

Headship and Submission: Do you agree or disagree?

(for class discussion purposes)

1. It was God's idea that a wife should immediately give up everything to go with her husband.
2. The Scripture teaches that the husband is the head of the family. Thus the wife should be submissive and obedient to her husband in everything even if he is an unbeliever.
3. The wife is to be regarded as the one who does the cooking, washing, training of the children, and at the same time she is to be a "helpmeet" to her husband.
4. Since the man is the head of the family, and this headship is patterned after that of Christ, therefore, the husband should be the "boss" of his wife.
5. A wife has the right to disobey her husband when she feels he is dictating to her.
6. It is all right for the husband to demand obedience or order his wife to respect his authority.
7. Since the wife is assigned the subordinate position in marriage, she is not on an equal basis with man.
8. Usually the husband should make the final decision when he and his wife cannot agree upon a decision that must be made.
9. It is all right for an obedient wife to instruct and give advice to her husband.

The Debate between Traditionalists and Egalitarians:
Does the husband have an authority to lead that the wife does not?

We are always under Authority!

Husbands and wives have the authority to serve one another in love and married couples are authorized by God to give themselves to their mates.

The two "dirty" words: "Submission" and "Sacrifice."

The "Full Say" and The "Final Say."

At the deepest level, a man serves a woman differently than a woman serves a man.

Headship, the expression of a man's authority to serve, is characterized by rich involvement in the life of his family and providing them with love and direction, and by leadership that includes making decisions to resolve an impasse.

Submission, the expression of a woman's authority to serve, is characterized by invitation with her into an intimate relationship, and using her unique resources as a woman to encourage and support her husband.

"Headship and submission represent masculine and feminine movements in the dance of relationship. They cannot be properly understood apart from realizing that headship is what a man does when he is living as a godly man, and submission is what a woman does when she is living as a godly woman. Headship and submission therefore are neither rules to follow nor roles that demand conformity. Rather they are mature and loving expressions of our distinctive sexuality. Headship and submission, when defined as opportunities to uniquely give to our spouses what they long to receive, become the route to enjoying the difference between men and women. The differences are real and deep. Men are designed to enter their worlds of people and responsibilities with the confident and unthreatened strength of an advocate. Women are designed to invite other people into a non-manipulative attachment that encourages the enjoyment of intimate relationship."

The Debate over Headship and Submission

From *Men and Women: Enjoying the Difference*, by Larry Crabb, pp. 168-183

Headship and submission presents us with the chance to satisfy the unique desires of our mates by giving what is distinctly ours to give. We have thought about self-centeredness, repentance, forgiveness, humility, and differences between men and women. Now it's time to wonder what this all means in an actual marriage relationship. If men were designed to enter their worlds with a humble but confident intention to do good and if women were designed to invite people into their worlds to experience the joys of relationships, then perhaps we have a basis for thinking through how men and women can enjoy each others differences. And perhaps the principles of headship and submission can be understood not merely as roles to fit into, but as opportunities to enjoy the differences.

Look at the [following typical marital conflicts](#) and how they could be resolved if the participants understood headship and submission as other-centered activity that reflects the differences between men and women.

Situation #1 Discussion over relocating the family between husband and wife.

Situation #2 Disagreement over who should answer the phone ruins an evening.

Situation #3 Wife keeps getting upset for unclear reasons, the husband is unclear how to react.

What does it mean that "the husband is the head of the wife" and that wives are told to "submit to [their] husbands" (Eph. 5:22—23)? What would it mean in each of these three situations for the husband to function as head of his wife and for the wife to submit? Sometimes we are forced to think more clearly about biblical teaching when we have to apply it to specific circumstances.

Should the husband who wants to relocate do his best to wisely consider every relevant factor, including all that might be triggering his wife's emotional resistance, and then make a decision? Is that what headship means? And does submission require his wife to pack her bags without complaint if he decides to move?

How about the couple whose phone stopped ringing after ruining their evening? Should they hold a round table forum to prepare a strategy for handling similar occurrences? Perhaps they could take turns with anticipated responsibilities or assign them specifically to one or the other. And more open communication about churning resentments might help them to recognize areas of immaturity and selfishness and lead to a more generous spirit as they live together. Would that be mutual submission?

