

## SHOULD WIVES SUBMIT TO ABUSIVE HUSBANDS?

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### INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of this paper we need to make clear the context and aim of what follows. In recent days, comments by Paige Patterson, the president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, have raised concerns over how complementarians think about a wife's submission to her husband in the context of abuse. His comments were simply awful and we reject them outright. That's the context in which we are writing.<sup>1</sup> Second, our aim is to address a very specific question: Does Paul's command for a wife to submit to her husband (Eph 5:25) hold in the context of abuse?<sup>2</sup> For example, if a husband were to tell his wife she must submit to him, though he is an abusive and oppressive man, is the call to submit to his leadership still binding? Must she submit to an abuser?

Let us be clear: a wife should never submit to a husband who is abusing her.<sup>3</sup> Never. In this short paper, we want to show that while submission to various human authorities, including that of wives to husbands, is God-honoring and biblical, there are nevertheless times—like when a woman is married to an abuser—when wives should refuse to submit.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Read the context in more detail, Jonathan Meritt, "The Scandal Tearing Apart America's Largest Protestant Denomination," *The Atlantic*, May 3, 2018 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/05/sbc-patterson/559532/>). Paige Patterson and the trustee's of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary have also released a document, "A Statement on Abuse," SWBTS, May 1, 2018 (<https://swbts.edu/news/releases/statement-abuse/>).

<sup>2</sup> What is abuse? John Henderson states, "A good working definition of domestic abuse is "a godless pattern of abusive behavior among spouses involving physical, psychological, and/or emotional means to exert and obtain power and control over a spouse for the achievement of selfish ends" (Justin Taylor, "Hyper-Headship and the Scandal of Domestic Abuse in the Church," TGC, April 28, 2015 (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/hyper-headship-and-the-scandal-of-domestic-abuse-in-the-church/>).

<sup>3</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with the complex question of when a behavior crosses the line and becomes abuse. We are assuming here that there is a case of clear abuse, whether physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, spiritual, psychological, or financial.

<sup>4</sup> This article does not describe in complete detail how one should counsel an abused spouse. These are complex and delicate matters, including discussions about separation, divorce/remarriage, involving secular authorities, church discipline, etc. Given the complexity, we recommend the following works as a start to thinking through the issues: Darby Strickland, "Counseling in the

## A DEFINITION OF SUBMISSION

What do we mean by “submission”?

*Biblical submission is the honoring, affirming, and helping to carry out the leadership of another.*<sup>5</sup>

This never means the voice of the one who submits is silenced. We are not talking about a passive, blind, or thoughtless following of every directive. We are talking about the active support of another’s direction.

We also need to clarify the fundamental nature of submission. We should distinguish between the *desire* to submit and the act of submission.<sup>6</sup> That is, there is a difference between a *desire* to honor, affirm and help carry out the leadership of a husband and *actively* honoring, affirming, and helping carry out said leadership. What we are saying is that active submission flows from an *orientation of the heart*, or an *attitude*, that *desires* to submit to the leadership of another. The desire of a wife to submit to her husband flows from a heart that delights in God’s good design. While a husband is (imperfectly, to be sure) sacrificially and lovingly leading in the home, a wife joyfully submits to his leadership.

Think, for instance, about submission to governing authorities. Though there are times when we cannot submit to the demands of an authority (e.g. Dan 3:1–18; Acts 5:29), we certainly *desire* to submit to our governing authorities as those established by God for our good (Rom 13:3–4; 1 Pet 2:13–14). We desire to submit to them as they lead in ways that promote the general welfare and yet do not call us to forsake our heavenly King. We long to see our governments leading us wisely and justly and faithfully, and we long to follow their lead, *if only they would cease calling us to disobey our God!* We simply cannot honor, affirm, and help carry out any leadership that contradicts the Word of God.

