

The Ideology of Wifely Submission: A Challenge for Feminism?

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This article examines the writings of women who explicitly embrace wifely submission, including those who advocate corporal punishment. Through a close reading of primary sources, the article seeks to illuminate the biblical literalist theology that underlies the ideology of wifely submission and to explain the reasons why many heterosexual women find such an ideology appealing. While many readers might be tempted to dismiss such women as antifeminist, the question of desire that their writing raises goes to the heart of a major challenge faced by contemporary feminist theory, which since the “sex wars” often remains divided between those who accept whatever women choose as feminist and those who stand in judgment of other women’s choices. This article uses the case of wifely submission to examine the problem of desire, the concept of consent, and the benefits and limitations of “choice” discourse within feminist theory. It argues for a middle-ground approach that respects women as agents in their own lives, while also engaging them in reflective conversation about desire and its ramifications.

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. . . . As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands.

Ephesians 5:22–24

You may be smarter, wiser, or more gifted than your husband, but you are still to respect the position God has given him. You are like the soldier who stands at attention, salutes, and says, “Yes, Sir!” to his superior officer.

Martha Peace, *The Excellent Wife*, 2005

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Feminists have long criticized patriarchy, but how should feminist theorists respond when women are the ones advocating male dominance? This article examines the writings of women who explicitly advocate wifely submission and explains why many heterosexual women find such an ideology appealing. While many readers of this journal might be tempted to simply dismiss such women as antifeminist, the question of desire that their writing raises goes to the heart of a major challenge faced by contemporary feminist theory, which since the “sex wars” often remains divided between those who want to accept whatever women choose as feminist and those who want to stand in judgment of others. This article uses the case of wifely submission to examine the problem of desire and the limitations of “choice” discourse within feminist theory and argues that we need a middle-ground approach that respects women as agents in their own lives, while also engaging them in reflective conversation about desire, its construction, and its role in American society and in their personal lives.

FROM FEMINISM TO BACKLASH

The feminist movement has not always had a very productive approach to dealing with women’s desire for things that do not support feminist goals. During the height of second-wave feminism, the movement split twice over issues directly related to women’s sexual desire. First, in the mid-1970s, heterosexual women felt judged for wanting sexual relationships with men, and many left the movement (Echols 1989, 240). Second, in the early 1980s, feminists split during the sex wars over issues of pornography, prostitution, and lesbian sadomasochism (Evans 2003, 204). Together these two splits left many believing that second-wave feminism was anti-heterosexual, anti-male, and anti-sex — a view espoused not only by right-wing pundits but also by many young “third-wave feminists” (Snyder 2008).

Seeking to prevent another divisive split within feminism, many women today embrace what Linda Hirshman (2005) has called “choice feminism,” a nonjudgmental position that accepts any choice a woman makes as feminist, just because she chose it. While choice feminism makes sense within the liberal feminist context, it leaves women’s socially constructed desires unexamined. Because women’s desires often prop up systems of male dominance, they need to be subjected to critical interrogation. The logic of choice makes it difficult for feminists to examine how

chosen desires are constructed and offers little recognition of how an aggregation of individual choices can have a negative impact on gender relations at large. The invocation of “choice” often works to shut down critical discourse.

While second-wave feminists were grappling with the difficult problem of feminine desires within patriarchy, conservative women began mobilizing in opposition to feminism (Luker 1984; Mansbridge 1986). For example, Beverly LaHaye was “stirred to action” by Betty Friedan’s claim “to speak for the women of America”; she founded Concerned Women for America in 1979 to provide an alternative ideological vision of gender relations based on “biblical principles” (CWA 2008a, 2008b). In direct opposition to feminist visions of gender equality, LaHaye explicitly advocates male-dominated marriage, which she sees as God given.¹

Because it is repeatedly stated in the Bible (Genesis 3:16, Ephesians 5:22, Colossians 3:18, Titus 2:5, I Peter 3:1–6) — and illustrated by the story of Abraham and Sarah — the ideal of wifely submission is central to the worldview of LaHaye and other Christians who emphasize biblical literalism. As LaHaye explains it, the husband’s authority is “not earned, not achieved, not dependent on superior intelligence, virtue nor physical prowess, but *assigned* by God” (B. LaHaye 1993, 134). The wife’s proper role is “to adapt herself to his needs, to respond to his initiation, to submit, to receive” (p. 134). When women “usurp men’s roles,” it “squashes [their] ability to lead, protect, care for, and provide for their families, churches, and communities,” which creates a multitude of problems (p. 117). Unfortunately, LaHaye argues, women tend to be defiant because, like Eve in the Garden, they “are more emotionally responsive to misdirection” and more “easily deceived” than men, which is why God put women under the leadership of their husbands (p. 113). LaHaye’s advocacy of patriarchal marriage is supported by her husband Tim, James Dobson, and other Christian Right leaders (Snyder 2006).

