

Roles in Marriage: A Study in Submission: 1 Peter 3:1-7

Dorothy Patterson

The Definition of Submission

The English term "submission" is derived from a Latin root meaning "the placing of oneself under the control of another."¹ The unabridged dictionary continues with these phrases: "the act of letting down or lowering," "humble or compliant behavior," "a yielding of power or authority" or "a surrendering of person and power to the control of another."² Submission means to put oneself wholly — that is, understandings, knowledge, opinions, feelings, energies — at the disposal of the person over you. It is the yielding of humble and intelligent obedience to an ordained power or authority. One glaring omission from all these definitions is the suggestion of inferiority or worthlessness.

According to Arndt and Gingrich, the verb *hupotasso* means "to subject oneself" or "to be subjected or subordinated to," "to obey persons worthy of respect" — for example, husbands (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1, 5), parents (Lk. 2:51), masters (Tit. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18), secular authorities (Rom. 13:1; Tit. 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13), and church officials (1 Pet. 5:5). The word is also used with respect to God (1 Cor. 15:



Dorothy K. Patterson teaches seminars in womanhood and family life at the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies in Dallas. She holds the B.A. degree from Hardin-Simmons, the Th.M. degree from NOBTS, and the D.Min. degree from Luther Rice Theological Seminary. She serves on the Board of Directors of Religious Roundtable Issues and Answers and on the Advisory Board of the Hawaii Baptist Academy. She is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society and of the American Association of Christian Counselors. She was an Assistant Editor of the Criswell Study Bible and is the author of The Sensuous Woman Reborn and of Sonshine for Your Kitchen.

28; Heb. 12:9; Jas. 4:7) and to Christ (Eph. 5:24).³

There is no confusion as to the meaning of the root in the Greek language, i.e., "to place under," as under the authority or power or control of another. The connotation of the word, however, does not necessarily emphasize obedience itself or the determination to do the will of someone else as much as it indicates the predisposition to lose or to surrender one's own rights or will to another, including coming under the protection of that authority.

In the New Testament *hupotasso* is found only in Luke, Hebrews, and James, and First Peter. There is no word which indicates any more clearly the divinely-willed order, which is clearly delineated in the home with the wife's submission to her husband's headship (Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1; Tit. 2:5) and is properly maintained in the church assemblies (1 Cor. 11:5; 14:34). The order also extends to civil authority or government (Rom. 13:1,5; 1 Peter 2:13) and to the relationship between slaves and masters, which relationship, though not ordained of God, was a social reality protected by civil authority at that time (Tit. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18). Though slavery could not be set aside legally, it could be overcome through the Christian principles of individual worth and brotherhood.

Thus, both linguistic evidence, that is the meaning and etymology of the word itself, and the interpretive examples of its usage, as well as its transmission and adaptation to our own English language, show clarity, unity, and continuity.

Submission actually is above and beyond obedience, which in itself could be the forcing and coercion to outward conformity. It is resting and leaning upon, trusting another, even abandoning one's rights, desires, energies to another. Submission is void of stubbornness or rebellion. Submission is the confidence that the will of the one to whom we are submitting is best; it is casting oneself in simple but complete faith upon the providence of God, since any earthly authority is but a shadow of the heavenly monarch, YAHWEH God.

The Example of Submission

The teaching of Scripture is that there is equality and sameness in essence and being and yet distinction and difference in office and function. The poet has well written:

For woman is not undeveloped man,
But diverse
Not like to like, but like in difference.
Yet in the long years liker must they grow;
Till at the last she set herself to man,
Like perfect music unto noble words;
Distinct in individualities,

But like each other ev'n as those who love.⁴

Surely our Lord knew the struggles of this and every generation over equality of and differences between the sexes. Therefore, he gives in the Godhead the most amazing and irrefutable example for our instruction.

