

WHAT DOES
“SUBMIT IN EVERYTHING”
REALLY MEAN?
THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF
MARITAL SUBMISSION

STEVEN R. TRACY*

I. INTRODUCTION:
*WHY ANOTHER PAPER ON MARITAL SUBMISSION?*¹

For several decades evangelicals have wrestled with the issue of gender roles, including marital submission. Thus, the question arises: Do we really need another article on marital submission? An evaluation of the current evangelical literature in fact reveals that very much and very little has been written. In terms of sheer volume, hundreds of books and numerous ministries address the subject of marital submission; in that way much has been written.² But a closer inspection of the literature and a careful assessment of contemporary culture reveal that very little has been written which addresses the parameters of marital submission in terms of the specific issues that are increasingly confronting Christian women. Some would even argue that the very question, “What are the limits of marital submission?” reveals an unbiblical capitulation to modernity. Stephen Clark, in what for many years was virtually the handbook for traditional gender role theology, makes such an assertion. He argues that modern secular society asks such questions merely to control “the scope of someone’s authority” whereas the biblical

*Steven R. Tracy is Professor of Theology and Ethics at Phoenix Seminary in Phoenix, Arizona.

¹My focus in this paper will be to analyze various models of marital submission, not to defend the concept of marital submission itself. It is beyond the scope of this paper to respond to egalitarian arguments, but I would simply note that I believe a detailed study of the Greek words for head (κεφαλή) and submission (ὑποτάσσω) used in the NT marriage texts reveal that the husband does have some unique authority. The question here is what is the nature and extent of that authority.

²For instance, a search on the Council for Biblical Equality (CBE) website (www.cbeinternational.org) gets 2077 hits on the subject of marriage, and 320 hits on submission. A search of The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) website (www.cbmw.org) gets 211 hits on marriage and 156 hits on submission. Both of these organizations promote dozens of recently published books that deal with gender roles in marriage and marital submission.