

Command or Curse

A Look at Genesis 3:16 in the Light of Abuse

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God said to man, "The earth will bring forth thistles."

Man replied, "I'll weed them out. I'll develop weed killers and make my garden a paradise."

God said to man, "You will work by the sweat of your brow."

Man replied, "I'll invent tools that will make my work easier: the plow, the hoe, the tiller and the John Deere tractor."

God said to woman, "You will have pain in childbirth."

Man responded, "Yea, so be it, let her suffer so my quiver can be full. It is God's will. My work was made hard because of her."

God said to woman, "Your husband will rule over you."

Man responded, "Of course that's the way it should be. I am to be her master. I was created first."

And woman bowed her head and said, "I am indeed under a curse."

According to the traditional interpretation of Gen. 3:16b, God gave the husband both the right and the responsibility to govern his wife. The wife is to desire only what her husband desires and is to submit to her husband. Reading this as command, however, fails to consider how it compares to the rest of Chapter 3. In the context, all of the statements are negative to the addressees, and all have universal implications.

The question of command or curse is not merely academic. Women throughout Christendom have suffered physical, emotional and spiritual abuse from husbands who have used Gen. 3:16 to support their supposed biblical right to control other human beings both body and soul. Even though abuse may not be advocated from the pulpit, it is nevertheless silently condoned by church leaders who preach a doctrine of moral authority that allows men to play God, accompanied by a doctrine of submission that encourages women to become idolaters.

Some approaches are more blatant than others, but all, either directly or indirectly, find their roots in a misapplication of Gen. 3:16.

Abuse in evangelical churches exists. While the word *abuse* may conjure up visions of black eyes and bruised flesh, abuse is much broader than physical violence. The more common abuse in Christian families neither bruises the flesh nor breaks the bones but instead bruises and breaks the spirit. It damages the emotions and devours spiritual integrity, destroying even the will to live. Many Christian husbands do not recognize their controlling behavior as abusive because they justify it from Scripture. Eph. 5:22¹ is seen as a continuation and confirmation of Gen. 3:16b: “Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.” Principles of kindness, gentleness, humility and servanthood, i.e., fruits of the Spirit, are set aside in favor of a tyranny of control. The law of loving one’s neighbor is ignored because the object is not a neighbor but a wife.²

¹ “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.” All quotations are taken from the *New International Version* unless otherwise indicated.

² Studies on spousal abuse, particularly violence, are inconclusive as to whether Christian families are more immune to violence than non-Christian families. Some studies would suggest that they are. In a study reported in *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, the primary conclusion was that couples in the U.S. who regularly attend religious services experience a significantly lower rate of domestic violence than of that of society at large. Religious participation among both Catholics and Protestants exerts a positive influence by involving people in a social support system, by reducing the abuse of alcohol and drugs, and by providing a means of meeting psychological needs (Kristin L Anderson and Christopher G. Ellison, “Religious Involvement and Domestic Violence Among U.S. Couples,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40:2 [June 2001], 269-287). The authors admit, however, that more study needs to be done. Although they found little variation across denominations, they refer to Nancy Nason-Clark’s research (1997) that indicates “religious communities may unwittingly exacerbate the problem of domestic violence” because of their intense promotion of the sanctity of marriage, causing “victims of abuse to remain in dangerous relationships. Certain theological systems may also make it more difficult for clergy and others to acknowledge and deal with the phenomenon of domestic violence, and may limit clergy awareness of (or interest in) secular agencies or resources for helping abuse victims and their families. These and other important issues deserve close attention from researchers in the future.”

An earlier study by Lenore Walker was less conclusive (Lenore Walker, *The Battered Woman Syndrome* [New York: Springer, 1984], 156; cited in Grant Martin, *Counseling for Family Violence and Abuse* [Dallas: Word, 1987], 20). The percentage of “batterers” who claimed Protestant or Catholic affiliation was 65% of the total, while the percentage of “non-batterers” who said they were Catholic or Protestant was only 53%. “It might be assumed that nonbattering mates would be more likely to claim a religious affiliation, but it appears that husbands who batter more often claim to be Protestant or Catholic. While only suggestive, this type of data adds to the opinion that coming from a religious home is certainly no guarantee of freedom from abuse (Martin, 20-21).

Although the Church as a whole has made progress in recognizing and fighting physical abuse,³ it has often indirectly promoted emotional and spiritual abuse through overemphasizing teachings on submission and headship at the expense of fruits of the Spirit. Why, with all of the Bible's endorsements of kindness, gentleness, mercy and self-control, would a Christian try to defend his abuse as biblically proper? The answer is in Genesis 3. Even as Satan twisted the words of God to deceive Eve, so also man twists God's words to Eve to promote the very sin named therein, thereby fulfilling the statement that a woman's husband would rule over her.

