

## Submission — 2. The Christian and submission

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To recap what I hope you weren't able to miss from the first session: when submission is understood in terms of Jesus' life and relation to the Father then two conclusions are unavoidable — it has nothing to do with value and it has nothing to do with power. The Son who submits is deserving of the same honour as the Father to whom he submits. They are completely equal in being and value and this is no less so because the submission of the Son is a characteristic of their eternal relationship. Furthermore, the submission of the Son to the Father is freely given and not in any sense coerced. It is the Son's appropriate expression of other-centred love just as the Father's headship is his appropriate expression of other-centred love. The Son seeks above all else the glory and honour of the Father and so gives himself always to do the Father's will. The Father seeks above all else the glory and honour of the Son and so he acts as head, putting all things under his feet. I said at the end of the last session that this is entirely subversive of the way we tend to operate in our sinfulness. Far too often submission in our experience is coerced and far too often those who submit are considered inferior. But that is not what submission is like in the experience of the Lord Jesus. And it is not the way submission should operate in the lives of his disciples.

Of course not all our experience of submission in the world is negative. Some degree of submission to others is in fact necessary for society in general to work. It is not a uniquely Christian concept, despite the suggestions of Friedrich Nietzsche in the late nineteenth century. We recognise an authority arising out of responsibility in a variety of contexts and we submit to it for the good ordering of the group or the wider community in which we operate. In fact, we generally agree that is appropriate and even necessary to apply sanctions when people

refuse to submit in those situations. Our police officers have authority to instruct us at various levels as they seek to protect us all and maintain peace and order in the community. When the blue flashing lights are turned on and the siren sounds you are required to pull over. If instead you plant your foot on the accelerator you can be sure it will not end well. The police officer has the authority and power to direct you to comply. And if you don't, you can expect a ticket or worse. In parliament the members are expected to submit to the authority of the Speaker. When a member refuses to abide by the Speaker's direction they are named and repeated infringements can see them removed from the chamber. In a myriad of ways, some quite trivial but others very significant indeed, submission is a reality in our everyday lives. Think of the way we operate in times of a medical crisis, on a building site, when visiting a school playground. We recognise, obey and submit to our doctors, the foreman, the Headmaster or Headmistress and if we don't there are consequences.

But the reality is that, for many of us, the moment we start to speak about one human being's submission to another, our minds move quite rapidly to the examples of gross abuse with which we are all familiar. After a century of totalitarian regimes—Nazism in Germany in the 1930s and 40s, Fascism in Italy in the same period, Stalinism or the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe right up to the 1980s, the rule of Mao Tse Tung, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein and many others—we recoil from anything that even vaguely resembles the coerced subjugation of one person or group of people by another. Men, women and children have been subjected to the most horrible, inhumane treatment, sometimes with the explicit justification that those so subjugated were somehow less valuable, even less human, than those who subjugated them. In its worst expressions this was the case with apartheid in South Africa, where black South Africans did not have the same rights and were considered by extremists as sub-human. To our shame, some spoke this way about indigenous Australians in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Their land could be taken, their interests ignored, because they did not matter as much as the white settlers who had lately

come to the Great South Land of the Holy Spirit. It is worth remembering that men like Richard Johnson and Samuel Marsden fought against this way of thinking and instead were determined to see aboriginal men and women saved and become members of the kingdom of Christ — their lives were no less valuable than those of the convicts and free settlers; some of them too will be gathered around the throne of God and of the Lamb on the last day. And of course we must face the reality of the abuse of women by men, the way women have had to fight for the right to own property, to participate in the electoral process, to receive the same wages for the same work, and much, much more. There is an ugly chauvinism that refuses to die in the West and it surfaces, even very recently, on the lips and in the actions of some very high profile people.

And so here is the first thing we need to say about the Christian and submission. Christian submission and its converse, Christian headship or leadership, always exists in the arena of a fallen world full of fallen human beings.

### **1. Christian submission takes place in a fallen world**

In this area, as in so many others, even our best attempts are marred by our self-centredness. The very first casualty of the Fall was the relationship between the man and the woman in the Garden. Where before they could be entirely open with one another, as soon as they do what God had commanded them not to do they hide from one another (Gen 3.7). Adam does not suddenly become abusive or tyrannical and neither does Eve. But the harmony and peace of their ordered relationship before the Fall is fractured and the fracture only becomes worse as the years and generations roll on.

