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Recommended Citation

Sedlacek, Beverly J. and Sedlacek, David, "Family Leadership Through Submission." (2016). *Faculty Publications*. 442.

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Family Leadership Through Submission

DAVID AND BEVERLY SEDLACEK

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The topic of submission is hard to address in families, even for many Christian families today. Perhaps nothing goes so strongly against our carnal human nature as to submit to another. And yet the experience of submission is that which will carry us through the remarkable events which are so soon to come. Satan has masterfully created different challenges to true Biblical submission in various parts of the world. In some cultures, submission implies total, unquestioning obedience of children, regardless of age, to their parents, and wives to their husbands. Anything short of full, immediate obedience could result in physical punishment for either children or women. In other places, there is too little respect for parental authority or spousal position. Both extremes (dominating subjection or permissive rebellion) are at odds with Biblical submission. Paul warns us about this in his letter when he says, "In the last days, people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving" (2 Timothy 3:1-3). These attitudes and behaviors are evidence of a self-focus that is uncharacteristic of Biblical submission.

Rebellion against God's law, originating in Lucifer's rebellion in Heaven (Isaiah 14:12-14) is the heritage of all of Adam's children whose hearts have not been regenerated by the indwelling spirit or character of God's love. Parents, as lawgivers in the family, stand in the place of God, The Lawgiver, and are to teach their children about the blessings of tranquility, order, and long life that is reaped when they keep the law. Parents teach their children about law not only by the rules they make but also by how they enforce these rules. When parents are inconsistent, children may take glee in "getting over on them." At the same time, children may be angry and disappointed that they were permitted to do so, and may judge their parents as being weak, gullible and easily manipulated. When parents are too harsh in administering discipline or do so in anger, children learn to comply out of fear. They don't internalize the love of law. Rather, fear of authority and rebellion against law are the seeds planted. If these seeds are not rooted out they will produce a harvest of rebellion against God.

Donna was a minister's daughter. Her father held such high standards for his daughters that they never felt able to please him. He did not trust his daughters and therefore made very rigid rules to control their behavior. Donna did her best to please her dad, but she feared him and resented the continual message that she was untrustworthy. On one occasion, when she dated a young man, innocent

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circumstances resulted in her getting home one hour after curfew. Instead of inquiring if there were extenuating circumstances, her father immediately accused her of being a whore and severely beat her. Later in life, Donna herself accepted Jesus as her Savior and developed a strong walk of faith. However, she made it clear that she would submit to no man, not even her husband. Further, she insisted the Christian life was *only* a walk of faith, and that obedience to the law had nothing to do with godly living. She continually hurt herself by overeating and eating unhealthy foods. She refused to exercise, but claimed the blood of Jesus to heal her from elevated blood pressures, as high as 300/180 (the normal range being 120/80). She did not see that her rebellion against the law was rebelling against God, and was causing her to hurt herself in the process. The root of this rebellion was in her relationship with her father, and spilled over into her relationships with anyone in authority, including her husband. Suggesting to her that she needed to look at the law from a different point of view meant that we were challenging her love of God and her Christian walk. Through gentle, persistent, persuasion and prayer, she experienced healing in her relationship with her father, which enabled her to deal with the spiritual strongholds. Deep spiritual and physical healing were the results, as she learned to care for herself.

There is perhaps no greater wounding of the spirit of a person than when a father molests his child. When the father of the family, intended to be God's representative, violates a child in such an intimate way, the spiritual wounding that takes place makes it next to impossible for that person to trust. A profound sense of rage seethes within the child, which leads to rejection of the violator and all he stands for, or to an unholy attachment to him in an attempt to get his love. While we cannot fully explore the ramifications of sexual molestation here, suffice it to say that such individuals will have great difficulty submitting to any authority figure including God (regardless of their external profession of faith). Rhonda's father was an elder in the church. They belonged to a church that had very high standards, and he held his family to them meticulously. Yet, there was a secret in this family: Dad regularly molested each

of the six girls in the family, including Rhonda between the ages of four and fourteen. One day, he offered Rhonda to a deacon in the church who also sexually abused her. It is a wonder Rhonda and others like her have not totally rejected Christianity, to say nothing of the church in which they were raised. Individuals like Rhonda will not submit in their hearts to someone they cannot trust. They may obediently comply, but their obedience may not be true submission.