Should the man in the third situation seek professional help? Maybe the problems he faces with an irrationally angry wife cannot be remedied with the medicine of other-centered relating. But remember his observation that slamming the door seems, among the options he has tried, to most reliably improve her mood. Has he simply been too weak with her, perhaps placating her when stronger leadership was called for? Maybe his wife longs to feel secure in a strength she has never known, and therefore responds to even a poor counterfeit of what she wants. Should he therefore be more decisive than tender when she is upset, more directive than solicitous? Is that masculine leadership?

When we ask about headship and submission in the context of concrete marriage struggles, it is a little more difficult to discuss our positions with glib confidence. Thinking about actual situations may help us to focus the discussion and to more clearly recognize the central issues.

THE HEART OF THE DEBATE

Before we can understand what headship and submission might mean in situations like these, we must move to the heart of the debate and first answer one basic question: *Does a husband possess a God-given authority in marriage that his wife does not possess?*

This is perhaps the central issue that divides us in our views on marriage. For centuries, Bible students have wrestled with the meaning of the word *head*. Does its use in Scripture carry the force of "authority over someone" or does it really mean something very different, such as "source" with no hint of authority?

Whichever view one takes on this question, most of us agree that one partner should not dominate the other or issue military-style orders. Whatever *headship* means, it does not mean "tyranny." Even though the Greek word Paul used for *submit* was sometimes used in a military setting, only the extreme traditionalists (and may their numbers decrease) think that wives should mindlessly obey their husbands the way a private responds to the commands of his sergeant.

Reasonable advocates of both positions insist that mutual servanthood is a central issue that must never be compromised by one spouse selfishly asserting any kind

of power—financial, emotional, sexual, or intellectual—over another. John Piper, for example, representing a balanced traditional perspective, teaches that “mature masculinity expresses itself not in the demand to be served but in the strength to serve and to sacrifice for the good of the woman.”

A position statement by a non-traditional group expresses a similar thought: “In the Christian home, husband and wife are to defer to each other in seeking to fulfill each other’s preferences, desires, and aspirations. Neither spouse is to seek to dominate the other, but each is to act as servant of the other, in humility considering the other as better than oneself.”

On this point, most Christians agree. Disagreements surface when we try to understand the proper course of action married partners should follow when they hold opposing views on the same issue, for example, on disciplining a rebellious teen or attending a different church.

Husbands and wives should, of course, communicate openly and honestly. And such honesty needs to be bounded by sensitive love, where each person works hard to understand both the other’s point of view and whatever deeper concerns may lie beneath the disagreement. Sincere efforts to listen in an atmosphere of mutual submission may lead to a happy resolution satisfying to both parties.

But what happens when it doesn’t?*

Should a couple appeal to a third person and submit to binding arbitration in order to avoid one spouse deciding for both in a strongly contested matter? Or is there an authority structure within marriage, a final court of appeal, within which one partner exercises decision-making power?

Traditionalists and egalitarians differ on many issues, but none have more immediate and definite implications for married couples than the way they answer this big question: *Does the husband have an authority to lead that the wife does not have?*

Traditionalists answer, “Yes, he does!” He may not always use it, and whenever he does he must remain deeply sensitive to his wife’s interests, but he is the final authority in the home. In John Piper’s words, mature masculinity “accepts the burden of the final say in disagreements between husband and wife but does not presume to use it in every instance.”

Egalitarians answer, “No, he does not.” In their understanding, marriage is a relationship between sexually distinct but fully equal

* *Marriages in which the partners live intimately with one another rarely move through disagreement with calm efficiency. When two people determine to put together a real marriage, things will often be stormy. Efficiency is more often a sign of distance, not maturity. Communication between husband and wife rarely leads to a negotiated solution. Instead, it creates an opportunity for real love to show itself through sacrifice. I therefore find little profit in most instructions about communication techniques.*

human beings. This equality should be recognized by dividing the responsibilities of leadership not on the basis of gender, but “on the basis of gifts, expertise, and availability.” Neither partner has authority over the other. “In cases of decisional deadlock, [husband and wife] should seek resolution through biblical methods of conflict resolution rather than by one spouse imposing a decision upon the other.”