Perhaps it is worth taking a moment at this point to consider just what changed at the Fall. Some have suggested that prior to the Fall there was no order in the relationship of the man and the woman. They propose that order, headship and submission, or however else you may wish to describe it, is itself a consequence of

the Fall. Patriarchy, to use the loaded term, is the primal form of human sinfulness. It had no place in God's original intention. There are, however, a number of hints in Genesis 1 & 2 that this is not so, hints which are taken up by Paul, among others, in the New Testament.

Among those hints is the order of creation. Genesis 2 presents us with God's creation of the man and then of the woman from the man. That doesn't make her in any way less than the man. In fact, the burden of that part of the narrative is that she is of the same stuff as the man: 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' (Gen 2.23). As Genesis 1 had made clear 'God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them' (Gen 1.27). However, the order of creation, the man created first and then the woman from the man, is not simply an incidental piece of chronology. It carries significance at the level of responsibility and leadership, and Paul picks that up when he writes to his young colleague Timothy in our New Testament (1 Tim 2.13).

Furthermore, the woman is created as 'a helper suitable for [the man]' (Gen 2.18). It is not good for him to be alone. Not, I suspect, because he was pining away out of loneliness, or at least not only that. I think the context suggests that the issue is that he cannot fulfil the mandate that has been given to him on his own. In order to 'fill the earth and subdue it' (Gen 1.28), in order to rule the world as God's image in the world, to care for it as God's representative in the created order, he needs a helper, rather, he needs *this* helper. Although we might quickly want to suggest that he is her helper as well, this is something the text does not say. She is his equal in being and value and honour. But the relationship between them, at this point of interacting with the wider created world, has a particular order.

A third hint is found in the easily overlooked fact that God calls out to Adam and initially holds Adam to account for what was done in the Garden at the Serpent's suggestion. God calls out to Adam and asks 'Where are you?' (Gen 3.9) Adam is the

one first interrogated. Only then does God turn to the woman and finally to the Serpent. What is more, the curses of Genesis 3.14–19 find their crescendo in the words directed towards Adam. He had been the passive one following the Serpent's words. 'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife' (Gen 3.17). It was not that he was never to listen to her; as if he, and he alone, was to do the talking in the relationship. No doubt it was critically important for Adam to *listen* to his wife over their very long life together. But at that critical point in the Garden he had abdicated his responsibility to lead his wife in their life before God in the world. And he is held to account with the most far reaching of consequences:

cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return (Gen 3.17–19).

To these three hints many would add another. It comes in the very next verse of Genesis 3: 'The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living' (Gen 3.20). Under God's direction, Adam had named the creatures God brought to him (Gen 2.19–20). Now, just as he had called her 'woman' in Genesis 2, he gives her the name 'Eve'. Perhaps this too is another sign of the order in their relationship, the loving leadership he was properly to exercise as they live in God's world.

The order in the relationship between the man and the woman was not a product of the Fall. Instead it was disrupted and made difficult by the Fall: 'your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you', God said (Gen 3.16). Just as every other facet of life was subject to distortion and struggle, so this most intimate relationship, while remaining good, will now be subject to strain and stress and struggle. Abuse becomes a reality after the Fall. Pain and distress, even in this most precious area of life, becomes a reality after the Fall. What God created in the beginning is still good—even the order he created from the beginning—but

along with the other things in the Garden of Eden, they spoiled this too. It now needs to be redeemed.

I want to go on in a moment to talk about how that has happened, how the pattern of headship and submission in the relationship of men and women has been redeemed and the difference it makes. But before I do, I want to set that very particular instance of Christian submission in another context. And that is simply to say that the principle of Christian submission operates in a range of situations and is not limited simply to the relationship of a man and a woman or a husband and a wife.

