

Seeking to Apply God's Word to Our Lives

Biblical Leadership in the Marriage

There are many opinions about leadership within Christian marriages. These opinions range from no leadership at all to militaristic dominance. What does God's Word say about leadership in the marriage?

Marriage is based upon equality with distinct roles:

Marriage is a union created by God, involving a man and a woman.¹ Both men and women are created in the divine image of God and fully equal in personhood, dignity, and worth (Genesis 1:26-28). They both were chosen before the foundation of the world, predestined for adoption, have redemption through Christ's blood, and have obtained an eternal inheritance (Ephesians 1:4-12). They are on equal footing before the Savior (Galatians 3:28; 1 Peter 3:7). They both have received the Holy Spirit and have been given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (Ephesians 1:13; 1 Corinthians 12:7).

Although based upon equality, biblical leadership relies upon complementary yet distinct roles. Roles perform an essential function within the kingdom of God. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit minister under unique roles. The Holy Spirit seeks to glorify Christ (John 16:13-14). Jesus Christ did not speak or act under His own initiative but submitted to the Father (John 8:28, 5:30, 6:38).

In Ephesians 5:22-33, the Apostle Paul explains the roles of the husband and the wife by comparing them to Christ's relationship with the church.

The wife is to be subject to her husband (vs. 22-24):

In Ephesians 5:22-24, the Apostle Paul writes, "²² *Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.* ²³ *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.* ²⁴ *But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.*" In these verses, we find three biblical principles for wives:

1. The wife is to be in subject to her husband, as to the Lord (v. 22):

Paul instructs the wife to be subject to the husband as she is to the Lord. The Greek word for "subject" means "to place or rank under, to submit, or to obey."

2. The husband is head of his wife, as Christ is head of the church (v. 23):

The Apostle explains why the wife is to be subject to her husband. In the same way that God made Christ as head over the church, He has made the husband head over the wife.

3. The wife is to be subject to her husband as the Church is subject to Christ (v. 24):

Paul addresses the extent to which the wife is to submit to the husband. She is to willingly submit to her husband in every aspect of life, just as the church is subject to Christ in all things.²

The husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church (vs. 25-33):

In these verses, Paul explains how the husband's love for his wife is to equal Christ's love for the church:

1. The husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church:

In verses 25-27 the Paul writes: "²⁵ *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her,* ²⁶ *so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,* ²⁷ *that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.*" In these verses, Paul commands the husband to sacrificially love his wife, as Christ loved the church. He then explains the scope and purpose of Christ's love:

A. In verse 25, Paul explains the scope of Christ's love. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. The word "love" is the Greek word "agape," which can be defined as a self-sacrificing love, seeking the best for others at one's own expense. This occurred when

¹ From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female (Mark 10:6; Genesis 1:27). For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother, be joined together with a woman and the two will become one flesh (Mark 10:7-8; Genesis 2:24). What God has joined together no man is to separate (Mark 10:9).

² This submission is unconditional and not based upon the husband fulfilling his responsibilities (1 Peter 3:1). The only time the wife is not to submit to her husband is when the husband instructs the wife to do something which contradicts the Word of God. In such cases, the wife must choose to obey God's Word (Acts 4:18-20) and allow her quiet and chaste behavior to convict the heart of her husband (1 Peter 3:1-2).

Jesus died upon a cross and gave Himself up for us as an offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:2).

- B. In verse 26, the Apostle explains why Jesus gave Himself up, “so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word.” The word “sanctify” here refers to the church being set apart to God by the cleansing of the spoken word of the gospel.
- C. In verse 27, Paul explains the purpose of this sanctification, “That He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.”

2. The husband is to love his wife as himself:

In verses 28-30, the Apostle writes, “²⁸So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; ²⁹for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church ³⁰because we are members of His body.” In these verses, Paul writes that the husband is to love his wife as his own body:

- A. The husband is to love his wife as his own body. He who loves his wife loves himself.
- B. He who loves his own body nourishes and cherishes it. The Greek word for “nourish” means “to feed, to nourish.” This nourishing involves providing for both physical and spiritual needs.³ The word “cherish” means “to impart warmth; hence cherish, comfort, tenderly care for.” This same word is used to describe how a mother tenderly cares for (cherishes) her child (1 Thessalonians 2:7). Both “nourish” and “cherish” are present tense verbs denoting an ongoing action.
- C. The husband is to nourish his wife both physically and spiritually as Christ nourishes and cherishes the church. Christ does this because we are members of His body.

3. The husband and wife are one flesh, as the church and Christ are one:

In verses 31-32, Paul writes, “**FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.**” The word “JOINED” literally means to glue or unite. It is a passive verb denoting that God unites the husband and wife into one flesh (Matthew 19:6). The oneness experienced by the husband and wife is to be a reflection of the oneness of Christ and the church. Paul concludes his instructions to the husband by summarizing the husband and wife relationship. He writes, “*Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.*”

Conclusion:

The world views leadership as an opportunity for control and personal gain. In contrast, biblical leadership in the marriage is based upon equal standing, complementary roles, and sacrificial love.

God instructs the wife to be subject to her husband as she is subject to the Lord. For the husband is head of his wife, as Christ is head of the church. Therefore, she is to be subject to her husband as the Church is subject to Christ. The wife’s submission to her husband is a reflection of her love and submission to Christ.

God’s role for the husband is to love his wife. This love is to equal the intensity and scope of Christ’s ongoing love for the church. He is to seek her highest good, so that she can live in a holy and blameless manner. He is to nourish and cherish her both physically and spiritually.

Motivated by their love for God, the husband and wife are to unconditionally fulfill their roles in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴

“Seeking to Apply God’s Word to Our Lives” papers represent an overview of various Bible doctrines. Each paper contains biblical truths that often set TVBC apart from other churches and religious organizations. We invite the congregation’s biblically based feedback as we seek to accurately handle the Word of God.

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³ While Elders are to equip men and women for the work of service (Ephesians 4:11-12) and older women are to encourage the younger wives (Titus 2:3-4), only the husband is commanded to sacrificially love, cherish, and nourish his wife his wife (Ephesians 5:25-29). Therefore, the husband is primarily responsible for the biblical training of his wife.

⁴ For further information about walking in the Holy Spirit, see the paper entitled, “The Spirit-Directed Life.”