A THIRD ANSWER

These two answers seem to be the only options. But perhaps there is a third answer, one that may have important elements in common with both traditionalists and egalitarians but that brings a few additional perspectives into sharper focus. This third answer, that best fits my understanding of the biblical ideal, might be expressed as follows:

Husbands and wives both have authority in marriage. Their authority is equal in responsibility; that is, it is not like a captain’s authority over a sergeant or a sergeant’s authority over a private. Husbands and wives have the authority to serve one another in wisdom and love. Married partners are authorized by God to give themselves to their mates. This is their authority.

However, because the sexes are distinct in what they were fundamentally designed to give and in what brings them the greatest joy in relationship, the expression of their authority should reflect those distinctions. At the deepest level, a man serves a woman differently than a woman serves a man. Headship, the expression of a man’s authority to serve, is characterized by rich involvement and by leadership that includes making decisions to resolve an impasse. Submission, the expression of a woman’s authority to serve, is characterized by invitation and supportiveness.

This lengthy statement requires clarification. My direct answer to the central question —does a husband possess an authority that his wife does not? — is no and yes. *No*, it is not true that husbands possess authority and wives have none. Each has been granted equal authority under God to serve the other. Authority is fundamentally authority to serve, not to lead.

But yes, there is a difference. The authority of a husband to serve his wife is distinct from the authority of a wife to serve her husband. The distinction in authority is not imposed by fiat; it rather grows out of distinctive resources for service in men and women.

It is misleading to define *headship* as a husband's right to decide something for his wife and then to require her submissive cooperation with his decision. Defining headship centrally as decision—making authority puts the wife in a position of subordination to a despotic authority. It creates a kind of hierarchical arrangement that blocks the growth of intimacy. Order is achieved at the expense of passion.

But it does not therefore follow that neither husband nor wife has a unique responsibility for leadership. Because of their differences, husbands and wives express their authority to serve differently.

A husband's authority to *wisely serve* his wife with the *resources of his masculinity** requires that he involve himself deeply in the affairs of his family and that he serve them as advocate. It requires that he provide them with love and direction in accordance with his understanding of God's character and their needs.

A wife exercises her authority to serve by prayerfully evaluating how her unique resources as a woman can best encourage her husband as he moves into his home and work. And as she uses her abilities to advance God's purposes through her life, she will remain sensitive to her unique (and therefore priority) opportunity to minister deeply to her husband. She is not required to mechanically obey her husband but rather she is wonderfully equipped to serve her husband, and free to do so wisely.

A wife serves her husband by offering him non-demanding respect and being strongly and vulnerably *for* him in order to affirm his masculinity.

A wife and a husband's freedom and authority is the same: *to wisely use the personal resources of their sexual being on behalf of their spouse.*

Should a husband consistently demonstrate ungodly behavior, his wife's responsibility is to submit to God's purposes without angrily demanding that her husband change (1 Peter 3:1—6). Her actual response to her husband could range from full cooperation to a clear refusal to cooperate. She would refuse to cooperate, for example, if he were to ask her to engage in perverted sex or if he were to abuse her physically. She needs to judge what would best promote godliness in her husband.

This understanding of authority in marriage raises a number of discussable issues, two of special interest to me.

First, this understanding of authority places responsibility for behavior squarely on the shoulders of each spouse. Neither can -

* Notice again the two elements that go into any decision on how to serve one's mate: (1) a wise understanding of what the other was designed to enjoy and (2) an appreciation of one's own unique resources as a man or woman to provide this enjoyment

say, "He/she made me do it." And wherever people are given the freedom to exercise their authority as they see fit, this freedom will be abused.

For example, the husband in Marriage #1 may reason that it's really best for his wife if they relocate. He may persuade himself that she has an unhealthy dependence on her parents that is interfering with her growth as a mature wife and mother. A selfish decision to advance his own career may therefore be disguised as a responsible exercise of his authority to serve.

The wife's determination to stay put may similarly prejudice her assessment of things. She may conclude that supporting her husband in his desire to move would in fact strengthen materialistic leanings that could one day consume him and thereby she might justify her refusing to move as a godly exercise of her authority to serve.

