

What Does the Word Say?
Session 29: Delegated Authority in the Family
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Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine what the Bible says about authority in the home. Dr. Spencer, this topic is one where what the Bible teaches is radically different from the norm practiced in our society, so how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: It's hard to know where to begin because your observation is correct; our society's conception of the family is severely at odds with the biblical norm, and that is *not* a good thing. But, even worse, the majority of confessing Christians also have a family structure that is radically different from what the Bible teaches.

Marc Roby: What do you see as the major deviations from the biblical norm?

Dr. Spencer: First, and most obvious, the husband and father is not the true head of the home. The idea of a man leading is considered old-fashioned at best, and wicked at worst. And, of course, since being a true leader is not an easy thing, men are often all too eager to relinquish this role.

Marc Roby: But, the Bible is quite clear about that role. We quoted from Ephesians 5 last time and in Verses 22-24 it says "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."¹

Dr. Spencer: And, as we noted last time, that passage is despised by the modern world, even most people in the church. But, part of the reason people despise this message is that they have entirely the wrong image in mind. When Paul speaks about wives submitting to their husbands, I think many people get an image in their head of the man sitting in his lazy chair with a beer in his hand, watching a football game, and commanding his wife to serve him. But such an image is the exact antithesis of the biblical idea of leadership. As we noted last time, God delegates authority for the purpose of blessing those who are under that authority. And it is *hard* to properly exercise authority. It takes a lot of hard work, a lot of prayer, and a lot of sacrifice.

Marc Roby: Which is why, I'm sure, proper biblical leadership is rare.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure you're right about that.

Marc Roby: And not only is proper leadership rare, but there is also a lot of abuse of authority in our world.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. But, just because there is abuse of authority does not mean that authority itself is bad. We need to have the proper idea in mind of what the ideal is and then we need to aspire to attain that ideal.

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Marc Roby: And, of course, the ideal is God himself.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And there is a very important biblical doctrine that it is worth spending a few minutes on to get a better understanding of the proper relationships within a family.

Marc Roby: What doctrine is that?

Dr. Spencer: The biblical doctrine of man. In Genesis 1:26-27 we read about the creation of man. It says, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” The first thing I want to point out in this passage is the implied plurality in the godhead. There is only one God, but he says “Let *us*, make man in *our* image ...”. The plural pronouns are there because there are three persons in the godhead. The second thing I want to point out is that in making man in his image, God made him male and female.

Marc Roby: But the persons of the godhead are not male and female.

Dr. Spencer: No, of course not. But there is a sense in which our being created male and female allows us to do a better job of showing forth the image of God. Think about marriage, which is the start of a family. We read about it in Genesis 2:24, where it says, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.” We, of course, have a tendency to think about this idea of becoming one flesh in terms of sex, and that is certainly a part of it, but it is not the largest part. Think about a marriage. What percentage of the time do you think people spend having sex?

Marc Roby: Probably a much smaller percentage than most men would like!

Dr. Spencer: OK, I’m sure you’re right, and I suppose that had to be said since most men were thinking it. But, to be serious, it is a very small percentage of our time. Now, it is admittedly a very important part of the relationship. Our society has cheapened sex tremendously by not honoring the marriage bed. The biblical norm is for the man and the woman to both be virgins when they marry and for them to then be faithful in marriage. That idea is simply laughed at in our culture, but the idea of sex as nothing more significant than recreation cheapens it and devalues marriage.

The bond between a husband and wife is meant to be the deepest bond any two human beings can ever have, and sex is just the physical expression of that bond. But it is much deeper than that. They are to be one in purpose, one in mind, one in spirit. They should work together in everything, never thinking of themselves as individuals, but as partners in this new organic entity called a marriage. And, in that unity, they reflect in some small measure the glorious unity in the godhead. Wayne Grudem does a good job of bringing out this aspect of the relationship in his

Systematic Theology. In commenting on Genesis 2:24 he writes, “This unity is not only a physical unity; it is also a spiritual and emotional unity of profound dimensions.”²

Marc Roby: There is a significant difference here though; God is triune, whereas a husband and wife are only two.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. And Grudem deals with that. He notes that the Bible doesn’t explain this to us, so we are speculating a bit, but he gives two reasons why God might have chosen to do it this way. First, the fact that God is triune and a marriage only includes two persons may partly reflect that the unity of the godhead is much greater. The second reason he postulates is that when you include children, there are three partners in the family relationship; husband, wife and children. The analogy is obviously not exact, but it is there. We are told in the Nicene Creed, which does a good job of summarizing the biblical teaching on the Trinity, that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son”, which certainly bears some resemblance to the fact that children proceed from the father and the mother.

Marc Roby: I think the analogy is clear, even though it is imperfect.

