

Woman

An Honored Vessel

Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.
(1 Peter 3:7)

No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.
(1 Cor. 12:22-25)



Introduction

This was written 15 years ago when I had occasion to ask the Lord to open up to me a clearer vision of my own place as a woman, so that I might have confidence that I was truly walking with Him in obedience to His desire and plan for me. I spent months combing the scriptures for every reference concerning women (and many others), praying for understanding, and I saw them come together into a full and rich picture that fully satisfied my own heart.

I realize that many women (and men) may not be able to relate to all that is shared here, having been raised (as was I) in a world greatly disfigured by the accumulated effects of sin. You may have some emotional reactions at first. But please bear in mind that this was for me a “vision,” for “without a vision the people perish.” Now, 15 years later, I am willing to share this vision with others, for I have had the great privilege of being able to walk in it and taste the good fruits in my own life.

My prayer is that others might find light and encouragement from the Lord by reading what He opened to me in my search, regardless of whether they end up agreeing with every point. May Jesus, with all His love and marvelous grace, be real to you as you read.

– An “older woman”
who wants Jesus to have all glory!

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God's Purpose

"...But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him. And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said:

*'This is now bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called Woman,
Because she was taken out of Man.'*

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:20a-24).

"... 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh,' So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:5-6).

Woman: specially designed by the hand of God from a part of man, given back to the man by the hand of God as a "helper comparable to him" to be joined together again by God himself, never to be separated—how much more special and honored could one be!

It was a beautiful beginning to a perfect relationship, but the very first thing to come under attack by the enemy of God, and probably the greatest target he has concentrated upon since. Should we wonder at the great confusion and conflict that centers upon women and their place in the world and in the church? Yet the Bible unveils God's positive direction to any who come to find out how to experience this perfect relationship, and how to walk in the total fulfillment God planned to give to man and woman alike.

God's purpose from the beginning was that man and woman be one, not two. We tend to relate this only to marriage, where it does, of course, find its fullest expression. But the words of Jesus, "Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" could apply much more deeply than to any one individual union. Although the primary truth is that no man can separate a man and wife, can it not also have a broader application—to the relationship of man to woman, specifically in their oneness as heirs together of the grace of life? (Galatians 3:28 and I Peter 3:7)

I Corinthians 11:11 in the Amplified Bible reads, *"Nevertheless, in [the plan of] the Lord and from His point of view woman is not apart from and independent of man, nor is man aloof from and independent of woman..."* We see that God has established a relationship of unity, not competition. When you are one, there is no question about being "equal"—no reason to compare or compete! If we keep this in mind, we can consider specific directions given to women within the context of the family and the church without feeling there is any threat to our "equality." Instead we will see a recognition and an honoring of our *uniqueness*.

The Uniqueness of Woman

"So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27). In the same sentence we see the unity and the diversity of "man" or "mankind." "Him" in the next phrase becomes "them" and the combination is what in unity represents "the image of God." Man was formed of the dust of the ground, and the breath of life was breathed directly into his nostrils by the Lord God himself. But woman's design was more unique, "taken out of man" to complete his lack of "a helper comparable to him." God took Adam's rib and "custom-designed" her from it, then brought her to the man who recognized her as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"—a part of his own body (see Ephesians 5:28-29).

There is great significance in God's use of Adam's rib, rather than another part of his body. The rib is closest to his heart, the organ by which we symbolize our emotions and the greatest of human attributes, love. It is encircled and protected by his arms, which are used to nourish and to cherish (Ephesians 5:29). God did not

choose Adam's head, nor did He choose his feet. Woman is not meant to be the head (in authority over man), but close to his side, encircled in his arms of protection and affection, beside him and in union with him, the two seen by God as one.

I Corinthians 11 states that God is the head of Christ, who is the head of man, who is the head of woman. This is the *order* in which authority flows (authority does not imply inferiority/superiority). Verse 7 says man is the glory of God and woman is the glory of man. A woman's glory is her long hair (verse 15). This is why I believe a woman covers her glory with a "symbol of authority" when the church gathers, so that only God's glory is seen, not man's. All of this makes no sense to the world around us, but the angels who observe us recognize its significance. Long ago in the heavenly kingdom, Lucifer disdained his appointed high place, wanting rather to be "as God," and was therefore cast out of heaven (Isaiah 14:12-14). So when a woman wears the outward symbol of her inward heart submission to the order that God established for her, her act brings a rebuke to the fallen angels who joined Lucifer, and encourages the angels who retained their place of submission. We will look more at this topic in the third chapter.

"But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" (I Corinthians 11:3). God's order and call to the woman is to submission. Why does that word offend so many? "Women's lib" has been around for a long time—ever since the beginning, when Eve moved out from her place of protection and made her own choice. So, is submission a negative thing? Is woman indeed a captive to be set free, as proponents of feminism might assert? I see an entirely different model set by our Lord and Savior, who took the ultimate place of submission, described in Philippians 2:5-11: *"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* Our mighty Creator took the humble place of a babe, lived as an ordinary man, and ultimately died a shameful death on the cross. Do we look down on Him? Does God? No! *"Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow..."* Would a woman's calling and reward not be of a similar nature? I believe it is.

Heirs Together and Submission

"For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus....There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26, 28).

"Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered" (I Peter 3:7). "Equality" and "submission" are not antonyms, not opposites, but different aspects of a single unity of purpose. Jesus was equal with God, yet He voluntarily took a place of submission and complete obedience to the will of His Father. In I Corinthians 12 we read, *"For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ"* (v. 12). *"Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually"* (v. 27). In a body you see differences of form and function among the various parts, but unity in the symmetry of the whole. There is order, purpose, and cooperation in every individual part, and the "control center" that directs and holds it all together is the head. If this were not so, the resulting chaos and disorder would prevent the body from accomplishing anything necessary or useful. We see in this chapter that each one has a certain place for full functioning of the body. No part can be considered "unequal," for each is part of the whole. So it is in the relationship between male and female.

As we consider the concept of submission, then, let us not confuse submission with inferiority. Was Jesus less than God? When He voluntarily humbled Himself in submission and obedience to His Father, did that lower Him? On the contrary, this act lifts Him higher in our affection and adoration than any other being! And *"therefore God also has highly exalted Him..."*! In a similar way, as a joint heir with man, woman has the privilege of voluntarily submitting to him as her head—for the same reason

that Jesus did: it was His Father's will. The result is that she is brought into a place of great honor, a place of being nourished and cherished (Ephesians 5:29, I Peter 3:7).

The basic key to a right perspective toward submission is union, as we have already established. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have been one for all eternity, and their relationship will never be broken. Separation is what we see around us: man separated from God, woman separated from man, master separated from servant. Each is looking for what he can have for himself; individuality and independence are the guiding principles. This has been true since before Eden, when Lucifer set his own goal! Again, our Lord lived His life and relationship with His Father before us to show us God's purpose: "...*the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner, For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things that He Himself does...*" (John 5:19-20). The Father loves the Son and shows Him what He does. Jesus submitted and would not move in any way apart from that union (see John 17:20-23).

Jesus in turn loves us, the church, and shows us what He is doing: "*You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you*" (John 15:14-15). This is fulfilled in our union with Jesus by the Holy Spirit: "*However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth...He will take of Mine and declare it to you*" (John 16:13-15). We are one with Christ by the Spirit He places within us, and should never move apart from that union.

It is the same with the relationship between husband and wife. The husband "loves his wife and shows her what he is doing," and she responds and moves in submission and union with him. There is no place for the concept that the husband is "boss" and the wife an uninformed "servant." This would be separation, which is what the world twists and distorts submission to mean. The Bible does not anywhere make a place for independence and self-interest in this relationship. Submission is active and very positive.