CHOOSING SUBMISSION

While some critics may believe that Christian Right leaders are trying to impose the ideology of wifely submission on women, the reality is more

1. This theory of gender-based dominance and submission also underlies the Christian men’s group the Promise Keepers. For a discussion, see Gutterman 2006.

complicated. In fact, many women are choosing a submissive lifestyle for themselves, insisting that submission in marriage will solve a host of problems. There seems to be a cottage industry of female-authored advice books on the market that emphasize wifely submission as the secret to a happy marriage.² Examples include P. B. Wilson, *Liberated through Submission: God's Design for Freedom in All Relationships* (1990); Elizabeth Handford, *Me? Obey Him?* (1994); Laura Doyle, *The Surrendered Wife: A Practical Guide to Finding Intimacy, Passion, and Peace with a Man* (2001); Julianna Slattery, *Finding the Hero in Your Husband: Surrendering the Way God Intended* (2001); Nancy Leigh DeMoss (ed), *Biblical Womanhood in the Home* (2002); Nancy Cobb and Connie Grigsby, *The Politically Incorrect Wife* (2002); Carolyn Mahaney, *Feminine Appeal: Seven Virtues of a Godly Wife and Mother* (2004); Martha Peace, *The Excellent Wife: A Biblical Perspective* (2005); and Helen Andelin, *Fascinating Womanhood: How the Ideal Woman Awakens a Man's Deepest Love and Tenderness* (2007).

With the exception of Doyle, all of these books base their advocacy of submission on a literal reading of the Bible, and most are explicitly antifeminist. In fact, Andelin's book, now in its sixth edition, was originally published in 1963 as an anti-feminist response to *The Feminine Mystique*. Remarkably, the current interest in wifely submission actually constitutes a return to the understanding of submission that dominated within evangelical Protestantism until the 1980s, when the concept of mutual submission of husband and wife to each other briefly gained ground (Griffith 1997, 183). It is important to note that evangelical Christianity includes not only gender-essentialist arguments that emphasize male headship and female submission in marriage but also egalitarian approaches that emphasize partnership and mutual submission of husband and wife to each other (Gallagher 2003, 15). This article focuses on the former.

All the cited authors claim that their methods have radically transformed marriages for the better, including their own. The books seem to be aimed at women who have very dysfunctional marriages, full of constant bickering and power struggles. The books make frequent reference to women who are controlling, nagging, demeaning, or rude toward their husbands, behavior that reportedly yields apathy, thoughtlessness, passive aggression, or outright hostility on the part of men. The books instruct wives to be

2. A men's literature exists as well. See Boone 2000; Cooper 1974; Eggeriches 2004; Eldredge 2001; T. LaHaye 1996; Priolo 2007; Scott 2002; Weber 2006; D. Wilson 1995, 1999.

respectful and submissive and to try to recapture the way they adored their husbands during courtship. The idea is that a woman only has the power to change her own behavior, but when she does, her husband's behavior will change as well, since every relationship is a dynamic.

Advocates of wifely submission also include women who espouse a lifestyle called "Christian domestic discipline" (CDD), in which wives submit to their husbands "in everything" as commanded in Ephesians, or get punished, most often with spanking. Leah Kelley's self-published books *Consensual Christian Domestic Discipline* (2007) and *Christian Domestic Discipline 101* (2007) explain the CDD ideology and its basis in Scripture. While the Bible says nothing explicit about wife spanking, it does praise the benefits of discipline, parental and divine (Hebrews 12:5–11). While biblical support for the corporal punishment of children is well known (Proverbs 13:24), the Bible also mentions physical discipline for adults (Proverbs 26:3). Advocates reason that since the husband is the head of the household (HOH), and true authority must be enforceable, he has the right to discipline his wife as well as his children. Moreover, submitting "in everything" means accepting punishment as required.