STANDARDS TO FOLLOW OR A NEW DESIRE?

The notion of equal authority to serve with distinct expression leaves husbands and wives with a large measure of freedom to exercise their authority, and this goes against a common understanding of how to live the Christian Life.

We sometimes think that God's job is simply to tell us what to do, and our job is first to figure out what he said and then to try very hard to do what we're told. Successful Christian living, in this way of thinking, comes down to two key elements: God's holy standards, reflecting his perfect character, and our moral effort, indicating our commitment to obedient discipleship. Thousands of sincere Christians eagerly sit week after week under preachers and teachers who devote most of their sermons to telling people what God wants them to do.

"Husbands, lead your families," exhorts one teacher. "Wives, come alive with your freedom to be who you are," shouts another.

And every Sunday at noon the clearly taught saints march resolutely out of church, determined by the grace of God to live as they should or to be all they can be. A week later they return, feeling disappointed in themselves and a bit ashamed (a few with less self-awareness are proud of their achievements). They sense an angry discomfort as they sit with other folks who, judging by the force with which they sing the hymns and the rapt attention they give to the preacher, appear more spiritually successful.

The root of the trouble is an approach to Christian living that essentially depends on knowing God's ideas about things and working very hard to honor them. When those two elements are treated as the core ingredients in becoming mature, our churches will eventually resemble first-century synagogues run by Pharisees who carefully and with self-conscious piety teach the law (can you imagine a Pharisee ever telling his congregation that he was currently struggling with personal sin?) and filled with either weary folks who know that their best efforts fall short but are willing to try harder again next week, or proud people who, like their teachers, so badly miss the point of God's law that they think they are keeping it and eagerly parade their maturity before others as a worthy example.

This approach to Christian living is deadly.

I wonder how many women struggle every day to submit to insensitive, sometimes cruel husbands, believing that submission is another law to keep, another burdensome principle to observe, another weight of duty God piles on already bent shoulders. I wonder too, as they try their hardest to do whatever they think submission requires, how many panic over ugly feelings and thoughts that emerge from somewhere inside them. Perhaps they long for either their husbands' death or their own, or they secretly hope another woman might seduce their husband and thereby release them from marital bondage.

How many husbands are determined not to interfere with their wives' freedom, believing that their primary responsibility as men involves enabling rather than leading. And how many, as they applaud their wives' achievements, battle privately against sexual temptations, sometimes perverted, always strong, that promise to relieve an empty space within, or against feelings of inadequacy that feed a competitive spirit or encourage a safe retreat. I wonder how many of these men have overcome temptation by cutting the nerve endings to their masculine souls and live out their lives as spiritual eunuchs, with a displayed competence that draws no one to enjoy their strength.

Before we worry whether the Bible teaches a traditional understanding of marriage or an egalitarian one, we must rid ourselves of this heretical notion that Christian living consists in nothing more than trying hard to keep standards. Whichever set of marital standards we accept, as long as we regard them as rules to follow or principles to observe, we will know little of true freedom or joy. Our lives will be characterized more by rigid conformity or liberated selfishness than by humble passion.

The gospel introduces us to an entirely new perspective on what it means to live by standards. In fact, it makes the standards so much a part of us that the key to relating well is not in following a set of well-studied principles, but in

But the gospel has turned the whole thing around. Biblical principles still need to be understood and obeyed, but Christian

living now depends on the change God has made inside of us. And this change, though often unfelt and unnoticed, is profound.

A REMARKABLE CHANGE

Other people—pastors, friends, spouses, parents—can influence my behavior. They can exhort me to live in good ways. They can ask things of me or scold me or encourage me or attempt to persuade me on certain matters. They can provide me with various pleasures or tempt me with them. They can help me understand what is going on within me and clarify connections between past events and present reactions.

But what they cannot do is change my heart.

When a parent sets the standard for the cleanliness of a teenage daughter's room, two opposing forces are set in motion: the *parent's intention* as expressed in the declared standard and the *teenager's intentions* to do what she wants. As long as these two forces are at odds, parent and daughter will never enjoy sitting together in the daughter's room. Discipline, scolding, promises of wrath to come (with an occasional advance taste), generous expressions of material kindness—nothing that the parent can ever do will make a deep and enduring difference. At best, the room may be treated to a cosmetic clean-up—everything visible in good order. But a closer inspection beneath the bed and behind the dresser will make it clear that the girl's heart was not in the project.

