

Getting to Know the Bible: Colossians 3:18-4:1

Does this passage advocate gender oppression?

Does this passage support slavery?

Time and time again, the Bible has been the source of equality and hope. Yet time and time again, the Bible has been used for injustice and oppression. Colossians 3:18-4:1 and similar passages in the Bible have been key texts, and should be understood properly.

On Gender Oppression: Some key things to think through

What does it mean for a woman to “submit?”

- The word is used places where it is absolute subjection, something lesser subjecting to something greater (eg. Phil. 3:21), but also used in places where equal people submit to each other (I Cor. 15:28- Jesus submits to the Father, Eph. 5:21- church people submitting to each other). Thus it *cannot* be said that the Bible is saying here that women are somehow less than men in terms of worth, dignity, ability, authority, etc.

- The word does *not* speak of passivity, blind obedience, or a loss of will. Instead, it is a voluntary yielding (note: middle voice of verb, and contrast with “obedience” that is asked of children and slaves) that chooses to follow God and discern what He is trying to do (“as fitting in the Lord”).

- It is a command given in light of the conflict predicted as a result of sin back in Genesis 3:16. There it is said that the woman’s “desire will be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” What is this saying?

1. The woman will have desires against her husband, to somehow exert her will in a sinful way. This is clear because the exact phrase, “your desire will be for” (six words in the Hebrew), is used in Genesis 4:7 in describing how sin is going against Cain- “It’s [sin’s] desire is for you, but you must rule over it.” Here, “desire” speaks of sin’s desire to overtake Cain in an ungodly way. Since the same sentence construction and word is used, the same idea should be given to 3:16.

2. The man will exert himself in a sinful way against the woman. There are two ways to interpret the phrase “he shall rule over you”:

a) see Adam’s “rule” as a good thing, which would parallel Gen. 4:7- Cain ruling over sin is a good thing there. This would point to the idea that there is some sort of good leadership role for the man (note below).

b) see Adam’s “rule” as a bad thing. This would be based on the notion that the word, used in context of human-human relationships, seems to always refer to ruling by a greater power, force, or strength (good and bad), that could at times be oppressive (Neh. 9:37, Isa. 19:4). In light of the context of the curse, and in light of the lack of any sort of rule of power and force in the prior creation episode, this latter idea is taken: the man will exert himself over the woman in a sinful way.

And so Paul recognizes the sinful ways both men and women can be in a marriage context, and teaches against it. The passage, along with the rest of

the Bible, in **no way** advocates some sort of gender oppression or discrimination.

The question then becomes: is there some sort of gender distinction? Do the husband and wife have different “roles?” This is where there is heated debate. The position I will take is yes- there is a difference of roles in the marriage in the sense that the man/husband is ultimately accountable and responsible to God as leader of the family [Note: again, this distinction does not advocate some type of passivity, weakness of will, or lack of decision-making and rights for a woman. And it does not confine women to and necessarily lead them to “traditional” homemaker roles (the woman is asked to rule over the earth with the man! See Gen. 1:28)].

While many passages should be considered,¹ the focus here will continue the thoughts of Genesis 1-3. Consider the following:

a) the woman was created as a “helper fit for him [the man]” (Genesis 2:18,ESV). This is not a derogatory term in any way; the word “helper” is used of God (e.g- Psalm 33:20, and many others), and the word “fit” (or “suitable” in other translations) refers to how the woman corresponds to, or complements, the man, much like how two puzzle pieces “fit” together. Nonetheless, there is a difference here.

b) God entrusts the man to teach the woman about the tree in the garden (Gen. 2:16-17), and as a result ultimately holds him accountable by going to him first (Gen. 3:9), and identifying him as the representative of sin (Rom 5:12ff).²

c) The cure of Genesis 3:16ff takes something that God intended to be good and tweaks it. As such, childbearing is not a result of sin, but *pain* in childbearing is (Gen. 1:28; 3:16); and work is not a curse, but suffering in work is (Gen. 2:15; 3:17-19). As such, the woman’s desire for a husband is good (desire can have a positive connotation- so Song of Songs 7:10), sin messes it up; and a man’s good leadership is a good, but sin corrupts it as well.

Again, It should be noted again that this distinction does not advocate some type of passivity or weakness of will, or some sort of lesser status. It is, however, is a claim that there are God-given distinctions between a man and a woman in the marriage context.

On slavery and why Jesus and the NT didn’t get rid of slavery

See “Slavery and Christianity” excerpt from *Colossians and Philemon* by David Garland, pp.352-359, provided on the back table.

¹ For a detailed overview of the various sides, consider *Discovering Biblical Equality* ed. Ronald Pierce and Rebecca Groothuis, and *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* by Wayne Grudem.

² Those who disagree with this view note that the reason why God goes to Adam first is because it fits the chiasmic structure of the story-telling (eg- Glen Scorgie, *The Journey Back to Eden*, 84; *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 90). I agree with this observation, but I do not think it explains away the possibility that God chose to talk with the man first because He held him responsible. See Rom. 5:12, and “c” for further reasons.