

Wives, Submit!

In the English-speaking evangelical world – across all denominations – at least one new book a month appears on the gender question and all the issues connected with it: gender, transgender, marriage, family, abortion, abuse, domestic violence in Christian marriages, and so on. In Germany the frequency is lower; people have made themselves comfortable with the status quo. Perhaps three books a year take up this subject.

Some stormy waves are sweeping through the Christian world – reason enough to face these questions anew in every generation and to understand afresh, for ourselves, for our marriages, and for our churches, how we should and can live out the relationship between the sexes. Christians take their bearings from Jesus and the apostles, and thus from the Bible.

As is well known, many conservative Christians understand the relationship between the sexes, by and large, to mean that Adam, and with him every man, has a superior, more responsible leadership role over Eve and over woman as such. That is why the woman submits and holds no offices in the church, or only a few. She does not preach or teach. This is the teaching of church history – not of the first and second centuries, but from then on until a few decades ago. And many think this is divine truth, the right teaching and the right way to live. The motivation behind it is faithfulness to the Bible, no question. Only when this male dominance is fundamentally called into question do patterns of thinking come to light that had gone unnoticed until then.

In the USA this view is represented by newer movements such as T4G and The Gospel Coalition, and most of all by the Southern Baptists (the Danvers Statement). Grudem, Moore, Piper, Schreiner, Köstenberger, DeYoung, Keller, Carson, Storms, MacArthur, and Strauch are well-known figures who advocate this view – a view I consider fundamentally wrong. For a long time I held and taught this view myself, and I value most of the brothers named and their exegetical work. The disagreement has to do with this man–woman issue (and with the Calvinism they hold, which is not relevant here).

In Germany, initiatives and publishers feel called to follow these leaders, to refresh these theses, and to sell them as biblical truth. I name a few here whose “faithfulness to the Bible” I share on most points, but not on this man–woman issue: E21, EBTC, 3L-Verlag, CLV-Verlag, CSV-Verlag, CV Dillenburg, Betanien, etc., Exclusive and Open Brethren assemblies, churches with a Russian-German background, in part also Free Evangelical Churches (FeG) and Baptist churches (EFG), and all churches listed at KFG.org.

This document contains two chapters from the book by the South African Terran Williams, *How God Sees Women: The End of Patriarchy*. He himself is the pastor of a large church and until some time ago held the complementarian view – that is, the hierarchical subordination of women, though in a moderate form – and followed the American brothers mentioned above. Until he took up the biblical texts thoroughly once more and had to reject this view completely. Something similar, almost the same, happened to me. Out of this came a book that is illuminating all over again and simply refutes this patriarchal and complementarian view.

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf, April 2022, expanded in October 2026

The whole book

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Wives, Submit

“The marriage partners are neither set in a hierarchical relationship with one over the other, nor set apart as autonomous units each doing what he or she pleases. Instead, the relationship of marriage is one of mutual submission.”

Richard Hays¹

“We need to train our daughters to submit to their husbands one day.” As I recently overheard a mother saying this to my wife, it really got my juices flowing. Should I really teach Ivy how to submit to her husband one day? The subject of leadership–submission in one’s own marriage is personal enough, but when I am forced to think about the teachings I should pass on to my children about marriage, I feel even more committed to get that teaching right.

One-Point Complementarianism

It was only as I researched and wrote this and the next chapter that I finally and fully abandoned the idea that God's ideal for all marriages involves even the mildest kind of husband–wife authority–submission. Based on my reading of Ephesians 5 prior to this, I had long held to the idea that a husband's sacrificial leadership of his wife is meant to show something of Christ's sacrificial leadership of his church.

One-point complementarianism holds that females are allowed to lead men in church and society, even though wives are to practise some kind of one-way submission to their husbands.² This is different from *two-point complementarianism*, which calls for female submission in marriage and in church. Interestingly, many biblical scholars and churches all over the world hold to one-point complementarianism.³

I suspect that many two-point complementarians may read this book, and feel convinced about letting go of female exclusion in church leadership, but perhaps still hold to some kind of authority–submission in marriage—and because I also held this position for a few years, I can fully appreciate this position.

Interestingly, *when my ongoing study of Ephesians 5 caused me to abandon even one-point complementarianism, it did not change my marriage very significantly.* As I will explain, I realized that I was more or less a mutualist even in marriage, already. That's because, if my nearly two decades of marriage experience has taught me anything, it's that a peer-to-peer marriage is much more desirable than a leader-to-follower marriage. This, despite how many beautifully articulated one-liners about "Christian" marriage that I and others have preached so often, such as: "He sacrifices, she submits; he leads, she follows; he initiates, she affirms."⁴

Though Jesus says not one word about a husband's leadership of his wife,⁵ Paul seems to have a lot to say, especially in Ephesians 5, which is the focus of this chapter. Here's the passage:

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—30 for we are members of his body. 31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." 32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

As I have researched this chapter, I have discovered something C.S. Lewis wrote to be true: "Many ... find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand." In this case, Ephesians 5 is a tough passage that is

loaded with theology, one I have been chewing on for many years. There are three reasons I have wrestled so much with it.

The first is that my primary earthly relationship is with my wife. I want to obey God's word and apply God's wisdom to my marriage, and this passage is one of the primary biblical texts on marriage, so I best understand it well.

The second is that the "husband leads and wife follows" reading of this passage cuts against the grain of my own experience and cultural sensibility. Let me explain: I am married to a woman who is as educated and adept as I am, and in many aspects more so. She's better with managing finances than I am and currently makes more money than I do; better at reading the emotional and practical needs of our kids than I am; and a better natural leader of groups of people than I am. Also, God seems to speak to her about our family and our ministry as much as he speaks to me about it. For me to assert leadership over her seems to me to be not only arbitrary, but a violation of our relationship and her adequacy. If I am honest, it seems much better to me to partner with her *as my equal*, than to offer her my leadership.

The third reason that I have wrestled with this passage is that excellent biblical commentators land in different places on what this passage is saying, and pastors land in different places on how to apply their beliefs to an actual marriage. Simple as the words may be on first reading, upon more reflection, Ephesians 5 raises more questions than answers. Consider just the first few verses: why does Paul frame the marriage relationship with the preceding verse about mutual submission? What does "head" mean? What does "submit" mean? Does "submit" mean the same thing in verse 21 ("submit to one another"), verse 22 (wives submit to their husbands) and verse 24 (the church submits to Christ)? And practically, what does it mean for wives to submit to their husbands "in everything"?

I will tackle these questions by offering four different interpretations—or "views." Since three-quarters of the Ephesians 5 passage addresses the husband, I will define each view by what is asked of the Christian husband. These views see the husband as the decision-maker (View 1), tiebreaker (View 2), servant of his equal (View 3), and redeemed *paterfamilias* (View 4).

View 1: The Husband As (Regular) Decision-Maker

This is Wayne Grudem's view. He argues that when Paul says, "submit to one another" in Ephesians 5:21, Paul does not mean that all believers submit to all believers, but only that all believers submit only to those in rightful authority over them. In other words, submission flows from wife to husband, but definitely not the other way around.

He says that "head" in "the husband is the head of the wife" means *authority over*. Paul is pressing men to take leadership of their wives, and wives to accept this leadership. When it speaks about the husband laying down his life for his wife like Jesus did for the church, this means that Paul is urging a husband not merely to love his wife, but to lead his wife in a loving way. And when Paul then quotes Genesis 2:24 at the end, he argues that Paul is grounding this authority of the husband over the wife in the pre-fall account of Adam's authority over Eve.

As to the practical implication of all this, Grudem tells us how he works this out in his own marriage:

In every decision, whether large or small, and whether we have reached agreement or not, the responsibility to make the decision still rests with me. (I am speaking here of the decisions that involve the both of us, not the individual decisions we each make about our personal spheres of

responsibility.) I do not agree with those who say that male headship only makes a difference once in ten years or so when a husband and wife can't reach agreement. I think that male headship makes a difference in every decision that the couple makes every day of their married life. If there is genuine male headship, there is a quiet, subtle acknowledgment that the focus of the decision-making process is the husband, not the wife. And even though there will often be much discussion, and there should be much mutual respect and consideration of each other, yet ultimately the responsibility to make the decision rests with the husband.⁶

John Piper shares something of this view as he fondly recalls his parents' marriage, in which his father was the regular decision-maker:

When my father came home he was clearly the head of the house. He led in prayer at the table. He called the family together for devotions. He got us to Sunday School and worship. He drove the car. He guided the family to where we would sit. He made the decision to go to Howard Johnson's for lunch. He led us to the table. He called for the waitress. He paid the check. He was the one we knew we would reckon with if we broke a family rule or were disrespectful to Mother. These were the happiest times for Mother. Oh, how she rejoiced to have Daddy home! She loved his leadership. Later I learned that the Bible calls this "submission."⁷

Most popular Christian books on marriage espouse this view. One says, "The husband ... is responsible for the important decisions in the home. ... A responsive and receptive wife willingly ... surrenders her freedom for his love, adoration, protection, and provision."⁸ Another echoes the same sentiment: "A man may have many bosses outside the home, but inside the home, he has the opportunity to kindly provide authority and to receive his rightful respect."⁹

Now, before I move on to explore the other views, let me say this: up until the 1980s almost all biblical scholars and Christians read it in precisely the same way. This is therefore a view to be reckoned with.

But allow me to be honest: that approach would be the death of my marriage! And as a pastor, I have never advised this view—no doubt Grudem's and Piper's life experience is different from mine, but I can't imagine an intimate relationship thriving where one person makes all or most of the decisions that involve both of them. I can't but help conclude that couples that espouse this view as working in their marriage are either those who, by upbringing or culture, prefer "the traditional marriage" of yesteryear, or consist of a husband who is a natural leader and a wife who is a natural follower. Not every married relationship is wired that way, however, and certainly not Julie's and my one. I am glad that in the last few decades, pastors and theologians started to suggest a modification of this view, which some call "soft complementarianism," or what I call "the husband as tiebreaker."

View 2: The Husband As (Rare) Tiebreaker

Timothy and Kathy Keller, in their bestselling book *The Meaning of Marriage*, offer a softer view of complementarian marriage. They write an entire chapter on the fact that, contra Grudem's view, Paul frames the gender roles in marriage as an expression of mutual submission in verse 21, which they define as the choice to humbly serve and please the other:

In Philippians 2:2–3, Paul says bluntly that Christians should "in humility consider others better than [them]selves." ... We should consider and count the interests of others as more important than our own. Elsewhere he says that we should not "please ourselves" but rather should "please our neighbor, for his own good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself" (Romans 15:1–

3). Paul goes so far as to tell Christians to be “*douloi*” of one another (Galatians 5:13)—literally bond-servants. ... Whether we are husband or wife, we are not to live for ourselves but for the other. And that is the hardest yet single most important function of being a husband or a wife in marriage.¹⁰

By this view, mutual submission flows both ways: in verses 22–24, Paul tells the wives to submit to their husbands, while in verses 25–29 he tells the husbands how to submit to (taking the form of sacrificial love for) their wives.

Mutual submission aside, the Kellers still argue for the husband as leader. They do so by shifting from the language of a husband in mutual submission with his wife to that of a husband who submits “to the role of servant-leader.”¹¹ (I must note that this is a questionable use of the word “submit,” because it now means something different from its use in the idea of mutual submission: submitting to a role is not at all the same thing as submitting to a person.)

Thankfully, the Kellers offer a much softer kind of leadership than has been the understanding of a wife’s submission in centuries past—“[W]here both parties cannot agree, but some kind of decision must be made [the husband has] the right to cast the deciding vote and (thus) take the greater responsibility for the decision.”¹² Elsewhere, Timothy Keller calls this the right of the husband to “overrule” his wife by offering “the final say.”¹³ In other words, *only where there is disagreement, and not in everyday decision-making*, should the husband make a decision.