We can recognize the wisdom in God's order as we consider how we are made. Let's begin with Eve. I Timothy 2:14 tells us that Adam was not deceived (he knew what he was doing and why), "*but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.*" Read Genesis 3 for the whole story. Notice how cleverly the serpent insinuated to Eve that God was trying to keep something good from them, but he left a place for Eve to rightly correct him—and add a little more to what God said besides (do we women like to correct others and put them straight?). He went on to put doubts in her mind about God's character and motives (Satan always starts here), so she looked at the tree, thought about it, and ate. We could wonder what Adam was doing at the time and why she did not consult him, or what might have been different had she done so. But she ate, and "*also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.*" It is difficult to imagine Adam taking the fruit first at the suggestion of the serpent (we are not told that the serpent approached Adam at all, but we know that Adam was not deceived), but it is also difficult to picture him refusing it from the hand of his wife. Many subtle things were happening throughout this narrative that can also be seen working in and between men and women today.

Having laid the foundation of woman's significance and position, let's look more specifically at the scriptures which address her role and relationships in the home, the church, and the world around her. From this point I will use the term "sister" in many places, which in biblical terms indicates one who has been born into the family of God by the Holy Spirit. But let us first consider some questions that may have come to mind during the previous discussion.

Unmarried Women

In many passages about women, wives are addressed specifically, or the application seems to be more to married women. An unmarried sister can sometimes read these passages and assume they do not apply to her; therefore, she may not give them careful consideration.

The sister who is not married is as much a part of the church as the married sister, for her connection is based upon her relationship to Jesus, not to a husband. (The same is true for married sisters, of

course.) Although many of the admonitions to women are given in the context of the marriage relationship, they are also directly related to our relationship to the body of Christ, as Ephesians 5:22-33 points out. So the unmarried sister should not excuse herself from basic principles given to women regarding their attitude and conduct. In many instances she may apply these principles toward leaders in the church, parents, or brothers in Christ as they function in the church, and those in authority over her outside the church, as in work situations. The Holy Spirit will work godly attributes deep in the inner person of a godly woman, and she will manifest them in every situation without even being aware of it. These qualities express the life of Jesus in her to the world around.

Let's take a principle from Matthew 24:45-47, where it is said of the faithful and wise servant who will be qualified to rule: "*Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing...*" The young woman who hopes to marry will not be suddenly transformed into a godly woman and wife on her wedding day. In fact, a wise and godly man considering a possible wife will look to see whether the qualities he desires are already being manifested in her life and expression. A woman should respond to the Lord because she sees His desire and will for her as a godly woman, whether she marries or not. "As unto the Lord" is the basis for her obedience even when she is married, not "as unto her husband."

Of course, there are some who will never marry. The Bible gives very positive encouragement to these. Paul concludes for a number of excellent reasons that it is actually better not to marry, for then you are free of the care of husband and family that take so much time and attention, and able to be more concerned for the things that belong to the Lord (I Corinthians 7:25-40). He does not say that a married woman cannot care for the things of the Lord, but rather that she will have many things to attend to which the single sister does not. Any married woman with the responsibilities of a family can assure the single women that this is so—which does not mean, as Paul affirms, that it is unspiritual to marry.

One possible reason that some sisters do not marry is that they have not wholeheartedly received and responded to the admonitions we are about to consider. If there is rebellion against these, conscious or unconscious, it may be manifest in her life in such a way that the kind of godly man she desires is not attracted to her. This is a grievous place to be, for the rebellion can turn into bitterness that might ultimately destroy her relationship with God as well (Hebrews 12:15). But there are many reasons for not marrying, and it should never be assumed that a woman is somehow unfit for marriage just because she is unmarried. Many who do get married are not prepared for it!

The sister who has been divorced or has lost her husband is not left out, either. As she experiences more reality in her life in responding to the Lord as a godly woman, perhaps regrets will come to her over failures in the past that she cannot remedy at this point, but the grace of God is always available to lift her up into an ever-increasing relationship with Himself that will continue on into eternity, when Jesus will wipe away every tear. Yet I believe she also can find complete fulfillment—in her place as a woman, precious in the sight of God—as she walks in the light the Holy Spirit is giving her today.

Those of us who have daughters should be mindful to train them in these matters from their birth, for the Lord desires us to experience them from an early age. Ultimately each must respond in personal faith to the Lord, but until that time we are responsible to train them up in the way they should go, molding them as much as we are able into vessels that are prepared for the filling of the Holy Spirit. If we do, they will be ready to easily respond to His working within their hearts. How wonderful it is when the Lord does not have to undo many things in a wayward life as He begins to complete His work of grace.

The Man's Part

It would be good at this point to turn our focus and consider the man, and how God reveals that he should function in this relationship of oneness with the woman.¹ It is possible for fear and mistrust to enter in when a woman considers the words “head,” “submit,” “obey,” etc., if she or the man does not perceive the corresponding requirements of him in the relationship. Again, even the unmarried man should be cultivating the attitudes in his relationship to women which he must have if he should marry. The same principles apply to him as to married men, especially within the church.

Returning to Genesis 2:23, we see that the very first thing Adam did was to recognize that the woman was part of himself: *“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...”* Ephesians 5:28-29 fills out the rest of this picture: *“So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.”* Notice the command to *love...as the Lord does the church*. Jesus again gives us the purest example to follow—what He Himself has already done: *“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish”* (vs. 25-27).

Notice in rereading the verses above that Christ did not expect the church to come to Him already clean and pure and finished; He did not put the burden upon her to be as she should be, but took full responsibility to give Himself for her in order to bring about this marvelous reality in her. I believe if every husband saw his own responsibility and “laid down his life” for her, every wife would rejoice wholeheartedly to discover each new way to respond to her husband with submission—just as every believer will do in his or her relationship with Jesus. The more we see of His unfathomable love and complete giving of Himself for us, the more joy and satisfaction we find in returning the same to Him.

In the Amplified Bible, I Peter 3:7 addresses husbands (after wives are told how to submit properly): *“In the same way you married men should live considerately with [your wives], with an intelligent recognition [of the marriage relation], honoring the woman as [physically] the weaker, but [realizing that you] are joint heirs of the grace (God’s unmerited favor) of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered and cut off. [Otherwise you cannot pray effectively.]”* It is clear that an improper understanding and wrong ways of working with his wife will hinder a man’s own spiritual experience. God may not listen to his prayers! In other places, we are told that many of the qualifications of an elder relate to his relationship with his wife and family. We can easily see why this is so, for who can rightly respect an elder who does not treat his wife properly; will he treat the church any differently?

The key for the man is the same as for the woman: see your relationship as *one*, not *two*. When we are one with Jesus, we will reflect Him to the world around us because He is working within our lives by His Spirit. In a similar way, a wife reflects all that her husband is; and how he reveals himself through her is his responsibility. Jesus is continuing to cleanse and sanctify us (set us apart for Himself) by the “washing of water by the word” (the word He is speaking to our hearts). Sometimes it takes some hard scrubbing to wash out the spots and some hot pressing to get out the wrinkles, but He is willing to make all the effort so that in the end, He may present Himself with a “glorious” church. A husband who lays down his life to nourish and cherish his wife will also receive a great reward.

“An excellent wife is the crown of her husband...” “He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord.” “...But a prudent wife is from the Lord” (Proverbs 12:4, 18:22, 19:14).

¹ Please note: The purpose of this section is to disarm the impression any woman might have that the entire responsibility is upon her, without regard to what the man is or does. We should be aware of the equal—or actually greater—responsibilities God has given to the man. Remembering that this is a comprehensive vision of the whole picture that I am sharing with women, I trust that it will be understood that this is not intended to be “teaching men.”