No one changes the human heart. No one disturbs the center of my being where passionate energy continues to move in self-centered directions. No one except Christ.

When Christ goes to work, he gets right to the heart of the matter, literally. He tears out my old heart and puts in a new one (Ezek. 36:26). And then, rather than standing outside and telling me what to do with it, he moves inside and directs things from there. He still has laws for me to keep and principles to follow; but now the laws are not merely imposed from without, they arise from within. God's law is now written on our hearts (Jer. 31:33).

Because we embrace the lawgiver and are embraced by him in a relationship so intimate that we actually "participate in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4),* we want

* *The more we understand God's passion for intimate relationship, the more we will warmly regard sexual intercourse as not only pleasurable but also richly expressive of the life-sharing and deeply satisfying union between Christ and his church. How God must hate adultery, rape, sexual abuse, premarital relations! How he must grieve when married couples experience pleasure-less sex, idolized sex, pressured sex, manipulative sex, or mechanical sex!*

more than ever to keep his laws, but now we see their deeper dimension. We come to realize that biblical principles reflect the heart of someone we love and trust, and we receive his directions, not as required duties (though, of course, they are), but rather as welcome opportunities to live as he intends, knowing that our good is always on his mind. Only with this understanding of things can we say with the psalmist: *"I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free; . . . how I long for your precepts; . . . how I love your law; . . . your statutes are the joy of my heart; my heart is set on keeping your desires to the very end"* (Psalm 119: 32, 40, 97, 111, 112).

The gospel frees us from the burden of always living by standards that feel imposed. When we come to the Bible, we can expect to find principles for living that promote a sense of freedom within our souls rather than ones that chain us to our duties. As we grasp that we live our lives as forgiven sinners, as unworthy servants, as purchased slaves, we will be less inclined to redefine biblical teaching to accommodate the ambitions of a much-loved self. Rather than changing the law to fit our hearts, Christ has changed our hearts to fit his law.

Either we live by external standards in the strength of moral effort, with grace as a warmly regarded side issue, or we live by grace in the strength of a new heart, enjoying the law as a needed and welcome guide and no longer hating it as a crushing weight.

When we approach the topic of headship and submission from the first perspective, we become *law-keepers* who frantically sweat to do what we should and end up defeated with good reason or proud without reason; or we become *law-breakers* who in our self-exalting determination to rid ourselves of unnatural restraints learn to hate boundaries more than love God.

But, when we approach our marriage responsibilities in the freedom of our new relationship to God's standards, we will measure the accuracy of our biblical understanding by continued study of the text and we will determine the impact of the text, in part, by how deeply we are moved to serve our mates with the joyful passion of a consuming interest in their well-being.

Headship and submission are best understood as sexually distinctive expressions of an equal authority, the authority to serve. But this mutual authority to devote the unique resources of manhood and womanhood to the sexually distinct longings of our mates can be abused. Wherever there is freedom, there will be abuse.

The biblical safeguards against abuse do not consist in either removing freedom by tightening authority into well-defined roles as in a traditional relationship or removing authority and emphasizing self-expression as in an egalitarian relationship. It is better to deal with the potential abuse of freedom by promoting a deeper appreciation of the gospel. Forgiven sinners with new

hearts, who are growing in the wonder of what the gospel has done and will yet do, do a better job of handling their freedom than folks with either controlled hearts or unrestrained hearts.

With confidence in the gospel and with a determination to root all our teaching about marriage in the freedom of the gospel, we must be prepared to arrive at an understanding of headship and submission that encourages husbands and wives to sense their responsible liberty to move in whatever directions they deeply desire to move as men and women who are forgiven by God, who rejoice in the uniqueness of their sexuality, who value the uniqueness of their spouses' sexuality, and who passionately long to affirm their mate as a man or woman.