As a long-time soft complementarian, I and many other teachers in the same camp have applied this teaching, by saying things like: “Every now and then, on very rare occasions, a choice must be made and the two of you can’t agree, then the wife should ask the husband to take a decision on the matter.” For example, my friend Alan Frow, an influential complementarian pastor in Southern California, says that almost all decisions in his marriage employ collaboration: “I have been married for 25 years,” he says, “and in that time only five times my wife has said to me, ‘We can’t agree. You are the leader, so go and seek God.’”¹⁴

In my own marriage, years would pass by without the need for me to use my “tiebreaking authority,” because we always managed to reach consensus. *But see, this means that in our lived experience, my “leadership” of Julie and her need to “submit” to me practically didn’t exist.*

Doubting The Tiebreaking Model

For many soft complementarians, like myself for many years, the difficult work of theologically upgrading one’s position hardly feels worth the fuss. On almost any day of the year, their kind of marriage is exactly the same as a mutualist one. In fact, I may have stuck with the Kellers’ view longer than I did (and am empathetic towards others who still do) except that I have come to question whether *even a soft form of authority–submission really is God’s ideal for all marriages*. In fact, I have five serious doubts.

First, if we idealize a wife’s submission to her husband’s authority, then it is that much easier to disregard her vital contributions in church and in society. Despite the soft complementarian insistence that a wife’s submission is *only* to her husband, and not to all men, complementarians still use this point to argue that if a wife is to be led at home, she should not lead in the church.¹⁵ Frow, for example, rightly says that marriage roles in a human family are a “mysterious mirror”¹⁶ of Christ’s

relationship with the church, and while he then still affirms women leading in society, he concludes that, “in God’s family there should also be some mysterious mirroring.”

But is it right to make this jump? In Ephesians 5, Paul says that the union of husband and wife is a “mystery” that points to the union between Christ and the church. Why would complementarians then feel the liberty to superimpose this “mystery” generically onto an entire community, so that male elders somehow represent Jesus as husband (and, by this argument, must be male) while the rest of the church represents the bride (now strangely deviating from the analogy by including females *and males*)? Besides, the idea that elders represent the husband of the church is a dangerous and unbiblical one—especially when Jesus emphatically and solely holds that role in the church. If we stick with the marriage–church analogy, the closest church leaders should come is to being Jesus’ best man, like John the Baptist in John 3:29.

Second, I found myself wondering why, according to the complementarian view of marriage, Paul would idealize the very hierarchical arrangement that the fall brought about when God announced its consequence not as a promise but as a dire prediction: “[H]e will rule over you.”¹⁷

Third, I continue to be horrified at the level of partner abuse that has been proven to so often exist in Christian marriages. Sociologists like Elaine Storkey argue that it is not at all helped when female submission is taught as a divinely decreed norm. Despite hearing teachings about their “benevolent” authority, husbands are sometimes encouraged by the very idea of divinely ordained male authority to hold “an overt or subconscious belief in male privilege and entitlement, by which men assume rights to freedom, status and opinions not applicable to their partner.”¹⁸ Unless they are the most sanctified kinds of husbands, by not seeing their partners as their true equals, they remain more inclined, even if ever so slightly, to treat them as less-than.¹⁹

In Africa, where I live, the level of gender–violence is truly horrifying. I have heard stories of Christian husbands beating their wives for insubordination (and even of a pastor beating a wife in his congregation for being insubordinate to her husband). Also, some research²⁰ shows that the doctrine of female submission increases the likelihood of an abused wife sticking it out in an abusive marriage, as well as the churches they reach out to for help *not* giving them counsel to get away from their abuser. If this is God’s ideal teaching, I wondered why, once it falls on Christian ears, it too often harms.

Fourth, as much as I prefer soft complementarianism to a harder form, I had to admit that it was a brand new creation. If the interpretation that gives rise to the soft complementarian marriage is only a half-century or so old, it is even younger than the interpretation that gives rise to a mutualist marriage. Though I am grateful for this new soft Keller-style complementarianism, I must agree with complementarian scholars like Grudem and Russell Moore, who imply that this softer approach is in fact more akin to a mutualist marriage than a complementarian one. If a plain reading of the text requires my regular decision-making and my wife’s regular submission, then we have never actually had a “biblical” marriage after all. Instead we have had a marriage that “affirms mutual submission within an equal marital partnership,” in which decisions are made “through a process of negotiated consensus”—this is how Moore defines a “feminist” and definitely not a “biblical” or complementarian, marriage.²¹ If Grudem (and the historical view) is correct, then either God wills that I change my practice and start making more decisions on my wife’s behalf, or I need to change my theology. Continuing to live out of sync with what we believe is mere inconsistency.

Fifth, there is no satisfactory answer, from the way I see it, to the question, “*Why* should the wife submit?” View 1 might be jarring to many of us now, but for centuries it made perfect sense: culture and church doctrine believed that women were inferior to men, and therefore needed to be led for their own good. But since the 1960s those ideas have been abandoned in the culture *and* the church. We all know many women who are more intelligent and decisive than their husbands. So it can’t be that they are inferior at making decisions. So why then?

The Kellers brave an answer: “[T]he answer to that question is another question: ‘Why did Christ become the one to give up the authority to the Father?’” Their point is that a wife’s submission to a husband’s authority is meant to mirror Christ’s relationship to the Father. As I have explained in Chapters 3 and 6, however, this misportrays the Trinitarian relationship, as well as overlooks the fact that Scripture *nowhere* compares the Son giving up authority to the Father with the wife giving up authority to the husband.

John Piper gives another answer: a Christian wife’s submission to her husband represents to a watching world the church’s submission to Christ. That preaches nicely, but take a closer look: this only works in View 1 where the husband leads the wife every day of her life. View 2 is a lousy portrayal of Christ’s leadership of the church—if Jesus is our Lord, we sign up for his daily leadership, not some soft collaborative decision-making, where only every now and then, when we can’t agree, we allow Jesus to play his trump card.

Though theologians like Keller and Piper try to provide tenuous theological reasons, many pastors, who are often more pragmatically orientated, offer this justification for a husband’s authority: anything with two heads is a monster, they say, so it’s important to know who the buck stops with. But this is the reason I cannot accept. Allow me to explain why.

“But Who Will The Buck Stop With?”

In a two-person union, does the buck really need to stop with only one person or else the marriage goes awry? I can see the need for a captain in a sports team, or a general over an army, or a CEO in a company. But two people in a “one flesh” union, who are ideally, as Genesis 2:24 says, “naked” or purposely vulnerable with one another, do not seem to need a leader as much as they need both to fully commit to loving and serving each other as equal partners.

Love and Respect, the most influential popular Christian book on marriage, states the argument like this: “To set up a marriage with two equals at the head is to set it up for failure. That is one of the big reasons that people are divorcing right and left today.”²² But where I wondered is the evidence for this outlandish claim? Though I hope to read further studies on the matter, a recent study of 21,000 married and divorced church-going Christian women has come to the opposite conclusion: “Couples where one spouse makes the decisions, even if they talk their decisions over with their spouse first and seek their input, are 7.4 times more likely to be divorced than couples who share decision-making power.”²³

Many Christians intuitively know this (whether or not they claim to theologically believe it). Of the thousands surveyed, about 40% believed that the husband has tiebreaking authority, while about 60% believed that the wife should love her husband by submitting to him—and yet, “only 17.3% of couples actually act out men having the final say. In contrast, 78.9% of marriages function without a tiebreaker—so that couples either make decisions together or forgo making a decision if they don’t agree.”

What we have here are two quandaries that pastors like me have preferred to not admit. First, there's a mismatch of beliefs and behaviour in the people we lead. While the majority of Christians believe that the husband is the decision-maker or tiebreaker, most do not practice it! Second, "though many Christian couples believe husbands have decision-making authority, *the belief did not cause harm to the couple until it was put into practice.*" Should pastors like me *insist* that God's people start practising what they believe, or do we question what we have been teaching them to believe? If I as a pastor really want the best for the married couples I lead, I have to face up to some hard data:

When women don't feel heard, and instead feel as if their opinions are not as important as their husbands, their marriages are 26 times more likely to end in divorce. ... Even if he consults his wife, in marriages where a husband has decision-making power, his opinions, by definition, matter more than hers. And when women feel their opinions are not given the same weight as their husbands, marriages [are more likely to] crumble.²⁴

Conversely, there are glaring benefits to mutuality in marriage. When couples make decisions together, wives are over four times more likely to rate themselves among the happiest 20% of marriages than among the least happy 20%, and are 67% more likely to frequently orgasm during sex."²⁵ These statistics verify that the marriages (and sex lives) that fare best are those that decide to work things out together, and when they disagree, to give the matter the time and care it needs to come to an agreement.

I can appreciate how, in a leadership team of say ten people, the leader may need to act as tiebreaker on occasion. But let's be careful of importing organizational decision-making dynamics into a marriage, which is only two people, far more relational than functional, pledged to a soul-level union.

Besides, how often do couples ever find themselves in a situation where a crucial decision *must* be made without the time for them to find consensus? Usually there is time to decide, or for the couple to defer to the one with the most conviction or expertise in the area that this decision impacts. But if a couple still disagrees, it shows that both feel strongly about their view. *For the husband to then pull rank, precisely at the moment of greatest difference, seems to me the poorest outcome!* Is there not a way for the couple to talk this one through until there is consensus? Until that clarity comes, it's better to extend the conversation, while both husband and wife seek the best outcome in prayer, seek counsel from others, and attempt to really, really hear each other.²⁶

My experience leads me to this conclusion: employing my authority at the very point where my wife feels strongly enough about something to disagree with me, seems like relational sabotage. Unlike Alan Frow, who recalls five times when his wife asked him to play the trump card, I have only a single memory of making a big decision in a way that overruled Julie's uncertainty about it. But even that particular time she trusted my conviction more than merely accepting my authority. Now that I think about it, I have many more memories of trying to make a final decision in opposition to her view, only to have her bravely push back on me. Thankfully, each time I listened and we delayed making a final decision. In hindsight, I think I would have damaged her trust if, despite her legitimate concerns, I had tried to pull rank.

All that to say, I have come to have serious doubts about View 2! The older I have become, and the more couples I have journeyed with as both a pastor and friend, the harder it is to sweep these concerns under the carpet. I have concluded that how Julie and I conduct our marriage in God's sight, and how we raise our children to treat their spouses, and allow their spouses to treat them, is such a

pivotal subject that it's better to face up to the weaknesses of even the tiebreaking view, and be open to other possible interpretations of Ephesians 5. When I did that, I rediscovered the joy of not merely surface-reading difficult passages like Ephesians 5, but drilling deeper, asking not only what the passage was saying, but also why it was saying that, and who it was originally saying that to.

View 3: The Husband As Servant Of His Equal

Before I ever properly investigated this third view, I had assumed it was obviously an attempt to sidestep the clear teaching of Ephesians 5. I would have agreed with Frow, who suggests that it is an attempt to do interpretive “flick flacks” with the passage. *I was astonished then, when I finally and properly applied my mind to this view, to discover how compelling it really is*—not a case of exegetical gymnastics, but the result of doing the much-needed hard yards involved in sound interpretation. The biblical scholar Philip Payne makes several observations about Ephesians 5 that make it very feasible that Paul is in fact promoting equality and mutuality as the basis for marriage, and not—as a surface reading suggests—leadership and submission.

First, Paul casts Christian marriage within the matrix of mutual submission. Payne says that Paul's joining of the words “submit” (meaning, to place one's self under another) with the reciprocal phrase “one another” (Greek: *allelous*) is one of the most socially revolutionary and linguistically creative teachings of Paul. Most times in the New Testament the word “submit” (Greek: *hypotasso*) means to comply with the authority of another, but by adjoining it to “one another,” *he makes this submission reciprocal, thus shifting its meaning from accepting someone's authority to placing one's self in their service*. This fits perfectly with what Paul has already said to the Ephesian Christians who are to be: “bearing with one another in love” (4:25); “kind and compassionate to one another,” and “forgiving one another” (4:32). The reason Paul gives is that we submit to each other “out of reverence for Christ” (5:21)—this points back to the beginning of the chapter, where Christ is shown to have put himself at our service: “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (5:2).

