is his glory. Adam beamed with approval on the first woman. So does God looking at Christ and Christ looking at the church. So should the husband looking at his wife.

So that is headship: the head loves the body, and the one with a head acts to honor the head and be its glory.

## 2. Submission

Complementarians rightly claim that the normal meaning of the verb "submit" is submission to authority. Egalitarians point out that Paul's command in Ephesians for the wives to submit to their husbands is predicated on the call to submit to one another (5:21). But complementarians say that means only that some submit to others.

Paul has a one-sided view of submission. I don't mean that he only tells the wives to submit, which is true, but that he never tells the husbands to exercise authority. The only time the apostles call for submission to authority is with respect to the governing authorities (Rom 13:1, 5; Tit 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13-14).

The Christian life is about submission but it is not about authority. At every turn Paul turns authority on its head. How did the church go so wrong in reinstating authority? When men think of headship and submission in terms of authority, whether in the family or in the church, they immediately set off on the wrong foot. Much harm has been done in both arenas. As a man, let me apologize to you women who have been harmed by male insistence on submission to authority. As a pastor, let me apologize to all who have been harmed by church leaders' insistence on authority.

Ideally the man to whom the woman is called to submit is a saint, a godly example of Christ-like love. But none of us men are; even the best of us falls far short of being Christ-like. But still wives are called to submit, even to nonbelievers, so that "they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives" (1 Pet 3:1-2).

What does headship and submission mean in practice? Paul is very vague. He concludes his instructions in Ephesians 5,

**However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. (Eph 5:33)**

That is evidently enough. He doesn't talk about who should do the dishes, change the diapers, bring home the paycheck, keep the finances, or make the final decisions. What headship and submission look like in practice will vary considerably depending on culture and on the gifts of the husband and wife. Tim Keller tells of the battle he and his wife Kathy had early in their marriage over who should do the dishes. In Tim's home his mother did the dishes; in Kathy's home it was her father. Both did so out of great love and service to their spouse. But how that self-sacrificial love worked out in practice was diametrically opposite in the two homes. Tim and Kathy had to work out for themselves what it would look like in their home.<sup>1</sup>

The greatest danger in marriage is self. We must die to self, for we have been raised with Christ. The woman is called to self-surrender, the man is called to self-sacrifice. This is biblical submission and headship. The key is that we do this "as to the Lord." We mutually submit to one another "out of reverence for Christ." Wives submit to husbands "as to the Lord." Husbands love their wives "as Christ loved the church." This is Christ-centered living and it is possible only when we are filled with the Spirit. This is living resurrection in the marriage relationship. As we read in our Scripture reading,

**Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. (Phil 2:3-5)**

### Submission (Sharon Coleman)

**Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord (Col. 3:18).**

I'm not up here because I have all the answers or am a great example. I'm here because John asked me to share on submission so I submitted, thanking him for this opportunity to share on a Sunday morning on such a benign, safe subject – submission. It is actually most women's least favorite subject. It's a controversial one! Just the word submission can stir up all kinds of tension and confusion. I've been reading and listening to lectures and I'm afraid the mystery can't be removed, formulas don't work and gender roles can't be oversimplified! I do think it's important to talk about headship and submission on the same day because the two work hand in hand. It is a chicken and egg type thing. I'm going to try to give a picture of how it looks in my marriage, in my day-to-day life as a 21st century American wife, who is sinful but redeemed in the Lord Jesus Christ and who is trying to respond to her husband as the church responds to Christ.

This talk comes at an interesting time for me: in 2 months my daughter will get married and we are deep into wedding plans, with all the romanticism and excitement that entails. Juxtaposed are Jim and I finishing up our 32nd year in the country of marriage, as John calls it, and as I have been reflecting on our marriage in preparation for today, I can assure you we haven't mastered marriage, headship or submission.

