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MINISTRIES

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Authority in Marriage

The Scriptures exhort us to obey the authorities that are over us (Numbers 27:18-21; John 5:25-27; Romans 13:1-2; Titus 3:1). One of these authorities is the authority in a marriage. According to the Scriptures, a husband has authority over his wife (Numbers 5:29; Colossians 3:18). In this teaching, we’re going to examine this scriptural marriage authority. What’s the nature of this authority? Why does it exist? And how can we, as believers, follow this authority structure and obey the Scriptures?

Let’s start at the beginning. What were men and women placed on earth to do? When God created mankind, he wanted them to be “in his image;” he wanted them to be like him, specifically, to be creators of life, and to have dominion over the earth:

Genesis 1:26-28

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

So, from the very beginning, God wanted people to be “in his image.” What does it mean to be in God’s image? Does this mean that our bodies look like God’s body? Clearly, this cannot be what it means to be in God’s image, because God is spirit, not flesh (cf. 2 Chronicles 32:7-8; John 4:24; 1 Corinthians 15:44-53; 1 Peter 4:6). So being in God’s image doesn’t mean that our flesh looks like God; rather, it means that we are doing what God does. God has dominion and creates life, and people were made in order to have dominion over the earth and to be fruitful and multiply, to create life. The perfect expression of this image is Jesus, whose Hebrew name is Yeshua. In Colossians, Paul describes Yeshua as the image of God, and goes on to describe what that means:

Colossians 1:15-18

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

Just like man, in the beginning, displayed God's image by having dominion and creating life, so too Yeshua displays God's image by having dominion and creating life. However, Yeshua is also the "head of the body, the church." He is not supposed to display the image of God all by himself; he displays it together with those who abide in him.

2 Corinthians 3:18

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

1 Corinthians 15:49

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

1 John 3:2

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

Philippians 3:20-21

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ [Messiah Yeshua], who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

God's intent is not for Yeshua to be alone in displaying his image; he wants the church to display his image together with Yeshua. In the same way, Adam was not supposed to display God's image alone; God gave him a partner to display it with him:

Genesis 2:20-24

The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD [YHWH] God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD [YHWH] God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Mankind was told to "be fruitful and multiply" in Genesis 1:27, but without both men and women, mankind cannot do this. They need to be together in order to fully express the image of God. Each of them has a specific job that they need to do in order to accomplish God's will and display his image. This is paralleled by Christ and the church: Christ is the preeminent one, but having Christ and the church together is what fully expresses the image of God. Marriage is a symbolic picture of this:

Ephesians 5:28-33

In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

So, God wants mankind to be in his image—to rule over the earth, and to create life. To fulfill that purpose, God made mankind male and female, and established a marriage system by which two people could become “one flesh.” When a married couple emulates Christ and the church, with the husband loving his wife as Christ loves the church, and the woman respecting her husband as the church respects Christ, then together they display the image of God.

For more on displaying the image of God, see our teaching, [Returning to the Image of God](#).

So then, how does authority factor into this marriage picture? Does a husband have authority over his wife? If so, what does that authority look like, and how does it help to display God’s image? First, let’s establish that there is an authority figure in a marriage. After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, God told them what their futures were going to look like. This is what he said to Eve:

Genesis 3:16

To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.”

There is debate over exactly what this verse means, and why God said it to Eve at this time. However, one thing is clear: this verse says that the husband will rule over his wife. Paul gives some insight into why that is the case, and how it reflects the image of God:

Ephesians 5:22-24

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Since a marriage symbolically displays the relationship of Christ and the church, the parties in the marriage function in similar roles. The husband should love his wife like Christ loves the church, and the wife should submit to her husband like the church submits to Christ. Paul repeats these ideas in Titus 2:3-5, 1 Timothy 2:8-12, and Colossians 3:18-19. Peter also has similar comments in his first epistle:

1 Peter 3:1-7

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct. Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious. For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening. Likewise, husbands, live

with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

So, both Peter and Paul agree that a husband has a kind of headship over his wife, and that this headship should be properly exercised. But, what exactly is the nature of this headship? What does it mean for a wife to “submit” to her husband? And, how should a husband exercise headship over his wife?

