

**Authority in Marriage**

I Corinthians 7:1-5

I was recently reading John McArthur's blog Grace to You and came across a comment with several questions that I found interesting. I did not see any attempt to answer the lady's questions, so I thought I would respond to her question through my online writings. The woman wrote:

"I am concerned about a marriage situation in which the husband is a ob/gyn doctor. He believes they should not use birth control and delivers all their children at home. She is exhausted with the load of the continual pregnancies and the little ones. He is not willing to allow her to have outside help in the home. She would like to be able to limit the pregnancies." He rules! She submits. How does this fit in with God's balance of the man loving the woman? What are her options in this type of marriage? How can she disagree and be biblically correct? Any insights on this? I would love to hear them."

McArthur, Piper and other conservative Bible scholars I admire are fond of referring to the husband's "authority" over his wife. There is only one place in the entire New Testament, however, where the word "authority" (exousia) is used in reference to the husband and wife--I **Corinthians 7:4**:

"The wife has not authority (exousia) over her own body, but the husband. In the same manner, the husband has not authority (exousia) over his body, but the wife."

Authority in the marriage seems to be mutual between husband and wife. Paul goes on to affirm mutual authority by saying in the next verse that the sexual union in marriage is an act requiring "mutual consent" or agreement. The Greek word is "symphonou" from which we get our English word "symphony." In an orchestra there is harmony in the symphony when all instruments are played at the right time and the right place with mutual understanding and agreement. There is a discordant and disharmonious symphony if even one instrument strikes out on its own against the wishes of the rest.

So it is in marriage. The Bible is quite clear in its answer to the lady's questions above.

1. There is no sexual union unless both the husband and wife agree.
2. Multiple childbirths requires mutual consent, not the demands of one.
3. Disagreement in marriage is not only biblical, it is expected, thus I Corinthians 7.
4. The loving spouse will honor the wishes of the spouse and wait for mutual consent.
5. Authority and submission, according to the sacred text, is mutual in the husband and wife relationship.

It is ironic to me that many inerrantists seem to want the sacred text to say that which it doesn't. It's time we actually believed the Bible and obeyed it. Authority in marriage should bring unity!

One of the words that is often heard in our evangelical, conservative circles is the English word "authority." Christians are told they must be under the covering of their authority, wives are to be submissive to the authority of their husbands, churches are to obey the authority of their elders, etc...

Without doubt, believers are under the headship of Christ as their authority, but is the standard, conservative teaching of male authority over females, or a husband's authority over his wife biblical?

Most evangelical conservatives claim the husband "has the authority" and the wife is to submit to it. But again, is that biblical?

The often quoted book complementarian book *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood* (1991), devotes entire chapters to passages like Ephesians 5:21-33, 1 Corinthians 11:3-16, Colossians 3:18-18, and 1 Peter 3:1-7. But the ONLY text in the Bible that uses the word "authority" in the context of marriage, 1 Corinthians 7:1-5, is given no consideration.

Likewise, in John Piper's book *What's the Difference? Manhood and Womanhood Defined by the Bible* (2001) there are two lists of verses dealing with marriage provided, but 1 Corinthians 7:1-5 is not even included (see pages 21,66). Jon Zens, the author who pointed out to me the above facts, has also written me an email with some interesting insight into 1 Corinthians 7:1-5 and the Bible's use of the word "authority" (Gr. *exousia*) in connection to marriage.

His conclusions, based on the sacred text itself, may surprise you, but if you truly cherish the teaching of the Bible over man's opinions, they may also change the way you teach on the subject of "authority" within marriage.

"First, 1 Cor.7:1-5 is the only place in the NT where the word "authority" (Greek, *exousia*) is used with reference to marriage. But it is not the authority of the husband over the wife, or vice versa, that is in view, but rather a mutual authority over each other's body. 1 Corinthians 7:4 states that the wife has authority over her husband's body. One would think that this would be a hard pill to swallow for those who see "authority" as resting only in the husband's headship.

Second, Paul states that a couple cannot separate from one another physically unless there is mutual consent (Greek, *symphonou*). Both parties must agree to the separation or it doesn't happen. The husband cannot override the wife's differing viewpoint."

John Piper suggests that "mature masculinity accepts the burden of the final say in disagreements between husband and wife, but does not presume to use it in every instance" (p.32). The problem with a dogmatic statement like this is that it will allow for no exceptions. But 1 Corinthians 7:5 contradicts Piper's maxim. If the wife disagrees with a physical separation, the husband cannot overrule his wife with the "final choice" (p.33). Such separation can occur only if both husband and wife are in "symphony" (unity) about such an action. **Now if mutual consent applies in an important issue like physical separation from one another for a period of time, wouldn't it seem proper that coming to one-mindedness would be the broad model for decision-making in a healthy marriage?** Piper feels that "in a good marriage decision-making is focused on the husband but is not unilateral" (p.32).

In light of 1 Corinthians 7:1-5 I would suggest that decision-making should focus on finding the Lord's mind together. Over the years the good ideas, solutions to problems and answers to dilemmas will flow from both husband and the wife as they seek the Lord as a couple for "symphony."

1 Corinthians 7:5 throws a wrench into the works for those who would include the husband's "final say" in male headship. Paul teaches that unless the couple can agree on a course of action, it cannot be executed.

I suggest that this revelation invites us to re-examine what the husband's headship really entails (cf. see Gordon D. Fee, "1 Corinthians 7:1-7 Revisited," *Paul & the Corinthians: Studies On A Community in Conflict*, Trevor J. Burke/J. Keith Elliott, eds., Brill, 2003, pp.197-213).