Hard complementarians who hold View 1, push back on this. Both Wayne Grudem and Kevin De Young try to refute the reciprocal implication of a husband's submission to a wife by arguing that the phrase “one another” can mean “some to others.” For example, Grudem refers to the use of the term in “men will slay one another” (Revelation 6:4) and says that it means that “some men will slay other men.” But if the author of Revelation had simply envisaged some men slaying others, but not being slain themselves, he would not have used the term at all. De Young points to other texts that use the phrase “one another”²⁷ that he claims are not reciprocal—yet on close examination they most certainly are, as is every use of “one another” in the rest of the letter to the Ephesians, as well as the entire New Testament. Grudem and De Young's attempts to make submission to “one another” flow only one way (from the subordinate to the one in authority) fails. Even pioneering complementarian theologians like George Knight and Tom Schreiner disagree with them on this point.²⁸

Second, Paul specifies what kind of wifely submission he is referring to. As I have just said, there are two kinds of submission. There's *compliant submission* given by a subordinate to an authority, such as a citizen to their government.²⁹ Then there is *serving submission*—as we have seen, this is what Paul means when he speaks of mutual submission.³⁰ The former is one-directional and can be demanded. The second kind can be reciprocal, and it is always voluntary.

When Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands, which kind is he referring to? Our ability to answer this is affected by our English translation. Flip open any Bible and we will see a full stop at the end of verse 21, then a whole new paragraph begins. Some translations even insert a heading between verse 21 and 22, such as “*Wives and husbands*” (ESV). But this paragraph break or inserted heading obscures something very important: *in the Greek language, there is no full stop between verse 21 and verse 22.*

In fact, and this blew my mind, the oldest Greek copies we have do not even have the word “submit” in verse 22. It does not have it because verse 22 borrows the verb from verse 21.³¹ The Greek literally says, “submitting to one another in reverence for Christ, wives [note the missing word] to your own husbands ...” *In other words, when Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands here, he refers to precisely the same kind of submitting all believers are to give one another.* Paul is not here telling wives to be especially subordinate to their husbands. Rather, he refers to the second kind of submission, in which wives choose to humbly serve and please their husbands. He uses the word submit one final time in the same sentence to then refer to the church’s submission to Christ, which in light of the use of the word “submit” in verse 21 and 22, we should then read as, “As the church *humbly serves and pleases* Christ in everything, so should wives *humbly serve and please* their husbands in everything” (v24).³²

Third, “head” (Greek: *kephalē*) in this instance very likely does not mean *authority*, but *life-source*. In modern English, “head” used metaphorically means authority—the CEO is the “head” of the company; the commanding officer is the “head” of the platoon. Additionally, when we picture a literal head of a literal body, we moderns assume that the head, which contains the brain, is therefore the control centre for the body. Through the nervous system, it sends orders to the body.

The question we must ask is what Paul meant when he chose the word *kephalē* and what would his original readers have understood. Complementarian scholars argue that, since Paul compares Christ as the head to the husband, who is the head, surely a husband’s authority is implied. But this overlooks the fact that when Paul uses the word as a metaphor, this is probably not his meaning at all. Yes, Paul understood Jesus Christ to have authority over the church and creation, but when he chooses to speak of Jesus as *kephalē* of a body, he usually highlights something related to but not exactly the same as authority. In Appendix 3: The Meaning of *Kephalē*, a must-read, I explain that, contra Grudem’s claim, the word at Paul’s time did not commonly mean authority.

What is the meaning Paul intends here in Ephesians 5? The most important clue is that he uses it as part of an analogy for marriage, a brand new literary invention at that, in which *the husband is the head of the wife, who is his body*. The Greek word for “head” is used in connection with the male–female relationship only twice (here and in 1 Corinthians 11:3), and scholars are divided as to the meaning of the word in each case (although in Chapter 6, I make the case that it means *honour-worthy life-source* in 1 Corinthians). Only in Ephesians 5 is the word used within the metaphor of *head-and-body*. Does Paul give us any clues as to what he may mean then by “head of the wife, who is his body”?

Yes he does! The actual Greek sentence structure in verse 23, unfortunately obscured in most translations, is “husband head of the wife, ... Christ head of the church, *he himself Saviour of the body.*” In the Greek, we see what Paul means by “head.” These three parallel phrases highlight that Paul uses “head” synonymously with “Saviour.” If Paul had wanted to emphasise the husband’s authority, he could have used one of the many Greek words to say as much: *kyrios* (lord), *exousia* (authority), or *proestōtes* (manage). Instead, he opts for the head–body metaphor, which he compares to Christ’s

giving himself as Saviour (not Lord in this case) of his body. Sure, theologically speaking, Christ is both Saviour (what he gives to us in service and care) and Lord (what he rightfully demands from us) but *Paul packs into this analogy only the meaning of Christ as Saviour of his body*. If we have any doubts that a husband as head here means a husband's care and service, the idea of care and service is sustained in the verses that follow, though it is a little hidden by the way Paul weaves in yet another metaphor of Christ's marriage to his bride, the church:

Christ gave himself up for her [his bride/body] to make her [his bride/body] holy, cleansing her [his bride/body] by the washing with water through the word, and to present her [his bride/body] to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church.

See that? Throughout this passage, *Paul emphasises not authority but service and care*. When he speaks about the husband as head of the wife, he does not imply that husbands should assert their authority over their wives, but rather that *husbands should serve their wives as any of us would serve our own bodies*.

Having unpacked in verses 21–30 this triple layer metaphor (of head–body; husband–wife; and Christ–church), Paul then adds yet one more layer to the mix: Adam and Eve's pre-fall union—this complicates the picture he is painting, but makes a wonderful point nonetheless: “‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.” (v31). Paul's analogy of a husband being the head, and his wife being the rest of the body, allows Paul to take us back to the first-ever marriage between Adam and Eve, when they first enjoyed a metaphoric “one flesh” unity. As we have already seen in Chapter 4, the union between Adam and Eve was not about authority and submission but celebratory intimacy and partnership. *Using the head–body metaphor, Paul in Ephesians 5 thus highlights not a chain of command but a bond of love*.

Let me offer one last insight based on reading Ephesians 5 as God's calling the husband to serve (not lead) his wife: *there's not a single instruction in this passage for a husband to lead his wife*—not here and not anywhere else in all of Scripture! Go ahead, read that again. It's an interpretive game changer.

All this brings us to the mighty conclusion that there might be *nothing* in Ephesians 5 about a husband's authority over his subordinate wife. Rather, what Paul highlights through graphic metaphors, is that husbands and wives are to lovingly unite with and mutually serve and please one another.

Does this mean that Paul is telling husbands and wives to treat each other in the same way?

Yes and no. Yes, because both are called to “submit to each other.” And although only husbands are told to “love” their wives here, both are to love each other—elsewhere Paul specifically tells wives to “love their husbands.”³³ But also no, because Paul may have in mind the patterns he had observed in so many marriages in the churches in the Greco-Roman world. For example, notice that the husband is described as the *kephalē* or life-source, not told to be one. Paul is probably addressing the fact that in the ancient world, wives were mostly younger and less educated, bound up in child-rearing, and thus completely reliant on the economic and physical care of their husbands. Describing a dependent wife as a *kephalē* would not have made any sense.

Also, if the husbands in Paul's time were anything like so many husbands I know of today, then they were (on average) less likely than the wives to lay down their lives sacrificially for their spouses.³⁴ For this reason, Paul feels it sufficient to merely tell the wives to submit to (that is, to humbly serve and please) their husbands, but then proceeds to chip away at the husband's selfishness by saying three times as much to him—pressing him to sacrifice like Christ. The shoe certainly fits me: in my own marriage, it is not Julie but I who have needed the most prodding from Scripture and the ongoing transforming work of the Spirit to sacrificially and humbly serve and please my spouse. I suspect that my friend, Andrew Bartlett, is correct to conclude, "Paul is calling the husband to go first in self-sacrifice. While this is not different in kind from the wife's Christian obligation of unselfish love for her husband, it is an intensification of the husband's responsibility to love."³⁵

In verse 33, Paul implores men to especially "love" (not lead) their wives, and wives to especially "respect" (not subordinate to) their husbands. Why does he tell wives to respect their husbands, and husbands to love their wives? Though most wives, then as now, would want to be respected, and most husbands would want love, it is likely that Paul knows something about the distinctive psyches of so many of the men and women of his day.

Even as I describe View 3—the husband as a servant of his equal—I feel the strength of it. To be honest, I hope this is the correct interpretation, because I find it to be so inspiring and challenging. If I find Grudem's take of the husband as daily decision-maker to be bad news, and the Kellers' take on the husband as tiebreaker to be better, but still problematic and inconsistent, I find this view to be both good news and eminently workable.

Still, what if Paul did mean to imply in this passage, even if he offset it by calling husbands to loving sacrifice, that Ephesian wives were to recognize some kind of authority in their husbands? After all, any comparison of marriage to the divine marriage, in which there definitely is a difference in rank between God/Jesus and us, may at least bring to mind hierarchy in the marriage relationship. So, determined to get this passage right, I chewed on it even more. I wondered if I had applied *all* the most important principles of biblical interpretation to the task—and then realized I had not.

View 4: The Husband As Redeemed Paterfamilias

As said before, one of the most common mistakes we make when trying to understand and apply Scripture is to imagine that its various parts were written directly to us. But they were not: *they may have been written for us, but they were not written to us*. Only as we understand the situation of the original readers, and what they would have understood by the words, can we who live in a very different situation or culture begin the task of deriving meaning for ourselves from the text. Thankfully, in many or most passages, our modern situation is quite comparable to the situation of the first readers; making this an easy task. But what about when their situation is very, very different from our own?

*The Christian today is separated from the biblical audience by a "river" of differences (e.g., language, culture, circumstances). This river hinders us from moving straight from meaning in their context to meaning in ours. We are certainly part of the same great story, but our place in the story is often different from that of our spiritual ancestors. Sometimes the river is wide, requiring a long bridge for crossing. At other times, it is a narrow creek, which we can cross easily. We need to know just how wide the river is before we start trying to construct a principalising bridge across it.*³⁶

As I applied this interpretive key to my study of Ephesians 5, I realized my mistake, and the mistake of almost everyone I had read on this passage: we assume that Ephesians 5 is a narrow creek, which we can cross easily, whereas it is in fact a wide river that requires a long bridge for crossing.

Let me explain. We imagine that the married couples present in the Ephesian church were more or less like modern ones. We imagine that Paul “sees” us, our contemporary marriages, and therefore writes this letter to us. But no, the marriages he addresses are those in the first century Greco-Roman world, so different from our own. In that world, households did not consist of two working parents, two children and a dog and cat. It mostly consisted of a man, the *paterfamilias*, who ruled over his wife, his children, and sometimes his slaves. Owing to the teaching of Aristotle, homes were hierarchically arranged—in that culture, this was the best way to be a household. (Only when there was no adult man, the ruler of the house was a woman.) I use “ruler” intentionally: Aristotle said, “the rule of a household is a monarchy”³⁷—the husband and father was king.

As I mentioned children and slaves in the previous paragraph, something might have begun to dawn upon you, as it did me. The husband–wife relationship in Ephesians 5:22–33 is the first of three sets of relationships Paul addresses. The next two follow immediately: parent–children (6:1–4) and master–slaves (6:5–9). What I had failed to see previously was that *Paul is applying the gospel to these stratified ancient households*, consisting of a hierarchy of men, women, children and slaves. Husbands had rights, privileges, and freedoms denied to wives,³⁸ held the power, and provided most of the income. Most often, women could not own property and run businesses nor conduct legal or financial transactions without a man acting on their behalf.