The Torah gives one clear example of how a wife should submit to her husband. He has authority over her vows:

Numbers 30:1-15

Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the people of Israel, saying, “This is what the LORD [YHWH] has commanded. If a man vows a vow to the LORD [YHWH], or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. “If a woman vows a vow to the LORD [YHWH] and binds herself by a pledge, while within her father’s house in her youth, and her father hears of her vow and of her pledge by which she has bound herself and says nothing to her, then all her vows shall stand, and every pledge by which she has bound herself shall stand. But if her father opposes her on the day that he hears of it, no vow of hers, no pledge by which she has bound herself shall stand. And the LORD [YHWH] will forgive her, because her father opposed her. “If she marries a husband, while under her vows or any thoughtless utterance of her lips by which she has bound herself, and her husband hears of it and says nothing to her on the day that he hears, then her vows shall stand, and her pledges by which she has bound herself shall stand. But if, on the day that her husband comes to hear of it, he opposes her, then he makes void her vow that was on her, and the thoughtless utterance of her lips by which she bound herself. And the LORD [YHWH] will forgive her. (But any vow of a widow or of a divorced woman, anything by which she has bound herself, shall stand against her.) And if she vowed in her husband’s house or bound herself by a pledge with an oath, and her husband heard of it and said nothing to her and did not oppose her, then all her vows shall stand, and every pledge by which she bound herself shall stand. But if her husband makes them null and void on the day that he hears them, then whatever proceeds out of her lips concerning her vows or concerning her pledge of herself shall not stand. Her husband has made them void, and the LORD [YHWH] will forgive her. Any vow and any binding oath to afflict herself, her husband may establish, or her husband may make void. But if her husband says nothing to her from day to day, then he establishes all her vows or all her pledges that are upon her. He has established them, because he said nothing to her on the day that he heard of them. But if he makes them null and void after he has heard of them, then he shall bear her iniquity.”

So, just like a father has the authority to confirm or annul the vows of his young daughter, a husband has this same authority in regard to his wife. This shows the nature of the husband’s headship: he can authorize what kind of commitments his family will make, and the practices that his family will be bound to.

How does this help display the image of God? Well, if Adam had exercised this authority when Eve gave him the forbidden fruit—if he had rejected her decision to sin, and not accepted it into their family—then he would not have lost the image and glory of God (cf. Romans 3:23). Instead, because he consented to her sin and also participated in it, all mankind fell into sin and death. As Paul said:

1 Timothy 2:13-14

For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Adam was not deceived; he knew that what Eve was doing was wrong, but he consented to it instead of opposing it. Again, if he had exercised spiritual headship and rejected her commitment to sin, then he would have maintained God's image and glory.

So, then, how does a husband properly exercise this spiritual headship? What are a husband's responsibilities as the spiritual "head" of his wife? Well, his first responsibility is to emulate Christ.

Ephesians 5:23

For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church...

How can a husband emulate Christ? Well, for one, he must learn to submit to his own spiritual head:

1 Corinthians 11:3

But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.

The husband should submit to Christ in the same way that Christ submitted to God. Christ did not teach his own ideas for the purpose of benefiting himself, but he taught God's ways and obeyed them. He was dedicated to the purpose and the work that God had for him. Here are some of the scriptures that describe Yeshua's commitment to God's purpose:

John 5:19

So Jesus [Yeshua] said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise."

John 5:30

I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me..

John 6:38

For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.

John 7:16

So Jesus [Yeshua] answered them, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me."

Yeshua did not teach his own doctrine, but he taught God's doctrine, and husbands should do the same. Yeshua condemned those who taught their own doctrine over God's doctrine—those who used their spiritual authority as a means of elevating themselves, rather than a means of serving God:

Mark 7:6-13

And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' You leave the commandment of God and hold to the

tradition of men.” And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.

Matthew 23:1-4

Then Jesus [Yeshua] said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.”

Yeshua showed what it means to submit to one’s head. He did not exalt himself or live for himself, but he lived for God. So too, a husband should not impose spiritual rules that serve himself, but instead should direct his family to serve God. Husbands should obey God, and should establish family practices that glorify God.