Marriage

Marriage is God's idea, not man's. It is not merely a human custom; it is the first ordinance of God, and it is good. The complete story of creation in chapter one of Genesis concludes: *"And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good (suitable, pleasant) and He approved it completely. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day"* (Genesis 1:31, Amplified). We have already seen that woman was formed from a part of man rather than separately from the dust of the earth, as Adam was. Adam recognized her as part of himself (Genesis 2:23) and called her *"Woman, because she was taken out of Man."* Genesis 2:24 tells us God's purpose: *"that they shall become one flesh."* In Ephesians 5:32 we see that this union has deeper meaning: *"This mystery is very great, but I speak concerning (the relation of) Christ and the church."*²

Marriage is the most intimate, profound, and foundational of all human relationships. Romans 7:1-3 tells us that God's law binds a marriage until it is broken by death, and that if one remarries while one's original spouse is living, it is adultery. In Luke 16:18, Jesus says, *"Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery."* Again, in Mark 10:11-12, *"So He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.'"* These are simple, clear statements of our Lord, which must be considered by every believer in honesty and purity of motive before Him alone. We must see the great significance God gives to marriage, for He chose it to illustrate His relationship with us.

The Old Testament frequently pictures the relationship between God and Israel in the terms of a marriage in which He was continually grieved by her tendencies to unfaithfulness. In the last Old Testament book, Malachi (2:13-16), God tells them that one of the reasons He does not respond to their tears and offerings is that they have dealt treacherously with their wives, and *"the Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence."* In the New Testament, the church is portrayed as "the bride of Christ" (Ephesians 5:22-33, II Corinthians 11:2, etc.), beautifully and carefully prepared by Him for culmination in the glorious "marriage supper of the Lamb" in Revelation 19:7-9 and the rest of eternity as the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2, 9-11, etc.).

When men disregard the fact that marriage was created by God, they distort and misuse it for their own purposes, and we see how far it has been brought down in our world today from what God intended. But when we return to the Lord and seek His will and His way in our lives, we can begin to experience precious realities of expression within marriage that beautifully illustrate His relationship with His bride, the church. All of eternity may be needed to demonstrate this profound correlation, but our earthly marriage, with Christ at the center, should be a foretaste of what is ahead for those who are His own.

A good marriage is based upon giving, which is how godly love is expressed, "God so loved...that He gave..." Husbands are told to love their wives, "just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it," and loving cannot be separated from giving. Lust, in contrast, is based on "getting something for me." If a marriage is begun on that basis it is destined for destruction. Unless there is a true care for one another that goes far deeper than physical attraction and gratification, there is no foundation on which to build when testing and trials come, or dissatisfaction and boredom begin. When a relationship is based upon true love and giving, inevitably there will also be receiving, whereas lust will in the end cause all that was desired to be defiled and lost.

2 I realize that some readers might be in the difficult place of a dysfunctional or broken marriage, whose hearts may be deeply grieved. Jesus, more than any other, knows your heartbreak and pain, your every tear. I pray that you will sense His presence lifting you to see the higher vision that is open to all who are part of His bride, with no exceptions. May His comforting Spirit empower you to "live above" in your daily walk with Him. Let me also clarify that the relevance of this section is not limited to those who are married. A single woman (or man) is not a "second-class citizen" in the kingdom of God, for neither Paul nor Jesus was married! Being unmarried does not disqualify one from the greater application Paul gives to marriage: "I speak concerning Christ and the church."

Total giving is a requirement for the true oneness that God intended in marriage. At the beginning, each must desire to give all to the other, but what depth and riches come with time and shared experience! In this respect, marriage is again a picture of our relationship with Jesus. There must be a beginning in our union with Him, but as we move on, a precious process of further unveiling and responding continues, until He takes us into the eternal reality and fullness of being face to face with Him. If at any point we begin to “hold back” in either relationship, it hinders and spoils the joy of union until the hindrance is cleared away. Jesus gave all to receive us; we must give all to receive Him. Only with time can we begin to comprehend and experience what is meant by “all.”

This total commitment brings great joy to both, as well as great privilege and great responsibility. Paul points out, *“The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does”* (I Corinthians 7:4). There is no place for self-gratification or the attitude of “What’s in it for me?” It is a relationship of absolute giving up of oneself and one’s “rights” to the other, which with time becomes an ever fuller experience of oneness and deep fellowship. This is what God had in mind from the beginning.

Submission

“To the woman He said: ‘...Your desire shall be for (toward) your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16).

Wives are told to *“submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.”* Then follows *“Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything”* (Ephesians 5:22, 24). The church’s love for Christ is revealed as it does His will, for love is intrinsically related to obedience (read John and I John, where we are told that if we love Him, we will keep His commandments). Likewise, a woman’s love is revealed as she does her husband’s will.

Love comes from the inner nature of the one who loves; it is not an emotion that comes and goes. Truly doing the will of another requires a deep work within the heart; it is not a surface matter! Only the Holy Spirit can explore the deepest inner motives that are involved in this process. Being able to do the will of another comes by confidence in who the other person is. We are secure in doing Christ’s will because we know who He is and what He has done for us. A wife is secure in doing her husband’s will partly because of who he is, but more because she is obeying the will of God, and doing it “as unto the Lord.” Many times we think we are submissive and obedient, for we mentally agree, but as we look deeply within we may realize (and our actions will reveal) whether we have truly taken on our husband’s will as our own. As we do so, we will experience the fruits of that oneness.

In Proverbs 31:11 we are told of the virtuous wife, *“The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain.”* Doing the will of another with our whole heart, with no reservations, brings about a trust within the relationship which brings great privilege (as we will see in reading more of this much-praised woman). On the other hand, mistrust and suspicion will lurk wherever a wife seeks to do her own will rather than that of her husband. This is true in other relationships as well, where there is resistance to authority within the heart. Beware of bringing your own judgment or interpretation into matters: “obeying...my way.”

We might gain more understanding of how to be subject to our husbands if we consider some ways in which the church is—or should be—subject to Christ. We can also see some of the results when the wife, or the church, is not “subject...in everything.” First, the church should receive its direction from Christ, not come up with its own ideas and plans for how to serve Him. When we are in union with Him, we will know His voice and learn to recognize His direction; He wants us to obey His commandments, so He will show us what they are. Much confusion and disappointment comes when the church comes up with its own ideas and brings them to Christ for His “blessing” on things He has never told them to do. Secondly, the church can expect His provision when it is obeying His direction. One reason so many find themselves “begging” is that they have made their own plans and thus are responsible to find their own support. Thirdly, the church will find complete satisfaction in sensing that it is pleas-

ing to the Lord in response to His direction. There is no need for outward signs of “success” that we often see put forth to show that God is “blessing.” It is enough to receive His approval.

Ideally, a wife should in a similar way receive direction from her husband, know his provision, and know the blessing of bringing him joy by her response within their union. Keep in mind that a wife is one with her husband, and his direction should be for the good of the whole, in the same way all that Christ directs the church to do is for the perfect good of the church in union with Himself. We can understand that Christ has supreme wisdom and knowledge of all things, so we readily see that He is capable of guiding His church. But sometimes in our finite thinking, we question the capability of every husband to lead his wife with pure motives for the good of both. Therefore, a wife might feel she must hold onto her right to think independently for her own protection, guarding against the failures and shortcomings of her husband. This thinking will destroy the prospect of two ever becoming one, for it puts a division at the core of their relationship. We can fall into the trap of thinking that our situation is unique and therefore God’s order in the marriage does not apply. It is probably true that every situation is unique, but Jesus is personal and knows our situation. If we come to Him in faith, He is faithful to show us what to do so that we will be protected and Jesus will be glorified.