Dr. Spencer: As analogies always are to one degree or another. But this is a very profound point if you stop and think about it for a while. Our purpose in life is to glorify God. And we are made in his image, in other words, we are his image bearers. We are to display the glory of God visibly to the rest of creation. And a properly functioning family, with proper biblical order, does that beautifully. In the economic Trinity the Father is the functional head, the Son is under the Father, and the Holy Spirit is sent by both the Father and the Son. They are one God, with one purpose, and they are all equal in essence and glory, but in three distinct persons with different functional roles. Similarly, a properly functioning Christian family is one family, with one purpose – which is to glorify God – and they are all equal in essence and glory, but in three distinct persons with different functional roles.

Marc Roby: That is a powerful and profound analogy when you spell it out like that. But, what about people who are not married, or don’t have children? And that, by the way, includes Jesus Christ himself since he was never married.

Dr. Spencer: Actually, Christ will be married, but in a much greater sense than that word usually implies. In fact, there is an even more beautiful and extensive unity explained in the Bible that goes beyond the individual family and certainly includes all single and childless believers. The entire church, composed of all of those who have or ever will confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, is the bride of Christ. This imagery is given to us in Chapter 19 of the book of Revelation. In Verse 7 we read, “Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.” And, in context, it is clear that the Lamb is Jesus Christ, whom John the Baptist called the Lamb of God in John 1:29, and the bride is the church.

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pp 454-455

Marc Roby: Paul also uses that imagery. In 2 Corinthians 11:2 he wrote, “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.”

Dr. Spencer: The idea is also present in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 62 there is a wonderful passage where the prophet, who has been telling the people about the salvation God has planned, tells them in Verse 4, “No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married.” Hephzibah means “My delight is in her” and Beulah means married, so God is saying that he will marry his people, the church.

Marc Roby: That is a beautiful image, and it gives us an unbelievably exalted view of the church.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly does. And so we see that God’s plan for a family, and for his church, is a marvelous plan. And it includes a functional order in our relations that mimics the order in the relations between the persons of the godhead. So, when you think about authority in this context, it should lose all of its negative connotations. The husband is the head of the wife, but he is to rule in a self-sacrificial way, always doing what is best for the family.

Marc Roby: Which does not, however, always translate into doing what the wife wants.

Dr. Spencer: Of course not. But it also doesn’t always translate into doing what the man wants. And, as I said before, a godly husband properly exercising this authority will find out what his wife thinks and wants and will take those into serious consideration. But, the responsibility for the final decision is with him. When a family properly functions this way it is a beautiful thing. The husband and wife talk and pray together and then the husband makes what he thinks is the best decision, and the wife fully submits, accepts the decision as the word of God to her and does everything in her power to make it work, whether the decision is what she originally wanted or not.

Marc Roby: And God says that he will bless a home that functions that way.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he does. In Luke 11:28 Jesus told us that “those who hear the word of God and obey it” will be blessed, and this family order *is* the word of God, so blessing will definitely come to those who obey it.

Marc Roby: And, of course, to continue with the family relations, the children should be obedient to both mother and the father.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. Paul continues teaching about family order in his letter to the church in Ephesus, and in Ephesians 6:1-3 we read, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’—which is the first commandment with a promise—‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’” And he is referring here to the Fifth Commandment, which says “Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you.” (Dt 5:16) But, Paul also gives one more command to parents, which he specifically addresses to fathers. In Ephesians 6:4 he says, “Fathers, do not

exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” Which makes explicit the idea that authority is always to be used for the good of those who are under that authority.

Marc Roby: It is also important to note that fathers are under authority as well.

Dr. Spencer: That is a very important point. Fathers only have delegated authority in the home. They are accountable to God for how they manage their homes, which should cause us all to tremble when we make decisions or discipline our children. In addition, a Christian family should be members of a good church, in which case the wife also has recourse to the elders if her husband is somehow abusing his position as the head of the home.

Marc Roby: Speaking of discipline, when we discussed the authority of the state in our last session, we saw that the state is given the power of the sword to enforce its authority. What power is given in the family?

Dr. Spencer: The power of the rod, which obviously refers to spanking children. This is an extremely controversial and emotional topic in our society and I don't want to get bogged down in it, but every parent should read what the Bible says and prayerfully consider it. Modern psychology is not the authority, the Bible is. If spanking was the right way to discipline children 2,000 years ago, it is *still* the right way. But, and I must emphasize this point very strongly, it must be done correctly. It is never to be done in anger. It is never to inflict real harm. It is to be explained as soon as a child is old enough to understand, and it is always to be done in such a way that the child understands the parent loves him, but also so that he understands that punishment is what we deserve and what we get when we transgress proper laws.

Marc Roby: There is one last point that I think it would be good to make clear. We are not saying that husbands and fathers are always right.

Dr. Spencer: Of course not. Fathers, like every other human being except for Christ, are imperfect, sinful people. Therefore, they make mistakes, and they sin. But, God will still bless the wife and children who humbly submit to their authority, with the obvious caveats that they are not being commanded to sin and the husband or father is not being abusive.

Marc Roby: Very well, I think we are out of time for today, so I want to remind our listeners to email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.