

Colossians 3:18-21

Wives submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord

There are some people who suggest that these verses 3:18-4:1

- represent a complete break from all that went before, but I think they are mistaken
- earlier in chapter 3 of Colossians, we thought about the ‘Christian and Christ’
- the theme progressed to the ‘Christian and the church’,
- not surprisingly it continues with the ‘Christian at home’
- and later considers the ‘Christian at work’
- but for the present we are looking at 3:18-21, the ‘Christian at home’

It all appears to be Paul’s more detailed exposition of verse 17

And whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks to God the Father through him.

(Colossians 3:17)

It is odd that in our Methodist Marriage Service (MSB) Colossians 3:15-17 is one of the lessons

- and yet Colossians 3:18-21 about Christian marriage and parenting is not included
- it is as if we are comfortable with the general principle but unsure of the application
- we come to the biblical text with our own presuppositions; the text includes four commands:
- wives, submit to your husbands; husbands, love your wives; children, obey your parents
- fathers, do not embitter your children
- and the question is, ‘can these teachings be applied to us today, a very different culture?’

The apparently innocuous question, ‘can these teachings be applied to a very different culture?’

- is in fact a question of fundamental importance
- not simply for this matter but as a general principle of biblical interpretation
- in short, do we seek to preserve the inner meaning of scriptural teaching or abolish it?
- Is this truly God’s design for a happy family in every age and culture?
- Are these normative rules for Christian households today?

You will know that I am very fond of alliteration for sermon points

- I believe that it is important to be able to remember an outline of a sermon
- As my tutor, Dr Donald English, used to say:
- ‘if you cannot remember the outline of the sermon before the service ...
- how do you expect the congregation to remember it after the service?
- It is a good point well made

Sometimes, after I have listened to a preacher, Janet will ask me what the sermon was like

- and often I will reply, ‘it was like a plate of spaghetti’
- there was a lot of content but it was difficult to unravel

In order to avoid this being a plate of spaghetti, which it could very easily have become

- I am using three points and they all begin with the same letter
- Because they all begin with the same word! But I find this in the passage
- The Pattern for Christian Living; the Pattern for Christian Marriage; the Pattern for Christian Parenting

I THE PATTERN FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING

Here we must return to Colossians 3:17, for this is the pattern for Christian living

- ‘And whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus
- giving thanks to God the Father through him.’
- For many Christians, ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus’ is just a tag at the end of a prayer
- But this is, in fact, a good reminder of what prayer should be
- It should mean, in effect, that if the prayer were to be written down, it could be signed by Jesus
- ‘Whatever you do ... do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus’ becomes clear
- WWJD, What would Jesus do, does not solve every contemporary moral dilemma
- But what we must ask is ‘can I do this in his name?’ For Christ gives the pattern for glorifying God
- The Christian has to live a life that could be lived by Jesus – Jesus came to obey the Father
- The Christian should live like Jesus and remember the inner relationship of the Holy Trinity

The basic doctrine for Christians is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, a difficult and sophisticated doctrine

- that is the Christian way of making sense of the truths that we find in scripture:

There is in the Divine Being but one indivisible essence. In this one Divine Being there are three Persons or individual subsistences, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The whole undivided essence of God belongs equally to each of the three persons. The subsistence and operation of the three persons in the Divine Being is marked by a certain definite order. There are certain personal attributes by which the three persons are distinguished. The church confesses the Trinity to be a mystery behind human comprehension.