The result is a form of idolatry. The deceived man sets himself up as a mini-god to whom his wife must give the devotion properly due only to deity. He imagines that he has the right to discipline his wife in any way necessary to bring her under his complete control, lest it should be said of him that he cannot manage his own family (1 Tim. 3:4-5). Wives may indeed submit, but out of fear, not love. It is no wonder that women have seen Gen. 3:16 as proof that God is unfair. They have witnessed man's mistreatment of woman in the name of God and have accused God of starting it all. Many have turned their backs on Christianity because of this one issue.

Command or statement?

The deceit is caused in part by ignoring to whom the words are spoken. Gen. 3:16b is addressed to Eve, not to Adam. Like God's other words to Adam and the serpent, they are statements, not commands. They are predictions and prophecies, laying out the penalties that were to fall on the entire earth as a result of Adam and Eve's sin. Like the parent who gives a

³ The Church does not have a good record in fighting wife abuse. In general, it is more known for upholding a man's authority at the expense of the well-being of his wife. In earlier times, a husband's right to chastise his wife by beating her "was simply taken for granted as part of the divinely ordained order of things." The excuse, "It's for her own good" is not an invention of this age. A marriage manual from the 1400s encouraged men to bully and terrify their wives, and if that didn't work to beat her soundly with a stick, "not in rage, but out of charity and concern for her soul, so that the beating will redound to your merit and her good." Abusive behavior was judged praiseworthy if

disobedient child time out, God announces the consequences of sin—only this “time out” is to last thousands of years until sin has been completely abolished.

Ref.	Addressee	God’s statements
3:14a	Serpent	Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals!
3:14b		You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.
3:15a		And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers;
3:15b		he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.
3:16a	Eve	I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children.
3:16b		Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.
3:17b1	Adam	Cursed is the ground because of you;
3:17b2		through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.
3:18a		It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
3:18b		and you will eat the plants of the field.
3:19a		By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground
3:19b		. . . for dust you are and to dust you will return.

Table 1 The curses of Gen. 3

Although none of the consequences is stated grammatically as a command, man has successfully turned 16b—and only 16b—into one. By so doing, he ironically fulfills the prediction itself. The guilty husband ends up ruling over his wife, not with love and mercy but selfishness and insensitivity, resulting in misery for his wife.

Logic also rules against 3:16b being a command. Commands may be either direct or indirect, but in Genesis 3, God speaks directly to all parties. Adam, who was right there with Eve, heard God’s words, but they were intended for Eve. Like the rest of the consequences, the husband’s rule was a negative result of disobedience, framed in words that were intended to

bring dismay to the one being addressed. The headship Adam had in the beginning was perverted into the rule of 16b. The only rule taught in Genesis 1-2 is a joint rule of both man and wife over the creation, not of a man over his wife.

What about Eve's desire? Was that not a command? No, it was another negative consequence of sin. Regardless how one interprets desire, desire cannot be commanded. Desire comes from within, not from without.

The woman's desire

Determining that Gen. 3:16b is indicative rather than imperative does not by itself solve all the difficulties this verse has engendered. Much controversy still churns around the meaning of *desire*. What is the woman's desire, and how does this affect the interpretation of the passage?

Hebrew *šêshûqâ* (שִׁשׁוּקָה) occurs only three times in the Old Testament: twice in Genesis and once in the Song of Solomon. Its scarcity complicates the efforts to determine its exact meaning. Even the supposed root *shwq* (שׁוּק) is speculation. Although the Arabic cognates can give insight into the possible meaning, they are still Arabic, not Hebrew. The final decision must be based on the context of *šêshûqâ* in Scripture.⁴

Michael Stitzinger delineates three “worthy” views of desire in Gen. 3:16: (1) sexual desire; (2) a “deep, natural attraction which a woman will have for her husband”; and (3) the view argued by Susan Foh that a woman would have a sinful desire to control her husband, but the husband should in turn rule her—“if he can.”⁵ He rejects all three, proposing a fourth

⁴ The study of related languages is helpful in finding clues to possible meanings, but in the final analysis, the cognate languages cannot determine meaning. Spanish *embarazada* looks and sounds like English *embarrassed*; both share a relationship with the French and Portuguese. Many Spanish learners, however, have been *embarrassed* in claiming that they are *embarazada* (pregnant).