In the Mediterranean society, the average age of a man at marriage was thirty, but for a woman was eighteen or less at marriage. When a man married he was already a man of the world who knew how to live in society. He was a person who could function socially and economically. When a woman married she was still a girl who had never even been allowed to answer a knock at the front door of her home. A typical woman bore a child about every two years or thirty months through her childbearing years. She was always “barefoot and pregnant” and at home. She bore a child as soon as the previous one was weaned.³⁹

Most women were not educated except in home duties. They were entirely dependent on and, for all their lives, set *under* a man—a father, or perhaps a guardian, then a husband. Subordination was the norm for children, slaves, *and wives*. In this context and culture, the *paterfamilias* was supposed to be in control, not humbly serving anyone, especially their own subordinates, who were in fact to serve the *paterfamilias*. This was Aristotle’s idea: “[T]he male is by nature fitter for command than the female ... [T]he inequality is permanent. ... The courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying.”⁴⁰

Now notice this: Paul is not creating a domestic structure in which the senior man rules everyone else any more than he creates the governmental structure in which Caesar is Lord of the Roman Empire. He is merely speaking to it, trying *to work within the existing social structures by finding ways to redeem them, and not necessarily by trying to overthrow them*. Like any good missionary today would do as they enter a new culture, Paul accommodated to what he could, even though he did not necessarily endorse it as ideal.

The Gospel Meets The Ancient Household

If you were the apostle Paul in that context, how would you have pastored these hierarchical households in your church? Let's observe the three ways Paul pastors the Ephesian households in their context.

First, he immerses all household relationships in the gospel. Paul guides the wife and husband to treat each other "out of reverence for Christ," and baptizes every instruction in wording that relates to Christ: "as you do to the Lord," "as Christ is," "to Christ," "just as Christ," and "I am talking about Christ." He carries on the same approach in getting parents and children, and masters and slaves to reimagine their way of relating. Every second word it seems is "Christ" or "Lord." Paul is artfully attempting to help everyone—wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters—to see their way of relating to the other as an outworking of their relationship with Christ.

Second, Paul especially undermines the self-serving and dominating behaviour so common in the *paterfamilias*. In ancient codes that specified the roles within the household, the *paterfamilias* was told to rule, and all the rest were told to be subordinate. Most of the focus in those codes was on the subordinates who needed to get their act together. But Paul's upgraded "code" does something never done before: in each pairing of relationships, he gives most attention to telling the husband/parents/masters (the same man is included in all three!) to get *their* act together. Presuming that the *paterfamilias* already rules by virtue of their culture, he tells him to now lay down his life for his wife, to not exasperate his children, and to not threaten his slaves. This would have been an absolutely groundbreaking challenge in its day. In a culture that gave husbands the power of life and death over their wives, Paul tells husbands to lay down their power, even to die if need be, so their wives can flourish.

Third, Paul uses the gospel to soften and reformat the subordination of the wife, children and slaves to the *paterfamilias*. Without suggesting they become insubordinate, he suggests the kind of subordination that the gospel may bring about *in their situation*. As we have seen, for a wife this means that she should not merely reluctantly subordinate herself to her husband's authority, but rather humbly serve and please him, in the same way she would humbly serve and please Christ.

Paul's teaching worked wonders.

By hammering away at the *paterfamilias*, and then addressing so tenderly the most powerless in a patriarchal society—the wives, the children, the slaves—Paul helped the early church to attract the powerless in droves. The pagan critic Celsus mocked the church in the second century, saying that "Christianity is a religion for women, children, and slaves."⁴¹

Paul's spin on the functioning of the household relations was unheard of in the culture. *In all this, he does not obliterate the ancient hierarchy—but neither does he seek to uphold it as some kind of divine ideal*. If anything, he subverts it in such a way that not only is the entire structure baptized in the gospel, but it will eventually dissolve in it; as it has in our day.

At the time, however, no pagan in the ancient world looking into a Christian household would be likely to think that Paul was trying to overthrow Roman law, or implement flat-structure, egalitarian households. What they would notice in the redeemed *paterfamilias* is the unusual way he tenderly cared for and sacrificed for those he led, and the joy in his wife, children, and slaves.

So, contra View 3, which suggests Paul is teaching undiluted egalitarianism, this view posits that when Paul calls the husband the head, he may well infer that the husband has authority over the wife as a cultural norm. And when he likens the husband–wife relationship to the Christ–church relationship, it is possible he is picking up on the fact that one is “in charge” of the other. However, *though he assumes the paterfamilias is in charge, he certainly is not prescribing it as some kind of “role” or status that the husband should have for all time and in all cultures over their wives*. Far from idealizing a man’s cultural power over a woman, he tries to redeem it with the gospel.

Countering John Piper’s Argument

Some complementarians make the counterargument that, if we accept Paul both acknowledges the authority of the husband and relates it to Christ’s relationship with the church, then he does in fact idealize and immortalize husband–wife leadership–submission. Piper says (and writes a book to say) that the redeemed yet hierarchical Christian marriage demonstrates the gospel to the world. He says, “The husband’s loving leadership of his submissive, dependent wife is a picture of Christ and the church. If the husband loses leadership, then it no longer is.”⁴²

His argument is triply flawed. First, Paul says something similar about slavery in the household when he tells slaves to obey their masters in the same way they obey Christ who is their master. By Piper’s rationale, God created the master–slave relationship to show forth to the world the “beauty” of our subservience to Jesus our master. No! In both cases Paul is applying the gospel to a real but not necessarily ideal situation.

Second, it is not the hierarchy of a marriage that displays the gospel, but the redemption of such a marriage that does so. What Paul stresses in this passage is not hierarchy, but the husband’s service of his wife, who mutually submits to him, with whom he enjoys an intimate relationship. Surely this can be even more evident in a mutualist marriage than a stratified one? As pointed out in View 3, Paul qualifies his use of the word *kephalē*, by stressing Jesus as Saviour and sustainer of the church, not Lord over it.

Third, no hierarchical marriage can ever be hierarchical enough if we assume that what God wants to show a watching world through marriages is Jesus’ lordship over his church. Jesus is Lord of his church, whereas a husband most certainly is not lord of his wife.

The weaknesses in Piper’s argument aside, *I agree with him that Christian marriage is meant to display something of the gospel*. What a Christian marriage can do really well is exactly what a Christian community can do: it can show the world that we are Jesus’ disciples by sacrificially loving each other as he has loved us. Mutualist marriages can do this as well, if not better than, stratified ones. The other thing a Christian marriage can do well is to mirror the permanent and intimate union we have with Christ. The analogy of head-and-body, what Paul then calls “one flesh,” indicates a profound, covenanted bond of love, and a vital and organic connection. In contrast, it is not so disconcerting to imagine a leader divorcing his follower, but it is utterly disturbing to imagine a head being decapitated from its body.

Where We Go Wrong With Ephesians 5

In his 800-page book, Grudem valiantly argues for a wife’s subordination in marriage, yet at no point does he acknowledge the vast distance between first century marriages and our own.⁴³ Likewise, nowhere in their detailed study of Ephesians 5 do the Kellers pay attention to this, or explore the

ancient marriage situation. Not even once. This is a mistake: they treat as a narrow river that which is actually wide.

Paul is not attempting to immortalize the ancient household structure. Rather, he applies the gospel to a unique cultural situation, very different from our own. Paul was not addressing my world, in which most adult women are as educated as men, in control of their fertility, financially independent, and without the societal need of a man to be over them. All of this makes for a different kind of marriage.

The question next is: now that we know that there is a very wide river between their situation and ours, how do we “construct a principalising bridge”? Or, said another way, what would Paul have said to society’s contemporary marriages, no longer stratified but egalitarian? I propose the following:

He would tell us to keep Christ as the centre of our marriage. Our way of “seeing,” relating to, cooperating with, and honouring each other should be informed by our priority relationship with Christ. We should mutually submit to each other, laying down our independence and selfishness, and seeking out an intimate one-flesh relationship like the one modelled in the Garden of Eden before the fall. If we can assume that men, on average, are more independent and therefore self-orientated than women, who are, on average, more interdependent and therefore other-orientated than men, then by all means, husbands like me should meditate especially on Christ’s sacrificial love for the church that results in his bride’s radiant flourishing.

However, now that I understand the distance between the ancient context and our own, I simply cannot conceive of Paul coming to the average modern marriage, where husbands and wives are closer in age, equally educated, both possibly working and trying to raise children, and saying to that couple, “Well done for all the partnering. Keep that up! But I’d like to insist that the husband should be the leader, and the wife should be subordinate to him.” How could Paul do that when he teaches that the creation ideal for marriage is a one-flesh, full partnership, like in Adam and Eve’s initial marriage?

That’s not just my opinion. It is a widely accepted view, in fact the majority Christian view: Pope John Paul II, in his *Mulieris Dignitatem*, a binding encyclical for all Catholics, says that the man’s authority over his wife is a reflection of what is “old”; it speaks of a way of thinking “profoundly rooted in the customs and religious tradition of the time.” What is “new” and “an innovation of the gospel” is that “submission is not one-sided but mutual.”⁴⁴ If one of the most doctrinally inflexible denominations in the world can make this improvement to their doctrine, the rest of us should take note.

Of course, there are still cultures in the world where men do rule. For them, Paul’s teaching may fit hand-in-glove. In patriarchal societies, husbands usually have far more social, intellectual, political, and financial power than women. Well, he should use that power self-sacrificially to benefit his wife, as Christ uses his superior power on behalf of the church. However, if thousands of husbands in patriarchal cultures genuinely do this for long enough, eventually women and wives will rise in their own social and intellectual powers, and be more equipped to be equal partners to their husbands. That’s precisely where my investigation has led me. View 4—the husband as a redeemed *paterfamilias*—applied to cultures where marriages are stratified, will lead that culture ultimately to transform and empower a View 3 kind of marriage, as it already has in lands that have long been pervaded by Christianity.

Mind you, if we had merely widened the biblical texts on marriage we typically select to study in both the Old and New Testaments, God’s preference for a mutualist marriage should have been clear enough all along.

Wives Who Direct Their Husbands

Keeping in mind that every marriage mentioned in the Old Testament is worked out in a patriarchal setting, we can safely deduce that the cultural assumption is that wives are subordinate to their husbands. Remarkably then, other than God's prediction that "Adam will rule over Eve," *there is not a single command to wives to submit to their husbands*, neither in the laws of Moses, nor in the mouths of the prophets.

In fact, when we sample the little snapshots we have into the power dynamics of married couples in the Old Testament, we find again and again wives directing their husbands! At many crossroads in my own life I have prayed to God for wisdom, and strained my ear towards heaven for what he might tell me. And many times, I have heard him say to me the very words he once said to Abraham: "Listen to whatever [your wife] tells you."⁴⁵ What great advice. *I should know; wives very often hear God first.*

Isn't that what happens to Samson's mother? In a culture where it was inappropriate for a man to approach a wife directly, an angel takes on the form of a man and announces to a barren woman that she will have a Spirit-anointed child. The wife later summons her husband: "The woman hurried to tell her husband, 'He's here! The man who appeared to me the other day!'" Notice carefully the next words: "[He] got up and followed his wife." Perhaps not so happy that a stranger would contravene patriarchal norms, he asks, "Are you the man who talked to my wife?"⁴⁶ In fact, this story signposts an even more consequential birth in which, over a millennium later, an angel first approaches Mary to tell her the same,⁴⁷ and only informs her husband later.⁴⁸ In both scenarios, the wife is first to hear God about a matter and the husband only later is caught up to speed (his wife's speed that is). If there is any kind of "creation order" (there isn't), God seems oblivious to it.

Then there's the Shunammite woman who takes the initiative to host the prophet Elisha. She says to her husband: "I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. Let's make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us."⁴⁹ Once again, the husband immediately complies with his wife, instinctively trusting her spiritual discernment on the matter.

A quick observation is in order: despite the ever-so-popular application of taking "the husband is the *kephalē* of the wife" to mean, "the husband should be the spiritual leader of the home," I regret to inform you that the idea is not biblically prescribed. You might need to throw away those notes you once took about how the man (not the wife) should initiate prayer, or call for a family devotion, or choose which church the couple or family should go to. Without detracting anything from the crucial initiative a husband or father may take for the spiritual health of his family, still, a better idea is for *both* husbands and wives to do all they can: as a team and as individuals, to seek God; to select and settle into a church; and to pursue the spiritual flourishing of the others in the family. In answer to those teachings that say the husband should be the pastor of the rest of the family, I recommend that the husband and wife should be the pastoral leadership team of the family.

