

An abusive husband will often try to twist God's beautiful design for marriage by saying domestic violence is acceptable in the light of God's call on women to submit to their husbands. Is his assertion true?

The first thing to note when answering this question is that submission is *not* the same thing as obedience. Obedience comes from the word *obey*, which is defined by Merriam Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary as:

Obey: to follow the commands or guidance of; to conform to or comply with (as in "obey an order").

Whereas submission comes from the word *submit* which is defined as:

Submit: to yield oneself to the authority or will of another; to defer to or consent; to abide by the opinion or authority of another.

As we see from these definitions, a person obeys because they have no choice, they are being commanded, ordered to conform, as a child obeys a parent, or a marine obeys his sergeant. However, submission implies that a person *chooses* to yield themselves to the will of another person; they consent out of their own free will. A Christian woman therefore would choose to defer her will to that of her husband out of love for him and out of love for and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's look at what the apostle Paul says about Christian submission. Ephesians 5 is often used to describe submission only for women. However, it really describes submission for all people. This section begins in verse 21 with this directive:

Submit to **one another** out of reverence for Christ (emphasis mine).

It then continues with additional instruction: Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

An abuser might focus on the above three verses, but fail to apply the next seven verses to himself. Note as you read this passage that it is calling for *mutual* submission:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and **gave himself up for her** to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her 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—for we are members of his body. "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 (emphasis mine).

A husband who follows these seven verses is submitting his life and will to the Lord, but also, to his wife. If he gives himself up for her, and cares for her as he does his own body, he is submitting his needs to hers. The apostle Paul sums up his discussion of Christian submission in marriage by saying:

However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

John Piper, a renowned preacher, says that the husband’s position as the leader in the home does not give him the right to command and control his wife. It’s a responsibility of the husband to love like Christ: to lay down his life for his wife’s in servant leadership. And the submission of the wife is not meant to be slavish or coerced or cowering. That’s not the way Christ wants the church to respond to his leadership: He wants it to be free and willing and glad and refining and strengthening.

In other words, Ephesians 5 is meant to do two things: to guard against the abuses of the husband’s leadership by telling husbands to love like Jesus; and to guard against the debasing of submission by telling wives to respond to their husbands the way the church does to Christ. (See <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/husbands-who-love-like-christ-and-the-wives-who-submit-to-them> for John Piper’s sermon on June 11, 1989 about submission.

Another set of verses that have been used to describe submission in the Bible come from Genesis 2:18–23:

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.”

Biblical scholar Dr. Walter C. Kaiser says that the word translated in the NIV as *helper* (which is used in Genesis 2:18 and 2:20 to describe the woman) comes from the Hebrew word *ezer* meaning “to rescue, to save, and/or possibly the word *gezer*, meaning “to be strong.”

Furthermore, the word translated as *suitable* in the NIV comes from the Hebrew word *kenegdO*, which means “corresponding to him” or “equal to him.” Therefore, Dr. Kaiser’s translation of the woman’s position in the marriage would be “a *strong rescuer who is equal* to the man.”

Therefore, “suitable helper” does not connote a weaker, inferior or subordinate position. Her role may be different, but she is not less valuable, or less important. Her role can be compared to the role of Jesus in the Holy Trinity. When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, he asked his Father to take away the cup of suffering that he was just about to bear. Matthew 26:39-44 in the NIV reads:

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Once Jesus had prayed and asked God three times, he submitted himself to the Father’s will, as we see in verses 45 and 46:

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

When Peter cut off the ear of one of the soldiers, Jesus chided him in verses 55 and 56, saying,

“Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”

This is a great example of submission. Jesus, coming from a position of power as God’s son, the creator of the earth, *chose* to submit his will to that of his Father so that the Scriptures would be fulfilled, and so that you and I could be forever in right relationship to God. In the same way, I believe that in the context of a loving marriage, God calls women to submit their lives and wills to that of their husbands. I believe that God has placed the husband in the role of the leader of the home, and his wife’s role is to help him to carry out whatever he feels he is being called to do by the Lord. This does not mean that she must blindly do whatever he says without discussion. I believe they are a team, and the two working together will be better than

either of them working alone. However, in cases where there is disagreement, she should lovingly, kindly allow him to lead, and to trust the Lord that God will use her submission for His purposes.

But how can an abused wife use this advice?

A husband who is not truly abusive will respond favorably to a woman who loves him, thinks about him, and gives herself up for him. On the other hand, a man that truly is abusive will “ask for”—really, demand—more and more obedience from his wife. This type of man will most likely not be won over by this behavior, but he will feel entitled to this type of treatment and will see it as another way he can control her.

In their book *Boundaries: When to Say YES When to Say NO to Take Control of Your Life*, Henry Cloud and John Townsend say on pages 161 – 162, “We have never seen a ‘submission problem’ that didn’t have a controlling husband at its root.”

In his book *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, Jay Adams defines marriage as a *Covenant of Companionship*. On pages 16 and 17 he says a spouse is supposed to be someone with whom he (she) can talk things over, someone to counsel, someone to care; to share joys, perplexities, ideas, fears, sorrows and disappointments: a helper. A marriage companion is someone with whom one can let down his/her hair. Marriage is meant to be the closest, most intimate of all human relationships. Two persons may begin to think, act, and feel as one.

The relationship Jay Adams is describing here is *not* the description of a marriage that is abusive. In an abusive relationship, there is no oneness of spirit, no openness, and no equality. Because of the abusive way the husband is treating his wife, he is breaking the Covenant of Companionship that the Lord designed the marriage union to be. He is therefore committing sin against you.

God’s desire is for all marriages to be havens of support and love for everyone in the family, as we saw described in Ephesians 5:25–33. Therefore, it truly grieves the Lord to see you treated disrespectfully and abusively. This is *not* His ultimate desire for you.

So, let us turn now from theory to ask some pertinent questions about your marriage:

- Is your husband following Paul’s advice in Ephesians 5:25 and loving you like Christ loves the church? In an abusive marriage, this is probably not the case. Do you live in freedom, or must you live as a slave to his whims and rules?
- Are you experiencing grace and freedom in your marriage? Usually husbands who quote Ephesians 5 turn their wives into slaves and condemn them for not submitting. If you incur wrath or condemnation for not submitting, you and your husband do not have a grace-filled Christian marriage; instead, you have a marriage “under the law,” (Romans 4:15).
- Does your husband demonstrate that he loves you as much as he loves his own body? Ephesians 5:28-29 says, “Husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church.” When your husband treats you with lack

of respect, he sins against not only God but against himself. There is no such thing as slave-like submission described in the Bible. Christ never takes away our will or demands us to do something we don't want to do. He is a gentleman, and he treats us with gentleness. He never uses us as objects; instead, He "gave himself up" (Ephesians 5:25) for us. He takes care of us as he would his own body.

So.....we are finally back to the question I posed at the very beginning of this blog. An abusive husband will often try to twist God's beautiful design for marriage by saying his physical, verbal or sexual abuse is acceptable in the light of God's call on women to submit to their husbands. Is his assertion true? The answer is **NO**. God does not ask wives to submit to abuse. That was never his design for marriage.

I will caution wives of abusive men at this point. It would not be wise to take this information and confront your husbands with it. An abuser's main object is to have power and control over you. He may have been succeeding at this quite nicely by telling you God commands you to submit to him, no matter how he behaves. Please use wisdom and caution before sharing this information with him. However, now that *you* know, you can be free in your heart from that particular form of control.