What happens when the wife insists upon “her way” either openly or in the very subtle ways that come to us so easily? She might gain what she thinks she wants, but she will lose what she truly desires for her marriage, total union with her husband. There cannot be two wills that only compromise for the sake of peace but hold onto their own right of independence. Jesus tells us to ask what we will, to ask anything in His name, and He will do it. How can this be? May we think of anything we desire and get it? No, there is a deeper principle revealed in Jesus’ own life and relationship with His Father. He did only His Father’s will, and nothing more, for His Father’s will was His will. We, in turn, come into a relationship of such oneness with Him that our desire is His desire and all our “asking” is in harmony with His will. That we would wish something apart from Him and His will is inconceivable within the precious relationship we have entered into. As wives, our relationship can become this way with our husbands, and our relationship with him will be a reflection of our relationship with Christ.

God ordained a husband to be the leader in marriage and his wife to be the “responder” to his leadership. Each part is crucial for the whole to function in a way that is satisfying to both. If a husband tries to lead and his wife does not respond, either he might give up and be passive or uncaring, or he might proceed to dominate (or attempt to). Neither reaction will satisfy wife or husband, and the relationship will deteriorate if it continues. A wife should never underestimate the significance of her response to her husband in any area, from the intimacies of marriage to the everyday responsibilities of life. She must not be passive or oblivious to her husband’s suggestions (spoken or unspoken), nor rebellious and uncooperative, for either response will hinder their unity. Again, this relationship has so many comparisons with our relationship with Jesus. He leads us so gently, with that “still small voice,” and it can be so easy to ignore His promptings and just go our own way either purposely or unthinkingly, missing what He wants to do in our lives.

“Likewise you wives, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear, Do not let your beauty be that outward adorning of arranging the hair, of wearing gold, or of putting on fine apparel; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God, For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror” (I Peter 3:1-6).

Here is some very clear and searching direction for all wives, with a very specific application for the wife whose husband does not “obey the word.” It is often assumed that this refers to an unbelieving husband, who is certainly included, but this description has a much broader application to *any* husband who is not fully walking in what God intends for him as a husband or elsewhere in his spiritual life.

What is the first natural inclination for a wife who sees any area in which her husband is not doing right? To tell him so? There are times and situations in which this is truly her responsibility, at the right time and in the right place, in a submissive manner, in love, and in private. The Holy Spirit can guide the godly wife in these situations, and He will guide her when she resists her first impulse and waits for His permission to speak (if it is given). But in all matters, especially spiritual, a wife must learn the full significance of this directive: "...they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives..." Verse 2 enlarges upon this, and the wording in the Amplified Bible is very enlightening:

"In like manner, you married women, be submissive to your own husbands [subordinate yourselves as being secondary to and dependent on them, and adapt yourselves to them], so that even if any do not obey the Word [of God], they may be won over not by discussion but by the [godly] lives of their wives,

"When they observe the pure and modest way in which you conduct yourselves, together with your reverence [for your husband; you are to feel for him all that reverence includes: to respect, defer to, revere him—to honor, esteem, appreciate, prize, and, in the human sense, to adore him, that is, to admire, praise, be devoted to, deeply love, and enjoy your husband]" (1 Peter 3:1-2, Amplified Version).

It will take years of pondering and practicing to even begin to probe the depths of meaning expressed in this passage—and this is what marriage is all about! The wedding day is wonderful, but it is only the beginning of a lifelong relationship that should be growing deeper, fuller, richer, beyond what could even be imagined on that first day. In just the same way, our relationship with God has only begun the moment we are born of His Spirit, and all eternity will be given to plumb the depths of His unsearchable riches (Ephesians 3:14-21)!

What should the wife do who recognizes that her husband does not "obey the word" in some way? As noted above, this verse does not tell the wife that she should never speak the truth to her husband. At the appropriate times, in the right way, she should communicate to her husband on any area she senses God would have her share with him. But if he does not receive from her, she must be very careful to obey fully in order to "win" her husband to his own obedience to God. She should not nag, argue, or criticize (verbally or in her own mind). What happens if she does, in words or by her attitude? A normal husband will react either openly or subtly, by resisting her at every point. He will sense her disapproval, division will come into the relationship, and he will become defensive and possibly closed to her help, even though she might be completely right in the matter. When things go wrong, he will tend to blame her rather than face his own responsibility, essentially seeing *her* as the problem.

Reverence

It is particularly important for a wife always to honor her husband and speak well of him before others. Sometimes a wife will tell others the faults and shortcomings of her husband, perhaps to demonstrate that she knows better or does better. She may sometimes need godly counsel, and to share candidly with another person for her own spiritual encouragement and help, but her motives must be pure in doing so. Before most people she must let love "cover a multitude of sins," give her husband the esteem he should have just because he is her husband, and thereby identify herself as one with him, whether he "deserves" it or not. Does not Jesus do this with us?

Why do we love Jesus? Because we are perfect and love flows from us naturally? No, it is because He loved us first—while we were unlovely, still sinners. His unconditional love toward us is what drew us to Him in repentance and gave us the desire to be filled with His Spirit. Then it is the continual unfolding of His love toward us that completes the deep work of changing us within until we become "conformed to His image." In a similar way, the wife who allows Jesus' love to flow into and through her toward her husband, whether he seems to deserve it or not, gives him the opportunity to respond to God, and to her, in an entirely different manner than if she looks at his shortcomings and responds to those.

If a wife, from her heart, will obey the injunction to first submit (a heart attitude), then conduct herself in a “pure and modest way,” and reverence her husband simply because he is her husband, then she will not stand in the way. God will be able to deal directly with her husband, and she in turn will be able to trust God to protect and care for her, no matter what the outcome.

Sarah is given as our example for this type of situation. Many women have balked at obeying the commands in these verses because of the fear that they might have to do something sinful or wrong in their obedience. If that were the case, there might be a place to refuse to obey while keeping a submissive attitude, but consider Sarah’s situation first. She certainly had a fine, godly husband, but he was not presented as a man without faults (the Bible doesn’t hide faults!). He even did the same wrong thing twice! In Genesis 12:10-20 and in Genesis 20 (just before Sarah conceived Isaac), we see that Abraham did not seem to trust God fully to protect him (although he had experienced God’s power before), so he resorted to a half-truth to protect himself from being killed by heathen leaders who might want Sarah for her great beauty. Sarah must have been a remarkable woman, for she was close to ninety years old and still appealed to other men!

What would we have done in Sarah’s place? Had a big argument with Abraham and chastised him thoroughly for his lack of faith? Told someone else, so they could help us? Put on a stubborn pout and started a “cold war”? Told Pharaoh or Abimelech about Abraham’s subterfuge and pleaded mercy, or warned them that God would judge them if they touched her? It is remarkable that we don’t read of Sarah’s speaking one word to anyone; she simply obeyed, in both cases. Sarah may have lived in another era, but being taken into the harem of a heathen king is a serious thing in any age. Only one thing made the difference: “BUT GOD...” He personally and definitely intervened for Sarah in both cases and restored her to a humiliated Abraham, untouched and unharmed. Can we not trust the very same God to intervene for our protection when we step out in faith and obey His instructions to us as “daughters of Sarah,” with no fear?

A Woman’s Place in the Church

Let’s consider the very special place given to women and their function in the church. There is much controversy about this area, both in the religious world and in the secular world around us, and I do not expect to give a “final word” on the subject. This is simply the emerging understanding that the Holy Spirit has been giving to one woman (in union with her husband) who has been seeking His light to be shed upon her own pathway.