Now I am sure that makes a feel a whole lot better, but we cannot leave it there

- the three individual subsistences (persons) are co-equal and co-eternal
- the Father and the Son are equal and eternal; The Son and the Spirit are equal and eternal
- The Father and the Spirit are equal and eternal
- But the subsistence and operation of the three persons is marked by a definite order
- In personal subsistence, the Father is first, the Son second, the Spirit third
- This is not about priority of time or of essential dignity
- The Father is neither begotten by, nor proceeds from any other person
- The Son is eternally begotten of the Father; The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son
- Or in a more familiar way, Things are out of the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit

Now some people will suggest that this is all rather heavy, when we could have been having a lot more fun

- Asking if Paul was a misogynist and arguing whether brides ought to say ‘obey’ in the marriage service
- I am sorry, I thought I had answered both of those, perhaps you missed it, I don’t want to repeat myself
- at least not right away – does the NT have anything to say about Christian living, Christian families?
- Some people are baulking at parts of the text, ‘wives submit to your husbands’
- Because it seems politically incorrect to say the least – but what makes us think we today have it right?
- We live in a world of broken marriages, single-parent families and child abuse
- Of course, these all existed before the last forty years, no one is pretending that things are getting better
- We must recognise the reality of our situation as well as the reservations some have about scripture
- Confucius, he say, ‘the strength of a nation is derived from the integrity of its homes’
- And whatever else he say, he is surely right on that one

II THE PATTERN FOR CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

In scripture the fundamental unit of home life is marriage

- Marriage is simply rendered as 'leaving, cleaving and becoming one flesh' (Gen 2:24)

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Part of the problem we have with the breakdown of marriage is that its proper pattern is not followed

- in the marriage bond an old relationship changes (leaving father and mother)
- a new relationship begins (man and woman united);
- a new glue is given (they become one flesh, spiritually and physically)
- Undoubtedly, the most profound bond that most of us have in our early years is with our parents
- marriage is the mark that the old relationship is changing and a new relationship begins
- it is a profound step that must not be entered upon 'lightly or selfishly'
- but now the transition has changed from the bride being escorted down the aisle
- and being given by her Father, on behalf of her parents, to the new relationship
- what was once a solemn public declaration of commitment,
- easily becomes a more casual, private matter
- not always supported by family and friends, not always carefully considered, not always duly prepared for
- what we must ask ourselves is not 'which way is better?' That will just end up in an argument
- But does the new way or the traditional way most faithfully represent the nature of God?

‘Wives submit to your husbands’

- in New Testament times, in the pagan world women were regarded as inferior
- before we write Paul off as a women-hating misogynist, we must remember it is Paul who wrote, in Christ
- ‘there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female’ (Galatians 3:28)
- three great barriers of the ancient world broken down, the gospel radically changed the position of women
- the responsibilities of the wife and the child (and later the slave) are not new, but rights and freedoms are
- however, it seems that some found these new rights and freedoms hard to handle

It is important that the Christian household is run decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40)

- the Colossians passage is not isolated (Eph. 5:22-6:9; 1 Tim. 2:8-15, 6:1-2; Tit. 2:1-10; 1 Pet. 2:13-3:7)
- Ephesians (5:21) tells believers ‘submit to one another out of reverence for Christ’
- Before continuing with the same words as Colossians, ‘Wives submit to your husbands’
- Ephesians adds, ‘as to the Lord’, Colossians adds, ‘as is fitting in the Lord’
- The second part of the text, a part easy to miss, is the clue to how marriage operates
- Exploring the Trinity, we learned that Christ is equal to the Father and yet willingly subject to him
- In the writings of Paul we see these two dimensions in marriage
- The wife is equal to the husband and yet willingly subject to him
- The pattern of marriage reflects the pattern of the Godhead
- In the Holy Trinity we see that equality and submissiveness can co-exist
- The paramount interest is that of the Lord, the cause of the gospel is paramount
- The emphasis of the whole passage is on duties and not on rights

But what does ‘submissiveness’ mean? The first thing to say is that it is clearly underpinned by equality

- it is about husband and wife both being submitted to the Lord and to each other
- it is about Christian wives being subject to Christian husbands, not about women being subject to men
- it is about husbands loving their wives as Christ loved the church
- it is about both a Christian husband and a Christian wife behaving as is fitting in the Lord
- ‘submission’ cannot mean servile, menial bondage because Christ liberates us from that
- the Christian wife’s submission to her husband reflects her commitment to her Lord
- just as the Christian husband’s love for his wife reflects his commitment to his Lord
- the command does not mean that the wife should do what is wrong, just because her husband says so
- submission can only be in the context of love, voluntarily (entered into when a couple marry)
- the wife defers to her husband because of her husband’s unselfish love