Within the triunity Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all equal (John 4: 25-26; 10:30; 11:25; 14:4-7; Acts 5:3-4; Col. 2:9), and their unity is seen throughout Scripture (Gen. 1; Matt. 3:16-17; John 1:1; Eph. 1: 2-14). Salvation is the result of the cooperative purpose and activity of the triune God. The perfect wisdom of the Father planned and directed redemption, the complete sacrifice of the Son made atonement, and the continual teaching of the Holy Spirit nurtures the faith. In office or function, the Son was obedient to the Father in his incarnation (Luke 22:42; John 5:19-20; 6:38; 8:28-29, 54; 14:13, 28, 31; 1 Cor. 15:28; Phil. 2:5-11), and the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father to testify of and to glorify the Son (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-14). Neither is less than God in submitting to the authority of the Father as he directs redemption through the work of all. Each is not the other in function and office, but all are God in essence and being.

The example of Jesus is especially helpful to the wife. (1) Jesus had no other purpose but to do the Father's will (Heb. 10:7). His office and the task it required made him absolutely committed to humble obedience. Furthermore, (2) Jesus performed the Father's will with delight (Ps. 40:7-8). This attitude of joy pushes beyond mere obedience and resignation to submission and commitment. The demand for personal rights is completely contrary to the teaching of the New Testament and the person and example of Jesus Christ (Judg. 21:25; Prov. 3:5; 12:15; 21:2; 29:15; Is. 53:6; Jas. 1:14-15).

There are also women in Scripture to whom we may look for examples. Sarah followed Abraham willingly and without complaint when he left their homeland. She also put their only son at the disposal of his father, though surely sensing the apprehension of the occasion. These incidents alone make her exemplary to us all as a model for submission.

The book of Esther provides an excellent study in submission in the lives of two queens. Vashti—self-ruled, greedy, selfish, cowardly—was unwise in disobeying Ahasuerus, who was not only her husband but also her king. She sought to cover her disobedience with the pretense of propriety and attempted to hide her pride with a show of modesty. There is no evidence in the text that her husband did any more than give a ridiculous and distasteful command. Obedience only in all reasonable things is not good judgment but selfish license; such is not God's plan but Satan's weapon.

On the other hand, Esther was obedient, grateful, selfless, and courageous. She had every difficulty life could offer—a member of a minority

race, an orphan child, bereft of family and friends, saddled with awesome and fearful responsibility. Yet Esther rose to the occasion with inner beauty of spirit and unshaking commitment to God's providence. She was obedient to her foster father (Esth. 2:20), cooperative with authorities over her (Esth. 2:8-9, 15), and submissive to her husband (Esth. 2:17; 5:2-4; 8:3). One may well conclude that she saved her people not by her power as the Queen of Persia but by her influence as a submissive wife.

The Method of Submission

Paul uses the phrase "as unto the Lord" (Eph. 5:22). Ultimately the motivation for a woman's submission must be beyond pleasing her husband; she must be committed to obeying God. Hers is a commitment to God's plan for marriage. Only when fulfilling that domestic obedience would blatantly violate God's moral law does a wife find an avenue for escape (Acts 5:29). Submission primarily honors the Lord who established the relationship and exalts God who is the ultimate authority for the couple, since the husband himself is directly accountable to God.

God's plan from the beginning of creation is for the woman to be a helper for the man — not for every man, but for the one for whom she was designed (Gen. 2:18). God does not take architectural plans, but he does "build" (from *banah*, Hebrew) a custom-designed, prescription wife for any man who seeks his will (Gen. 2:21-23). This "helper fit for him," his "counterpart" (*'ezer kenegedo*) was designed to be a spiritual partner to assist the man in keeping the garden, obeying the word of God, and performing spiritual service. The woman was a perfect resemblance of the man, possessing neither inferiority nor superiority but alike and equal in essential being, while unique and different in function.

On the other hand, after sin entered the world, the woman's desire to submit to her husband's leadership was distorted so that she desires to possess or control her husband (cf. Gen. 3:16). Her overwhelming desire is to contend with him for leadership. Therefore, the Lord commands the wife to submit to her husband's headship. On the other hand, the husband is usually stronger and bolder, instinctively seeking to lead. Therefore, he commanded to love. There is a beautiful and efficient reciprocity, which is described by Jeremy Taylor:

He rules her by authority,
she rules him by love;

She ought by all means to please him,
and he must by no means displease her.

Submission is not only an attitude of obedience but also an act of the will. Submission does not suggest that a woman has no right to her opinions, nor does it preclude her prerogative to disagree with her hus-

band, nor does it demand that she change her own convictions. However, when a decision must be made in the midst of differences in opinion, the wife responds out of affection for her husband and respect for his God-given leadership with an attitude of gracious and loving cooperation with her husband, supported all the while by her recognition of the just ground for his authority and by her deep confidence in the providence of God.

