

## Mutual Submission (part 1)

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In many marriages, a typical drama unfolds between husband and wife. It is, in fact, a drama that is as old as the very first couple in Genesis 2-3. We start out so blissful, so unified, with very little impeding our pursuit of oneness. *“For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and the his wife were both naked and were not ashamed”* (Genesis 2:24-25). What interrupts this happy arrangement is the exertion of one will over another, though, sometimes in the form of sins. In the case of Adam and Eve it was the woman’s pursuit of God-like knowledge and power, a rejection of her place in the creation. When Adam similarly failed as a husband, conflict and disunity ensued. Their relationship with one another, as well as with God, had been disrupted. Of course, not all conflicts arise over sins, at least as we see them. I would even go so far as to say that most of our arguments are over matters of judgment or conscience, even trivialities:

- Particulars of the sexual relationship (how often, repertoire, etc.);
- How to spend the money (necessities versus luxuries, budgeting, “my money, your money”);
- Certain vices or habits that we perceive to be “gray areas” (smoking, social drinking, occasional gambling, language, wandering eyes). Not addiction, necessarily, but enough of a problem that it causes conflict;
- Matters of judgment in parenting (how old before dating, scholastic expectations, punishments, tolerance for mischievous behavior).

Not that I mean to dismiss the conflicts that disrupt oneness with our mates, but think back to your last argument and ask yourself, “Was it worth it?” I often reflect on my moments of stubbornness and wonder if winning this fight or that was worth my time and the damage it did to my mate. In marriage, it should never be a question of who is winning the marriage right now, or keeping score of indiscretions and bad judgment calls (when was the last time “I told you so” made *any* marriage stronger?). Oneness and intimacy can never be achieved between competing interests, just as unity is impossible on a sports field between opposing teams. When my rooting interests are at odds with my mate, I have missed the Biblical initiative to leave my father and mother and cling to my spouse.

### Love and Submission

We often consider Ephesians 5:22ff a great starting place for a discussion of the Bible’s model for effective and happy marriage. *“Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be subject to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her... So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church...”* It seems clear that each partner in a marriage has some unique responsibilities and roles. But how can people with such vastly different needs and skills ever become one, as the scripture says (Ephesians 5:31)?

More importantly, how do we move from being selfish and stubborn in our conflicts to mutually submissive? I know that the term turns some Christian men off when they first

hear it. "Submission is the woman's role," one might say. "She is supposed to submit to me in *everything*," men crow. But in the same way that we steam roll our way through the sexual relationship with 1 Corinthians 7:1-5, we also misapply Ephesians 5 to the point that we forget about some other vital Biblical concepts.

Consider the verse just prior to our previous text. "*And be subject to one another in the fear of Christ*" (Ephesians 5:21). While it is true that this is contextually speaking of Christians interacting with one another in general, is there not an application to marriage also? Do not forget that just because two Christians get married does not mean they stop having the exact same spiritual relationship they always had. Peter exhorts husbands to live in an understanding manner with their wives, going on to say, "*and grant her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life*" (1 Peter 3:7). Paul writes that Timothy should treat all Christian women as "*mothers and sisters, in all purity*" (1 Timothy 5:2).

And going back to our original text, is it a stretch to say that Jesus Himself, though He is King of kings and Lord of lords, submitted to His bride? He might not have submitted to His bride's authority, but He submitted to oneness, to unity, to her needs and her salvation. He submitted His very life for her. Romans 15:8-9 goes so far as to say that Jesus became a servant to the Jews for the sake of the Gospel. Philippians 2:5-7 clearly teaches that Christ humbled Himself, taking the form of a "*bond-servant*". He served in John 13, and submitted to His disciples to the point of washing their feet. Yet in all of this, Jesus never lost His authority. It was through His submission to the needs of His bride that He accomplished the greatest, purest act of love that history has ever witnessed.