So as I share experiences from my marriage, it may be difficult for some to relate because every person is different, every couple is different,

and the dynamics of every relationship are different. Each spouse brings his or her own personality, gifts, and history to the marriage. Most people would describe my husband, Jim, as easy going or laid back, helpful, friendly and sensitive. They might describe me as energetic, efficient, outgoing and caring. I always have a running calendar or list of things I'm working on. Jim gets to things when he gets to them. I take a while to fall asleep; Jim falls asleep instantaneously. I relax with Facebook and iPhoto; Jim relaxes with TV. Jim likes boating; I like aerobics. Jim works in Silicon Valley in a stressful, demanding computer industry job. I'm on staff part time here at PBCC with women's ministries. Jim and I came from very different families, both loving homes, but we have many differences in how we were raised. We are very different, have different strengths and weaknesses, and all of that plays out in the day to day dynamics of our marriage, but we have a lot of fun together, we both love the Lord, each other and our kids.

But anyone married any length of time knows loving each other doesn't make marriage easy! John reminded us in the e-newsletter a couple of weeks ago that spiritual formation happens in our relationships, where both wounding and redemption take place. Well, marriage is a grand place for spiritual growth! It's the closest form of community we have, the place where real life happens right in front of each other, often unexpectedly exposing our true nature to ourselves and to each other, but where, if we are willing, God can grow us in Christ-likeness.

I'm going to venture to tell you how my thoughts on submission have progressed and changed over the years. I was married at 19 and I'd been living with Christ as my Lord for only about 2 years when we talked at our pre-marital counseling about submission, and I remember wanting to understand the principle but still be sure I retained my individuality if I submitted. Part of our wedding ceremony included Philippians 2:1-11, the passage we heard this morning as our Scripture reading.

At the time I thought: Jesus submitted to God, the church submits to Christ, we are all to submit to one another (Eph. 5:21), we are also to submit to authority figures in our lives (1 Pet. 2:13) and I've submitted my life to Christ, so if Scripture says submitting to your husband is good, it must be good! Plus, Jim loves me, so submission couldn't be that hard. I was young and idealistic! When we marry, we think we understand the plan God created for marriage but then we settle into the reality of how far we fall short. I am a sinner and I married a sinner!

I observe a rhythm, a cycle in marriage and perhaps all close relationships, precipitated by the gap between men and women's expectations of marriage and their actual fulfillment in it. Life happens and goes along fine until there are unmet expectations and disappointments, then hopefully not much later we take them to God, a discussion ensues with the spouse, and not much later again forgiveness might be requested and granted. We make up and start over again, hit "reset." It's like trying to eat right but failing – we don't give up – every day is a new day! After all, we are married sinners and alienation is expected as the result of sin.

My view (hermeneutic) on headship and submission has been honed over the past 32 years and it has been my experience that those who have the most outspoken theology of headship and submission have the most difficult marriages. If it is too big a deal in the marriage, or we think we have it all figured out, it grows out of proportion and isn't healthy. Most of us are still figuring it out and we have a wide variety of opinions on the subject. I appreciate that so many of you in the body here at PBCC that I talk with, even though we may not all agree on everything about submission, headship and gender roles, are genuinely seeking the Lord and wants to be faithful to God and His Word.

Headship and submission are difficult to get our heads around. On the one hand, as a woman, there is freedom in the husband being the head. As a woman on staff, I know the elders are in a position of headship over me and have my back. I submit first to the Lord, then to my

husband and to church leadership. I am to submit fully, as unto the Lord, because ultimately I am submitting to the Lord. God is my head, beyond or behind Jim and the elders. When interviewing me, the elders asked me to bring Jim. They wanted to be sure he supported my coming on staff and that he knew they respected his headship. It was kind of weird, but kind of nice. I felt cared for, protected. Under such loving care women can flourish! Here was headship and submission working together for the good of both husband and wife!