It is impossible to develop a set of principles that can be adequately translated into a clear response to every potential situation in a marriage. It is not impossible to develop an appreciation of the gospel that, coupled with an understanding of God's principles for living, moves us to respond to every situation with maturing wisdom and love

Worksheet # 8

Making Decisions

Describe the decision-making process of your marriage by indicating the percentage of influence you have, and the percentage your spouse has, for each issue. The total for each decision must be 100 percent. (Those who write 50:50 too many times will be considered dishonest.)

	Percentage of My Vote	Percentage of My Spouse's Vote	Who I feel is more qualified to contribute to this decision. (Initials)
New car	_____	_____	_____
Home	_____	_____	_____
Furniture	_____	_____	_____
Your wardrobe	_____	_____	_____
Spouse's wardrobe	_____	_____	_____
Vacation spots	_____	_____	_____
Decor for the home	_____	_____	_____
Mutual friends	_____	_____	_____
Entertainment	_____	_____	_____
Church	_____	_____	_____
Child-rearing practices	_____	_____	_____
TV shows	_____	_____	_____
Home menu	_____	_____	_____
Number of children	_____	_____	_____
Where you live	_____	_____	_____
Husband's vocation	_____	_____	_____
Wife's vocation	_____	_____	_____
How money is spent	_____	_____	_____
How often to have sex	_____	_____	_____
Where to have sex	_____	_____	_____
Mealtimes	_____	_____	_____
Landscaping	_____	_____	_____
Various household tasks	_____	_____	_____

If you and your spouse could show a film of your parent's marital style, would you see your marriage reflected there?

Is the responsibility for making decisions based on your abilities and giftedness?

Does one spouse fail to assume responsibility for making decisions, thus forcing the other to make the decision?

Do you discuss together your methods of making decisions?

Is your plan for decision-making successful?

Have you ever asked your spouse if he/she has difficulty making decisions?

Have you agreed to make decisions in certain areas on your own without interference from your spouse?

What are some of the major decisions that each of you makes? Minor ones?

Do our thoughts and decisions reflect our relationship with the Lord?

A goal is something we would like to achieve or see happen.

Clearly defined goals give clarity to life, while muddled and hazy unclear goals lead to confusion, purposelessness and depression.

Unless you clarify your goals, your goals will be determined for you by circumstances and the expectations and demands of others.

Areas in which goals need to be established include: finances, time spent together, recreation, roles and responsibilities, home life, sex life, vacations, communication, trust, resolving conflict, devotional life, prayer and Bible reading, as well as other lifestyle and vocational matters.

Goals should be:

1. Stated in terms of the end result. (Purpose)
2. Achievable in a definite time period.
3. Definite as to what is expected.
4. Practical and feasible.
5. Stated precisely in terms of quantities where applicable, i.e. measurable.
6. Summarized in One statement, rather than several.
7. Able to be broken down into steps and intermediate goals.
8. Flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances.
9. Organized in terms of priorities.

In developing goals:

both partners must have independent input, and then together formulate, evaluate, prioritize and adopt.

This is where the principles of having the "Full say" and "final say," and of "headship" and "submission" will need to be brought into the process. Goals should be prayed over and considered in terms of their spiritual implications and place in God's will as well. Both partners must then work together making the effort and sacrifices necessary to achieve their goals and both should celebrate together upon reaching them.

On a sheet of paper, each of you should separately list as many of your goals for your marriage as you can think of.

Apply the above tests to them.

Then label when you hope to achieve these: (S) for short term (6 months), (*) for one year, (L) for long term (5 years or longer).

Label each with a <A, B, C> in order of importance.

Then check each one you feel you have already adequately discussed with your mate.

Then plan a time for you and your mate to sit down and discuss these and put together a list of short term and long term goals for your marriage including a date for review and evaluation later on.

For Wives only: In 1 Peter 3:1-6, wives are commanded to be submissive, respectful, and to show a gentle, and quiet spirit within.– How do you live these out in your marriage and especially in decision making matters?

What guidance can you draw from Sarah's example?

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For Husbands only: In 1 Peter 3:7, husbands are commanded to be considerate (understanding) to treat them with respect (honor), as the weaker partner (to protect) but also as joint heirs (spiritual equals) with them of the gracious gift of life. – How do you live these out in your marriage and especially in decision making matters? What are the spiritual implications of the end of verse 7?