⁵ Michael Stitzinger, “Genesis 1-3 and the Male/Female Role Relationship,” *Grace Theological Journal* 2:1 (Spring 1981) 40-41.

alternative: that desire refers to (4) “the woman’s longing or yearning that she may have about the affairs of life,” in which case “your desire is to your husband” is a factual statement that she is still under subordination in spite of her failure to subordinate herself when she was deceived by Satan.⁶ Each of these, along with some variations, will be examined briefly below.

Desire as *eros*

Normally, a nearer context by the same author is of higher value in determining meaning than a passage written hundreds of years later by a different author. Nevertheless, one of the most common interpretations of *desire* is sexual desire, based on the use of *t^eshûqâ* in the Song of Solomon: “I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me” (SS 7:10). The romantic and even erotic setting of the Song of Solomon legitimates *desire* being understood in this way—in the *Song of Solomon*. However, if this is its meaning in Gen. 3:16b, then God has cursed woman with sexual desire as a punishment for sin. For the sake of argument, however, let’s assume that this is the meaning of *desire* in Genesis 3 as well. What are the implications?

First, if it is a punishment or curse, then sexual desire must be construed as an imperfect substitute for whatever was in its place at creation. In the Song of Solomon, however, *desire* is an attractive, pleasant yearning more in tune with the blessings of Gen. 1-2, where God told Adam and Eve, in a world where everything was good, to be fruitful and fill the earth.⁷

Second, if the woman’s *desire* is sexual, then it should be a universal reality. Hard labor to produce food for the table is still the norm for the man (unless he is rich enough to benefit from someone else’s hard labor). Hard labor to produce and raise children is still the norm for the woman, with women still regularly dying in childbirth. The serpent continues to slither on its

⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁷ The grammar of Gen. 1:28 indicates that the command to be fruitful and populate the earth *is* the blessing.

belly. No one, with the exception of the Redeemer promised in 3:15, has been able to conquer death, no matter how many body parts have been replaced.

Sexual desire for one's husband, however, is not a universal reality. Lesbianism and other perversions abound. Even among moral, church-going Christians, sexual intimacy is a problem. Ask the marriage counselors. A frequent complaint is that the wife does *not* want sex. Whatever resemblance she may have once had to the bride in the Song of Solomon, a common wish in later years is "Just leave me alone!" Interpreting *desire* in Gen. 3:16b as sexual does not fit the universal pattern seen in the rest of the curses.

The context of Gen. 3:16 is neither romance nor *eros* but curse. Some may *wish* that the desire of Gen. 3:16 were focused on the marriage bed, but the corruption of society confirms that when the sin nature controls a woman's sexual desire, it looks for fulfillment somewhere else, especially when a husband has made himself undesirable by neglecting or abusing his wife. We must look elsewhere for a satisfactory interpretation of *desire* and leave sexual desire in the Song of Solomon where it belongs.

Desire as "deep, natural attraction"

A second view is that woman has a psychological desire for intimacy with a man that may or may not include a sexual relationship. Keil and Delitzsch in the mid-eighteenth century saw this desire as degenerate. Since the woman had liberated herself from the man to whom she was to be subordinate, "she was punished with a desire bordering upon disease," and possesses "a violent craving" for her husband.⁸

⁸ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 4, *The Pentateuch*, trans. James Martin (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 103. Their comments do not explicitly call this desire sexual, although they have been interpreted as implying this.

Over a century later⁹ a similar view was expressed by Irvin Busenitz in the *Grace Theological Journal*. Busenitz believes that *desire* includes sexuality but is not limited to it. The woman’s desire is to be with man, i.e., with her husband, even if it results in the pain of pregnancy and childbirth.

Even though the unity with man would bring woman to the threshold of death itself in the process of childbirth, yet woman would still possess a strong desire to be with man. The broken intimacy and the pain in childbearing would not be allowed to nullify the yearning of woman for man and the fulfillment of God’s command to populate the earth. . . .¹⁰

This interpretation, however, suffers from the same shortcoming as the first: it is not a universal principle. Neither can the natural “yearning of woman for man” be considered a curse. In a *good* world, the woman whom Adam declared to be “bone of my bones” and “flesh of my flesh” would indeed have a natural physical and psychological longing for her husband that would be satisfied by him alone. However, we live in a cursed world, not a utopia.

Desire as control

The third view ties the *desire* of 3:16b with *desire* in 4:7, the desire that sin had for Cain. As Foh and others have pointed out, “the Hebrew of these two verses is exactly the same, except for appropriate changes in person and gender.”¹¹ Their close proximity and their having the same author are strong arguments for a similarity in meaning. In most translations, however, these two verses are rendered differently.

