

Right or Wrong? A question of wedding vows

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"I attended a wedding recently. Nowhere in the vows did the bride say she would obey her husband. This seems to be a trend. Do you think that's why there are so many divorces-the wives are not submitting to their husbands?"

Let me briefly address an issue that is seldom discussed but raised in your question-weddings. My good friend Curtis Shelburne, pastor of 16th & D Church of Christ in Muleshoe, says, "Weddings have precious little to do with marriage." In our time, weddings are social events with immense pressure. Think of the strains of planning a ceremony to fit the personalities of the couple; obtaining a church, even your own, on the schedule you need; developing invitation lists; attending showers; writing thank-you notes; figuring out lodging for out-of-town guests; food choices for the rehearsal dinner to the reception; buying lavish gifts, etc. All of these reveal that little in a contemporary wedding focuses upon marriage. Marriage is the union of two people who in spite of high water or summer drought are committed to building a life together. Building that life together is not captured in a ceremony.

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At the least, we should not put too many expectations on the wording of the vows to be all that holds a couple together. Still, the choice of a wife submitting to her husband can be explored, but it should be done so through New Testament emphases.

Look at the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 5:21 Paul writes, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." Paul is encouraging all Christians to consider the welfare of one another as part of our service for Christ.

The question in interpreting this verse, however, is this: Does this sentence conclude the preceding passage? Ephesians 5:3-19 focuses upon calling these new Christians to live lives different from their pagan past, urging them to put on such things as sexual purity and wholesome language, and to avoid greed and live in wisdom, and, therefore, "Be subject to one another" Or does Paul begin the following discussion of family roles with this sentence?

As a community of believers in Christ, should we not seek the best for one another? Sure, we should. Should we be any less considerate of family members? If the starting point of family relationships is, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ," then the idea of submission takes on new meaning. Every member of the family-parents and children alike-should, in the name of Christ, serve one another.

Wives are called to serve their husbands as they would serve Christ. Husbands are admonished to love their wives as Christ loves the church and gave himself for it. Marriage is a two-way relationship, where ideally each desires what is best for the other. As Jesus sought to present the church "... in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind-yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies" (Ephesians 5:27-28).

Marriages do not fail because one partner fails to obey the other. Marriages fail for many reasons, and among those is that husbands and wives fail to honor one another. Paul concludes in Ephesians 5:33 with these words, "Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband." Marriage is a relationship of mutual love for and submission to one another.

The paradox, inherent in the nature of the gospel, is that serving one another builds the relationship. Marriages flourish by "Be(ing) subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."

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Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.

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