Submission Defined

The question then arises, what is true submission? For the Christian, an examination of Christ's life and death on the cross provides a wonderful illustration. Christ embodied submission to God by taking upon himself human nature and the penalty of sin, thus freeing us from the power of sin: "So when He [Jesus] came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me. Then I said, 'Here I am: I have come-it is written of me in the scroll of the book to do your will O God'" (Hebrews 10:5, 7 NET Bible). "I can do nothing on my own initiative. Just as I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will, but the will of the one who sent me" (John 5:30, NET Bible). "But the Son of God was surrendered to the Father's will, and dependent upon His power. So utterly was Christ emptied of self that He made no plans for Himself. He accepted God's plans for Him, and day-by-day the Father unfolded His plans. So should we depend upon God, that our lives may be the simple outworking of His will" (White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 208).

The embodiment of submission as a way of living is manifested in a willingness to be subject to another as Jesus was to His disciples when washing their feet. This embodiment reveals a spirit of humility and power that is born of meekness. Those who embody submission will inherit the new earth (Matthew 5:5).

In other words, submission is a principle of the heart, rooted in love for God and other humans, and is an expression of the indwelling presence of the life of Jesus. "He [God] made him who knew

no sin, to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians. 5:21). As a result of this amazing act, Christ has restored communion and fellowship with God to the human race and invites us to receive this power over sin. "We know that our old man was crucified with him so that the body of sin would no longer dominate us, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin" (Romans 6:6). Once we submit to him and embrace His life, death, and resurrection, we become the means to invite others into this experience: "Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians. 5:20). Submission is an essential ingredient, as we embody the fullness of Christ's life in us.

There are several implications of the embodied Christ living out his submission in us. First, submission is continuous. We do not jump in and out of submission depending on the circumstance. This continual submission stands against Satan's seeds of rebellion he planted in the human heart. Submission always results in obedience when it is a response to a command of God. "The submission on our part must be proportionate to the gift of God; it must be complete and wanting in nothing. We are all debtors to God. He has claims upon us that we cannot meet without giving ourselves a full and willing sacrifice. He claims prompt and willing obedience, and nothing short of this will He accept" (White, *Counsels for the Church*, p. 188).

Second, submission does not always result in obedience when it comes to responding to the authority of other humans. Obedience is often an external, behavioral expression of submission. Therefore, it must be true that one can submit to rightful authority but not obey. Even though our obedience to other men is dependent upon their position of authority as assigned by God (parents, husbands, employers, church leadership) as well as the conformance of their command to the law of God, the Bible never sets such limits upon submission. It just states: "Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God" (Ephesians 5:21). "And

all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5). It is, therefore, not only possible to submit even when you cannot obey, but it is required. A Biblical example of this is the three Hebrew boys as recorded in Daniel Chapter 3. King Nebuchadnezzar summoned all of the officials of the kingdom to the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon (Daniel 3:1-3). This command would not result in any violation God's law, and therefore, the three submitted to the command and obeyed. When the king commanded that everyone assembled bow down to the image he had erected, the three Hebrews in the assembly respectfully responded to the king ("May the king live forever," verse 9), thus honoring his authority. But, they politely refused to obey and were subsequently thrown into the fiery furnace. Thus, they demonstrated the embodiment of submission even as they refused to obey. Likewise, we are always required to submit to authority, even when we cannot obey.

Third, submission is between equals. God and Christ are equal in power and authority but Christ chose to submit to him for the task of saving humanity. Likewise, in the marriage relationship, the principle of mutual submission is based on shared authority. "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" (I Corinthians. 7:4). Eve's formation from Adam's side (Genesis 2: 4) is evidence of the equality of man and woman. Man's Biblical headship is descriptive of life in a fallen world, but not prescriptive of the way of life God intended.

Fourth, if submission is between two equals, it must be freely given, not forced. Children, spouses, and others under the control of others can be treated in such a domineering way that they will comply with a command obediently, but not embody submission in their hearts. God instead draws us into obedience through his self-sacrificing love (John 12:32). Jesus also said: "You are my friends if you do the things I command you" (John 15:14). Rather than

commanding obedience as he has the right to do, God invites obedience from the position of one friend to another. The position of humility assumed by God invites the human heart's submission.