It is important, in this process of seeking His light, to recognize the difference between being “legal” in our approach, and recognizing God’s word to our own heart. An illustration might help. The command in I Timothy 2:9 reads, “...that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation...” Recognizing that every woman (and man) who reads this passage might have a different picture of what the words *modest*, *propriety*, or *moderation* might mean, a group of elders might take it upon themselves to clarify the matter by setting precise definitions upon the type and style of clothing considered acceptable. This would be “legal” in the sense that men have set the interpretation of written words, rather than letting the Holy Spirit illuminate them to the heart of each individual believer. In this case, one could obey what the elders say (who might indeed be spiritual men and correct in their interpretation), and seem to be obeying God, but actually be obeying men, with no necessity of having the Holy Spirit within.

To respond to the very same verses “in life” (in a relationship with God), an individual woman may sense the Holy Spirit speaking within her own heart that the clothing she is wearing or considering would grieve Him, even though she might not be able to precisely identify why; so in faith she responds by choosing to not wear that garment. The Holy Spirit might speak to her through another person, and she can follow certain principles in dress, but she should be able to sense in her own spirit

from the Lord what would not be modest or proper for her. Clothing worn by Christian women might end up being similar, but the woman in our first example would be watching for the elders if she suspected her clothing might not be acceptable, and in this way she would be responding to man. In the second example, the woman is responding to the Holy Spirit directly in her personal relationship with Jesus, and will be satisfied when she pleases Him.

It is not my purpose to be “legal,” then, in discussing the following scriptures, but to share the understanding that has been accumulating over many years in my heart, with the desire that the Holy Spirit will open His revelation to every seeking heart.

Head Covering

“But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered.

“For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

“Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as the woman was from the man, even so the man also is through the woman; but all things are from God.

“Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering, But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God” (I Corinthians 11:3-16).

The foundation for understanding this passage is again, oneness, and within that oneness, diversity of activity and responsibility. This basic concept is a continuing thread throughout the New Testament revelation that Jesus builds of His relationship with His Father and with those who are His: *“...that they all may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me, And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me...” (John 17:21-23).*

In I Corinthians 11 we see the visible expression of one aspect of this oneness. It opens with the depiction of Christ as head of man, man the head of woman, and God the head of Christ. Remember, Christ is not less than God, nor woman less than man, but there is an order of functioning in which each voluntarily takes a place of submission for the glory of the whole. The word “glory” (a fascinating study in itself) might be defined as “the honor resulting from a very high opinion, splendid, worthy of all praise.” Man is “the image and glory of God”; woman is “the glory of man”; and her long hair is “a glory to her.”

The opposite of glory is dishonor, or disgrace. A man is told that he dishonors his head (Christ) if he covers his physical head while praying or prophesying. (Men remove their hats for prayer.) A woman who uncovers her head while praying or prophesying dishonors her head (man). It puts her on the same level as a woman whose head is shorn or shaved. Too many cultural explanations can undermine the spiritual meaning of a passage, but these can be helpful when we do not readily understand things that were more obvious at the time these words were penned. Scholars explain that when a woman was found guilty of immorality, her hair was shorn or shaved as a public embarrassment and warning to others. The fact that a woman had her own long hair was a public testimony to her purity and faithfulness. So if a woman prayed or prophesied with her head uncovered, she would bring the same

shame to her husband as if she were known to be immoral. Even though we do not have such a custom in our day, the woman's use of head covering is obviously a very serious matter.

When men and women gather in the presence of God as the body of Christ, only one thing should be visible: the glory of God (not the glory of man). Here is where the angels enter the picture. Watchman Nee offered an explanation for the puzzling phrase "because of the angels." Lucifer refused to be satisfied in his original high and holy position in the presence of God and let pride in his own beauty fill him with lust to ascend and be "like the Most High." The angels, eternal beings, were looking on, and many of them were swayed to join him in his rebellion (see Isaiah 14:12-15, Ezekiel 28:14-19, Daniel 8:10-11, Revelation 12:3-4). Now women have the same choice, to rise up and refuse to be content in their own honored place, or to choose the place of submission to the order God has established. The angels are "looking on" to see what our choice will be. Could it be that we mortal women have the privilege of being able to encourage angels?

Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words comments on I Corinthians 11:7 (under "Glory") "of man as representing the authority of God, and of woman as rendering conspicuous the authority of man." When the woman puts a "symbol of authority" on her head, she is showing the angels, if no one else, that she recognizes and is content in her submission to the authority God has given to the man (Genesis 3:16). She has the great privilege of voluntarily covering her own glory, her hair, so that man's glory (the woman) is not "seen" when the church gathers together in the presence of God. As with other symbols in the church, such as the communion cup and loaf, water baptism, anointing with oil, or laying hands on the sick, it is not the physical act that has meaning and power in the spiritual realm, but the reality it represents.

This scripture makes the appeal to "nature itself" that long hair dishonors a man but is a glory to the woman. The world shows its innate awareness that long hair is a "glory" to women by its advertisements of everything from shampoo to cars, which rarely depict women with short hair. One could wonder what underlying motivation causes many women to prefer short hair, and why long hair is often the first expression of rebellion for men. We should not look to the world's styles or to convenience for our standards in these things, but to the Spirit of God to guide us each individually, with pure motives, to express the beauty He has given us in a way that honors Him. We do not want to be those "who seem to be contentious."

To Speak or Not to Speak

"Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church" (I Corinthians 14:34-35).

"...In like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works. Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self-control" (I Timothy 2:9-15).

As we discuss this area, let us establish again that it is all positive. All that God does and says is for a positive purpose, never negative. The suggestion that God is trying to keep something good away from us was the very first thing the serpent put into Eve's mind, and it is often the thought he will attempt to put into ours. If we allow the slightest hint of doubt about God's character, it will undermine everything, so we must examine our hearts down to the deepest motives. If Jesus fills our vision with His love and we realize all He has done to reveal Himself to us, He can guard us from these doubts that will eat away at the foundation of our relationship with Him.

These verses have a primary application to the woman's place "in the churches," and this should be kept in mind, but there are deeper principles that guide her conduct and demeanor in every area of her life. Of course

she is a whole person, not one way in one place and another way in a different situation. The original word translated “shameful” is expressed by Vine’s as “of that which is opposed to modesty or purity.” That is, a woman who does not “keep silent in the churches,” “teaches or has authority over a man,” or does not “learn in silence with all submission” is by her actions opposing her ordained expression of modesty or purity. She exposes herself to great risk or spiritual vulnerability when she removes herself from her place of God-given safety and protection.

What is the basic issue involved in “Let your women keep silent in the churches”? Some have suggested that it is direction to correct a cultural problem: women who tended to chatter during the church meetings. Vine’s says this is “a meaning absent from the use of the verb everywhere else in the N.T.; it is to be understood in the same sense as in I Corinthians 14, vv. 2, 3-6, 9, 11, 13, 18, 19, 21, 23, 27-29, 39” (under the second entry for “Speak”). All these verses discuss the speaking gifts of the Spirit and their use in the church meetings. Why are women excluded here, and where are they to use these gifts, if not “in the church”? We will address the second question later, but let us think through the first one carefully.

When one speaks in the church, he is told to speak “as an oracle of God” (I Peter 4:11). Again, Vine’s is helpful in explaining “oracle”: “the utterances of God through Christian teachers.” It is clear that Jesus, as the head of man, will express what He wants to say to His church through His representatives there, the men. Anyone who speaks to the church should do so with the authority of God. So if a woman speaks, she assumes a place of leadership that is not according to God’s order for her in the church.

What might be some of the reasons this direction is given? We observed earlier that woman was formed from man’s rib, next to his heart, the place of closest affection and emotion. She is more likely to express the loving, caring, compassionate side of human nature. She responds more readily in her emotions than the man, who responds more strongly in his mind. This quality is not unnecessary, inferior, or undesirable, for she was meant to complement the man. But emotions, when unrestrained or unchecked by wisdom, can be easily led astray; hence, we read “...but the woman being deceived, fell...” Adam sinned, but he did it knowingly, by choice. We may wonder how he could do that, but Eve, who was the focus of his love and finer instincts, had gone ahead of him. To resist, he would have had to stand against her and separate himself from her!