A number of Internet sites focus on CDD. For example, the Christian Domestic Discipline Yahoo! group exists for those "interested in discussing . . . discipline and accountability founded on the principles of God and His Word. [It] offer[s] a LOVING approach to all who wish to learn and grow in a traditional Male, head of household, female submissive, Christian Domestic Discipline relationship." Forum guidelines strictly prohibit any discussion of "alternative lifestyles such as female dominance, bondage/dominance/sadomasochism/masochism (BDSM), or homosexual relationships." The homepage quotes Hebrews 12:11: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Kelley's Website, Traditional Christian Marriage, espouses the same vision of marriage and proclaims, "The Bible is God's inerrant Word and we will honor it as literal and valid for all time" (TCM 2007). She emphasizes that "CDD is practiced between a man and a woman; . . . the husband has authority to spank the wife. The wife does not have authority to spank her husband" (TCM 2007). While a husband "has the authority to spank his wife for punishment," she continues, "in real CDD marriages this is taken very seriously and usually happens only rarely." When it does occur, however, the spanking must be "a strong

enough deterrent to help her overcome her sin nature and remain obedient to her husband” (Kelley 2007a, 46).

While occupying the role of righteous disciplinarian, the husband must remember that he is commanded to love his wife “as Christ loved the Church” (Ephesians 6:25) and is accountable to God for his actions. In this context, Kelley argues that

CDD is so much more than just spanking. It is the husband loving the wife enough to guide and teach her, and the wife loving the husband enough to follow his leadership. A Christian marriage embodies true romance and a Christian man a true hero. Though this seems unusual in today’s United States, this kind of marriage has been practiced throughout history and is still practiced in many parts of the world today. (TCM 2007)

Husbands cannot do whatever they want, only things that are acceptable in God’s sight.

Nonreligious versions of domestic discipline (DD) exist as well. Jules Markham’s *Domestic Discipline* (2007) addresses many of the same problems and claims to provide many of the same benefits touted by the books mentioned here.³ Her vision differs, however, in that it does not completely exclude female-dominated or same-sex couples. Moreover, she sees DD as compatible with feminism, which she defines as simply women making choices. Nevertheless, her claim that the dominant partner, regardless of biological sex, by definition has a “male psyche” highlights the heteronormative bias of the DD community, which uses a romanticized vision of patriarchal marriage as its ideal (Markham 2007, 28–29). While there is no way to document the number of people who condone domestic discipline, there seem to be an increasing number of sites on the Internet that advocate this lifestyle (p. 170).

THEOLOGICAL INEQUALITY

The theological basis of wifely submission and male headship that underlies both the marriage manuals and the CDD lifestyle presents an essentialist vision of gender that is fundamentally inegalitarian, despite frequent assertions to the contrary. The wife is commanded to obey her husband in everything — unless he orders her to sin (Peace 2005, 140). Kelley puts it this way: “The husband is responsible for praying and

3. For examples of male advocacy of DD, see LLD (Loving Domestic Discipline) (lovingdd.blogspot.com) and Taken In Hand (www.takeninhand.com).

following God in the best way he knows how. The husband is next in command. The wife is responsible for praying for her husband's wisdom and guidance in following God, and for obeying him in all things he tells her within the context of God's Word" (Kelley 2007b, 27). He should consider his wife's views, "but, in the final analysis, the man must go in the direction God is leading him whether his wife agrees or not" (P. B. Wilson 1990, 75). "Unless she is providentially hindered, her failure to comply" with "even very small and seemingly unimportant requests or directives" constitutes "not only insubordination to her husband but also disobedience to God" (Peace 2005, 143).

The wife must yield because on Judgment Day, God will hold men and women to different standards. As Wilson puts it, "when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ to receive our rewards, the man — not the woman — will have to give an account for the direction he took the family" (1990, 73). If a woman errs under her husband's leadership, he, not she, will be held accountable: "Your husband is responsible before God for his decisions — good and bad — and you have the protection of being in the will of God when you defer to him" (Cobb and Grigsby 2002, 166). God, however, "does not hold [the wife] accountable for her husband's actions" (Handford 1994, 91). "If you do your job, but he doesn't do his," explain Cobb and Grigsby, "That is between him and the Father. God will deal with a disobedient or ungodly husband. Your concern is . . . doing your job well, and you can gauge this by your obedience" (2002, 134).