## **2. Christian submission goes beyond male-female relations**

So far-reaching is the concept of submission in the New Testament that submission, or '[o]rdering our lives under another' to take the basic meaning of the Greek word *ὑποτασσείν*, could be spoken of as one of the characteristics of the Christian life.<sup>1</sup>

### **a. Submission to God**

The most basic form this takes, is, of course, our submission to God, the One who both made us and redeems us. This is the very opposite of what happened in the Garden of Eden, where the man and the woman were persuaded to turn aside from submission to God and his word and seek to know good and evil independently of him. Despite the goodness of God's provision in the Garden, his ongoing care and fellowship, they chose self-assertion rather than submission or obedience. And in contrast, James says in chapter 4 of his letter, after reminding his readers that 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble' (Jms 4.6),

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn

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<sup>1</sup> J. W. Woodhouse, *Colossians and Philemon: So Walk in Him* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2011), 220.

and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.’ (Jms 4.7–9)

James understood that this submission may well need to show itself in humble repentance and the bearing of discipline. But the goodness of God means this is not the final word. This submission, this willingness to humble ourselves and recognise the Lordship of God, is not like the Muslim concept of total submission to Allah. For the Christian this service ‘is perfect freedom’.<sup>2</sup> It liberates rather than eliminates active, conscious co-creative activity in the world. Christian submission is given this character by God himself. He is the one who gives and nourishes life. That why the writer to the Hebrews could urge us to ‘be subject to the Father of Spirits and live’ (Heb 12.9). At the heart of this submission, of course, is faith, that life-shaping trust in God and his promise which is the work of his Spirit in us and was exemplified by the long list of men and women in Hebrews 11, not least in the One who is the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12.2).

This is not just an individual thing of course. In the passage that was read for us earlier, Ephesians 5, Paul writes of how ‘the church is subject to Christ’. The character of the Christian life for each of us, and for each of us together as the gathered disciples of Jesus, is found in this willingness to order ourselves under the rule of God through his Christ by his word and in his Spirit. Of course that shows itself not just in confessing he is Lord—though it certainly involves that (Phil 2.11)—but in *doing* the will of our heavenly Father (Mtt 7.21) and *obeying* the words which Jesus has given us (Lk 6.46–49; cf Rms 8.7). The church submits to Christ when as his gathered people we take his word seriously and live as those who recognise and rejoice in his headship. The great goal of all this is that day when, sanctified and cleansed, Christ presents the church to himself ‘in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing’ (Eph 5.26–27).

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<sup>2</sup> ‘The Second Collect, For Peace’ in The Order for Morning Prayer, 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*.

Well, that is basic, and it explains why Christians ought not to be afraid of the idea of submission. It is part of the fabric of the Christian life, for we are those who seek to submit to the word and will of God, to order our lives both individually and corporately under the headship of Christ.<sup>3</sup> We know that to be good and nourishing and life-giving. That is where true fulfilment lies. Jesus came not to subject us to a life of painful servitude but that we might ‘have life and have it abundantly’ (Jn 10.10)! So the call to submit to God provides the backdrop to submission in a number of areas where the one who submits and the one to whom they submit are human beings created in God’s image.

### **b. Submission to secular government**

We are, for instance, called to submit to secular government. Paul’s words on this subject in Romans 13 include a glimpse of the rationale behind this call:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. (Rms 13.1–5)

These words are all the more telling when you consider the world in which Paul lived and the kind of rule exercised by the Romans in Judaea and throughout their empire. It must have been hard to respect Nero as one bearing authority given to

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<sup>3</sup> One of the most absurd pieces I read in preparation for these talks was the book by Alan G Padgett entitled *As Christ Submits to the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011). In order to establish his point, that mutual submission means reciprocal relationship, Padgett has to widen the meaning of the word *ὑποτασσείν* to include the self-sacrifice, servanthood and voluntary humiliation of Christ. Having redefined ‘submission’ he is then able to describe Jesus’ ‘temporary and free gift of service’ (p. 63) for the sake of the church as his submission to the church. However, nowhere in the New Testament is the word ‘submission’ used to describe the relationship of Jesus and the church, though the word and its cognates is used around 42 times. The New Testament’s perspective is that Jesus submits himself to the will of his Father but lovingly gives himself for the sake of the church. It is an example of creative exegesis in service of a contemporary agenda.



him by God. But Paul is not addressing the attack of the authorities upon the faith and the need to bear witness before them. That he would deal with elsewhere. Here he says the general pattern of life for Christians in the world is to recognise the sovereignty of God and his provision of secular government for the good ordering of society, to preserve peace and order, to promote the welfare of its citizens. Paul was no anarchist or revolutionary. The time would come when he would refuse to obey but that would be an extraordinary moment. He would ask Titus to remind those in his care ‘to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work’ (Tit 3.1). And it wasn’t just Paul. Peter, himself most likely to succumb in time to the cruelty of the Roman authorities, wrote

Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor. (1 Pet 2.13–17)

Neither Paul nor Peter anchor their call to submit to governing authorities in the superiority of those who govern over those who are governed. Not even in their goodness or fitness for office. Peter, in particular, almost falls over himself in those verses in pointing out this is to be done ‘for the Lord’s sake’, because ‘this is the will of God’, because you are ‘living as servants of God’. It is because we recognise that God has created ordered relationships in his world that we submit to those who govern us. There may be exceptional times when other biblical principles mean we must take a stand that puts us in conflict with them, but the general pattern is one of good citizenship, of being subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution of government.