Adam was held responsible by God, although he tried to shift the blame to Eve. The words of God to Adam must have been very painful for her to hear: “Then to Adam He said, ‘Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you...’” (see Genesis 3:12-19, and also Genesis 16:2). Adam might have been able to withstand Satan in the form of the serpent, for he was not deceived, but he did not withstand “the voice of his wife.” Do women today have any lesser effect upon the men in our lives? Can we take warning ourselves, and not bristle at the instructions to us as if we were being restrained from our “right to speak”?

Another reason the woman is to be silent in the church is for her own protection. Because of her emotional nature, she is in a vulnerable position when she expresses herself publicly—where she might feel misunderstood, rebuffed, or hurt. Her first reaction might come in her emotions, rather than under the control of the Spirit, and the distinction is not always readily obvious. God has made the man in such a way that he is more thoughtful and cautious. Women tend to move ahead of men to fill in the “gap” that men seem to leave by acting or speaking more slowly. A man usually will let a woman go ahead if he is not sure yet of God’s direction, so the woman finds herself out in a place of leadership. But if the woman is wise and obedient to the Spirit, and waits according to God’s order, she will find safety and contentment, knowing that God will uphold her and meet her needs in His way. Can we sense the great significance of the instructions given specially to us?

What kinds of speaking are not appropriate for women in the church? Basically, anything that would put them into a place of leadership or authority before the church. When one teaches or preaches, he is leading the church in a certain direction and is responsible directly to God for all that is said. The spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy address the church with authority and direction. When one leads in prayer, he brings the whole church together to the throne of God—a place of great responsibility and leadership. In sharing a public testimony, a person brings before the church some area of importance,

and directly or indirectly leads the church to a common awareness or response. Essentially, when any individual person addresses or leads the church even in expressions such as singing, he comes into public display as an individual; the attention of the whole church focuses upon him, and what he is doing or saying will affect the church.

A woman is a responsible member of the body of Christ. She must have her own relationship with Christ, which makes her a part of the body. God has given her a special trust to be submissive to the place of the man as her head in the church, and God will meet her needs in the process. If she has questions, she is to “ask her husband at home” rather than bring it publicly before the church as her husband might do if it were necessary. An unmarried sister might take her spiritual questions privately to her father, an elder, or other spiritual leader whom she respects. If a woman has a testimony to share with the church, it could be communicated by her husband or another brother in a way that does not put her into a place of leadership or exposure. She is responsible to be spiritually active within the areas of expression God has given her, but in the church meetings, her place is one of quietness and submission “as to the Lord.”

As a part of the body, a woman joins her voice in praise and adoration through song. She should be actively praying and communing with the Lord in her own spirit (I Corinthians 14:28b). She is responsible to give her witness in spiritual matters, although not in a public manner. Her attentive presence in quietness and submission is an encouragement to the brothers to be responsible and active in their place of speaking, to feed and nourish her from the hand of the Lord. Her place is a very active one in every way, because submission is always active, never passive! There are no passive members of the body of Christ.

Where does a woman speak, then, if not in the public assembly of the church? Numerous examples in the scriptures speak of situations in which women take part in spiritual discussion and encouragement, such as the instruction in Titus 2 to older women in their “teaching of good things,” specifically to the younger women. Priscilla, together with her husband, had a good influence upon Apollos in correcting the lacks in his understanding. Women were active in the use of spiritual gifts, such as the four daughters of Philip who prophesied, but not in a public setting. We will examine some of these more thoroughly, but the basic guidelines are: 1. Not in the public meeting of the church; 2. Not in authority over a man; and 3. Not lifting herself up in a place of leadership. Whenever a woman senses that she is being drawn out in a way that is “opposed to modesty or purity,” she should stop and consider very carefully. The Holy Spirit is well able to communicate this to her if she desires to hear and please the Lord. There is great freedom in this place.

A Woman’s Ministry to Others

Older Women

“...Speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine: ...the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things—that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed” (Titus 2:1,3-5).

Here is a positive, well-defined place for women to have an active ministry. In our modern western culture, there is little respect or any particular notice given to the older man or woman, unlike the eastern cultures in which this is still important. As we mature, we begin to perceive the value of maturity and experience in a way that our youthful confidence may have prevented earlier. But for those with a heart desiring to hear God, the direction has always been clear in the scriptures. When one begins to walk in obedience to these admonitions, the wisdom and blessings which unfold are remarkable.

To be able to function properly, the older woman's life must be above reproach and an example in every way. She is qualified to admonish the younger women because she has "been there" in the areas she speaks about. She must be "reverent in behavior"—that is, it should be obvious that her life is consecrated to God in every action and attitude she manifests. "Not slanderers" means that she does not find fault with the conduct of others, or spread criticism and innuendos in the church. "Not given to much wine" indicates that she does not indulge herself in excess drink, food, or other physical things. These are all outward expressions by which a younger woman can evaluate the lives of those God gives to encourage her.

The areas in which the older woman is to "teach good things" to the younger are carefully defined and should be kept in mind. Notice some of the things that are not included. Doctrine is conspicuously absent, for that is an area in which a woman "asks her own husband at home," and is the responsibility of the man as head. (This does not excuse a woman for following wrong doctrine if her husband is deceived, for she is still a responsible member of Christ, and He has given her safeguards.) All of what the older woman teaches is to focus the younger woman upon her relationship with her own husband, never to replace or undermine him in any area, lest the "word of God be blasphemed" (spoken evil of) because of her inconsistent behavior.

An older woman who has had a strong marriage and raised godly children is uniquely qualified to come alongside a younger wife and mother and encourage her desire for a deeper love relationship toward husband and children, by sharing the fruits that have come in her own life. Her wisdom should be available to the younger sister who faces struggles in her home, and her experience gives her perception regarding the ways to work out being "discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands..." She is an excellent resource and support for the younger sisters who want to be the "crown" of their husbands (Proverbs 12:4), for her own life sets the pattern.

The older woman is also in the position to encourage unmarried sisters, for she can recognize the needs they have and the concerns they face. They need to be especially aware of being discreet and chaste in all their attitudes and behavior. Much joy can be shared while encouraging them to give their affections and time to loving and serving the Lord.

Being a "Priscilla"

One fascinating woman mentioned several times in the New Testament is Priscilla, the wife of Aquila. Both were probably prominent Roman Jews. Their names are always mentioned together, which can be an indication of their being no longer two, but one in the truest sense. They may have been childless, for no mention is made of their children in the various references to them over the years, and Priscilla worked along with her husband in their tent-making trade. They were well esteemed by Paul, and he spent considerable time in their home, where they seemed to be of one heart and mind with him. They hosted the church "in their house" and served in many ways. At one point they took the bold young preacher Apollos aside "*and explained to him the way of God more accurately*" (Acts 18:24-28). Read about them in Acts 18:2,18,26; Romans 16:3; I Corinthians 16:19; II Timothy 4:19. Some interesting observations can be made from what is said about Priscilla and the ministry she shared with her husband for many years.