Hebrew	3:16b	וְאֵל-אִשָּׁה תִּשְׁקָתָהּ וְהָיָא יִמְשָׁל-בָּהּ
	4:7	וְאֵלֶיהָ תִּשְׁקָתָהּ וְאָתָהּ תִּמְשָׁל-בּוֹ

⁹ Keil and Delitzsch’s *Commentary on the Old Testament* was originally published in German in 1866.

¹⁰ Irvin A. Busenitz, “Woman’s Desire for Man: Genesis 3:16 Reconsidered,” *Grace Theological Journal* 7, no. 2 (1986): 208. Busenitz differs from Delitzsch in that he considers Gen. 3:16 to be a statement of conditions rather than a direct punishment. “The ‘desire factor’ is not part of the judgment but an explanation of conditions and relationships as they will exist after the Fall” (208).

¹¹ Susan Foh, *Women & the Word of God* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 68.

NIV	3:16b	Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.
	4:7	It [sin] desires to have you, but you must master it.
NASB ¹²	3:16b	Yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.
	4:7	Its desire is for you, but you must master it.
NKJV ¹³	3:16b	Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.
	4:7	Its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.
NLB ¹⁴	3:16b	And though your desire will be for your husband, he will be your master. [Alternate reading: <i>And though you may desire to control your husband . . .</i>]
	4:7	Sin is waiting to attack and destroy you, and you must subdue it.

Table 2 Representative translations of Gen. 3:16b and 4:7b

Whereas the husband's rule is translated with English future tense, God's words to Cain are translated as a command: "You must master it [sin]." Foh believes 3:16 should be interpreted in the same way as 4:7: Adam must master his wife.

Sin's desire for Cain was one of possession or control. The desire was such that Cain should master it, wrestle with it and conquer it; it required an active struggle. . . . [In Gen. 3:16] there is a struggle . . . between the one who has the desire (wife) and the one who must / should rule or master (husband). . . . After the fall, the husband no longer rules easily; he must fight for his headship. The woman's desire is to control her husband . . . and he must master her, *if he can*.¹⁵ Sin has corrupted both the willing submission of the wife and the loving headship of the husband. And so, the rule of love founded in paradise is replaced by struggle, tyranny, domination, and manipulation.¹⁶

Stitzinger objects to this view, believing that it requires the supposed sinful control of the wife to match Eve's earlier attitude and action toward Adam, i.e., forcing him to eat the forbidden fruit. It makes God curse woman with the same tendency which caused her to fall, i.e., controlling her husband. It would appear, though, that Stitzinger has not caught Foh's meaning.

¹² *The New American Standard Bible* (Nashville: Holman, 1977).

¹³ *The Nelson Study Bible: The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997).

¹⁴ *The New Living Bible* (Tyndale, 1996).

¹⁵ Author's italics.

Foh does not assume an “original sin” of insubordination, which Stitzinger says is required to make her interpretation work.¹⁷ Her emphasis is on the sinful control that both husband and wife exhibit toward each other after the fall. Instead of living in the peaceful and cooperative relationship designed in the beginning, man and wife now must struggle to attain and maintain marital bliss.

Nevertheless, Foh’s interpretation does entail difficulties. Her statement that the husband *must master* his wife “if he can” in the same way that Cain was to master sin implies a challenge for the husband to do whatever is necessary to subject the wife to his will, even though Foh admits that such control is “tyranny, domination, and manipulation.” It has become a command from God, as though God were approving of such abuse. Furthermore, since it is spoken to Eve rather than Adam, it contains a further implication that Eve should rise to the challenge and use her sinful control to prevent her husband from gaining the upper hand.

Forcing 3:16b to conform to the same English tense as 4:7, however, is not necessary. The writer of Genesis used the imperfect (prefixed) form of *mashāl* (מָשַׁל) in both verses, but the Hebrew form does not require the same form in translation even when the two occurrences of the word point to the same root meaning.¹⁸

In spite of these latter difficulties, Foh has clarified *desire* in a way that solves the problems of the previous two views, making *desire* in 3:16 similar in meaning to its use in 4:7. It points to attempts at sinful control on the part of both man and woman, a universal reality that

¹⁶ Foh, 69.

¹⁷ Stitzinger also would like to see more consistency between *desire* in Genesis and *desire* in the Song of Solomon. “Cant 7:11,” he writes, “will not permit the meaning of a forcible desire.” This is true, but neither is it required. הַשִּׁיקָה does not need to have the same nuances throughout the Old Testament any more than נֶפֶשׁ, which has multiple possible translations, including life, soul, creature, person, appetite, and mind (*TWOT*, 1395a). A word’s meaning is determined by its context, and its translation should reflect the nuances necessitated by the context.