Another way that husbands can emulate Christ is in self-sacrifice. Yeshua served God and God’s people even though it required that he pay a great price:

Matthew 20:25-28

But Jesus [Yeshua] called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Philippians 2:5-8

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua], who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Yeshua submitted to God’s will, and loved his people, even though it cost him greatly, and husbands should submit to Christ and love their wives, even when the cost of doing so is high:

Ephesians 5:25-30

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.

The husband should be willing to serve, just like Yeshua was willing to serve:

John 13:13-15

If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

Good leaders serve the people they lead, and God honors them for their service. Yeshua provided the church with perfect service, and so he provides perfect leadership. He is a husband's example of how to serve and how to lead.

Finally, a husband should seek to display the image of God. This involves the things we have already mentioned: submitting to God, and being loving and self-sacrificing. It also involves exercising dominion over creation and producing life. A man must provide for the practical needs of his family, to keep them alive by the sweat of his brow. Paul says this explicitly:

1 Timothy 5:8

But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

A man should also preserve his family's life by protecting them, like Yeshua protects the church. Yeshua spent a lot of time dispelling false teachings, and providing an example of righteous behavior for his disciples. Husbands, likewise, should keep lies and wickedness out of their houses, and should provide correction to their wives and families when necessary. They should properly exercise their authority found in Numbers chapter 30 and annul family commitments that are not good for their families.

Of course, a woman must also provide for her family's physical and spiritual needs (e.g., see Proverbs 31:10-31). Displaying the image of God is a team effort. But the man is usually better equipped to overcome the hard toil, thorns, and thistles that are obstacles to physical provision (Genesis 3:17-19), and it's his duty to provide spiritual protection. A husband should take these duties seriously.

We want to take a moment here to emphasize what the Scriptures do *not* say about a man's authority. First, with regard to fathers and daughters, the laws in Numbers 30 only apply to a daughter living in her father's house. If she gets married, her husband will acquire the authority to revoke her vows, and her father will lose that authority. Also, daughters who are single but are not living in their father's house cannot have their vows revoked by their fathers. Likewise, a divorced woman or a widowed woman has no one to annul their vows, and therefore, they must fulfill them just like men must fulfill their vows.

Second, men do not have general authority over women. The idea that all men have authority over all women is not found anywhere in the Scriptures. A husband has authority over his wife, and a father has authority over his children, but a man does not have authority over women in general. There is a critical difference between being a man and being a husband or a father. A wife must submit to her husband, but not to men generally. The Scriptures are very clear on this point:

Ephesians 5:22

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

Colossians 3:18

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Likewise, a husband has authority over his own wife, but not over women generally. The authority of a husband or father is limited to within his own family. He does not have this kind of authority outside of that family structure.

Third, the Scriptures do not teach that women are merely the servants of men. Helping one's husband is very important, but a woman is responsible for more than that. Proverbs commends women who "fear YHWH" (Proverbs 31:30). Yeshua commended Martha's sister Mary for building herself up spiritually by listening to his teachings (John 11:20). Both men and women should have a rich prayer and study life. A woman's spiritual role is not to help her husband and do nothing else. Also, even though a husband has authority over his family, that authority should not be exercised in a domineering, humiliating, or oppressive fashion. Both Yeshua and Paul are clear that this is not what leadership among believers should look like:

Matthew 20:25-28

But Jesus [Yeshua] called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Ephesians 5:33

...let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Colossian 3:18-19

Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.

So, then, how can wives submit to their husbands? Well, in short, a wife submits to her husband by allowing him to exercise his right to annul vows. Allowing the husband final say in what commitments the family will make, and what spiritual practices the family will adopt, is basically all that submission means. Wives have a divine calling to help their husbands manifest the image of YHWH in the world. If wives are to fulfill their calling to be a help to their husbands, then they must submit themselves to the authority structure that God established. Women are under the headship of their husbands, who are themselves under the headship of Messiah.

Now, this presents an important question: "Can wives receive direct revelations from God?" The answer is clearly, "yes." The Scriptures are full of examples of women, married and unmarried, who received direct revelation and instruction from God (examples include Rebekah [Genesis 25:22-23], Samson's mother [Judges 13:2-14], and Mary [Luke 1:26-38]). A woman's husband is not her conduit through which she has a personal relationship with God. Submitting to one's husband does not mean worshiping him as a God; it simply means deferring to his authority in family matters. However, since the husband has this authority, he should have the final say in what spiritual practices the family will adopt based on his wife's revelations. In other words, wives can and should share spiritual knowledge with their husbands, but ultimately the husband has the authority to allow or disallow the application of that knowledge. He determines what commitments his family will make.