First of all, her ministry was always in conjunction with her husband. Aquila did not seem to be a preacher or unusually strong leader, although his reputation as a Christian is spotless. We see that Priscilla did not outshine him in any way or make a place for herself in Christian service apart from him. She was simply beside him in every area of endeavor, whether having fellowship with Paul, sewing tents, or instructing Apollos. Priscilla probably had a part in the many discussions that took place with Paul, Apollos, and others, but we sense that she was aware of her proper place as a woman and did not lead in the discussions. Paul was used of the Lord to give many instructions to women, and he

would certainly not have commended Priscilla and Aquila so highly had Priscilla been insensitive in her conduct. Priscilla gave no indication of having authority over Apollos when she and her husband took him aside, although she likely shared in the “more accurate explanation of the way of God.” The Holy Spirit within will be faithful to guide the godly woman in her conversation, giving her many opportunities to encourage others in an appropriate way.

Priscilla had an accurate understanding of spiritual matters and was an active witness. Every believer should be “*ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear*” (I Peter 3:15). Every believing woman must have her own personal revelation of the body of Christ, and be able to recognize spiritual authority as it flows within the church. Priscilla and her husband give us a good example of those who are ready and active at all times and in many circumstances to serve and witness for their Lord.

Spiritual Gifts

Women have shared in the spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit from the very beginning. Acts 1:14 reads: “*These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.*” Acts 2:1,4 tells us: “*Now when the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place... And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*” When the Spirit was given to the Gentiles, there were surely women present and included. Acts 10:24,44,46: “*...Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends... While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word... For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God...*” Also, throughout the book of Acts we see that women were actively involved in all that God was doing, contributing their physical means and support as well as their presence.

As we look at these accounts, however, we note that women were not the leaders in any public matters. In Philippi, Paul and his companions sought out fellowship and found a group of women who customarily prayed by the river (Acts 16:13). One of them, Lydia, who was baptized with her household, constrained Paul’s company to stay in her home. She seemed to be the head of her household and to have her own business, yet we do not sense that she put herself into public prominence. Many women are mentioned and commended by Paul and other writers for many good things, but no mention is made of their being used by God in the public use of spiritual gifts.

In Acts 21:8-14 we see a very significant incident. Paul’s company comes to stay in the home of Philip the evangelist, and specific mention is made that he “*had four virgin daughters who prophesied.*” Yet the next verse tells us a certain prophet named Agabus came all the way from Judea with a message for Paul from the Holy Spirit. One might wonder why the Holy Spirit did not use one of the daughters to bring the message, since they also prophesied and they were right there. Would not that have put them into a place of authority and public prominence that we have seen is not in keeping with the special place of the woman? It is very clear that women can prophesy (and exercise other spiritual gifts as well), but they should be very mindful of the place and company in which it is done.

There are many opportunities for women to use spiritual gifts privately, with their families and possibly with other women in limited situations. To some it would seem very natural for a woman who is gifted, attractive, and well qualified to lead to be put into the spotlight because of her abilities, but are our natural abilities ever to be our qualification to serve the Lord publicly? One must know the calling of God to do this, and scripture gives no precedent for a woman being called by Him into public leadership in His church. It is a place of great danger if a woman is drawn out of her place of “modesty and purity” and becomes lifted up into a place of giving spiritual direction to others. She has a full calling from Him, however, to cultivate what He regards as true beauty, “*...the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God*” (I Peter 3:4). This is indeed a great trust and a great challenge.

A Woman's Place in the World

How does the godly woman fit into this world and its system without being “of the world”? What if she is not married and must earn her own living? Are there guidelines that can guard her from conflicts within herself and with her position in the world? In Proverbs 31:10-31, we read of a very active woman who is described as being successful in all areas of life. She is commended by God, her family, and the world. Let us examine how her life illustrates many of the principles we have been considering.

“Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life” (vv. 10-12).

This “wife of valor, in the sense of all forms of excellence” (marginal reading) has within her person what is beyond any quality that can be purchased or hired. The most significant relationship she has on this earth is with her husband, and it is solid and deep; they are truly one. There is no competition or struggle for self-expression in her relationship with him. He is totally confident in her, and we can be sure that she in turn is totally confident in him. This is the foundation of their relationship, and we find at the end of this passage that it is because she fears the Lord, not because she has a perfect husband. Every husband of a godly wife should be confident that he can safely trust her and that she does him good and not evil, for these are the qualities that her relationship with Jesus will produce within her.

A woman does not need to be married to be able to express this total trustworthiness; it should be her daily expression in every relationship with those who are important in her life. It is increasingly rare in today's workplace, and those in this world who are wise will recognize and value it greatly.

“She seeks wool and flax, and willingly works with her hands. She is like the merchant ships, she brings her food from afar. She also rises while it is yet night, and provides food for her household, and a portion for her maidservants (vv. 13-15).

We see some of the areas of life in which this woman was diligent, areas in which we can function likewise. Shopping wisely for quality purchases and working with your hands can encompass many activities. It is commendable to be an excellent cook and to prepare a variety of nutritious foods for your family, even rising early to be sure that this task is not neglected. “And a portion for her maidservants” reveals that she was an employer of other women, and a good organizer and administrator on their behalf. We might notice that she did not seem to be in charge of the male laborers that likely were attached to her household.

“She considers a field and buys it; from her profits she plants a vineyard, She girds herself with strength, and strengthens her arms, She perceives that her merchandise is good, and her lamp does not go out by night. She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hand holds the spindle, She extends her hand to the poor; yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy” (vv. 16-20).

This lady was certainly an astute businesswoman who could evaluate prudently and use money wisely. She was not above some real physical labor, and kept herself physically fit. She recognized the value of her talents without falling into the trap of arrogance, and she was willing to work late hours to accomplish an important task. She was likely a good seamstress, able to produce excellent work. We sense that she would not be willing to just “get by” in any area of life. Yet she was also compassionate toward those less fortunate in life, and she did more to help than just give them money; she got personally involved in ways that would truly help the needy to improve their lives.

“She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household is clothed with scarlet. She makes tapestry for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple” (vv. 21-22).

A wise woman is able to plan ahead and be prepared for things she knows are coming, so there is no panic or lack. Her family is well-dressed, as are the others associated with her household. Her home is tastefully decorated and likely reveals the personality of its mistress in many unique ways—not just

thrown together, nor a reproduction of a home magazine. Her own clothing is of fine quality and good taste, reflecting her sense of modesty and restraint. She knows how to enhance her discreet feminine attractiveness without drawing attention to herself in an inappropriate way. One senses that she provides well, but is not overly occupied with the fashions of the day.

“Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land” (v. 23).

This is one of the most intriguing verses in this chapter, and reveals the true godliness of this woman. “Being known in the gates” means that her husband was known and respected by the community. His wife has been so discreet about her activities that she does not draw attention to herself in a public way. She supports her husband and might share a lot of the credit for his prestige and reputation, but we do not see her seeking recognition for herself. She is content that her husband represents them, for they are one.

“She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies sashes for the merchants. Strength and honor are her clothing; she shall rejoice in time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness. She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness” (vv. 24-27).

Again we see that this woman contributed substantially to the income of the household, and it appears that she worked from her home. She isn’t out just to make money in any way possible, but rather it seems she has built a solid reputation for quality and dependability. Her integrity and honesty are established, and she always has time for the individuals who come her way and need her concern and counsel, for she cares for people rather than monetary gain. She is a good supervisor of her family and others who work for her, and sets the example for them. Any woman (or man) who establishes a reputation such as this in the business world of today will surely find a solid basis for success!

“Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: ‘Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all’” (vv. 28-29).

We observed above that it is her husband who is “known in the gates,” but the godly woman is known by her husband and family, and they will bless her. Those we live with know us best, and the highest test of our inner spiritual life is how we live with those with whom we are intimate. Many celebrities have been “undone” by the inconsistencies in their personal lives, and the modern press revels in searching out the smallest flaws. But when the inner life is right with God, it will also be right with those closest to us, and that is the source of our most cherished recognition.

“Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates” (vv.30-31).