¹⁸ See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), section 31.

exists wherever sin is not diminished by the grace of God. Bruce Waltke, who independently arrived at an interpretation similar to Foh's, writes,

As a result of the Fall and God's judgment upon [the man and woman], the woman desires to rule her husband, and he seeks to dominate her (Genesis 3:16B). The solution to this tragic power struggle that divides the home is the new creation in Christ, in which the husband humbles himself and in love serves his wife, and the wife submits herself to him in faithful obedience in everything.¹⁹

Desire as wish

Sitzinger's alternative to the three views above is "the woman's longing or yearning that she may have about the affairs of life."²⁰ This would point to the everyday use of *desire*, i.e., any wish that might arise in a woman's heart. She is not independently free to fulfill her own desires but must submit them to her husband. Gen. 3:16b is then a reminder to Eve that even though she acted insubordinately in deciding to eat the forbidden fruit, she is still to be ruled by her husband. The original hierarchical pattern is not changed.

This is actually a widespread view among Christians: the wife's desires, whatever they may be, must be first submitted to the husband for his approval. There is less agreement on why this is so. Like Sitzinger, some believe Genesis 3 is reaffirming the original pattern. Others believe that original submission was intensified into subjection because of Eve's sin.

John Calvin held this position. After pointing out that God had given Adam an "inferior aid," referring to Eve's obligation always to "be at hand to render obedience to him," Calvin affirms God's justice in depriving woman of any liberty.

"Thy desire shall be unto thy husband," is of the same force as if he had said that she should not be free and at her own command, but subject to the authority of her husband and dependent upon his will; or as if he had said, 'Thou shalt desire nothing

¹⁹ Bruce Waltke, "The Role of Women in Worship in the Old Testament," adaptation of a lecture given in Regent Summer School, 1992 (Palo Alto: Discovery Pub, 1995), <www.ldolphin.or/waltke.html> 4 May 2002.

²⁰ Sitzinger, 42.

but what thy husband wishes.’ . . . Thus the woman, who had perversely exceeded her proper bounds, is forced back to her own position. She had, indeed, previously been subject to her husband, but that was a liberal and gentle subjection; now, however, she is cast into servitude.²¹

Fundamentalists in twentieth-century America heavily influenced not only their own congregations but also the evangelicals who have their roots in Fundamentalist doctrine. John R. Rice, acknowledged leader of the Fundamentalists until his death in 1980, said that a woman must ask her husband’s permission for anything she wants: “Wives must make their desires known to their husbands and the husbands are to rule over their wives.”²² Such a view implements the servitude encountered in Calvin.

Jack Hyles,²³ successor to Rice, in a series of five messages to a large women’s gathering referred exactly 15 times to the husband as being the “superior force” and repeatedly used *inferior* to refer to the wife.²⁴ In reaffirming the wife’s obligation to submit absolutely to her husband’s rule, that of the “superior force,” he downplays the New Testament teaching that a husband should love his wife as Christ has loved the church, saying, “It is a greater sin for the wife not to be submissive than for the husband not to love.”²⁵ This is an abuse of Scripture that is a ready recipe for a husband to abuse his wife and for wives to submit to ill-treatment. The doctrine prevails in many Christian homes in evangelical churches as well, even when it is not preached from their pulpits.²⁶

²¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 3:16, *The John Calvin Collection, Ages Digital Library* (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998). John Wesley also believed that woman was made inferior to man but only after the fall. She was originally created equal with man (*John Wesley Notes: Gen. 3:16*, <<http://4-11.org/books/genesis/gen05.html#2.4>>).

²² John R. Rice, *Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives and Women Preachers* (Wheaton: Sword of the Lord, 1941), 17.

²³ Jack Hyles was pastor of the First Baptist Church in Hammond, IN until his death in 2001. The church, the largest in the state, had a membership of 50,000 at the time of his death.

²⁴ Jack Hyles, “Woman the Completer,” 5 sermons given at a “Women’s Spectacular” Conference at the First Baptist Church of Hammond, IN. (Date not given.) <http://jackhyles.faithweb.com/woman.htm>, 8 November 2003.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ This is not mere conjecture. *Woman the Completer* by Jack Hyles was named specifically in the trial of Lucy Tisland, who was acquitted of murder after a Minnesota court learned the abuse she had suffered at the hands of her

Overly stressed authority

Many writings on Gen. 3:16b focus on the significance of authority. The connection between creation and authority is made evident in 1 Tim. 2:11-15, where Paul uses Genesis 1-3 to outline the appropriate roles for men and women in the Ephesian church. Adam was created first, and Eve was created to be his helper.