One more wife who seems to defy patriarchal norms (even though she navigates the reality of a male-centred culture) is Abigail. Nabal, her very wealthy husband is "surly and mean in his dealings."⁵⁰ When David and his militia, on the run and hungry, ask for some food, Nabal callously sneers and denies their request. David, feeling very snubbed and angry, makes plans to kill Nabal and all the men on his property—not a very Christlike response.

Abigail intercepts the bloodshed by disobeying her husband and by not sharing with him the news she hears about David's murderous intentions. She loads up food on her donkey, rides out to David, and shrewdly adapts to David's offended ego by saying, "Please pay no attention, *my lord*, to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name—his name means Fool."⁵¹ Even as she calls out the terrible man her husband is, she calls out the best in David and pleads for mercy. David decides to drop his weapons.

When Abigail returns home and tells Nabal of her overturning of his ruling and David's sparing of his life, his heart fails and he dies ten days later. When David sends some men to take her as his third wife, she bows down and says, "I am your servant and am ready to serve you and wash the feet of my lord's servants."

It's a crazy story but notice that nothing in it shows God's endorsement on her calling both Nabal and David her "lord." Though both men accept the title without flinching, it is clear that here is a woman who has learnt to *survive* patriarchy by adapting to it. At times this even means disobeying her "male authority"—something which the passage commends. If anything we find an example of a woman who, in another more just culture, would probably have thrived as a leader. What attracts David to her is not only her beauty, but her strategic ability and winsome diplomacy, by which she rapidly averts needless bloodshed.

All that to say: *the Old Testament stories do not support a husband's authority over their wives as God's preferred norm.*

The Mutualist Marriage Of 1 Corinthians 7

The Song of Songs is the longest portion of Scripture to explore the inner dynamics of an affectionate, romantic, and sexual union of a couple. In it, there is absolutely no sign of male–female authority–submission. In romance and sex, both initiate and both yield; both give and both receive. This poetic book not only hearkens back to unfallen Adam and Eve's naked delight in each other as equals; it also has a New Testament parallel.

1 Corinthians 7 is by far *Paul's longest passage on marriage*. Yet, in his guidance about sex, service and separation in Christian marriage, Paul does not offer the slightest hint that a Christian marriage is anything but a mutual and loving partnership between equals. In fact, *this is the only chapter in the Bible that explicitly deals with the question of authority in marriage, which is incidentally given to both the wife and husband.*

Let me pull out some quotes⁵² that stress the reciprocal love and mutual authority God envisions in our marriages:

[E]ach man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband (v2).

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband (v3).

The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife (v4).

Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time (v5).

A wife must not separate from her husband. ... And a husband must not divorce his wife (v10–11).

If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must

not divorce him (v12–13).

[T]he unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband (v14).

[I]f the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or sister is not bound in such circumstances (v15).

How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (v16).

But if you [a man] do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned (v28).

An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs ... An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs (v32, 34b).

[A] married man is concerned about the affairs of this world. ... a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world (v33–34a).

What do we learn about God's plan for marriage in 1 Corinthians 7? "Paul's answers ... must have struck first century hearers as extraordinary," says Richard Hays. "The marriage partners are neither set in a hierarchical relationship with one over the other, nor set apart as autonomous units each doing what he or she pleases. Instead, the relationship of marriage is one of mutual submission, each partner [belonging to] the other."⁵³

When I first taught people how one might select a spouse, I suggested that we let *God* choose for us. Then, reading 1 Corinthians 7 one day, it dawned on me that I had just read the only clear teaching on the subject in the New Testament: "she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord" (v39). The lesson? *We* are to choose, and to choose wisely. Well, rereading 1 Corinthians 7 now, I've just had a similar *aha* moment: the only verse in the entire New Testament that speaks to how couples are to make important decisions (like when to have sex, and when to seek God together) is, "Do not deprive each other except by *mutual consent*." (v5) The lesson? *When a couple takes care to decide together as equal partners, the husband needn't command or break any ties.*

I conclude. 1 Corinthians 7 is the only chapter that explicitly speaks of a husband's authority over his wife—but, *see, it also speaks about a wife's authority over her husband*. In marriages it promotes gender equality, mutual submission, and mutual consent as the basis of decision-making.

Given the Spirit-authored unity of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 7 can and should guide our interpretation of Ephesians 5. What is strange, then, is that most major complementarian authors either only briefly mention 1 Corinthians 7 in a way that side-steps its actual clash with their interpretation,⁵⁴ or—more commonly—they simply ignore it.⁵⁵

Which View, Then?

Let me conclude this chapter about how we are to interpret Ephesians 5, by asking which of the four views should prevail in our marriages and churches.

I propose we reject View 1 (husband as decision-maker), and call it what it is: an oppressive theology.

View 2 (husband as tiebreaker) served Julie and my marriage as a halfway stop for many years, and for this I am grateful. However, an analysis of its related problems; the exegetical superiority of Views 3 and 4; and reading more widely in the Bible about marriage, means we should probably abandon it also.

So, which of the remaining two views do we choose?

Perhaps we don't need to.

View 3 (husband as servant of his equal) affirms a mutualist marriage, while View 4 (husband as redeemed *paterfamilias*) has nothing to say in contradiction to such a marriage (though it does provide guidance for those marriages and churches that still exist within heavily patriarchal cultures).

In other words, View 4 may best help us to *understand* the passage in the way its original readers would have. But View 3, especially for those of us living in more egalitarian cultures, is the right way to *apply* Ephesians 5.

God's wisdom for a married couple, then, is that they should recognize their "one flesh" union as showcased by Eden's romance. Also, they should re-inforce this unity by means of complete mutual surrender and service, and—when making decisions—mutual consideration and consent. Two analogies may inspire us as we take this path: Christ's sacrificial love for his church, and each individual's concern for their own body.

What do we do with remaining doubts about God's desire for true gender equality? Perhaps the most significant reason to abandon a patriarchal assumption in marriage (and in church and in society) follows next.

9



The God Who Accommodates

“Will [we husbands] try to hold on to an authority over our wives that once was given to us by the surrounding culture but now for the most part we no longer have? Or will [we] gladly drop power, as

well as the pretense to power, and treat [our] wives as equals, and reap ... a more intimate marriage relationship?”

Peter Davids⁵⁶

The Gates Foundation recently sponsored a massive international study that revealed that women are grossly underrepresented in media coverage. “For example, women were quoted voices in only 29% of online news stories analysed in the U.K. in 2019. In India, they made up just 14%.”⁵⁷ Despite all the wonderful progress made in the elevation of women in society, we are still far less inclined to “see” and “hear” women than we are to see and hear men.

How much more, in previous millennia when patriarchy was unchallenged, did the social conditions undermine the ability of women to rise in public roles? The archaeologist Ian Morris explains why there’s so little evidence that women even existed in ancient Athens: “Women and slaves remain invisible,” because of its “pervasive male citizen culture,” in which men “not only subjugated women but controlled the spaces in which women lived,” making them practically invisible in the culture then, as well as in archaeological finds today.⁵⁸

In the wider Greco-Roman world, into which the nascent church spread out, things were not much better for women. Although there were some rare exceptions,⁵⁹ honourable women did not aspire to public leadership roles. Their honour was found in domestic and child-rearing roles at home. In Grecian plays, the most common female characters would usually be slave girls and prostitutes, because these plays told “outdoor” stories. Respectable urban women and young unmarried girls were expected to remain home, out of sight. It is unsurprising then how few “leader-type” women one was able to find in the first place. After all, a person must receive some education and be released to play a role in public life to prove they have the gift of leadership. With women hidden away, few women with the God-given gifts of teaching and leadership ever had the chance for any of those gifts to be recognized, developed, and deployed in public spaces.⁶⁰

Why, after all, are wives of male leaders in the New Testament so seldom mentioned? The modern emphasis on Christian married couples enjoying equality, partnership and shared status hardly existed in the early era of the Christian church, when—even in the church—domestic and child-rearing roles were apportioned to wives.

Similarly, we can ask why there are so few women characters, relative to men in the Bible. Some critics today, denying the Bible’s divine inspiration, argue that this proves the book is merely a product of a patriarchal culture. Some complementarians say that this is God’s way of highlighting the unique high-profile roles only men are meant to play in the kingdom of God. However, a better way to both understand its divine authority and the many historical situations the Bible addresses is to say that *God accommodated his revelation to people in specific situations without necessarily idealizing those same situations*. When we miss this crucial interpretive principle, we naïvely jump from the observation that women were subject to men in various places in Bible times, to the idea that women, as part of God’s universal plan, should submit to men in all places and at all times.

Understanding Accommodation

At the end of history, God will finally rule over an ideal society. But, ever since the fall, he has elected to work redemptively within broken society rather than merely flooding it all in judgement as he once did. For now, God’s redemption rains down in such a way that “the living water of the Holy Spirit pours

over the [existing] social landscape, conforms himself like a meandering river to the contours he encounters. Yet as he does so, like the irresistible flow of water, he reshapes the landscape, eventually making the crooked ways straight.”⁶¹

The handful of passages wherein the New Testament authors seem to give a hat tip to the patriarchy of the wider culture are in fact examples of God’s accommodation. He works with what he has, and the apostles follow his example—they plant the seeds of the kingdom in soil that is still filled with rocks and weeds. For now, we live in an overlap of the ages. The kingdom of God is here in the midst of a fallen world pervaded by fallen social systems. One day the kingdom will completely eclipse those systems, but for now it sends its roots down into them, and flowers something new out of them.

Complementarian John MacArthur argues that, since only men wrote Scripture, this is proof that God only wants men to teach God’s word. He obviously ignores those scholars who argue for the plausibility of Priscilla (with Aquila by her side) writing Hebrews. But mainly he fails to notice that in the ancient world *hardly any women would have been trained to write*—the fact that only men wrote the books in the Bible (or mostly men, if Priscilla took pen to hand) is testament to God working with what is, even as he promises to bring about eventual *shalom*, in which all men *and women* will be able to read and write.

More On Wives Submitting

The ancient social situation for women, far worse than it is now (we still have a way to go), was to privilege men and not women with power and public roles; and to attend to what men and not women say and do, and to limit women to a tiny domestic sphere, thereby making them as invisible as slaves and children.

Any woman who stood up for herself was bound to pay for it. In Esther 1, for example, King Xerxes throws a banquet for the elite men in the kingdom at the same time as his wife Vashti hosts her friends for a women’s event. Halfway through the festivities, Xerxes “in high spirits from wine” commands that his gorgeous wife abandons her party to “display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at.” When Vashti refuses to come, the furious king, publicly embarrassed by the disobedience of his wife, seeks counsel from his wise men. They decide to depose Vashti from her role as queen, never to set eyes on her husband again. The reason they do this: to snuff out any possibility of other wives in the land following her example of not complying with their husband’s command. The goal is that “all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest.”

This story evidences that in almost every ancient culture, in this case Persia not Israel, the assumption has been that men should lead in public roles and women should be subordinate to their husbands. Scripture itself thus shows that *patriarchy is the product of the fall and not a special creation of Israel’s God*.

The apostles find themselves in a similar male-dominated world as they preach the gospel and plant churches across the Roman Empire. We have examined Ephesians 5 already, but even outside of that passage, the counsel of the apostles to Christian wives in the first century church is unanimous. Paul writes to the Colossians, “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands...”⁶² and to Titus, “Teach ... younger women ... to be subject to their husbands.”⁶³ Peter says the same: “Wives ... submit yourselves to your own husbands...”⁶⁴ To anyone who claims to take the Bible as authoritative, this seems on first reading to be completely decisive. *We might assume that God’s ideal for all marriages is that the wife*

submits to the husband, but in the rest of this chapter I will contest that conclusion by showing that this wrong assumption requires a superficial and wrong reading of these texts.