Submission extends to "everything" (Eph. 5:24). When one chooses whether or not to submit, she has taken the leadership into her own hands. The real test of submission comes when two diametrically opposed wills are locked together.

For example, Isaac and Rebekah held conflicting views concerning the future of their twin sons. Isaac was determined to honor Esau his firstborn with the coveted blessing, while Rebekah, seeing the deficiencies of the older son, being naturally drawn to the younger, and knowing the prophecy of God for Jacob's supremacy, determined to take matters into her own hands and secure the blessing for Jacob by deceiving her aging husband and outmaneuvering her wayward son Esau. She succeeded in securing the blessing for Jacob, but she also lost her favored son into exile and must have surely driven a sword into the heart of the husband who had been so devoted to her (Gen. 27:5-46).

Submission extends over all life but is limited in that no human being can make it obligatory for us to do what God forbids or not to do what God commands. This is an exceedingly difficult area for any wife. Surely the Holy Spirit, who is also God, will not direct a woman to rebel against God-assigned authority unless the husband violates a clear moral principle in Scripture.

Submission is patterned after the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22-30). The relationship between Christ and the church is an everlasting and unalterable one. Because of its sanctity, it is all the more urgent that the analogy not be irreverently cast aside. For example, to say that *kephale* (KJV, "head") is synonymous with *arche*, meaning "beginning," and conclude thereby that Jesus Christ is the "source of life" for the church and not its ruler, is ludicrous.⁵ That may undercut the headship of the husband, but it also erodes the authority of the very Son of God. The submission of a wife to her husband is sanctified and verified by its lucid analogy to the headship of Christ over His bride, the church.

Submission in a wife is a response to the love of her husband and a prerequisite to his headship or leadership. Just as Jesus Christ is the initiator of redemption and love and the church is the responder to his lordship and sacrifice, so the husband is the initiator by right of creation, order, and divine design (Gen. 2:22-23) and the wife a responder to his love and leadership (Prov. 5:18-19; Eph. 6:31, 33).

The Rewards of Submission

The essential key to unlocking the rewards of submission lies in the "meek and quiet spirit." This unique spirit ("the hidden man of the heart") develops in a woman's heart and innermost soul. It is that life which is "hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:2). It is formed only by Jesus Christ and issues forth in a new way of thinking, feeling, and willing (Col. 3:10). The personality of a Christian woman is made beautiful by the ministry of the Holy Spirit within her life, glorifying Jesus Christ and equipping her for spiritual ministry (3:15).

The self-description of our Lord as well as his representation by others is poignantly expressed in two words, "meek" and "lowly" (Is. 53:7; Zech. 9:9; Matt. 11:29; 21:5; John 3:3-15; Phil. 2:5-8; 2 Cor. 10:1; 1 Pet. 2:23). Nothing is exposed to any more contempt and ridicule than the spirit of meekness, describing the gentle cooperation with which a wife submits to her husband's requests and decision. It is absolutely foreign to the cringing servitude or paralyzing obeisance of the slave. Jesus described Himself as "meek" (Matt. 11:29), and yet he is also the "Lion of Judah" to whom God the Father has committed all judgment (John 5:22).

Meekness is not self-assertion but selfless service. Meekness is not selfish ambition but humble labor. Meekness is not the embezzlement of self-dignity but the banking of confident courage. Meekness is not the result of physical weakness but the exhibition of spiritual strength. Meekness is not losing personal rights but gaining self-control. Meekness may cost a woman all worldly possession, but in return it will gain "that which is in the sight of God of great price." The meek are true heirs to the inheritance of God (Matt. 5:5).

The Greek word *praeos* denotes that which is "gentle," "pleasant," "mild." It is a deliberate and active attitude and is not just passive submission. It is the antithesis of roughness or bad temper or sudden and volatile anger. It suggests a patient endurance.

