

Public Forum Letter: Column offers misguided interpretation of marriage

Published: March 14, 2014 4:00AM

Local pastor Matt Timmons submitted a pastor's column, published Feb. 7 in the Ashland Times-Gazette, titled "The idea of submission for wives not degrading."

He took his material from Colossians 3:18, "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord." (ESV) In focusing on this sentence alone, Timmons took the word "submit" into an unintended and dangerous context.

The meaning of the word "submit" becomes clear in the expanded treatment of the same subject in Ephesians 5:15-6:9. As he does in the Colossians passage, the apostle Paul addresses three pairs of relationships, all in the domestic sphere: wives and husbands, children and fathers and slaves and masters. The passage includes the words, "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" in Ephesians 5:21.

The words "to one another" are critical. In Paul's society, these call for an unthinkable concession, mutual submission by both parties, meaning recognition of the other person's dignity and rights in the relationship. Mutual submission accomplishes two important tasks.

First, it guards against unrestrained power from the dominant parties -- husbands, fathers or slave owners (written in the context of the first century Greco-Roman culture, when slavery was legal). Their attitude of submission calls them to forfeit personal satisfaction in favor of mutual benefit.

Second, it enables those who otherwise would live in danger of abuse -- wives, children and slaves -- to have a voice in the relationship. When the dominant parties are called to recognize the limitations in their power, the subordinate parties are able to live in peace. This is especially clear in the case of husbands and wives.

Where the wife is called to submit to her husband, the husband's marching orders are far more detailed. His duty to submit calls him to love his wife sacrificially "as Christ loved the church" (Ephesians 5:25). The language in Ephesians, borrowed from Paul's understanding of Christ's work, is expansive.

Like Christ, the husband is to give himself up for his wife's sake and treasure her as the unique and precious being that she is. He is spiritually responsible to sanctify his wife in a way that preserves her "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she may be holy and without blemish" in Ephesians 5:25.

He is not the passive receiver of his wife's silent obedience. He is not her boss, either by declaration or implication. He is her husband, and she is his wife, a divinely created relationship.

According to Timmons, if a woman does not relinquish her individual identity when she enters marriage, "A divorce looms over the marriage from the very beginning because the two are never really bonded together as one, as God designed for couples."

This kind of thinking holds a sword over the woman. Christian counseling rooms subscribing to this misguided interpretation of submission are populated by wounded wives who may be told they must not have lost enough weight, made themselves available enough, made themselves pretty enough or

were just not submissive enough for their husbands. Meanwhile, their husbands are called to do nothing.

The idea that the wife shoulders the responsibility for her marriage's preservation is alien to either the Ephesians or the Colossians passage, and to use either as a threat dishonors the meaning of both. Those passages do not threaten with divorce -- they promote harmony.

When the passage calls for the wife to respect her husband, it assumes the husband has taken the initiative to love her first. The wife's submission to her husband cannot be understood outside of his sacrificial love. Submission never means voicelessness.

Doug Knox

Ashland