What do we do with Paul in Colossians? “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.”? I propose that we do not reach different conclusions from our interpretation of these verses than the ones we reached in Ephesians 5. The scholarly consensus is that Colossians and Ephesians were written at the same time, even evidencing a “cut-and-paste” approach to key material that duplicates across both letters. The run-up verses are almost identical in both passages. They both use these phrases in the same order: “one another,” “psalms,” “hymns,” “songs from the Spirit,” “with gratitude in your hearts,” “in the name of,” “the Lord,” “Jesus,” “Christ,” “God the Father.” The difference is that the Colossians passage, only two verses long, is a truncated version of the longer Ephesians one—thirteen verses long. Ephesians 5 amplifies the minimal Colossians material, and, as such, throws light on it.

What about the other two passages, in Titus 2:3–5 and 1 Peter 3:1? We have good reason to doubt that Paul and Peter in those passages are counselling a universal command to all wives across human history to submit to their husbands.⁶⁵ It is pastoral advice to first century Mediterranean people who abide by Aristotle’s household codes, and, as such, *is motivated not by creational design but by an understandable reputational concern*. Allow me to explain.

The Household Codes

We run the risk of using the “wives, submit” verses as proof-texts when we snatch them out of context. Let’s look at the literary context, the larger passages in which we find these verses and others like them:

	<i>Wives–husbands / Women–men</i>	<i>Children–parents</i>	<i>Slaves–masters</i>
Ephesians	5:21–33	6:1–4	6:5–9
Colossians	3:18–19	3:20–21	3:22–4:1
1 Peter	3:1–7	No mention	2:18–25
Titus	2:1–8	No mention	2:9–10
1 Timothy	5:1–16	No mention	6:1–3

What do we notice as we analyse the literary context? First, each time a wife’s submission is mentioned it is part of something called “a household code,” in which the relationships within households, consisting of husbands, wives, children and slaves, are being addressed. Following Aristotle’s earlier teaching, by Roman law homes were to be stratified under the rule of a senior male. If there was no adult male, the senior female would fill the role. The ancient household code followed a hierarchy, stated in descending order, of head of the home; then wife; then children and slaves. *In other words, Paul and Peter are not spouting forth free-floating wisdom that should be applied to all married couples for the rest of Christian history.* They are addressing a very specific context—the outworking of the gospel in the average ancient household, as ordered by Roman society.

Second, in none of these passages is the husband commanded to lead. The wife is only told to submit. The apostles assume male leadership is already in play. What they try to do in their imperatives is to soften the man’s leadership and dignify the wife’s lower status. Peter and Paul coach the women to

embrace submission as something voluntary, and empowered by the gospel, instead of merely tolerating the husband's leadership,

Third, in all the passages, and this is most significant in this chapter's argument, *the wife's instructed submission to her husband runs parallel to the slave's instructed submission to their master*. In two of the places, the parallel is also applied to children's obedience to their parents, but the master–slave connection is made every time.

I will come back to the parallel between slavery and patriarchy shortly, but the point I make now is that Paul and Peter are not idealising either slavery or female subordination in marriage—instead they are, as all good spiritual leaders should, helping the churches they work with *to make the best of situations that are sometimes far from ideal*. God does something like this in Genesis 16 when Hagar the slave escapes her abusive mistress Sarah. After rescuing and reassuring Hagar, God says, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.”⁶⁶ Who of us would conclude that God's instruction to her was an expression of his highest and best for her? No, his parental counsel to her helps her to make the best of a situation that is far from ideal. Apparently, submitting to Sarah is better for her and her child than running into the wild.

Even today, it's sometimes better to make the most of an unideal situation we find ourselves in. For example, my newly married father was conscripted to two compulsory years in the service of the South African Army. With a newborn child and a young wife at home, he knew this was far from ideal, but his hands were tied. All he could do was to make the best of a bad situation. It was either that or prison. Sometimes a pastor might advise their congregation to vote in a democratic election, even though democracy is not in the Bible and is therefore not necessarily God's eternal ideal for human society. Preaching against it would create needless backlash—the same can be said in the first century about Aristotle's household code.⁶⁷

The Reputational Concern

Other than helping them to make the best of an unideal situation, why else do Peter and Paul counsel wives and slaves to voluntarily submit to their husbands and masters, who are in turn instructed to be gentle and respectful with their wives and slaves? In most of the texts, we find a compelling answer: *Paul and Peter are concerned about guarding the credibility and evangelistic attractiveness of the fledgling churches in the eyes of a watching world, which happens to be one in which the obedience of women and slaves to the paterfamilias is Roman law*.

Here's evidence for this in the texts:

- Just before Peter addresses slaves and wives, he counsels submission to the emperor, adding, “For it is God's will that *by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people*.”⁶⁸
- To wives Peter says, “Submit to your own husbands, *so that if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives*.”⁶⁹
- To wives in Crete, Paul says, “Be subject to their husbands, *so that no one will malign the word of God*.”⁷⁰
- To Cretan slaves, Paul says, “be subject to [your] masters *so that in every way [you] will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive*.”⁷¹
- To Ephesian slaves, Paul says. “All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, *so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered*.”⁷²

- Regarding all his instructions via Timothy to the church in Ephesus, Paul writes, “Give the people these instructions, *so that no one may be open to blame. ... [G]ive the enemy no opportunity for slander.*”⁷³

What is happening here? 1 Peter especially, but also Titus and 1 Timothy, are letters written to small, often-persecuted churches undergoing suffering. Satan’s strategy is to draw negative attention to these churches. The letter to the Ephesians is an “in-house” document, addressed entirely to Christians without concern for outsiders (hence no mention of reputational concern); whereas the motivation in these three letters is to address a situation-specific concern about the way that the church comes across in its dealings with outsiders. Says Cynthia Westfall:

*It was an honour culture in which gender roles played an important part. If a woman “acted like the master” of her husband by controlling him, it was seen as a destructive challenge to the entire hierarchy of the Roman Empire and the patronage system. Violations of such conventions were taken seriously and potentially could destroy the reputation of the church—the behaviour of women was fodder for polemical attacks on the early church and other sectarian religious movements.*⁷⁴

In a world where slaves and wives were forced to submit by law to the *paterfamilias*, these wives and slaves were called to go above and beyond, and willingly yield their lives to their husbands and masters. Thankfully, if the *paterfamilias* was a Christian, the apostles had likewise given him his own instructions to genuinely care for those in his household.

All that to say, when Peter and Paul told wives to submit to their husbands, they were not absolutizing a gender hierarchy across all marriages as some kind of Christian ideal. Rather, they were accommodating to an unideal situation. Peter, in the opening line in his letter, addresses not believers living in the future perfected society, but rather “exiles scattered throughout the provinces”—we are foreigners, doing the best we can to fit in, even while we live out our true citizenship in God’s kingdom. When we understand the ancient norms for the household, these passages are to be understood as the church being guided to subvert the cultural norms without outwardly revolting against them. Peter and Paul navigate imperfect systems because, with Roman officials looking for any excuse to imprison Christians, any challenge would bring scrutiny and persecution for these small churches. Interestingly, by the time 1 Peter, Titus and 1 Timothy were written, it was only a few short years before their authors Peter and Paul would be executed for disrupting the Roman order.

“Slaves, Submit ... Likewise, Wives, Submit”

Titus is told to guide wives to be submissive to their husbands (2:3), then soon after, he is also told that slaves are to submit to their masters (2:9).

Peter reverses Paul’s order: first he speaks to slave–master relationships, then to wife–husband ones. In 1 Peter 2:18, slaves are told to submit to their masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust, then in 3:1 we read that wives, in the same way, should submit to their husbands. Peter’s wording enforces the connection between these instructions: “Slaves ... submit ... wives, in the same way, submit...”.

Now for this chapter’s principal argument: *though complementarians interpret the instruction about wives submitting to be a timeless, universal one; we moderns with slavery now behind us realize that its parallel one about slaves submitting was a situational one after all!*

Because history repeats itself when no one listens, I will unpack this insight in some depth.

The Christian Resistance To Abolition

Christian abolitionists, driven on by a sense of God's justice, first overcame slavery as an institution in the United Kingdom in 1833, then the emancipation of slaves spread to other countries as time passed. People like William Wilberforce, John Wesley, John Newton, Charles Finney, the Grimke sisters, Harriet Stowe, Olaudah Equiano, and Frederick Douglass eventually brought the institution of slavery to a glorious and grinding halt. All modern Christians love to tell about these heroes of societal transformation.

What is less known, and perhaps we purposely forget, because it is now a matter of shame for Christians, is that in the USA the biggest opponents to the abolition of slavery were the Christians in the South. In fact, the now largest denomination in the US, the Southern Baptists, even split in 1845 from the Northern Baptists on this very issue.

Up until the eighteenth century, most Christians believed that slavery was biblical, and by that they meant *endorsed by God*. Biblical scholars in America like Robert Dabney, and J.H. Thornwell constructed powerful biblical defences for the keeping of slaves. Charles Hodge, the greatest Reformed theologian of his day, wrote an essay, *The Biblical Case for Slavery*, in which he argued that:⁷⁵

- *God established slavery.* In cursing Noah's son, Ham, to be a slave,⁷⁶ God himself instituted slavery.
- *God approved of slavery.* Even Abraham, David, and Job had slaves.
- *Moses's law supported slavery.* For example, in the fourth and tenth of the Ten Commandments it is assumed that God's people own slaves. Also, Moses' law allowed for making slaves of destitute Jews and those defeated in war.⁷⁷
- *Jesus never spoke against slavery.* What he did not condemn he must have condoned.
- *The apostles commanded slaves to submit to their masters.* They regulated without condemning slavery.
- *The apostles used slavery to picture a positive aspect of the gospel*—we “slaves of Christ” are to entirely obey the master who owns us.

A few theologians tried to change the mind of these majority theologians but failed. For example, in a four-day long debate in 1845, the abolitionist Jonathan Blanchard surveyed “the broad principles of the Bible” and “the whole scope of Scripture.” To him it was obvious that “the principles of the Bible are justice and righteousness.” He argued that one can quote texts in support of almost anything and end up with interpretations which oppose the overarching truths of Scripture.

Sadly, the Bible-believing Christians of the South were so convinced that God endorsed slavery that they were willing to take up arms in a civil war that cost over half a million lives to defend their right to uphold slavery! Though the civil war did not spell the end of racism in the American South, it did humiliate the Christians who once owned slaves enough to ensure they eventually conceded that slavery was wrong. The unstoppable cultural change—driven along by a sense of justice—caused them to go back to the Scriptures, where they slowly but surely saw the error of their ways. *Now, virtually every biblical scholar believes that, despite how numerous the earlier “biblical” arguments were, the Bible, when properly understood, does not support slavery, and that this practice is sinful.*

Slavery And Patriarchy Compared

Now let's discern how slavery runs parallel to patriarchy, the civilisation-long assumption that men should lead. Let's see how easily a similar line of arguments can be generated if one has a

complementarian method of interpreting Scripture:⁷⁸

- *God established male authority.* In the garden before the fall, God made Adam the leader of Eve.
- *God approved of male authority.* Patriarchs not matriarchs led the people of God. Kings not queens dominate Israel's history.
- *Moses' law supported male authority.* The tenth commandment says we should not covet our neighbour's wife, or donkey, or any other possession. Priests are to be male not female.
- *Jesus never spoke against a husband's authority.* What he did not condemn he must have condoned.
- *The apostles commanded wives to submit to their husbands.* They regulated without condemning patriarchy.
- *The apostles used a husband's authority to depict a positive aspect of the gospel,* in which the husband was to depict Christ the master, and the wife was to submit to her husband as if to Christ.

Can you see the remarkable and sobering parallels between trying to argue from the Bible for slavery and patriarchy? Even the largest church in the world now recognizes the parallel between the “wives, submit” and “slaves, submit” texts: in 1988, Pope John Paul II crisply argued that using Paul's writings in Ephesians 6 to justify slavery is no different than using Ephesians 5 to justify female subordination in marriage.⁷⁹

Apples And Oranges?

