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Does the Bible really ask a wife to “Obey”?

It is one of those myths in society that, on the one hand, the New Testament in the Bible says a wife should obey her husband, but on the other hand society says nothing about what the same letter of the New testament requires of the husband. This creates the extraordinary claim that a wife should obey the husband regardless of everything when that is not what is said at all!

One is words from St Paul in a letter to the Church in Corinth, and the other were the words from St Paul to the Church in Ephesus.

What was happening in the Church in Corinth was not identical to what was happening in the Church in Ephesus and we can discern that they were actually different questions. However, this is the same St Paul. St Paul does not contradict himself but is answering different questions.



So in the first letter to the Church in Corinth, we read in 1 Corinthian chapter 7:

²each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. ³ The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. ⁵ Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent

Please notice the part that says: *In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.*

Firstly the text clearly says “...Now for the matters you wrote about:..” so St Paul is clearly replying to a letter (that we don’t have) from the Church in Corinth. So it is all about what is happening in Corinth and the questions that they asked. The reply by St Paul matters which is why it is in the Bible, we just have to keep in mind that St Paul is talking about what is going in Corinth and not necessarily elsewhere at all.

St Paul writes:

"...The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband...."

There is no division in that statement, the husband and the wife are equal in their treatment of each other.

St Paul in his letters makes clear that all members of the Church are indispensable, all members are different, all members are responsible and all members of the Church are equal. At no point is there any text saying this is either men or women. These statements apply fully to both. Equality is the background context to what we read in letters from St Paul in the New Testament.

So now we get to the one reference that society gets wrong by only reading and talking about a small snippet out of context. The text is from St Paul's letter to the Church in Ephesus. If we ignore verse 21 then this is what verses 22 to 27 say. This also ignores what the Bible says in verses 28 to 31, even though all of these verse are part of the same writing.

So if we leave verses out then Ephesians chapter 5 says:

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

This appears to say that a wife should submit to her husband, but if, instead, we read what it actually says then Ephesians chapter 5 really says:

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

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of his body. ³¹ *“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”*

Starting at the beginning it actually says:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Equality is the background context to what we read in letters from St Paul in the New Testament and equality is present here. This is not about Wives submitting to husbands whilst nothing at all is asked of the husband in the very same section of the very same letter.

Putting the two verses together:

²¹ *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

²² *Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord....*

What it is really saying is that the husband should have reverence for Christ and the wife should also have reverence for Christ, and they are one, and should be one, and act as one.

This is entirely in agreement with what St Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth when I quoted earlier:

³ *The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.* ⁴ *The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.* ⁵ *Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent*

The context here is that marriage of a husband and wife means they become one and leave the tribe (which was Jesus speaking against the patriarchal culture of the time) and that marriage was between one man and one woman (which was Jesus also speaking against polygamy).

Our Lord Jesus Christ tells us in both Matthew's and Mark's gospel what marriage is when Jesus tells us:

⁵ *.....and said ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’?* ⁶ *So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”*

(Matthew chapter 19 starting at verse 5)

So the truth is that both husband and wife should be one, and act as one, having full reverence for Christ.

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