What was the nature of the authority given to the first man? The New Testament confirms that the husband's headship has existed since creation and not just since the fall. John Piper stresses more than this, though. He says that God also entrusted *moral* authority to Adam. The prohibition against eating from the tree was given to Adam before Eve was created. From this, Piper concludes that Adam was to take charge of moral issues for both him and Eve. "I think that Moses," says Piper, ". . . expects us to conclude that Adam is entrusted with the moral pattern of the garden and with the primary responsibility of sharing it with Eve and being accountable for it."

Having established Adam as the authoritative moral agent in the Garden, Piper claims that Satan approached Eve rather than Adam so that he could undermine the roles that God had instituted, enticing Eve to make an authoritative moral decision and to become the "spokesman" for the couple.²⁷

Wayne Grudem joins Piper in writing:

We think that Satan's main target was not Eve's peculiar gullibility (if she had one), but rather Adam's headship as the one ordained by God to be responsible for the life of the garden. Satan's subtlety is that he knew the created order God had ordained for the good of the family, and he deliberately defied it by ignoring the man and taking up his dealings with the woman. Satan put her in the position of spokesman, leader, and defender. At that moment both the man and the woman slipped from their

husband, a Baptist preacher. See James Alsdurf and Phyllis Alsdurf, *Battered into Submission: The Tragedy of Wife Abuse in the Christian Home* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 13-15.

²⁷ Ibid.

innocence and let themselves be drawn into a pattern of relating that to this day has proved destructive.²⁸

It is an illogical jump, however, to move from Adam's being the first to receive the prohibition to his receiving moral authority over his spouse. The weakness of Piper and Grudem's argument is evidenced by their conjectural statements regarding events in the Garden of Eden. When Piper says, "I think that Moses, as he writes, expects us to conclude that Adam is entrusted with the moral pattern of the garden," he has moved away from the text into a double speculation, first by filling in the silence regarding events in the Garden, and second by hypothesizing what Moses expects we are to conclude without any evidence from the text. He has then used that speculation to defend his views on authority and submission.

Piper evidently has anticipated such an objection, and so questions his listener: "Are we on track here or are we reading too much into Adam's being given the moral instruction?"²⁹ He concludes that he is "on track" because God calls Adam into account first.

And even though the woman had eaten the forbidden fruit first God came to Adam first, not Eve, to hold him accountable for the failure to live by the pattern He had given. . . . Why would God come to the man first, and call him to give and [*sic*] account instead of going to the woman first, especially since she ate the fruit first? The most natural answer is that God gave to the man a primary responsibility for the moral life of the garden and therefore man has a primary accountability for the failure to live by it. . . . [In] their relationship to each other God looks to the man and says, "Have you been the moral and spiritual leader you ought to have been?"³⁰

What has happened to *sola scriptura*? Nothing in Genesis justifies reading such an inference into the text. Piper has augmented the story and, in so doing, has produced an implied contradiction. According to the text, God's one and only prohibition was that Adam (and Eve) not eat of the tree. By making authority an issue, however, the first sin becomes Eve's usurping

²⁸ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, "An Overview of Central Concerns," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1989), 73. Raymond Ortlund's essay in the same book, "Male-Female Equality and Male Headship," builds on this view as well.

Adam's so-called moral authority, or Adam's failing to exert it, rather than overt disobedience to God's command.

God's rebuke to Adam does not bear this out. Gen. 3:17 has a two-pronged causal clause: "Because you listened (שָׁמַעְתָּ) to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you . . ." Hebrew *shāma'* (שָׁמַעְתָּ) means not only *to hear* but *to heed* and *to obey*. God is not rebuking Adam merely for having followed his wife's bidding. The first verb depends upon the second for the completion of the thought: ". . . and ate from the tree about which I commanded you." If Eve had suggested something else, Adam would not have sinned in doing what she asked. Eve was indeed the instrument by which Adam was tempted, but his sin was the same as hers: disobedience to God's command. She believed the serpent and disobeyed God. Adam heeded his wife and disobeyed God. The sin was to obey someone other than God, not to introduce a role reversal. Attributing unstated motives to Satan, assigning guilt to Adam for his supposed passiveness, and blaming Eve for usurping a presumed moral authority all belong in the genre of historical fiction. They do not form an adequate base for doctrine.