Because men supposedly crave it, respect is a major theme in the submission literature (Eggeriches 2004; Gallagher 2003, 157). Women are told that if they cannot respect their husbands as men, they must still respect their role as head of household. When Wilson "asked the Lord, 'Does this mean that I am to stand whenever my husband walks into a room?' He replied, 'No, but your spirit should. Your spirit should stand in honor and bow in respect'" (1990, 116). This is required, God reportedly told her, "even in the cases where husbands clearly do not conduct themselves in a respectable manner" (p. 116). Barbara Hughes concurs, "Even when a husband is utterly not respectable, his wife can honor him by respecting his position" (2002, 127).

While the ideology of wifely submission insists that men are divinely proclaimed to be heads of household, they do not always take a leadership role in their marriages. A perusal of Internet sites reveals both the testimonies of newly submissive women who are used to dominating their husbands and the laments of those whose husbands refuse to take

control. Often women complain about men who are insufficiently dominant, strict, consistent, or severe, which, as Kelley notes, women find “frustrating” (2007a, 40). Advocates emphasize that women must begin to submit in order to allow their husbands room to lead and to expect that their husbands may make mistakes as they learn to assume their rightful place as head of the household. When husbands fall short, wives should withhold criticism and act only in ways that bolster men’s authority.

Surprisingly, many women who advocate wifely submission insist that gender hierarchy does not entail inequality: “This is a hard concept for most people to grasp. We’re equal to our husbands, yet we’re still under their authority” (Cobb and Grigsby 2002, 133). Frequently used metaphors provide little clarity. Cobb and Grigsby say that “[i]n a sense, your husband is the president and you are the vice president” (2002, 133), while Slattery states: “In marriage, a husband has 51 percent of the stock. He casts the deciding vote” (2001, 53). Clearly, neither example illustrates the concept of equality as normally understood. In fact, as Sally Gallagher has noted, claiming that the theology of headship and submission entails equality requires defining equality in a way that “runs counter to everyday usage and understanding” (2003, 165).

Indeed, if the theology of wifely submission is a vision of gender equality, it is hard to imagine what would constitute inequality. Men and women may be equally valued by God, but the theology insists that husbands are always the boss, they always get to have the final say, and the wife always has to obey — regardless of merit or personal disposition (Handford 1994, 105). Moreover, the theology insists that the husband is going to be held responsible to God for the behavior of both himself and his wife, whereas the wife will be held to account for her own behavior — how well she submitted to his leadership. It seems obvious that wifely submission creates a *relationship of inequality* rather than equality, even if both parties are equal in some abstract, metaphysical sense. It is remarkable that the value of gender equality has become so well accepted in American culture that even those espousing its opposite insist they support it.

EXPLAINING THE DESIRE FOR SUBMISSION

Why would a woman embrace the ideology of wifely submission? Are these women simply interpellated by male-dominated narratives, as Catherine

MacKinnon argues (1989, 54)? Listening to the voices of submissive women reveals many reasons for their attraction to male dominance. First, some women accept it simply because they see it as mandated by the Bible, and many view wifely submission as a religious discipline (Gallagher 2003, 163; Peace 2005). Almost all the books discussed here base their calls for submission on a literal reading of the Bible. Wifely submission is a central component of some versions of evangelical Christianity, and the authentic religious moment should not be trivialized (Griffith 1997). Indeed, conservative evangelicalism is growing quickly in the United States, and many people see it as a deeply fulfilling alternative to the spiritual poverty of modernity (Gallagher 2003, 9–10). Many of the women (and men) who post on the CDD Yahoo! list, for example, represent themselves as pious, biblical literalists, who strive to obey all biblical commandments.

Yet citing the biblical mandate does not fully explain women's attraction to wifely submission, since many Christian women, even conservative ones, interpret those passages as allowing mutual submission (Gallagher 2003, 159). Moreover, while the Bible does command wives to submit, if you want to read literally, nowhere does it empower men to dominate their wives against their will or to punish them. Instead it says, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). In fact, men are commanded to "love their wives as their own bodies" (Ephesians 5:28), and all Christians are commanded to follow the Golden Rule: "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them" (Matthew 7:12). Consequently, since the husband is commanded to treat his wife as he would like to be treated, he has no justification for dominating or punishing her against her will, as he would not appreciate that kind of treatment from her. Moreover, if the husband is truly in charge, he can lovingly require his wife *not* to be submissive, if she finds it objectionable. She would then be submitting to his will by not being submissive.