How do complementarian theologians respond to this similarity? George Knight says that the “wives, submit” and “slaves, submit” texts are very different—“apples and oranges.” How so? I will excerpt an article⁸⁰ written by a leading complementarian theologian, Sam Storms, who gives six reasons why he believes we can condemn slavery while still endorsing the submission of wives. I will quote him a piece at a time, putting his words in italics and hyphenated commas, then respond to each:

First, *“Scripture is known to regulate undesirable relationships without condoning them as permanent ideals (see Matthew 19:8, 1 Corinthians 6:1–8). Paul's recommendations for how slaves and masters relate to each other do not assume the goodness of the institution.”*

So, Storms does understand God's readiness to accommodate to social structures. Good! Yet that is precisely the argument to be made about a wife's culturally mandated submission to a *paterfamilias* in the Greco-Roman world—the Bible regulates it without condoning it.

Second, *“The institution of slavery is not grounded in creation but is a distortion resulting from the fall. Marriage and male headship, on the other hand, are part of the original created order that antedates the fall.”*

Here, Storms takes a wrong interpretation of Genesis 2 and 3, and then idealizes something which Genesis 3:16 says is a direct result of the fall, not creation.

Third, *“On several occasions the seeds for the dissolution of slavery are sown. See Philemon 16, Ephesians 6:9. Nothing in the NT, however, suggests that the same was envisioned for the relationship between husbands and wives.”*

This is not true. Galatians 3:28, 1 Corinthians 7, and a proper reading of Ephesians 5, especially its teaching about mutual submission, are indeed “seeds for the dissolution” of male supremacy in marriage.

Fourth, *“if the argument from slavery is used to invalidate a wife’s submission to her husband, would it not also invalidate a child’s submission to his/her parents? Observe how the relationship between husbands and wives, parents and children, and slaves and masters are all addressed by Paul in Ephesians 5–6.”*

Storms uses the wrong word: children are to “obey,” while wives and slaves are to “submit.” This links wives and slaves in a unique way. Storms also seems to assume that parents and children in that culture would read the parent–child verses in the same way we do in the West today. Yet who of us would insist that our children obey their parents *well into adulthood*? Ephesians 6, to the ears of a first century reader, would be understood as Paul commanding even adult children to obey and not merely honour their parents.⁸¹

But even if the parent–child relationship was the same then as it is now (which it was not), *a gendered hierarchy in marriage is very different from the generational hierarchy in parenting*. The fact that our young children know little about life and wisdom puts them in a position where dependency and obedience is best for them and is therefore observed even in egalitarian cultures. The same is not true in a marriage of two educated adults. The goal of parenting is to move our children beyond dependence and obedience to eventually stand as the leaders of their own family, in which case they become our peers (as Paul implies in Ephesians 5:31). It would therefore be wrong to try make permanent a parent’s leadership of a child for as long as they live. Why then would we be so sure it is right to do that to our spouse?

Fifth, *“No permanent moral command or moral absolute is used with reference to slavery in Paul’s instructions to slaves.”*

Here, Storms repeats point one. But look at the words in 1 Peter 2–3: “Slaves, submit to your masters ... wives, in the same way, submit to your husbands.” On what basis is he sure that the first is not a permanent moral command while the second is? His position is inconsistent.

Sixth, *“Paul explicitly envisions and endorses the possibility of a slave obtaining freedom (1 Corinthians 7:21). He never says anything comparable to this with regard to wives and submission to their husbands.”*

That’s because, unlike slavery, marriage is by God’s design a one-flesh relationship.⁸² Freedom from slavery was desirable because it is the redemption of the God-ordained institution of *work*. Similarly, freedom from patriarchy is the redemption of the God-ordained institution of *marriage*. Paul’s goal in writing Ephesians 5 is, without sending a message of revolution against Aristotle’s codes, to bring about as equal a marriage as was possible in that culture.

All that to say, and contra the claims of George Knight and Sam Storms, slavery and patriarchy *are* extremely similar, not apples and oranges at all, but *rotten fruits on the same fallen tree*. Slavery is very similar in principle to the assumption of a husband’s leadership of his wife. Whether benevolent or brutal in expression, both practices are a result of a fallen world. It makes no sense to denounce even “benevolent” slavery—as all Christians do today—while being a bastion of “benevolent” patriarchy.

In fact, if a long-term effect of the gospel on society is to upend slavery, another bird it kills with the same stone is patriarchy. This is why, in a remarkable article about biblical interpretation amongst Afro-Americans, Clarice Martin asks a revealing question: “How can black male preachers and theologians

use a liberated hermeneutic while preaching and theologizing about slaves, but a literalist hermeneutic with reference to women?”⁸³

Lessons From The Earlier Injustice

By denying the similarities between slavery and patriarchy, complementarian scholars repeat the error of the Christian anti-abolitionists of the American South, and drag the churches who trust their theological acumen through a second embarrassment for the church of Jesus, as well as an extension of its devaluing of some of its own people.

What makes all of this more tragic is that the most influential contenders for male headship in the world are the *Southern Baptists*, the tribe of believers to which one in four American churches belong. They continue to broadcast their ideas into the world through their leading scholars and media. Sadly, as Georg Hegel warned, it seems that, “The only thing that we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.”

So what exactly should today’s church learn through the failures of the Christian anti-abolitionists? First, it is possible to be convinced—whole denominations and entire schools of biblical scholars are in fact—with detailed “scholarly” works that include texts from across the Bible, and still be wrong.

Second, it is possible for the culture to head in a positive direction that is in fact the result of Christian principles that have taken root in that culture over millenia. For example, Paul’s *Magna Carta for Humanity* in Galatians 3:28 is the first time anyone in history articulated so powerfully the idea of equality and the end of social hierarchies. How much do we actually owe society’s overthrowing of slavery and male supremacy to this very passage? Instead of reacting to the influence of the gospel in society, the church should claim it and celebrate it, not attack it.

Third, it is possible for discoveries and advances in society to challenge a long-held interpretation of Scripture. When most people thought the world was flat or that the earth was the centre of the universe, the church had Bible verses to support it. When scientific discoveries contested this, it gave us a chance to read the Bible in new ways and see what was there all along. As the industrial revolution and the first waves of what would become the Woman’s Liberation Movement swept through the West, for the first time ever women were given a chance to show their comparable intelligence and capacity to men. Instead of seeing this as a threat, this is in fact an opportunity for us to revisit Scripture itself with the question: what have we been missing all along?

Fourth, common interpretive errors must be avoided. It takes the whole Bible to interpret every part of the Bible. It is all too easy to piece together proof texts, that themselves are misunderstood. We must not forget that the books in the Bible were not written to us, even if they are written for us. We *must* steep ourselves in the historical context the text is written to, *before* identifying the timeless message which we can then apply to our day and context.

Fifth, self-interest and *groupthink* may result in a powerful bias to read Scripture in a certain way. (See Appendix 6 for more on this subject.) As a general rule, humans (even Christian ones) resist anything that threatens their place or privilege. Should slave-owning theologians have been allowed to be the loudest voice in theological debates in the 1800s? Should the people who would lose their job and reputation as pastors, leaders or professors in complementarian churches, ministries and colleges be allowed to be the most dominant voices on the issue today?

Sixth, it takes the whole church to interpret the Bible. It is never wise to ignore or demean sections of the church that see things differently to you. Calling people who genuinely love Scripture “cultural capitulators” or “liberals” may be a form of blocking your ears to the voice of God. People whom you dismiss as having a “low view” of Scripture may have a much better understanding of parts of it than you.

Finally, to hold onto corrupt cultural practices even as the wider culture abandons them is particularly unhelpful to the church’s credibility in society. Continuing to be a bastion of patriarchy is, in my view, as self-sabotaging for the church as continuing to use the Bible to argue for slavery. In those centuries when the culture and the church more or less agreed that slavery was acceptable, even while the church commended the most benevolent form of it, it did not do too much damage to the church’s reputation to go along with it. But imagine how it would go down if a modern Christian home in the West chose to “obey God” by keeping two slaves who consented to the practice on biblical grounds?

Similarly, as long as the church agreed with the cultural belief articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that “[the man] should be strong and active; the [woman] should be weak and passive; the one must have both the power and the will; it is enough that the other should offer little resistance,”⁸⁴ it was not too detrimental to the church’s reputation to go along with patriarchy. But now that our society bases an entire award-winning TV series, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, on the “horrors” of female subordination, we the church don’t look too different from this imaginary modern family with slaves if we teach our daughters to submit to their husband’s unilateral authority, and forbid women with gifts of teaching and leadership to teach and lead.⁸⁵

Over and above reaping a more intimate marriage, if believers extend the equalization of women beyond the home into church and society, we will also reap greater credibility for our gospel in our culture. What our fellow citizens have forgotten, but we can remind them, is that our culture’s present elevation of women is historically rooted in the slow-soak influence of our very own dignity-bestowing gospel, and in the knowledge of God’s loving and fair character—after all, for a long, long time now, God has been blissfully unaware of any complementarian restrictions, and has been raising women to full flight in their gifting, including using them to powerfully lead and teach men.

Notes

1. Richard Hays, *First Corinthians*, p. 116
2. Even if authority-submission exists in a marriage, it does not mean that the wife cannot have authority over even her husband in another domain. For example, Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, in the patriarchal culture she lived in may have (or may not have) taken orders from her husband in the home, yet nonetheless thrived as a leader in the land in which even her husband would need to take orders from her. Complex yes, but not inconsistent, since not a single Scripture passage uses a woman’s submission in the marriage as the basis of preventing her leading men in church and society.
3. As a small sample, I have picked up one-point complementarian views in Western Europe’s N.T. Wright, Eastern Europe’s Hayk Hovhannisyan, and, at one time, Australia’s Michael Bird. Those steeped in the egalitarian-complementarian “wars” of the US may not comprehend this possibility. N.T. Wright explains: “Part of the problem, particularly in the United States, is that cultures become so polarized that if you tick one box many assume you must tick a dozen other boxes down the same side of the page—without realising that the page itself is highly arbitrary and culture-bound.” When we are told something enough times, we tend to believe it. If I highlight two stars in the night sky and say “those two stars are joined together; they are a constellation called The Pointers,” then my hearer begins to imagine an invisible cord joining these stars. Every time they look into the sky their ‘togetherness’ is then noted. In truth they are millions of light years apart and are individual stars. Only from one viewpoint in our galaxy do they look like they are so

close. It's the same with husband-headship and eldership—they are separate individual stars. They are not joined together, necessarily, in God's mind and certainly are not joined together in the Scriptures.