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Brambles: How to Help Oppressive Marriages,” JBC 30:3 (2016): 24–46. Chris Moles, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse: Gospel Solutions for Men Who Use Control and Violence in the Home*, (Minnesota: Focus Publishing 2015). Lindsey A. Holcomb and Justin S. Holcomb, *Is It My Fault? Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014). Darby Strickland, *Domestic Abuse: Help for the Sufferer* (Phillipsburg, N.J: P&R Publishing, 2018). H. Wayne House and J. Carl Laney, eds., *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1990). Gordon J. Wenham et al., *Remarriage after Divorce in Today’s Church: 3 Views*, Counterpoints Series (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> In this article, submission generally follows the definition offered by John Piper.  
<http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-do-headship-and-submission-in-marriage-mean>.

<sup>6</sup> John Piper identifies submission as a “*disposition* to yield to the husband’s authority and an *inclination* to follow his leadership” (John Piper and Wayne A Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 47). However, we believe it is necessary to distinguish between the desire to submit, and the actual honoring, affirming, and helping carry out of the husband’s leadership.

## SUBMISSION IN THE CONTEXT OF MARRIAGE

The Bible teaches that wives are called to submit to the godly and Christ-like leadership of their husbands. It's important that we state this carefully, clearly, and with conviction. This is our conviction because we believe that the Bible supports a complementarian understanding of manhood and womanhood, specifically in marriage (Gen 2:20–23; Eph 5:22–25).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, we joyfully advocate this understanding of the marriage relationship, and the respective roles of men and women in marriage.

But we should carefully articulate what this command to submit means. We are not saying all women are called to submit to all men in all places at all times.<sup>8</sup> Instead, we are focusing on submission of wives to *their own husbands* (Eph 5:22).

Furthermore, we must keep in mind the context in which Paul calls a wife to submit. In Ephesians 5:21, men and women are called to submit to those who are in authority over them out of reverence for Christ.<sup>9</sup> However, this call to submit to one another, whatever that means, does not negate an order in the marital relationship, as made clear by what Paul says next (5:22–24).<sup>10</sup> Then, immediately after Paul

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<sup>7</sup> This article assumes a position of theological complementarianism in terms of gender roles within the life of the family and church. For a summary statement of complementarianism, see The Danvers Statement (<https://cbmw.org/uncategorized/the-danvers-statement/>). We believe complementarianism is God's good design but is often corrupted by mankind. We commend Dr. Jason Meyer's complementarian manifesto against domestic abuse. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/a-complementarian-manifesto-against-domestic-abuse/>

<sup>8</sup> Karen Jobes writes, “The Christian wife is to submit not to the expectations of any and all men in general but to her own husband.” (Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 398.) Also, see Dr. Russell Moore: <http://www.russellmoore.com/2011/12/05/women-stop-submitting-to-men/>

<sup>9</sup> Peter T. O'Brien details the discussion of so-called “mutual submission” in Eph 5:21, concluding, “The apostle is not speaking of *mutual* submission in the sense of reciprocal subordination, but submission to those who are in authority over them” (O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 404). Though Hoehner uses the phrase “mutual submission,” it seems he sees the text meaning “one is willing to submit to those who have authority” (Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 717). Regardless of where a person lands on this exegetical question, however, Paul follows 5:21 with a clear call for wives to submit to the leadership of their husbands.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of how to understand Ephesians 5:24, see Steve R. Tracy, “What Does ‘Submit in Everything’ Really Mean? The Nature and Scope Of Marital Submission,” *TRINJ* 29 (2008): 285–312. Peter T. O'Brien writes, “Although this phrase has raised modern questions about the limitations of a wife's submission to her husband... ‘in everything’ indicates that the wife is to be subordinate to her husband *in every area of life*. In this sense it is all-encompassing, and is not, as some have suggested, restricted to sexual matters or some other special sphere in their relationship” (Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester: Apollos, 1999), 417).

commands wives to submit to husbands, he commands husbands to love their wives “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). In another letter, husbands are called to love their wives and “not be harsh with them” (Col 3:19).