Furthermore, liberal Christians insist that biblical passages must be understood in historical context. For example, Paul said, "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ" (Ephesians 6:5). Nineteenth-century slaveholders used Paul's teaching to justify slavery, but today most people understand slavery as incompatible with the Christian message of human equality. They now argue that Paul was advising slaves on how to behave in a society that allows slavery, not advocating the continuation of the practice. The same can be said about wifely submission: It must be

understood in its historical context. So, in a sense, citing religion simply begs the question.

In today's society, the ideology of wifely submission must be understood in the context of feminism's "unfinished revolution, with all the frustrations and disappointments that entails" for many women (Marso 2006, x) — a revolution that has cleared the way for women to pursue careers but has not relieved them of their traditional responsibilities in the home; that has removed the patina of chivalry but left the realities of misogyny and objectification intact; that has made divorce easier without guaranteeing a decent standard of living for women and children afterwards. Indeed, since the onset of second-wave feminism, real wages have stagnated, and many families struggle to get by, even in two-income households.

Advocates of wifely submission often frame it as an alternative to feminism. "The feminist revolution was supposed to bring women greater fulfillment and freedom," but it has left them "utterly exhausted" (DeMoss 2002, 15). "Many women have realized that they are trying to do too much"; as a consequence, "giving up a bit of control isn't so bad" (Markham 2007, 7). Some claim that feminism nearly destroyed their marriages (Cobb and Grigsby 2002, 14–15; Peace 2005, 2): "The call to return to biblical womanhood resonates within Christian women who have tasted the bitter fruit of the feminist revolution and who know within their hearts that God's ways are right" (DeMoss 2002, 17). The patriarchal model is seen as offering clear relationship rules, and women choose it because of "their dissatisfaction with contemporary society" (Markham 2007, 7). Advocates see submission as offering better solutions to a range of problems plaguing contemporary women than does feminism as they understand it.

For example, wifely submission provides a seemingly simple solution to the problem of conflict between two subjects that can occur in an egalitarian marriage — which is the second reason women choose it. Marital harmony is a common theme among evangelicals in general and submissive wives in particular (Gallagher 2003, 160–61). "God devised a plan to keep absolute harmony in our marriage relationships" (P. B. Wilson 1990, 72–73). If a woman refuses to accept her husband as HOH, "if she insists on her own way, . . . she sows contentiousness and reaps bitterness and division" (Cobb and Grigsby 2002, 138). On the other hand, if "she is committed to doing what he wants her to do, there is no conflict of interest" (Handford 1994, 69). In "a home where the father presides . . . [t]here's less argument and contention, more harmony" (Andelin 2007, 155). CDD practitioners claim that it has

“brought peace to their homes, decreased the number of arguments in their marriage, . . . helped them deal with problems quickly and thoroughly” (Kelley 2007a, 11). For Markham, “discipline replaces arguments” (2007, 3).

Third, by clearly delineating the responsibilities of husbands and wives, the ideology of wifely submission helps relieve women of the “superwoman complex” that requires them to do everything well. “If you’re a wife who feels overwhelmed, lonely and responsible for everything,” Doyle argues, “this book is perfect for you” (2001, 25). One of the main tenets of the ideology is that husbands must take responsibility for the family finances. When the wife lets go of financial control, she will “also leave behind the anxiety and worry that comes with being the family banker” (Doyle 2001, 90). Moreover, if a man does not control the household finances, he is not really a man; he “has no power — he is ‘impotent’” (p. 91): “No man, stripped of his pride in providing for his family, will show much concern about the bills” (Handford 1994, 67). Consequently, his wife will have to worry, which will make her life much more difficult (Andelin 2007, 187). Even if the wife is better with money or the husband is financially irresponsible — if the electricity gets cut off when he does not pay the bill on time, for example — women should let him have control; eventually he will learn to behave responsibly.