Fifth, submission is learned. Looking at the experience of Jesus, Hebrews 5:8 reads: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through the things he suffered." In the Greek, the word for obedience is "hupakoe" (Strong's, 1890. 5218) which also translates as submission. Likewise, "He humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death; even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8). What are the implications of these impactful verses? First, Jesus learned submission through suffering, just as we must to prepare us for the time of trouble ahead. Secondly, who did Jesus submit to in becoming obedient to death on the cross? Was it His Father that Jesus submitted to as a part of working out the plan of salvation? The Father and the Son were in agreement about Jesus' sacrifice of His life on the cross (see John 10:17-18). Through the Jews' actions, Satan killed Jesus on the cross. Jewish law required stoning for blasphemy, which was the charge against Jesus. Jesus could have insisted on stoning, but the hatred of the Jews was so great that they were willing to violate the very law they claimed to uphold by demanding the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus said of the Jews: "You people are from your father the devil, and you want to do what your father desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not uphold the truth" (John 8:44). It was Satan working through the Jews who murdered Christ. In becoming obedient to death on the cross, Jesus submitted to be killed; he submitted in this sense to the Jews and Satan. He did not submit to them because they were right, but because He knew that it was through submission to the evil that they purposed to perform that He would triumph over sin. This principle of victory through submission is one that every Christian must have written on the tablets of his heart especially in the days to come.

Lest some misunderstand our message, we are emphatically saying that Jesus *did* not obey Satan's commands, nor become a toy in his hands. He voluntarily chose to place himself under Satan's power so that He could

obtain the victory for us. In the temptation in the wilderness, twice Jesus permitted Satan to carry Him bodily away. "Then the devil took Him into the holy city, and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple." "Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain" (Matthew 4:5,8). Jesus won the victory by allowing Satan to tempt Him. True submission is always an active process, never a passive one. To submit does not mean to be a doormat, passively "taking" whatever abuse another wishes to dish out. It is an active, strong, voluntary act of the will to place oneself under another for the good of all concerned.

How do these principles relate to the relationship between husbands and wives? Genesis 2 speaks to the relationship God intended for husbands and wives to enjoy with each other. The two individuals are to become one. In giving everything to each other, there is no selfishness, for they are giving to themselves. Giving everything combats selfishness. Ephesians 5:25 amplifies the call to submission: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it". As we have attempted to build a case that submission is mutual and also an embodiment of self-sacrificing love, we interpret this verse to mean that husbands might take a leadership position in the family in submitting to their wives. Love always seeks the good of the other and challenges the selfishness of the human heart. Husbands can take the lead in modeling submission in their families even as God did for fallen humanity by giving his life for us. Submission is a principle of life for all of us to live continually because it is a part of the essence of the life of God that dwells in us.

Ephesians 5:22 says: "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord." Too often, this text has been interpreted to mean that wives are to be doormats, but this is not the case. From the pen of inspiration, we read: "A woman that will submit to be ever dictated to in the smallest matters of domestic life, who will yield up her identity, will never be of much use or blessing in the world, and will not answer the purpose of God in her existence. She is a mere machine to be guided

by another's will and another's mind. God has given each one, men and women, an identity, an individuality, that they must act in the fear of God for themselves" (White, *Testimonies on Sexual Behavior, Adultery, and Divorce*, p. 25). "When the wife yields her body and mind to the control of her husband, being passive to his will in all things, sacrificing her conscience, her dignity, and even her identity, she loses the opportunity of exerting that mighty influence for good which she should possess, to elevate her husband" (White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 127). Submission does not imply in any way a lack of equality or a lack of dignity. Submission is an attitude of the heart and an act of the will. It is not something forced from us. The submission of the wife does not mean that her husband has superior wisdom. It is an acknowledgment of his position in the Lord. That is, the position of the husband's headship as Paul states in the book of Ephesians 5:23: "For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church".