Here is the final assessment of this woman’s life, which reveals the source of all her inner strength and her outer productivity. These come from her relationship with God. Her eyes have not been focused upon herself and her own desires, but upon her Lord and her family. In the end, the reward of her life will come to her through what she has given of herself to others: her own works will “praise her in the gates.”

There is a choice vignette in verse 30 from which we can all benefit. “Charm” and “beauty” are words that describe the unique attributes of women in general, and most are aware of the attention they receive for these from an early age. Just observe the cute and coy manners of the young girl from toddler age on, as she gains admiration and often more tangible rewards for her appearance and behavior. If parents are not wise enough to train her otherwise, a girl may grow up focused on herself and how she looks and acts to charm others for her own gain. These habits can lead a young woman into a life of vanity and immorality because of what they produce within herself and in those she affects. If what was cute in a small child becomes a life practice, it might result in an empty and self-centered life, ending in disappointment and despair, for all is focused upon self rather than upon pleasing God and serving others. Truly, charm is deceitful and beauty is vain...

“But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised.” Within every woman (and man) is a desire to be praised, or appreciated by others, but if she seeks this through her natural beauty and charm, it will never satisfy. The only way to gain true praise is to look away from self and self-seeking ways of gaining attention. Focusing upon the Lord, His beauty, His holiness, His will, and His ways will bring about an inner beauty which will, in the end, bring the genuine praise that was truly desired. This is one of the eternal principles expressed by Jesus, running as a thread throughout the Bible: *“For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it”* (Matthew 16:25).

Her Adorning

“Do not let your beauty be that outward adorning of arranging the hair, of wearing gold, or of putting on fine apparel; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God” (I Peter 3:3-4).

“...That the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works” (I Timothy 2:9-10).

If we look at Genesis 3 again, we find that the first result of sin recorded is that *“the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings”* (Genesis 3:7). When the Lord God came to walk with them as usual, they hid themselves with the explanation that they were afraid because they were naked, even though they had already covered themselves with the fig leaves. After God dealt with them and the serpent, we read that He provided them with clothing that He made himself: tunics of skin (which required the death of an animal). From the beginning, man’s ideas about clothing have not always been acceptable to God.

When we think about adorning or clothing, our first thought goes to the outward, but God’s thought goes right past that to the inward realities and motives. As women who desire to please the Lord, we must give careful thought to how we dress and adorn ourselves, rather than fall into habits of thinking and dressing without considering the source and the effects of what we wear. The question we should consider is: *“For whom do we dress?”*

Do I dress for comfort and convenience, pleasing myself? These are the watchwords of the society we live in. Most people are unthinking slaves to “what feels good,” and this motivates most choices in their lives, especially in clothing. Our society also has a strong god called “fun,” and the clothing industry serves it well. As Christians, we need to be very careful that we are not unknowingly affected by these trends, which will draw us from the path of conscious diligence in following the Lord.

Do I dress for men? Our immediate reaction to this question may be, “Of course not,” but let us recognize that there can be many subtle factors affecting the clothing women wear which they may not be aware of. Those who would not purposely wear a sensuous style of clothing may yet copy habits or “looks” they see worn by others, which communicate something they do not intend. One example might be the second button left open at the neckline or other ways to show or suggest cleavage. A woman’s curves are sensual to a man, including curvy hips. Pants and shorts reveal these in a way that attracts men’s attention to this part of her body, whereas modest dresses or skirts do not. Clothing that is not obviously revealing might still give a tantalizing suggestion of what is beneath, which has a powerful effect upon a man that women are not always conscious of. If Jesus holds a man responsible for lustful thoughts (Matthew 5:28), does He not also expect a woman to be careful not to prompt lustful thoughts by what she wears? A godly woman does not want to give even a suggestion of any such intent. The Holy Spirit is ready to guide every woman in her choice of clothing that will honor Him and not cause her brother or other men to stumble.

Do I dress for other women? Nearly every girl growing up experiences at least a temporary phase of being concerned about what her friends are wearing and “what they will think” about what she wears. More maturity usually brings less concern about this, but it is usually the other women in our lives who have the strongest impact upon our concepts of what is right and appropriate to wear. Therefore, let us be sure our “role models” have gained their direction from the Lord.

Do I dress to be acceptable to the world? I believe most men would say they prefer women in dresses or skirts, so why have pants/slacks/trousers become women's predominant choice in our society for nearly every occasion? We cannot take time to go into history here, but in our culture women have been on this pathway for such a long time that very few can even remember when society itself reinforced that "a woman should look like a woman," and pants were considered to be men's clothing. We must look beyond the "norm" around us and ask the Lord to guide us.

We have considered the uniqueness of the woman and the way God created her to be different from the man while being one with him. Satan tries to undermine and counterfeit God's design of oneness by a strong influence in the world sometimes called "unisex." The goal is to deny the differences and put women and men on the same level in all possible areas of life, such as hairstyles, clothing, occupations, etc. The Bible says, "*A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for all who do so are an abomination to the Lord your God*" (Deuteronomy 22:5). I personally grew up on a farm wearing blue jeans, and had difficulty changing my thinking, but I gradually came to see the deeper significance my choice of clothing represented to my Lord, and recognized that pleasing Him was much more important than my own preferences. God's design is that a woman look like a woman and a man like a man, for He created each perfectly. We must not let the shrewd tactics of the enemy defraud us of the fulfillment God wants us to have. He has given us the privilege of being women.

Do I dress for the Lord and for my husband? If we focus our eyes upon the Lord and His purpose in our lives, refusing to be distracted by the world and its vanity, we will find a place of rest and contentment in pleasing Him in all areas of life. One of these will be our clothing and adornment. If we are truly one with Him, this will take no special effort, just simple responses to His promptings by the Spirit. Think of a lovely bride on her wedding day. All eyes are upon her, but she is unaware of that, for her eyes are focused only upon her beloved. Her beauty is the reflection on her face of the love and anticipation that fills her heart. She has prepared herself to please him alone, and this made her choices simple because she has begun to know her beloved and to perceive how to please him.

The verses above tell us clearly what is precious to the Lord: the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit. Our selection of clothing and outward adorning should be consistent with this. Anything that draws attention to any feature of the outward physical person will feed pride or other improper motives. But a gentle and quiet spirit will reveal itself through our eyes and in many inconspicuous ways that draw others to the Lord alone. It will reveal itself through good works without any thought of gaining attention for ourselves. The secret of acquiring this gentle and quiet spirit is to turn our attention away from ourselves and fasten it fully upon Jesus, responding to Him just as the bride mentioned above. He will satisfy all our deepest desires and longings, and this will bring inner beauty to the hidden person of the heart, where time takes no toll but only increases its loveliness.

In Closing

“Contentment” and “contention” are two similar words with very different meanings, which can summarize these thoughts about woman as God created her to be and how this was spoiled by sin and rebellion. God’s creation was “very good” (Gen. 1:31), and it was His purpose that man and woman find contentment and fulfillment in their relationship with Him and with one another. But His enemy entered the picture and brought contention and dissatisfaction to Eve’s heart with the insinuation that God was keeping something good away from her. She was deceived by him and moved of her own accord to find out if this was so, separating herself from the protection God had provided for her in the man who was not deceived. Thus began the ever-repeating cycle of discord and contention between man and woman, and between them and God.

God loved and gave Himself in the person of His Son to restore our relationship with Him and to show us how to restore the relationship between man and woman. When we come to Him with humble hearts desiring Him to do His work of grace within us, He will respond by coming in the person of His Holy Spirit to dwell within our spirit, and He will do in and through us what we are unable to do for ourselves. This is indeed a great mystery, but it is available as a reality for each one who is willing to cease “contending” for his or her own way and come into that place of “contentment,” walking in oneness with Jesus and in obedience to His perfect plan.