The Greek word *hesuchia* means "calm," "tranquil," "quiet," "peaceful" (1 Tim. 2:2). In non-biblical Greek, Thucydides uses *hesuchia* to describe the quietness of peace as opposed to war, Plato uses it to mean relief from pain, Xenophon by it denominates a place of solitude, Plato by it reveals the tranquility of the philosopher who retreats from the clamoring political arena, and Herodotus uses the word to suggest a quiet disposition.

The failsafe combination for every woman who accepts the responsibility of submission, together with its resulting rewards, is the "meek and quiet spirit." "Meekness" does not cause upheaval or disturbance, and "quietness" bears the outbursts and disturbances of others with serenity. "Meekness" will not give provocation to others; "quietness" will

not be irritated by the provocation of others. "Meekness" suggests gentle cooperation and consistent self-control with no sign of rebellion or resentment. "Quietness" is most literally "keeping one's seat" and confirms the absence of panic or fuss and the presence of calm and peace.

Submission issues forth in a vibrant and productive witness (3:1). The situation described by Peter is presumably one in which the wife in a pagan family is converted. The passage is not directed to those who desire to marry out of the Lord. Believers are clearly forbidden to be "unequally yoked" with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14). They of all will find how bitter the consequences of disobeying a distinct command of God. No promise is given of winning the unbeliever when the believer first despises God's word.

Peter's advice is astounding. He, in agreement with Paul, does not suggest that the wife leave her husband (cf. 1 Cor. 7:13-16). He does not tell her to preach and argue and beg in order to win her husband to her position. His advice is simple: Be a good wife. Swallowing pride, forgetting selfish desires, refusing self-righteousness, working toward perfect love, she presents her sermon in the pantomime of Christian lifestyle.

Even the hardest of hearts, those husbands described by the verb *apeithein*, meaning "obey not" and denoting those who deliberately set themselves against the truth, will be won by the *anastrophes*, the conduct or behavior or lifestyle of their wives and "without a word." When a man will not read the Scriptures or listen to the preacher, often only a godly wife can bear the effective testimony, and God will honor her faithfulness.

Submission provides a springboard for teaching spiritual truths (Eph. 5) and training children (Titus 2:3-5). This ministry of teaching the mysteries of the kingdom is greatly extended by the examples within the home because the lessons in Christian marriage had a Christological basis for the submission of the wife to the husband and the overriding love of the husband for the wife. There is a deeper understanding of lordship, which is broadened to include responsibility, and of submission, which is extended to the voluntary dedication of oneself to the husband's leadership.

Submission is better caught than taught. The respect of children for parents is greatly enhanced by the exemplary relationship between husband and wife who not only provide a pattern for Christian marriage but also present a living object lesson of the relationship between Christ and the Church and an animated illustration of the submission of the believer to the Lordship of Christ.

Submission ensures that a woman is the recipient of human love and the object of divine protection (3:7; Eph. 5:25). Peter's exhortation to husbands was especially needed to avoid misunderstanding and abuse of the submission of women. Husbands are to live with their wives,

not in ignorance but in knowledge of their peculiar need and special desires, as chosen companions and faithful friends.

The word *skeuos*, meaning "chattel" or "piece of furniture," "an instrument adapted to a particular end," "a container," here applies equally to husband and wife (note usage of the comparative, *asthenesteros*), who are both the creative handiwork of God and who are designed one for the other. Both husband and wife may be visualized as vessels or "furniture" in God's house. The same Greek word is found to describe the vessel used in services of the temple (Mark 11:16). Though one is weaker and the other stronger, both are to be used in service to God.⁶ The wife needs his care and protection as the husband needs her ministrations — another example of the divinely designed reciprocity.

On the other hand, this term may simply be Peter's way of expressing the woman's unique feminine nature by comparing the size of her delicate body to that of a man's body, and the muscle strength of her delicate body to that of a man's body, without any intent at degradation.⁷ The word is also used to describe the apostle Paul as "a chosen vessel" (Acts 9:15). Certainly the wife is an instrument of God to bring glory to his name.

"Honor" is to be given. Husbands must give (*aponemontes*, literally "assigned to" or "portioned off") to their wives a special place of honor in their hearts. The word translated "honor" (*time*) is the same word translated "precious" in 1:19. This "honor" would suggest respect, deference, courtesy, kindness. The word denoted the "worth" one ascribes to an individual or the "value" of a thing. It is mere coincidence that the blood of Jesus is described as *timeo* or "precious" just as the wife is to be treated as *time* or with "honor."