In other words, the woman's submission is motivated in a uniquely Christian way because the Lord wants it that way. Submission to the husband is submission to the Lord. The wife's attitude to her husband will always be submissive, but her obedience will not be unconditional. If asked to do something sinful, such as rob a bank, she would not do it. Her obedience is first to Christ, then to her husband. Anything else would be idolatrous. However, in most cases today, just the opposite problem exists. There is resistance to submission to our husbands. Jacinta came for counseling to get her life right with God. She was furious with her husband who was an addict and unfaithful to her. Their communication often happened with bitterness and contempt. She wanted to divorce him but was advised not to do so because he was pastor of a local church. So she had lived in misery for years but now had come to the end of her rope. She did not want to discuss reconciliation, but only getting her life right with God. In the process of helping her with her agenda, she saw how hardened her heart had become and how she contributed to creating the very thing she hated the most in the relationship. This revelation broke her

heart. She called him and acknowledged that she too had responsibility for the problems in their marriage. She apologized to him for her hardness of heart toward him. Several days later, her husband called to ask for help for his problem, broken by his wife's submissive attitude. Today they are shining examples of what a happy marriage is intended to be for Christians. They can talk over differences with a deep mutual love and respect. It is a joy for Jacinta to submit to her husband today. In this marriage, 1 Peter 3:1-2 has been illustrated: "In the same way you wives, be submissive to your own husbands; so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior". Nothing so much builds and reinforces a husband's sense of manhood as his wife's submissive respect.

What if there are legitimate differences between husband and wife regarding a course of action? After they have prayerfully sought the Lord's will together, listened carefully to one another, and discussed the situation, the final decision rests with the husband. What if it turns out that the man's decision was the wrong one? A wife who has learned to embody submission, who understands that the two of them are one, will not rub his face in his error nor expose him to others as the one responsible for the mistake, but will accept the consequences of the error as if she had made the decision. "Love not only bears with others' faults but cheerfully submits to whatever suffering or inconvenience such forbearance makes necessary. This love never faileth. It can never lose its value; it is an attribute of heaven" (White, *Testimonies for the Church, Vol 5*, p. 169.2) Submissive love is an attribute of heaven because self has died and the wife is operating on a heavenly plane. The gift of divinity has overshadowed her humanity. She is dead, and her life is hidden with Christ in God.

The Biblical principle of submission learned in families has far-reaching implications for God's people during the last days in which we are living. In addition to the foundational submission modeled in the lives of husbands

and wives, God enjoins children to submit to their parents (Ephesians 6:1-3), employees to submit to their employers (1 Peter 2:18-21), the faithful to submit to church leadership (Hebrews 13:17) and all of us to submit to civil government (Romans 13:1-5; 1 Timothy 2:1-3; 1 Peter 2:13-16). While each of these injunctions is important, focus on submission to civil government is especially important to consider at the present time. More of our civil rights are being taken away. Very soon laws will be enacted taking away religious liberty and the faithful will be persecuted with economic boycott and ultimately a death decree (See Revelation Chapter 13). What will our attitude be during this coming time of persecution? Will we love our enemies? Will we continue to submit wherever possible except when a violation of God's law is at stake?

What were the attitudes of the cloud of witnesses that have gone before us when they were persecuted: the three Hebrew worthies, Daniel, John the Baptist, Stephen, the early Christian martyrs, the Waldenses, and especially Jesus Himself? Are we prepared to joyfully submit to the coming persecution regardless of the form it takes? Some of us will undoubtedly give our lives. Are we ready? Through all the trials which He has permitted in our lives, He has been attempting to prepare us for the days so soon to come. Without true submission, there will be no overcoming and no victory. "Do you remember what I told you? 'A slave is not greater than the master.' Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you. And if they had listened to me, they will listen to you. They will do all this to you because of me, for they have rejected the one who sent me". "...the time is coming, when those who kill you will think they are

doing a holy service for God. This is because they have never known the Father, or me" John 15:20-21; 16:2-3 (NLT).

Knowing the Father and knowing Jesus means knowing their heart of love and their willingness to submit to our foolish rebellion even while trying to win us with their love. They have allowed themselves so often to be judged by their creatures, to be made the butt of jokes, and their name to be used lightly. God knows what it means to submit to evil because even in the hearts of many professed Christians He coexists with the evil of a heart that is not fully dead to its enmity against Him. Will we choose to learn to love God so supremely that we would rather die than expose Him to any further disgrace? God embodies submission. Will you allow Him to embody it in you and through you?

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