### ***c. Submission to those who lead us in the gospel***

On a number of occasions we are called on to submit to those who labour over us in the Lord. Paul wrote to the Corinthians of the devoted service of the household of Stephanus and then called on them to 'be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and labourer' (1 Cor 16.16). Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians Paul will talk about weighing the words of those who prophesy (1 Cor 14.29). In his last letter to Timothy he will insist that only the Scriptures are 'breathed out by God' (2 Tim 3.16), and he is more than able to identify those who are false teachers and those who prey on the people of God seeking their own gain (1 Tim 6.3–5). But the general pattern is to be respect and submission to the leadership of those God has gifted and given responsibility in the congregation. They are not perfect and infallible. Their words are to be tested by the word of God and they must not act as tyrants, lording it over those they serve. Their authority is not absolute. They are in no way superior to those they serve. The leadership of God's people is to be strikingly different from the way leaders operate in the world, following the example of the one who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10.45). The model here is very different. The writer to the Hebrews would put it this way:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Heb 13.17)

Most of us will be familiar with the way cult-leaders demand the unswerving devotion and obedience of those they have persuaded to join them. Of course there is a lot more wrong with the phenomenon of the cults than just the authority structure with which they operate. What is taught is invariably at odds with what the Bible is teaching at point after point. However, they do provide us with a warning about unaccountable leadership, about submission that is demanded rather than freely given in response to self-sacrificial love, and about an insistence upon authority that goes well beyond the responsibility of the one who claims it. Christian recognition, support and indeed submission to our leaders

is markedly different to that. But it is no less real for those differences. God has given us those with a responsibility to ‘watch over our souls’ in Peter’s words. Ordering ourselves under them in this area is part of God’s good work for us in the world as disciples of the true shepherd. And it enables those who bear this responsibility to do so with joy and not with groaning.

#### ***d. Submission in the household***

The passage that was read for us earlier, from Ephesians 5 (Eph 5.15–6.9) contains very important material on the relationship of a husband and a wife, but it contains words about other relationships within the Christian household as well and it is worth dealing with those for just a moment before we narrow down to that particular. The starting point for the passage, you’ll remember is Paul’s exhortation ‘Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is.’ (Eph 5.15–17). In an important sense all that follows falls under this rubric: living appropriately in this world, understanding the context in which we live, and understanding the profound goodness of the will of God in that context. The language of submission and obedience that follows is all part of that. It is God’s will that in various particulars we should submit to one another and he goes on to fill out what this looks like in the case of husband and wives, children and parents, and masters and those who serve them, slaves. The relationships in each case are not reciprocal or interchangeable: husbands are not interchangeable with wives, children are not interchangeable with parents, and masters are not interchangeable with slaves. There is a pattern or order in the relationship of each pairing that requires particular instructions to each member of the pair: children obey your parents, fathers do not provoke your children; slaves obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling and a sincere heart, masters do not threaten and remember you too have a master.

Once again there is not the slightest indication that these differences in the relationships reflect the superiority of one member of the pair over the other. Masters are to remember there is no partiality with God, to whom they are accountable. God is the master of both the slave and the free. One is not more valuable than the other, rather they have different responsibilities and opportunities that arise from those responsibilities. Children are not less valuable than their parents, even though they are called upon to honour their father and mother. Even Jesus submitted himself to his earthly parents, as Luke records in Luke 2.

It is not hard to see that Paul was challenging what was very clearly standard practice in many households throughout the Mediterranean world. In fact the Old Testament alone provides plenty of evidence of the harsh treatment of slaves—think of Sarah’s treatment of Hagar, for instance—and the provocation of children by their fathers. But the coming of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ was meant to make a difference. I take it that we should not miss phrases like ‘in the Lord’ and ‘as bondservants of Christ’. The relationships are not undone or done away with, remarkably not even the relationship of masters and slaves, but in each case it is transformed by the gospel which reminds us of our common accountability before God for how we behave in whatever circumstances we find ourselves and of the grace and mercy of God which is our common inheritance.