4. Beth Allison Barr in "The Making of Biblical Womanhood" (ch. 6) cites "Happily Ever After."
5. Yet major complementarian scholars wrongly claim that he does! For example, Andreas Köstenberger in "God, Marriage, Family" (p. 250) writes: "Jesus affirmed God the creator's original plan for marriage, quoting both Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 (Matt. 19:4–6 and pars.). By this our Lord strongly and emphatically confirmed that God's original design for marriage with the husband as the head and the wife as the submissive, supportive partner."
6. Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, ch. 1
7. John Piper, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ch. 1
8. Ed and Gaye Wheat, *Intended for Pleasure*, fourth edition, p. 30–31
9. Kevin Leman, *Sheet Music*, p. 54.
10. Tim and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, ch 2
11. Tim and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, ch 6
12. Tim and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, Appendix
13. Timothy Keller, *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*, 2012–2013
14. Listen here: www.bit.ly/2ZPRZGH
15. John Piper puts the argument like this: "As men and women relate to each other in the church, men are to lead, on the analogy of the way a husband leads at home (Ephesians 5:22-33)." Interestingly, one of the largest churches on my continent allows for female preaching and church leading, yet a strange culture has arisen because of its emphasis on wifely submission: these female preachers and pastors refuse to get married, because the moment they do, the church members tend to take their leadership less seriously.
16. Listen here: www.bit.ly/2ZPRZGH
17. Genesis 3:16
18. Elaine Storkey, *Scars across humanity: Understanding and Overcoming Violence Against Women*, p. 210
19. Ideas spread beyond the church. That's why we also need to ask what ripple effect Christian ideas have in the wider culture. When a church teaches that female submission to a husband is God's ideal, it does nothing to stop the likelihood of gender violence. However, when the church stresses that God's ideal for marriages is mutualist, it certainly helps to undermine domestic violence.
20. See www.ab.co/3bHZF05 and www.bit.ly/3GNbrVt
21. www.bit.ly/3nVy1CK
22. Eggerichs, *Love & Respect*, p. 221. He made this claim without reference to any studies or any external validation.
23. Sheila Gregoire, *The Great Sex Rescue*, ch. 2. A secular study by The Gottman Institute concurs—John Gottman writes in "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work" that "statistically speaking, when a man is not willing to share power with his partner there is an 81% chance that his marriage will self-destruct."
24. Sheila Gregoire, *The Great Sex Rescue*, ch. 2.
25. Sheila Gregoire, *The Great Sex Rescue*, ch. 2.
26. In a podcast interview, Alan Frow defends the tiebreaking model by saying that, when he counsels egalitarian marriages as a pastor, he notices that "there is a lot of tension because they do not know who will make the decision." Listen here: www.bit.ly/2ZPRZGH—but is that widely true? If my experience of marriage, and all the couples I have counselled, is anything to go by, if a wife anticipates a husband's authority to fall if she and her husband can't agree, it will in fact add enormous amounts of tension in her experience of marriage. Numerous Christian counsellors insist that what most helps deal with the tension in conflicting Christian marriages, is not the introduction of a tiebreaking authority in the husband, but an absence of one. Rather, the couple need to learn how to really listen to, love and lay down their agendas in service of the other. I have heard enough stories of the women trying, desperately trying, to submit to their husband's tiebreaking authority, but nonetheless being hurt by it. When I try to imagine flipping the roles around, and put myself in the shoes of a wife who feels passionately about a certain decision that her husband feels equally passionate about and who will ultimately get to decide, I realize the tiebreaker view might force the husband to ignore Jesus' words: "Do [not] do to others what you would [not] have them do to you."
27. Matthew 24:10; Luke 12:1; 1 Corinthians 7:5. 11:33
28. Another way complementarians push back is to say if mutual submission (in Ephesians 5:21) is meant to frame all three of the pairs (husband-wife, parents-children, masters-slaves) then it is evident that Paul cannot possibly be undermining

the idea of leadership-submission in marriage, because the second and third pairs are by nature hierarchical. My own understanding of Ephesians 5:21 is that it is not the framing verse for all three pairs, merely the transition verse into the new section in Paul's letter, which Paul specifically applies to marriage relationships. This is a much better approach than the complementarians like Schreiner and Knight who, accepting the idea of mutual submission applying to both husbands and wives, strangely rephrase it as "the wife submits to her role as submissive wife while the husband submits to his role as sacrificial leader." Yet Paul is clearly not telling them to submit to roles, but to each other.

29. Romans 13:1

30. "Because *hypotassō* carries the idea of being ranked below someone else, it is apt both for submission to authorities and for submission in personal relationships between equals. In the former case there is an objective ranking in a hierarchy: for example, believers are under the authority of the civil government, and must therefore behave in submission to that authority. In the latter case, the ranking is subjective: believers are to rank themselves below others *as if* in a hierarchy; that is, they are to treat others as more important than themselves, for this is the essence of Christian humility (Rom. 12:10; Phil. 2:3)." (Andrew Bartlett, *Men and Women in Christ*, p.36)

31. Cynthia Westfall in "Paul and Gender" (ch. 1) writes, "Ephesians 5:18–23 forms one sentence in the Greek, and the instructions to wives in v22 are grammatically dependent on the mutual submission in v21 because of the ellipsis (omission) of the verb "submit" in v22."

32. Paul seems to protect this meaning for "submit" in his letter by then, in the verses that follow, selecting a different word—"obey"—for the parent-child and slave-master relationship.

33. Titus 2:4

34. There's even a neurological explanation for the way husbands tend to be more selfish than wives—see www.on.today.com/3CKRIsD

35. *Men and Women in Christ*, p. 64

36. Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's word*, ch. 13.

37. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1255b.

38. I am also assuming that, "In both Greek and Roman settings, slaves were legally incapable of marriage. Paul's remarks about the behaviour of wives and husbands in Ephesians 5 are therefore directed primarily to free persons, especially the social stratum who presided over households with slaves." (Andrew Bartlett, *Men and Women in Christ*, p. 66)

39. David Scholer, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30, December 1987, p. 416. www.bit.ly/3bDKpI9

40. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1259a.

41. Celsus was a pagan critic who lived in the second century. This quote is from Ross Shepherd Kraemer in "Her Share of the Blessings" (p. 128).

42. See John Piper, *Momentary Marriage*, ch. 6–8

43. Grudem only quotes the word *paterfamilias* once, in footnote 102 of ch. 7, in which another author argues for the importance of the senior member of the household.

44. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, p. 88.

45. Genesis 21:12

46. Judges 13:10–11

47. Luke 1:26–38

48. Matthew 1:18–21

49. 2 Kings 4:8–10

50. 1 Samuel 25:3

51. 1 Samuel 25:25

52. From the NRSV

53. Richard Hays, *First Corinthians*, p. 116.

54. For example, Grudem's major work, "Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth," was written to refute egalitarian arguments—one of which is that 1 Corinthians 7 teaches an equal marriage. Yet, in a very short section (6.7), taking up only 1 of his 800 pages, he merely asserts that 1 Corinthians 7 only regulates the husband's authoritative leadership. Yet he provides no argument at all against the assertion that it should not only regulate *the application* of the hierarchical interpretation of Ephesians 5, but should guide the *interpretation* of Ephesians 5. A passage like 1 Corinthians 7, that unambiguously states that both a husband and a wife have equal authority over each other, a fact which all interpreters

agree on, should carry some weight in an interpretation of a passage (Ephesians 5) that only some interpreters claim gives the husband unilateral authority.

55. For example, as Andrew Bartlett pointed out in “Men and Women in Christ” (p.18-19), in response to Philip Payne’s 2009 “Man and Woman: One in Christ,” Tom Schreiner writes a detailed synopsis and attempted rebuttal. Though Payne devotes a chapter to 1 Corinthians 7, strangely Schreiner makes no mention of the chapter at all. Similarly, Claire Smith writes “God’s Good Design: What the Bible Really Says about Men and Women” in 2012. Her goal is to deal with “the key Bible texts” that “should determine” the best model for marriage. It is glowingly endorsed by Don Carson and others, many of whom praise it for its comprehensiveness. Yet bizarrely, none of her five chapters on marriage look at 1 Corinthians 7. I am not suggesting any dishonesty in these authors, only the presence of a significant blind spot, and evidence of “confirmation bias,” in which people unwittingly come to the Bible not to find out all that it says on a subject, only to find support for their prior view.
56. Quote in “Discovering Biblical Equality”, p. 238
57. Source: www.gates.ly/3bMqqQZ
58. Source: Sandra Joshel and Sheila Murnaghan, *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture*, p. 217–20. Cited in Barr, “The Making of Biblical Womanhood” (p. 226)
59. See Susan Hylen, *Women in the World of the New Testament*
60. To help us appreciate how social conditions limit the kinds of people who can become leaders, think of a modern church consisting of mainly tertiary educated people in an affluent area. Now consider how unlikely it would be for an uneducated blue-collar worker to serve as an upfront leader in that church, for the simple reason that their ‘followability’ (and thus leadership) to these particular people would be in question. This is why we also have no examples of slaves being elders in the Bible.
61. John Stackhouse, *Finally Feminist*, p. 39
62. Colossians 3:18
63. Titus 2:5
64. 1 Peter 3:1
65. To keep my book from being too long, I decided to not unpack 1 Peter 3:1–7 in full. However, I commend to the task, chapter 6 of Andrew Bartlett’s book, “Men and Women in Christ.” The chapter is titled “Submission and Honour: 1 Peter.” Bartlett shows, convincingly in my view, that Peter essentially takes the same path as Paul does in Ephesians 5 to subvert the culture’s hierarchical arrangement with a teaching about mutual submission. Like Paul, Peter in 3:1-6 does not overthrow or universally endorse the wife’s culturally expected submissive role, but revises it with new gospel-motivations: not fear of one’s non-Christian husband, but hope in God and an attempt to win one’s husband over to Christ. And like Paul, Peter does not idealize or condemn the Christian husband’s culturally expected authoritative role, but strongly revises it in three ways in 3:7: 1) Husbands should behave towards their wives “in the same way” (that’s the crucial phrase that many complementarian scholars seem to miss) as previously stated for: believers to their God and king (2:13); slaves toward their masters (2:18–25); Christ toward his executioners (2:21); and wives towards their husbands, including Sarah towards Abraham in Genesis 18, (3:1–6)—that is, *in a humbly submissive way*. 2) Husbands should live with their wives in a way that is considerate of their wives’ being less strong than they are. 3) Husbands should honour their wives, who (contra the Greco-Roman culture) are not in a subordinate position, because they are equal co-heirs of salvation. “Honour” here is the same word used earlier in the letter to describe the submission all believers should give to Caesar; compare 2:13 (“submit” to the authorities) and 2:17 (“honour the emperor”). In other words, Peter, without using the precise words, tells husbands to reciprocate submission (as in, humble, honouring service) to their wives. Taken this way, Peter, like Paul in Ephesians 5, seems to revise the meaning of submission in marriage away from merely compliance with the authority of another, toward a commitment to humbly serve and please. Compliance to authority can only flow one-way; whereas, as shown in Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3, and regardless of whatever wider social structures they find themselves in, Christian marriages are to evidence a humble service that flows both ways. Notice also that Peter does not give as a reason for a wife’s submission the fact that the husband has, by God’s design, unilateral authority over her. Had Peter believed that, this would have been the perfect place to mention it. But he does not, and in fact no scripture anywhere in the Bible instructs husbands to exercise unilateral authority over their wives.
66. Genesis 16:9
67. Besides, like Aristotle’s household code and the monarchical government back then, democracy is perhaps the best governmental system society has uncovered yet.
68. 1 Peter 2:15

69. 1 Peter 3:1–2
70. Titus 2:5
71. Titus 2:10
72. 1 Timothy 6:1
73. 1 Timothy 5:7, 14
74. Source: www.bit.ly/3EL7OgM
75. Credit to Kevin Giles in ch.8 of “What the Bible Actually Teaches on Women” for this section.
76. Genesis 9:20–27
77. Leviticus 25:39–41; 25:44–46
78. Credit to Kevin Giles in ch.8 of “What the Bible Actually Teaches on Women” for this section.
79. Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, p. 24. Cited in Barr, p. 110.
80. Source: www.bit.ly/2ZXK1LY
81. “The relation between children and parents differed in significant ways from our contemporary culture. In the modern world, it is presumed that at some point after adulthood, grown children will achieve independence of their parents and are no longer under their authority. This was not the case in the ancient world, in which adult children were expected to remain under the authority of their parents well into adulthood.” (Howard Marshal, “Discovering Biblical Equality”, p. 188.)
82. Jane Hooker adds another argument, which I will add to Storms’ list: “There are significant differences between the biblical practice of slavery and the more recent American practice of slavery.” (Source: www.bit.ly/3GNFnk9) What she seems to mean by this is that the social movement to end slavery in recent centuries is understandable but that slavery in the first century wasn’t that bad. But slaves were treated awfully in the first century too. It also misses the point: in both scenarios slavery involved the ownership of a person for economic purposes. The abolition of slavery did not merely contend with the bad treatment of slaves, but also with the benevolent practice of it.
83. Cain Felder (ed), *Stony the Road we Trod*, p. 226. Cited by Barr, ch. 6.
84. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education* (1762). Cited Barr, ch 6
85. John Stackhouse in “Finally Feminist” (p. 56) is more pointed: “When society was patriarchal, as it was in the New Testament context and as it has been everywhere in the world except in modern society in our day, the church avoided scandal by going along with it. Now, however, that modern society is at least officially egalitarian, the scandal is that the church is not going along with society, not rejoicing in the unprecedented freedom to let women and men serve according to gift and call without an arbitrary gender line. This scandal impedes both the evangelism of others and the ... retention and development of those already converted. ... The continuation of patriarchy by churches in this society puts a religious stumbling block in the way of [many].”