Popular author Larry Crabb³¹ has developed the theme of Adam's passivity into an entire book, *The Silence of Adam*. Emphasizing what Adam did *not* do, he writes:

If Adam was there [with Eve], he was not speaking. Chaos had entered his perfect world, and he stood dumbfounded in its confusion and darkness. The Scriptures record no instruction from God to Adam about what to say to the serpent. So Adam said nothing.³²

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²⁹ Piper, "Manhood and Womanhood before Sin."

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Theologians and Bible school students may be more inclined to read the works of theologians like Piper and Grudem. Churches, however, are more likely to read writers like Larry Crabb, using their books for Sunday school classes and Bible studies. In considering the effects of teaching, we must not only look at the doctrine that comes from the theologians but also from the popular authors who have been influenced by them and whose writings are more widely read by church members.

³² Larry Crabb, *The Silence of Adam: Becoming Men of Courage in a World of Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 91.

Adam was not only silent with the serpent, he was also silent with Eve. He never reminded her of God's word. He never called her to a larger vision. He did not join his wife in battling wits with the serpent. He passively listened to her speak, rather than speaking with her in mutual respect. . . .

Adam disobeyed by failing to speak with the serpent and with his wife. . . . And God punished Adam for his silence.³³

Crabb makes the same mistake as Grudem and Piper by drawing conclusions based on what is *not* written in the Genesis story. We have no way of knowing whether Adam and Eve deliberated with each other over their decision to eat what God had forbidden. The only thing that can be proven here is the silence of the text, not the silence of Adam.³⁴

Both our faith and our practice must be based on the truth of Scripture, not on myth. E. K. Simpson writes, "The divine dispensation of truth does not beget fable-spinning but faith. . . . By faith we stand, not by weaving webs of whimsical fancies."³⁵

Moral authority and abuse

Piper, Grudem and others who promote the "moral authority" position would be among the first to deny that the woman has no responsibility of her own before God. They also would fervently object to a husband's using his authority to run roughshod over his wife or to demand that she follow him into sin. Nevertheless, the position they espouse is, at its foundation, the same as that of the extremist who insists he represents God to his wife and therefore must be given total obedience, even if what he says contradicts God's moral laws. Both introduce a human being between woman and God, giving him authority not endorsed in Scripture. The difference in the two approaches is a matter of degree. The first says that the husband has the

³³ Ibid., 97.

³⁴ Crabb uses Adam's supposed passivity and the "chaos and darkness" created by the serpent's being present in the Garden to develop a psychological position that men retreat into silence as a *result* of chaos. "My silence [as a man] is a defense *against* chaos, not an entry *into* chaos. When we refuse to enter the chaos of our lives, we miss a grand opportunity" (98). This view, however, requires us to visit the curses of Genesis 3 upon a pre-fallen world. What God created as good remained good until sin took place. Chaos entered as a result of sin. It did not cause it.

primary responsibility for the spiritual well-being of his wife.³⁶ The second gives little if any spiritual choice to the wife because she must submit totally to her husband without argument.³⁷

In either case, the wife is steered away from making Jesus Christ the sole object of her spiritual devotion. It is not “God and God alone” but “God and my husband,” and in extreme cases, “My husband alone, because he represents God.”

The husband is to be a leader in his family, but the realm of his leadership has boundaries. His wife’s submission also has boundaries. The woman must humbly submit in order to fight the tendency to control her husband. Similarly, her husband must constantly be on guard lest he let his headship become a harsh, domineering, and even abusive rule that is *his* sinful tendency. Neither can allow the other to rule the conscience or in any other way play the role of the Holy Spirit. There is only one God, and no one can serve two masters (Lk. 6:24).

Insisting that moral authority is in the hands of the husband is to give him a tool that enables him to carry out his sinful tendency to dominate. Some become so proficient in wielding this tool that they batter their wives with the Bible, or worse, use their fists to force their will. Perceived authority is upheld at the expense of wisdom and humility.

The husband does not have moral authority over his wife. He does not have a right to grab the priestly position that belongs to Jesus Christ alone. He is to be the loving head of the wife and to act responsibly in the management of his family. He possesses the same rights and obligations of other Christians, including his wife, to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit and act accordingly, but he cannot *replace* the Holy Spirit’s role in speaking to the conscience.

³⁵ E. K. Simpson, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 28.

³⁶ John Piper, “A Vision of Biblical Complementarity,” *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds. (Wheaton: Crossway, 1989), 47.