Now I’ve taken all this time looking at these other expressions of submission, starting with the submission of the Son to the Father and going on to look at the varied contexts in which submission occurs in the Christian life, because against that backdrop, the call for headship and submission in the relationship between a husband and a wife not only looks different, but it is guarded from distortion. It is not simply a reflection of a wider patriarchy in the Graeco-Roman world. It is a particular instance of walking carefully in the world; it is a particular instance of what it means to be filled with the Spirit (Eph 5.18). Women are not the only

people who are called upon to submit in the pages of the New Testament. But there is an order in the relationship between men and women, most particularly the relationship between a man and a woman in marriage, which is not merely a cultural arrangement. It is reflective instead of something much more significant.

### **3. Submission in marriage**

Once again it is the passage from Ephesians 5 which fills this out most helpfully for us. It has been pointed out many times that the bulk of the section from chapter 5 verses 22 to 33 is actually devoted to instructions given to husbands. However, the husband is never told to ensure that his wife is submissive. He is not told to demand or require her submission. He is told instead to love sacrificially, nourishing and cherishing his wife as he would nourish and cherish his own body, but more importantly as Christ nourishes and cherishes the church. The lead sentence of the paragraph devoted to the responsibility of husbands begins ‘Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’ (Eph 5.25). This is the measure of headship in the New Testament, the headship of Christ in the church. And Christ exercises his headship, not by coercing the obedience or submission of the church, but by lovingly sacrificing himself for her. He bore the cost of redeeming his people. He knew the horror of it — once again, Gethsemane is evidence of that. But he did not hold back. As Paul put it in Philippians, ‘he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross’ (Phil 2.8). His blood was poured out. His body was broken. He bore in full the consequences of our sin as the definitive demonstration of his love. He became a curse for us (Gal 3.13).

As a husband, this is an immensely challenging word. It cuts across my self-interest, against my inflated estimate of myself, and calls on me to take the initiative in service, to keep on taking the initiative in service, to pursue opportunities to serve, to lay down my life, doing all in my power to nourish and care for Kathryn, loving her as myself, so that she might flourish as a woman, as a

person, as one made in the image of God and redeemed by the blood of Christ. It is not easy and I cannot even come close except by the work of the Spirit of God. So often I need her forgiveness and that of the Lord whose word this is. But this is what it is to be careful how I walk as a husband. This is what it means to make the best use of the time because the days are evil. This is what it means to stop being foolish and to understand what the will of the Lord is. Christ has redeemed the headship of husbands by providing the example of how to love.

Alongside this is the word to wives and here the language of submission is used in verse 22:

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 Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

And a little further down in verse 33:

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

In this pair of husband and wife, the behaviour of one is not made conditional on the behaviour of the other. The self-sacrificial love of the husband is not conditional upon the submission of the wife and the submission of the wife is not conditional upon the self-sacrificial love of the husband. In both instances the reference is to Christ — ‘as to the Lord’ in verse 22, ‘as Christ loved the church’ in verse 25. They arise together as we understand what it means to belong to Christ, the Christ who is our Lord and has given himself in order to save us. This dynamic is a particular instance of what it means to submit to one another ‘out of reverence for Christ’ (Eph 5.21). Of course the willing, voluntary submission of a wife will be made much easier if it is clear that her husband is consistently seeking her welfare and sacrificing his own interests for the sake of her flourishing in Christ. Just so, the loving sacrifice of a husband is made much easier if his

initiatives in service are welcomed and his generous leadership is encouraged by his wife. When that is the case submission, just like the responsibility to lead and nourish and care, can be a good and joyful thing. But here in Ephesians, one is not made dependent or conditional upon the other but upon the example of Christ.

And as in the other cases of submission we have seen, there is not the slightest hint of inferiority. The wife who submits is of no less value than the husband who sacrifices himself in love. Even though this submission is not to be restricted to one particular area of life—I think that is the burden of the phrase ‘in everything’ in verse 24—it does not transform the wife into a slave. It does not make her ‘her husband’s possession’. In fact the only time something like ‘possession’ language is used in the New Testament to speak of marriage —actually the word is the normal word for ‘authority’—it is entirely reciprocal: in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul writes ‘For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does’ (1 Cor 7.4).