Honestly I can't say that submission and headship are often even on our radar at our house, but then it wouldn't be very effective if Jim told me to submit to him as to the Lord or if I told him to lead as a servant! We basically just try to get along, we each submit to the other at different times, respect each other and love each other. Headship and submission need to be underlying attitudes or dispositions that we have toward each other. Even if we don't agree, we believe in each other and try to accept one another without nagging for change. (That may take a lifetime and it's a big exercise in dying to self!) Of course, sometimes we get frustrated with each other and it is usually because we are different. We want to spend our time or money differently or we have different priorities for household tasks or we disagree about how to handle things with the kids. Having these differences gives us both plenty of opportunities to die to self!

One recent big decision we had to make concerned whether to undertake another home remodel. I wanted to put it off. Jim wanted to get started. After much discussion, we moved ahead. Jim's feelings for it were stronger than mine against it and I trusted his perspective. It is done now and we are thrilled, but it was an act of submission for me to move forward, and ongoing submission to get through it. Honestly, I did a fair bit of grumbling throughout. Remodeling is stressful on marriages but we survived.

Headship and submission are not just about who deals with finances or makes big decisions. Couples usually complement each other by having different strengths and dividing up tasks accordingly. We make basically all big decisions together and wouldn't consider making a big one without the other's input. We've racked our brains but can't remember a time when we were at a stalemate on a decision. We don't, on the other hand, consult each other over every little thing. When one of us feels very strongly about a decision, often that's enough to sway the other. We submit to each other.

Another illustration is when Jim wanted a boat. I didn't care one bit about a boat. Does that mean he can't have one? Does it mean I have to take up water sports? Jim had great reasons for wanting a boat: family time, serving others with it, creating community around it. I was persuaded. Do I now do water sports? Heavens no – that just isn't me and I can't be nor have to be something I'm not. I go along sometimes and ride in the boat, enjoy the people and support Jim in his love of it.

Headship and submission can also be gifts from God we give to each other to meet inner needs. We've heard that generally men need to feel successful and their greatest fear is inadequacy. I think this is why Ephesians 5 instructs women to respect as well as submit to the husband. He needs the reassurance that we think he has what it takes. He needs to receive our respect, appreciation, affirmation, affection and desire and trust. It wasn't good for him to be alone. These are some of what he needs from us and I think they add up to submission.

Generally women's greatest fear is insecurity, so we often fear unknowns and things being out of control. We sometimes get grouchy and busy trying to take control and dominate when feeling insecure or anxious. Husbands help wives feel secure by loving and leading them as Christ loved and led the church, giving himself up for her, and by encouraging them to be the glorious women God created them to be. Being loved well helps a wife submit fully and respect her husband. It

goes both ways, husbands and wives both have to die to self: put the other first. As a wife, it can be even harder not to put kids first, ahead of husband. It can be tempting for women to divinize or at least idolize home and family.

I confess that I can be grouchy, controlling, stressed out and have a harsh tone to my voice, and it can be from any number of reasons: feeling overwhelmed with responsibilities, physical or emotional exhaustion, frustration that Jim is working too many hours and not engaged at home, upset about something with the kids, hormones, etc. Jim feels disrespected, and rightfully so, when I use a harsh or sarcastic tone with him. I continue to work on this and try to speak my real feelings instead. But to help me, I've asked that when I do use a disrespectful tone with Jim, that he realize there is something behind my attitude and ask me gently, "Are you worried about something?" or "What can I do to help you?" When he looks beyond my tone of voice and inquires what is going on with me, I feel reassured and well loved.

It also helps when Jim initiates, leads, or engages in conversations about things that need discussing; follows up on concerns; and takes the lead in planning date nights or vacations. Women feel cared for when men initiate. It tells us we are a priority, reminds us that we don't have to control or dominate because we are part of a team. But at the same time, I'm not saying women shouldn't initiate. It is just that if the man rarely does, it feeds a woman's insecurity and she gets busy controlling and dominating again and has a harder time respecting him. It is that chicken and egg thing! Marriage is a partnership. Headship and submission work hand in hand. Granted, we can't meet each other's every need. We can't look to our spouse to be God for us and we can't possibly love our spouse the way God can, but we try to love them the way they need to be loved, doing the best we can, doing all as unto the Lord. This has been a big lesson for me when I get frustrated with Jim. I try to remember, "he's doing the best he can" and then I pray for him more and learn to trust God more.