³⁷ This is the position of many fundamentalists, including John R Rice, his daughter Elizabeth Rice Handford, and Jack Hyles, whose sermons and writings continue to affect the marriages of Christians in fundamentalist churches as well as others.

Overcoming the Curse

The historical interpretation of the curses in Genesis 3 has been exasperatingly inconsistent. Thorns and thistles, hard labor, and man's return to dust are accepted as curses against which we may fight. Man's invention of tools has made his labor less burdensome. The return to dust is delayed as long as possible through medicine and prayer, and in the end, through embalming and freezing. Man endeavors to offset the curse's worst aspects in order to make life on this imperfect planet more bearable and even enjoyable.

The same cannot be said of the curses to the woman. It has only been in modern history, for example, that the Church has looked favorably upon any attempts to alleviate the extreme pain of childbirth, instead sentencing women to experience the full measure of the punishment inherited from Eve.³⁸ In some western countries, physicians who tried to ease labor pains were attacked not only by their colleagues and educators but also by the clergy because "the use of anesthesia in labor [is] an attempt to contravene the decrees of Providence, hence reprehensible and heretical."³⁹

³⁸ ¶1609 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church reads, "In his mercy God has not forsaken sinful man. The punishments consequent upon sin, 'pain in childbearing' and toil 'in the sweat of your brow,' . . . also embody remedies that limit the damaging effects of sin. After the fall, marriage helps to overcome self-absorption, egoism, pursuit of one's own pleasure, and to open oneself to the other, to mutual aid and to self-giving." In analyzing the present Pope's teaching on God's intentions for patriarchy, G.C. Dilsver says, "The consequences of original sin have not traditionally been considered sinful in themselves, nor results of an inclination to sin, but rather as embodying 'remedies that limit the damaging effects of sin.' Nor did Christ do away with the effects of original sin, but rather made them the very means of man's sanctification (i.e. the redemptive nature of suffering, such as childbirth and manual labour)." G.C. Dilsaver, "Karol Wojtyla and the Patriarchal Hierarchy of the Family: His Exegetical Comment on Ephesians 5:21-33 and Genesis 3:16," *Christian Order* June-July 2002, <http://www.christianorder.com/features/features_2002/features_jun-july02_bonus_1.html#14f>, 11 November 2003.

³⁹ Bernard Seeman, *Man against Pain* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1962), 123. According to author Seeman, after the rise of Christianity and the fall of the Roman Empire, much of the knowledge of medicine as practiced by the Greeks and Romans was lost. The population of Europe tended to rely more on miracle cures and superstition. In the Renaissance, knowledge of anatomy and medicine was revived, but the Church was slow to endorse new methods to treat the sick. Church leaders were especially slow to agree to the use of painkillers because suffering was perceived to bring merit. Women in childbirth especially experienced the unreasonableness of this dogma because Gen. 3:16 was used to justify any alleviation of pain. An article in the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* in 1847

The last half of Gen. 3:16 has suffered from an even more glaring inconsistency. The traditional view would have God suddenly switching from a pronouncement of judgment to the issuing of beneficent commands: “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” Since the Word of God cannot be broken, the rule must be maintained, and therefore the Church, as a whole, has not looked favorably on a woman who is suffering under her husband’s harsh rule and would like to get some relief.

The overall context of Genesis 3 necessitates God’s pronouncements be interpreted as tragic consequences of sin. When sin corrupted the human heart, it set in motion a power struggle between husband and wife. In spite of the attraction a man and woman may have toward each other, sinful pride—in this age often disguised under the words *self-esteem*—results in each one’s trying to control the other. The man and woman’s differing capabilities, however, mean that each will use his or her own wiles to master the other. Since men are normally stronger physically, they are more likely to use force to accomplish their will, leading to abuse, whereas women are more likely to use subtle manipulation to take advantage of a man’s weakness.

The curse itself inspires man to turn Gen. 3:16 into a command and use it to justify abusive behavior. Even though the curse will not be finally destroyed until we live in the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 22:3), redemption in Christ has made it both possible and obligatory for us to fight the universal tendencies toward sinful control. Wayne House writes, “Man is to love as he leads, and woman is to submit herself to her husband. In Christ the creation intentions for male and female are restored.”⁴⁰ In Christ, both man and woman have the power to live selfless lives, demonstrating blessing rather than curse.

censured “those bold enough to administer the vapor of Ether” during surgery and especially during childbirth, “forgetting it has been ordered that ‘in sorrow shall she bring forth’” (ibid).

⁴⁰ Wayne House, “Paul, Women, and Contemporary Evangelical Feminism,” *BibSac* 136:541 (January 1979), 53.

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