When we look a little more closely, we see that in Ephesians 5 the wife’s model is actually the church. Husbands have the exacting standard of Christ set before them—love ‘as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’—but wives are told ‘submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord ... as the church submits to Christ’. But how does the church submit to Christ? First and foremost by receiving the salvation he has won for her, by looking to Christ to sustain and direct her life, by rejoicing in his headship and taking seriously his word. At each of these points there are crucial differences between Christ and the husband. The husband is not a Saviour as Christ is, he does not give or sustain life in the way that Christ does, and his word is not authoritative and infallible as Christ’s word is. But the dynamic of gratefully receiving the service that is offered, of honouring and respecting—it is interesting how the word ‘submit’ is replaced by the word ‘to honour’ or ‘respect’ or ‘fear’ in verse 33—the willingness to follow the lead that is given, all

of this makes the parallel between the wife's relation to her husband and the church's relation to Christ thoroughly appropriate.

There are other passages in the New Testament where similar ideas are expressed. One that provides a slightly different angle that is helpful is a single verse near the beginning of 1 Corinthians 11. The passage is one that is often near the centre of debates about the relation of men and women, particularly as they serve the Christian congregation. But the ground for the discussion is a single verse, verse 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'. I was tremendously helped when it was pointed out to me that this verse was not written in the way most of us would have done it. Instead of a ladder extending upwards or extending downwards, placing an emphasis on a scaled hierarchy, it is written as a loose chiasm. Instead of moving from wife to husband to Christ to God, or from God to Christ to husband to wife, we are told first of the relation man and Christ, then of a wife and her husband, and then of Christ and God. The explanation that appealed to me, and which I think helps us a little as we think about this issue, is that the middle couplet is surrounded on both sides by Christ, Christ the head of man on one side and Christ the one who lives under the headship of God [the Father] on the other. And this enables you to say that whether you are the man exercising headship, or the woman receiving and responding to it, your model is Christ. Christ is the head — follow his lead husbands. Christ has a head, God — follow his lead wives.

#### **4. Equality, order and love**

We began, at the beginning of the first session, by recognising that in recent days attempts have been made to draw a causal connection between the biblical teaching about a wife's submission to her husband and the scourge of domestic violence. The charge has been made that this doctrine encourages the subjugation of women and allows a justification for abuse in all its forms. I said



back then that there is nothing in Scripture which justifies the use of violence towards women or the abuse of women in any way whatsoever, and whenever an appeal is made to Scripture in attempt to justify such behaviour it is not only a perversion of Scripture, but a dishonouring of the God whose word it is. There is not and can never be any justification for domination, bullying and mental, emotional or physical abuse of women, least of all by their husbands. The teaching of the New Testament speaks of relationships characterised by profound equality, genuine order and other-centred love. As in the submission of the Son to the Father, the submission of a wife to her husband has nothing to do with value and it has nothing to do with power. It is not something coerced or demanded but something freely, willingly given. It is a relationship of two human beings of equal value, both created in the image of God, both redeemed by the blood of Christ. And in this asymmetrical relation of equals the common element is true other-centred love.

I mentioned one of the articles in the Herald last year I found most helpful amidst the attempt to draw a link between the biblical teaching about submission and domestic violence. It was written by a Christian woman, Sarah, and one of the explanations she gave for delighting with her friends in the Bible's teaching on this subject was this: such women

do not connect submission with personal worth, because they already know that they are infinitely precious to God and, in good marriages, to their believing husbands. Instead, they see submission — where one person trusts another to lead them, and honours them for exercising that responsibility selflessly — helps two people grow closer together and enables them both to flourish as individuals.<sup>4</sup>

Far from being an embarrassment to Christian men and women at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this biblical teaching is something we should rejoice in,

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<sup>4</sup> S. Colyer, "'Submission' to my husband allows us both to flourish in our marriage', *Sydney Morning Herald* 8 March 2015 online at <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/submission-to-my-husband-allows-us-both-to-flourish-in-our-marriage-20150308-13y83i.html> (accessed 23/12/15).

because it is God's word to us and God is good and always provides for the welfare of his people. We need to speak out in the loudest possible voices against domestic violence and do all in our power to protect those who have been subjected to it — women and men — I hope we will all do that and continue to do that. But biblical headship and submission is not the cause, in fact quite the opposite.