Now, what if the husband is not submitting to Messiah? What if the wife is better at representing the spiritual image of God than he is? The Scriptures tell us that this still does not change the authority structure:

1 Timothy 2:11-12

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.

1 Peter 3:1-2

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct.

1 Corinthians 7:13-16

If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

A wife, even one with a spiritually inferior husband, should “remain quiet.” This does not mean she is not allowed to speak; it means that she should not try to dominate her husband, to make spiritual commitments on his behalf. This would subvert the authority structure that God established. A wife who tries to dominate her husband is not submitting to God; she is not bearing God’s image. She cannot cause her husband to submit to God by defying God herself. Rather, she should show the example of what it means to submit to God with her “respectful and pure conduct.” When the husband sees the virtue in this kind of life, it can prompt him to pursue such a life for himself. As Paul says, by doing this, the wife may end up saving her husband. But forcing him into it is not how God operates, and it doesn’t work anyway.

For more on what the Bible has to say about women speaking, see our teaching, [Can Women Speak in Church?](#)

We should note that there is a critical exception—there is a time for a wife not to submit to her husband, and that is when the husband’s decisions are literally going to get someone killed. There are at least two examples in Scripture of righteous women rebelling against their husbands’ decisions in order to save lives. One is Moses’s wife Zipporah taking it upon herself to circumcise their son after Moses had neglected to do so:

Exodus 4:24-26

At a lodging place on the way the LORD [YHWH] met him and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin and touched Moses’ feet with it and said, “Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” So he let him alone...

YHWH was literally about to put Moses to death for his disobedience, but Zipporah stepped in and did what Moses had refused to do. What she did was a subversion of Moses' authority, but in so doing, she saved his life. A similar thing happened in the case of Nabal's wife Abigail in 1 Samuel chapter 25. Before he was king, David had been protecting the flocks of a man named Nabal (1 Samuel 25:7, 14-16, 21). David requested provisions from Nabal (v. 8), but Nabal refused to give him anything (vv. 10-11). David became angry, and decided that he was going to kill every man in Nabal's house because of this refusal (v. 22). When Nabal's wife Abigail found out what her husband had done, she went against his wishes (vv. 18-19), and provided David with both provisions and an apology for her husband's behavior (vv. 24-28). This caused David to change his mind about killing Nabal's family (vv. 32-34). So, by defying her husband, Abigail saved the lives of all the men in their household.

Both of these examples show the exception to the rule. Normally, a wife should not defy her husband in this way; the husband is the one with the scriptural authority to annul her vows and commitments (Numbers 30), and she should submit to that authority. But, as is often the case in the Scriptures, saving someone's life is more important than strictly following the rules (e.g. Luke 14:1-5). It is better for a wife to defy her husband and save the lives of her family than it is to obey her husband and let them die. Again, this situation is the rare exception to the rule; under normal circumstances, a wife should respect and submit to her husband.

In conclusion, let's quickly recap what we've covered in this teaching.

- Humanity was made to display God's image, by submitting to God and displaying his character and glory to the world. To do this, mankind would rule over the earth and be fruitful and multiply. Woman was made to help man do these things.
- Christ and the church provide the ultimate example of the image of God. Christ loves the church, and the church submits to Christ, and together they exercise righteous rule and bring life to the world. A marriage should be modeled after this Godly image, with a husband loving his wife, and the wife submitting to her husband.
- A husband's authority includes the ability to nullify vows, and to oversee the spiritual direction of his household. He should exercise this authority the same way that Christ does over the church: with great love and gentleness. He should also be submitting to Christ as his authority, rather than enforcing his own self-serving doctrines.
- A wife should submit to her husband's authority. She should not seek to dominate him, to force him to submit to God, but rather should submit to God herself and provide an example of what godly behavior looks like. There are cases where it is appropriate to defy the husband's authority, but they are the exception, not the rule.
- Together, husband and wife should seek to display God's image to the world by submitting to Christ and following his example.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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