Therefore, the New Testament defines submission in marriage as a wife submitting to her husband who is striving to lead his wife lovingly, gently, and sacrificially. A wife is called to honor, affirm, and help carry out (i.e. submit) this type of husbanding. Again, this is not a passive or blind following, or an agreement with everything the husband says, but a general orientation to follow his lead as they work through things together. However, outside of Christ-like leadership, she is not called to honor, affirm, and help him carry out his sinful inclinations.<sup>11</sup> Though the wife should long for (i.e. desire) a husband to whom she can gladly submit, she is not called to do so to a husband who does not care for her. Wives should only submit to husbands as they act like Christ, who acts in these ways towards his blood-bought bride, the church.<sup>12</sup>

A note should be made here about how 1 Peter 3:1-6 relates to this discussion.<sup>13</sup> Peter instructs wives in these verses to submit to husbands who are disobedient to the word, namely, to husbands who have not believed and entrusted their lives to the gospel. The point of Peter’s teaching is that the command to submit still applies when the husband is not a Christian. Non-Christian husbands can still fulfill the Christ-like role of husband in that they nurture, care, and provide for the needs of their wives and therefore wives should still submit to them.

Our argument is that wives are only to submit to husbands as the church submits to Christ, who loves and gives himself for his bride. This structure holds even when one person in the marriage is a Christian and the other is not, so long as the analogy holds. The analogy does not hold, however, when the husband fails to provide for the needs and nurture of his wife through abuse—whether that abuse is emotional, psychological, sexual, verbal, or physical.

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<sup>11</sup> For a treatment of the extent of a wife’s submission, see George W. Knight III, “Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church,” *Rediscovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 170–171.

<sup>12</sup> We acknowledge that this leaves open the question of what exactly it looks like “not to submit” in an abusive/oppressive situation. This, admittedly, is complicated and there is not an answer we could give that would satisfy every specific situation. This is why anyone who is in an abusive relationship should seek help as described below.

<sup>13</sup> See Wayne Grudem, “Wives Like Sarah, and the Husbands Who Honor Them: 1 Peter 3:1–7,” *Rediscovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 194–208. Also, Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, 395–404.

Thus wives are only to submit to their own husbands when that husband is fulfilling a Christ-like role of nurture, care, and provision. The husband will never do this perfectly, but so long as this is *the bent of his relationship* with his wife, the wife is called to submit to his leadership.

## WIVES SHOULD NEVER SUBMIT TO AN ABUSER

With these important preliminaries established, we can now assert that a wife is *not* called to submit to an abusive husband. The abuser, whether the abuse is emotional, psychological, verbal, or physical, is not lovingly and gently and sacrificially leading his wife. He is not treating her as Christ treats the church. A wife is *not called to submit to this type of leadership*.

Therefore, if someone were to ask us, “Should a wife submit to her abusive husband?” We would answer, “We do not believe she should submit to an abusive husband. But she should *desire* to see her husband repent of his sinful behavior and faithfully follow the example of Jesus so that she can gladly submit to his leadership.” She simply does not honor, affirm, or help carry out wicked patterns of leadership and behavior.

Furthermore, an abused spouse is not called to remain in harm’s way. Submission never means staying in the geographical or influential (e.g. email, texts, phone calls, etc.) reach of an abuser. Fleeing situations that threaten bodily, emotional, or psychological harm is warranted (cf Matt 10:23; John 6:15; Acts 17–18).

## HOW SHOULD THE ABUSED RESPOND?

If an abused wife should not respond with submission, how then *should* she respond? Once again, this paper is not a detailed treatment of how a person should respond to abuse. While we should never enable abuse by remaining in the geographical or influential reach of an abuser, we would advise anyone being abused to report the abuser to authorities when it is safe to do so. We acknowledge our own limitations in the area of counseling and would encourage anyone who is being abused to seek help from a close friend, the proper authorities, and their local church. What we offer below are *general* ways Christians should respond while leaving the *specific* and often complicated responses to those better equipped to speak into those situations.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Brad Hambrick, “How to Develop a Safety Plan for Domestic Violence,” September 28, 2016 (<http://bradhambrick.com/safetyplan/>).

However, we want to encourage an abused spouse not to lose heart. God loves you and is for your good and his glory (Rom 8:28). At the same time, remember that God is working in the midst of the suffering to conform you into the image of Jesus (Rom 5:3–5) and put the Suffering Servant on display (Col 1:24). Also, remember that God hates abuse and oppression and does not delight in wickedness (Ps 5:4–6; 11:5; Prov 6:22).