The husband can help the wife feel secure and well loved. The wife can help the husband feel successful. As Shaunti Feldhahn suggests in the *Life Ready Woman* workbook, a husband's willingness to take the lead, and the wife's willingness to submit or allow him to lead, serve to reverse both a man's tendency to withdraw and be passive and a woman's tendency to control.

Elisabeth Elliot said, "If two people agree to dance together, they agree to give and take, one to lead one to follow...insistence that both lead means there won't be any dance."<sup>2</sup>

So why do women bristle at the word submission? In scripture husbands are given 4 words for every 1 word to the wife, and men's instruction far more drastically changed their role in patriarchal biblical times. We're just told to submit to our husband as the church submits to Christ and we're told to respect our husband. Yet controversy abounds! Some are concerned we will be seen as a doormat, or we are not equal in God's eyes, or permission must be asked of the husband for everything, or that it is total unconditional submission. What if the husband is not a natural leader? Not a spiritual leader? What if I disagree with him or have more expertise in an area? What if his decision is not up to my standards? How do I show respect while disagreeing? What if he isn't a Christ follower?

We are to submit to our husbands as is fitting in the Lord. For all believers, all of life is to be submitted to the Lord, or lived as is fitting in the Lord (Col. 3:17). But there is no denying that women are told it an extra time, 4 times over, in reference to submitting to husbands. I ask myself, "Why?" We know Jesus treated women extremely well, in a

way totally counter to the culture at the time. And Paul makes it clear there are no distinctions or divisions between any who are in Christ, including male/female. All are equally advantaged and disadvantaged (Gal. 3:28). Even most verses regarding obeying, honoring, or respecting parents specifically say both father and mother, so both are equally worthy of honor and obedience and both have leadership/teaching roles in parenting.

So why tell women to submit specifically to husbands? Why pull that out in isolation?

In Kauai a few months ago, on a whale watching trip, Jim and I saw the momma whale pushing her baby along in the water with the father behind the momma and the tour guide said, "Like in every species, the woman leads!" That comment made me cringe for women everywhere! I don't think women want to be domineering, but our strong desire for security often causes us to dominate, to get busy controlling. We have the illusion that we can control most things if we're responsible and diligent enough. Genesis 3:16 says, "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you," so women must forgo or resist the temptation to rule over our husbands. In God's created order, male and female were to rule together, dominion without domination. But in the fallen order, we have fracture and brokenness, alienation that resulted from sin, so too often we strive against each other, we're divided instead of being one.

It all started in the garden, (Gen. 3) the evil one got the woman's focus off God and His perfect provision and onto herself and the one thing God had graciously withheld. She thought she needed that one thing and now. This is where unhealthy individualism started! The two who were created to be one flesh were divided and at odds with each other.

Women get this extra exhortation to submit specifically to her husband "as to the Lord" perhaps to help restore oneness, perhaps to discourage him from being passive, or wives from being controlling. Trusting the husband, submitting to him, tells him more effectively than anything else that we think he's got what it takes and that we believe in him. Perhaps it is God knowing the way men and women need to be loved – women being loved unconditionally and men being trusted and respected unconditionally. Whatever the reason for wives having this extra exhortation, God thinks it is a good idea.

So what sometimes keeps me from submitting myself, entrusting myself to Jim as I would Christ, and respecting him? Self and fear, the same things that keep me from giving myself more fully to Christ. It's scary to trust, so sometimes I respond in fear and try to take control to alleviate my anxieties. I resist self-surrender. I am ultimately trusting God though when I submit to and trust my husband, so the more I learn to trust God and give myself fully to Him, the more I will submit myself fully to my husband, and as a wife, that's what I'm called to do.

1. Timothy Keller with Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 149-152.

2. Elisabeth Elliot, *Let Me Be A Woman*, (Tyndale House, 1976), 175