

# Biblical Headship & Submission

Today's world is filled with distorted messages of what true headship and submission means. This is not a recent challenge. The struggle has been present since the fall of man (*Genesis 3*). Sin distorts, manipulates, and misuses what God intended for good. However, frequent viewing of the misuse of headship or submission can lead us to question the value and validity of God's original design or perhaps lead us to incorrect conclusions on how one should healthily engage in these roles as God intended. Therefore, it is wise for us to go back to the original "blueprint" to understand the purpose and intent of God's original design.

## Original Design & Covenant

In the beginning God created us as male and female (*Genesis 1:27*). Thus, our specific gender is not an accident, rather it is the very essence of who God created us to be. Some would imply gender is simply a "social construct." Thus, we can follow whatever path feels good for us when it comes to our gender. However, if gender is at the heart of who God created us to be, following our own path would mean rejecting an essential part of ourselves and abandon our God-given distinct roles.

There is an equality to our God-given roles. Prior to creating us male and female – "God said, *Let us make man in our image, after our likeness and let them have dominion.*" (*Genesis 1:26a*) "Man" in this verse refers to "mankind" as a whole, rather than just the male gender. Yet in this equality, there is a distinctiveness. *Genesis 2:20* refers to Adam not having a "help meet." The Hebrew word for "help meet" is 'ezer, which means "helper-companion, aid." "Helper" as we use the word today can seem to mean giving someone a hand with something they could have accomplished on his or her own. However, this account seems to imply making up for something that is lacking in strength or characteristic. Consider 'ezer is the same word used for "help" in *Psalms 33:20* "Our soul waiteth for the Lord: he is our help and our shield." Thus, females are equal to males in value and have a distinct role that men cannot fulfill. This does not mean one gender is more "complete" than another is or that married individuals are more "complete" than singles. Our sufficiency and completeness is in Christ alone (*2 Corinthians 3:5, Colossians 2:10*). These truths reveal males and females are of equal value in God's eyes and each gender reveals unique characteristics or attributes of God's image.

## The Fall & Consequences

*Genesis 3* recounts the story of mankind's fall into sin. Both Adam and Eve chose to distrust God's goodness and take things into their own hands. Sin destroyed their union in the garden and sin continues to distort God's original intent for the marriage union. What was designed as a relationship filled with oneness, harmony, and complementary roles has become a relationship struggling with oppression, self-exaltation, and manipulation. Further, we also see sin's corruption bleeds into distorting the roles of man and woman.

*Genesis 3:16* "Unto the woman he said, *I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.*"

Sin at its very core is self-reliant or self-exaltation. The passage in *Genesis 3:16* gives us insight into specific areas that will be a continual struggle for men and women in the marriage relationship because of the fall.

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One consequence of the fall was that “*he (the man) shall rule over thee (woman)*.” As the diagram reveals above, sin distorts humble, loving, and servant male headship into one of two extremes. For some men, the ruling desire will be to allow their masculinity and “brute strength” to become an idol that leads to hostile domination. For other men, the ruling desire will be to reject their masculinity altogether and become passive, lazy, and indifferent.



Another consequence of the fall was that the wife’s “*desire shall be to thy husband*.” As the diagram reveals above, sin distorts intelligent and willing submission that nurtures into one of two extremes. For some women, the ruling desire will be to allow their femininity or desire for “attachment” to become an idol that leads to clinging dependence or manipulative compliance. For other women, the ruling desire will be to reject their femininity altogether and become rebellious, demanding independence or blatant insubordination.

## Roles Restored

We can be thankful and rejoice that the story does not end with the Fall. In fact, God gives us a glimpse into His plan immediately after the Fall as He speaks to the serpent. *Genesis 3:15* records, “*And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.*” We know ultimately Jesus Christ, born in likeness of the “seed” of man delivered a blow to Satan’s “head” through the cross. Through this one act, redemption and restoration is possible. In addition to the restoration of our soul, God has given us a plan in His Word to restore the roles of husband and wife. The answer is to follow the example(s) of Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote the relationship between a husband and wife should represent the relationship between Christ and the Church (*Ephesians 5:21-33*). Paul also uses the Father’s relationship to the Son in describing a man and woman’s relationship (*1 Corinthians 11:3*). Thus, through Jesus we find examples of a restored headship (the way he related to the church) and a restored submission (the way he related to His Father).

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Husbands are called to “*love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it*” (Ephesians 5:25). We know Christ gave everything for the benefit of us, the Church. Jesus also exemplified this in His relationship with His disciples (the Church) and taught the exercise of power should only be done in service to others, not to please oneself (John 13:1-17). Thus, it seems restoration of the headship role for husbands is servant leadership focused on building up family and wife rather than puffing oneself up. Jesus served to “sanctify” and “cleanse” the Church so that He “*might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle... holy and without blemish*” (Ephesians 5:27). Jesus himself said, “*he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve*” (Luke 22:26). True headship is exemplifying Jesus’s sacrificial authority by taking the responsibility to lead and set the example of love and a Christ-like servant heart while providing protection and provision in the home.

Wives are called to “*submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord*” (Ephesians 5:22). This verse does not imply wives should put husbands in the place of Christ. Submission does not mean the husband’s word is absolute or the wife should surrender all thoughts to him. Only Christ’s word is absolute. Furthermore, as referenced earlier, a wife’s role as ‘ezer’ or “help meet” implies making up for something that is lacking. Genesis 3:20 reveals the meaning of Eve to be “*the mother of all living*.” In other words, she is a “life giver.” Women seem to give life as a nurturer in a physical sense as well as relationally and emotionally. This role and these perspectives are vital to the husband in a world that needs to see a complete image of God. So what is submission? It is a gift given out of reverence for Christ. Jesus does not force us to submit. He wants it to be free, willing and strengthening. Finally, submission does not come from ignorance or incompetence. Philippians 2 reveals a picture of Jesus shedding His divine privileges, without becoming any less divine.

## Conclusion

We can be thankful the fall of mankind does not change God’s original design or plan. Our hope is in Jesus. He has redeemed our gender roles and the concepts of biblical headship and submission. Engaging our roles as husband and wife according to God’s blueprint will lead to restoration and transformation in our lives and relationships to their original intent. It will also reveal God to a world desperately in need of Him. How we use and engage what we have been given for the glory and honor of Christ will be our testimony to others. Our relationship roles are a responsibility to be stewarded rather than a right to be demanded.

\*Note, at times “headship”, “submission” or even spiritual sounding language can be used as a means of controlling or manipulating another person. This is sin, abuse, and not biblical headship. It can be helpful to know the difference between healthy, unhealthy, and abusive behavior. The following document can build understanding on the difference between unhealthy and abusive behavior. Relationship Spectrum Healthy-Unhealthy-Abusive All of us at times engage in unhealthy behavior. However, abusive behavior crosses a clear line that requires professional intervention.