Furthemore, respond by cultivating a heart that lets go of anger, wrath, malice, slander, and any desire for revenge (Eph 4:31; Col 3:8; Rom 12:19). Pray for God to help you come to the place where you extend the hand of grace and forgiveness if only the offender would repent of their sins (Eph 4:32). Pray that the Spirit of God would help you genuinely hope for the spiritual well-being of the abuser (Matt 5:44). And ask God to help you pray for the offender (Luke 7:27–28).<sup>15</sup> These are the ways that *any Christian* is called to respond to the evils of this age, of which abuse is one.

## SUMMARY

In summary, wives are called to submit to the loving and gentle and sacrificial leadership of their husbands. In so doing, they give us a picture of what it looks like for the bride of Christ (i.e. the church) to submit to the leadership of Christ. Yet, apart from that type of leadership, we do not see any warrant for a wife to submit to an abusive husband. A husband who is manipulating, hurting, and dominating his wife is acting outside of his calling as a husband. The wife should not submit to such leadership and should seek to remove herself from the situation as quickly and safely as possible, contacting the proper authorities and seeking outside help. Yet, any abused person should cultivate genuine Christian responses to suffering and hardship. The abused should trust the Lord, let go of sinful feelings, prepare to extend a hand of forgiveness, desire to see the abuser come to a better spiritual place, and pray that God would do a miraculous work.

## CHRIST CARES FOR THOSE WHO ARE ABUSED

An abused wife is not called to submit to an abusive husband and has in a real sense been abandoned by her spouse. Yet, she is not left alone in this world. She remains under the care of King Jesus, who has given her his Spirit, his Word, and the church.

First, though her earthly husband has abandoned his calling, Jesus has not left her alone. As a follower of Jesus who has experienced the new birth, the Spirit of

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<sup>15</sup> John Piper, “Pray for those who Abuse You,” *Desiring God*, February 17, 2015 (<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/pray-for-those-who-abuse-you>)

God has taken up residence within her. Jesus has not left us alone, but has sent us a Helper! It is important for any Christian, especially someone who is suffering, to remember that Jesus is with us today. Paul Johnson writes, “Christ sent his Spirit not so that we might have a roughly suitable replacement in his absence, but that we might enjoy the *actual presence of Christ* (through the Spirit).”<sup>16</sup>

What this means is that even though her husband is failing her, Jesus is near. He has not, nor will he ever, forsake or abandon or abuse her. He cares for her more than she knows. She is not alone. One day he will return to right every wrong, wipe away every tear, and usher her into his kingdom where her heavenly Father will wrap her in his loving arms.

Second, the church provides love, care, and leadership. The church should offer care, protection, and if needed, provision for her and her family. More specifically, the elders of the church, along with female members, serve to help her respond biblically to her situation, care for her in her suffering, and think strategically and carefully about the future.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the church should intervene to call her husband to turn from sin, bear fruit in keeping with repentance (Matt 3:8), and pursue Christ-likeness in all areas of life, including marriage.

Jesus continues to be with the abused and has not left her without help. His Spirit dwells within her and unites her to his very person. The King of kings and Lord of lords is with her and for her. The church provides care, protection, and provision. The elders specifically come alongside the sister, in appropriate ways and with female support, to offer spiritual leadership and direction, while seeking to help her and her husband heal their marriage if at all possible.

In short, wives, you are not called to submit to an abuser. Flee harm’s way. Report the problem to the authorities. Lean into the body of Christ. Fall not into the arms of despair, but into the loving arms of Jesus.

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<sup>16</sup> Marcus Peter Johnson, *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 42–45.

<sup>17</sup> We should note, however, coming to the elders of the church is a difficult thing for an abused woman to do. There, quite often, needs to be a godly female advocate who will walk alongside of her before, perhaps, she can put herself in the vulnerable position of seeking guidance from elders or any other male. It is often a big leap for an abused woman, who often feels shame, fear, and embarrassment, to go from abuse by one man to trusting other men. The elders of the church are simply unwise if they fail to involve female support to abused women.