The ancient world was a man’s world but in Christ mutual love and deference are transformed

- the word translated ‘love’ in husbands *love* your wives is the Greek word *agape* – i.e. Christ-like love
- a deliberate attitude of mind that concerns itself with the well-being of the loved one
- a husband must not be ‘harsh’ or ‘cross with’ his wife, instead he must honour her (1 Pet. 3:7)
- this is distinctive Christian teaching, unknown in the ancient world, unfamiliar in the contemporary world
- to be fair, submission is not an easy concept to grasp, harder still to live
- the relationship in Christian marriage is like a journey in a car
- the loving husband, in Christ-like fashion, must set the course for the good of the wife
- the submissive wife, in Christ-like fashion, is equal to the husband/driver but does not take the wheel
- there has to be a driver – you cannot drive by committee – and snatching the wheel leads to disaster
- the relationship between Christ and the Church and in the Godhead give an insight to the divine pattern

III THE PATTERN FOR CHRISTIAN PARENTING

The Father-Son relationship in the Holy Trinity is, quite obviously, a pattern for parenting

- How can a Christian child best express his/her desire to serve Jesus?
- by honouring his or her father and mother, obeying his her parents – Why? Because this pleases the Lord
- Those of us who are parents know what it is to be on both side of this relationship
- as children (children of the household and not of adult age) we honoured God by obeying our parents
- when we disobeyed we normally learned (eventually) that our parents were right all along
- As parents ('Fathers' is probably inclusive) we are commanded not to 'embitter our children'
- an irritable parent will produce discouraged children, who lose heart
- disobedient children cannot be encouraged, while disobedience to parents marks the last days (2 Tim. 3:2)
- it is certainly the case that children who do not obey their parents
- will find it hard to accept any kind of authority even outside the home
- but Christian children are to obey their parents because it pleases the Lord
- who has the easier side of the deal, the child who obeys
- or the parent who has the model of Divine Fatherhood as the pattern to reflect?

Children will ask – aren't there exceptions to the biblical command to obey your parents?

- What can I do if my parents forbid me to do something that is right to do?
- Generally, the answer must be that obeying your parents has the priority
- What can I do if my parents order me to do something that is not right to do?
- Generally, the answer must be that the 10 commandments have priority

To return to a driving illustration, we say to a foreigner, ‘we drive on the left in UK’

- Now the foreigner could ask a whole lot of questions, aren’t there exceptions? E.g. A lorry parked?
- Parents can ask, ‘what should we do?’ spend more time with your children at home not at church
- Obeying and not embittering – a difficult balance for the godly child and parent

As part of his rules for holy living the Apostle Paul sets out some rules for Christians at home

- these reflect the relationships in the Divine Being, expressed in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity
- wives submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord,
- husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them
- is based on the pattern of the equality and submissiveness of Christ in the Godhead
- and draws on the self-giving love that Christ (the bridegroom)
- shows for the church (the bride) through his complete dedication on the cross
- children obey your parents in everything for this pleases the Lord
- fathers do not embitter your children or they will become discouraged
- is similarly based on the pattern of the Father and the Son in the Godhead
- as the Son obeyed the Father, so children should live according to that pattern
- as the Father loved the Son, so parents should live according to that pattern

I admit that the very basis of this teaching goes against the grain of modern thinking but is it more Godly?

- Loving and submitting, loving and honouring – a difficult balance for the godly couple
- Obeying and not embittering or discouraging – a difficult balance for godly parents and their children
- Is there a divine pattern that we should be seeking to live out?
- I believe there is and it is in this faithful Christian living that we seek to glorify God