The coequality and the unity of husband and wife is confirmed in the term *sunkleronomois*. Spiritually, the wife stands on the same level as her husband; both are positioned in Christ Jesus. The emphasis is not upon the eradication of differences in sex, race, or citizenship but upon the accentuation of likenesses in the creation as being in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), in the unity of spiritual sonship (Gal. 3:28), and in the inheritance of the grace of life (3:7). The distinction between husband and wife by virtue of creation is not and cannot be abolished, any more than Jews can be Greeks. The spiritual area — our essential being — is the only one in which distinctions are abandoned. The Holy Spirit showed no partiality in endowing the women of the early Church equally with the men. The Lord Himself had admitted women to the inner circle of his friends and followers. Yet in none of these instances does the Holy Spirit in bestowing gifts nor Jesus the Son in his calling to ministries violate the teachings of Scripture. A man is not a woman in physical nature. A Jew is not a Gentile in racial heritage. A prisoner

is not a free man in the jurisdiction of the civil law, but in Christ, we are all the same (Gal. 3:28).

The temper or disposition that leads a husband to neglect or abuse his wife also makes him unfit for service to God. This expression (*eg-kptesthai*) is used to describe the pruning, cutting down, and tearing up of trees and thus in this passage denotes the "cutting off" or "hinder-ing" or "rendering ineffectual" the prayers of the negligent husband. This puts beneath the submissive wife the everlasting arms of the Creator-God and envelops her in the protective care of the heavenly Father.

There is no more precious tribute to the Savior than the submissive wife who patterns her life after Christ, honoring him with her obedience and emulating Him with her example.

Conclusion

The key question for me, or for any woman, is not what I think submission means for me in my circumstances, with my education and experience, in my home in an advanced technological civilization, in a decade of civil and personal rights. Rather the question should be: What does God require? The focus must be upon a woman's individual commitment to the Lord and her trust in his providence rather than upon her respective circumstances and expectations.

Chrysostom said,

For if in things where men are the disposers, we oftentimes do not understand the method of disposition, and in truth many of them appear to us inconsistent, and yet at the same time we acquiesce, how much more will this be so in the case of God? However, with God nothing either is inconsistent, or appears so to be the faithful.⁸

God is always fair and just. God never places every responsibility or all duty on one side. The old Roman moral code placed all obligations upon the wife while giving all privileges to the husband. On the other hand the Christian ethic never grants privilege without a corresponding obligation.

The simple formula in Scripture for the husband/wife relationship is this: equality in essence and being, difference in function and office. Karl Barth expressed it this way:

Man and woman are not an A and a second A whose being and relationship can be described like the two halves of an hour glass, which are obviously two, but absolutely equal and therefore interchangeable. Man and woman are an A and a B and cannot, therefore, be equated. In inner dignity and right, and therefore in human dignity and right, A has not the slightest advantage over B, nor does it suffer the

slightest disadvantage . . . Man and woman are fully equal before God . . . They are also equal in regard to the necessity of their mutual relationship and orientation. They stand or fall together. They become and are free or unfree together. They are claimed and sanctified by the command of God together, at the same time, with equal seriousness, by the same free grace, to the same obedience and the reception of the same benefits. Yet the fact remains — and in this respect there is no simple equality — that they are claimed and sanctified as man and woman, each for himself, each in relation to the other in his own particular place, and therefore in such a way that A is not B but A, and B is not another A but B.⁹

Submission is a response to love and headship. A loving headship sets the stage for submission. Publius Syrus said, "It is the submissive wife who generally gets most of her own way."

Notes

¹Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, p. 880.

²Philip Babcock Gove, ed., *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam Co., 1971), p. 2277.

³Wm. F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 855.

⁴Lord Alfred Tennyson, "The Princess."

⁵Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be* (Waco: Word, 1974), p. 31.

⁶Charles Bigg, *The International Critical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (Edinburg: T. and T. Clark, 1961), pp. 154-155.

⁷Gerhard Friedrich, ed. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), p. 491.

⁸Philip Schaff, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), p. 142.

⁹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol III, Pt. 4 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961), pp. 168-169.