Furthermore, the sexual division of labor central to the ideology endows women’s traditional work with importance and respect. In her study of submission among evangelical Christians, R. Marie Griffin discovered the notion of “‘sacred housework,’ wherein surrendering to one’s ordained tasks is seen as an act of worship that also leads to greater happiness within the home” (1997, 181). She notes that “when housework is perceived as sacred, it may also become an important source of self-esteem” (p. 182). Embracing the sexual division of labor, Andelin counsels women not to expect men to help around the house. She tells women to “do your work willingly and don’t expect too much of your husband” (Andelin 2007, 105). It takes less time to pick your husband’s socks off the floor than it does to convince him to do it.

Fourth, the ideology of wifely submission requires the husband to pay a lot of attention to his wife, which makes a woman feel valued and loved. P. B. Wilson claims that male headship “means that he is deeply concerned about [his wife’s] well-being. He is sacrificially committed to every aspect of her personal growth and fulfillment. He is willing to take full responsibility for her protection and guidance, while leaving her the freedom to be herself and fully develop into the unique woman God

created her to be” (Wilson 1990, 73). Handford tells women that obedience will provide “the privilege of a husband’s lifelong loving devotion and concern for your welfare” (1994, 64). CDD requires that a husband monitor his wife’s behavior, as she needs to constantly feel his authority. Kelley and Markham suggest that he might want to require his wife to keep a behavior journal for him to check regularly (Kelley 2007a, 103; Markham 2007, 61).

Fifth, like other forms of authoritarianism, wifely submission relieves women of having to be responsible for many of life’s decisions: “When the wife is removed from leadership duties, she has less worry and concern” (Andelin 2007, 155). In fact, “one of the privileges of submission is that a woman no longer takes the consequences of a decision upon herself. When she submits to her husband and allows him to lead, the consequences fall on him” (Cobb and Grigsby 2002, 138). Handford concurs: “You have the freedom from having to take the consequences of making decisions. When you give back to your husband the responsibility for the direction of the home and the making of decisions, you also give him responsibility for the consequences of his decisions. . . . Fortunately, that’s the way a man likes it” (1994, 65–66).

Sixth, many women embrace submission because it provides them with a sense of security and protection (Gallagher 2003, 159–60). The ideology of wifely submission portrays men as protectors. According to Andelin, man “was created to be the protector for his wife and children. . . . In all periods of time, women have needed protection from dangers, strenuous work, and difficulties” (Andelin 2007, 163). “We feminists,” Doyle argues, “have struggled with acknowledging — and even tried to deny — that as women, we still want to be protected, pampered, spoiled, adored, pursued, and treasured. Having a man’s protection puts us at ease” (2001, 156). Cobb and Grigsby assert that God knows what women need, and “when you get married, another of your wedding gifts from God is an umbrella He gives you for protection. It has a name: submission” (2002, 131). CDD wives reportedly say that they have “a stronger sense of security, a feeling of being protected and cherished” (Kelley 2007a, 12).

Seventh, the ideology of submission gives busy mothers permission to find space for themselves and their marital relationship. Women are instructed to put their husbands first in their lives, even before their children. Cobb and Grigsby stress that “a wife’s role is not meant to be abandoned or amended once children come along. Certainly it is expanded, but her commitment to her husband and her respect for his

place in the family are to remain unchanged. Even though she is now a mother, she should still see herself as a helper to her husband” (2002, 213). Things like putting the children to bed early so that husband and wife can spend time together provides space for women to get away from their child-rearing responsibilities, which have expanded as societal mores have become more child-centric (p. 35). Moreover, a submissive wife needs a balanced life to be a better companion to her husband (Doyle 2001, 69–75).

Putting husbands first is directly related to the eighth reason why many women find submission appealing; they claim it helps maintain a strong connection between husband and wife. Improving the quality of conjugal relationships is important since love and happiness are now seen as essential to the continuation of marriage in an era when half of all marriages end in divorce, often leaving women economically as well as emotionally devastated (Coontz 2006). In fact, Gallagher finds the desires for love and increased emotional intimacy to be major reasons why evangelical women embrace male headship (2003, 157). As Handford puts it, “submission brings love. If you obey him, you will love him, love him more than you ever dreamed possible. . . . [M]any a woman who thought she could never love the man she was bound to has discovered that, when she obeyed him, she learned to love him” (1994, 88).

To protect their marriages, wives must attend to their husbands (Mahaney 2004, 31–47). Men crave admiration; if they do not get it at home, they may look elsewhere (Cobb and Grigsby 2002, 173). Wives must also attend to themselves. According to several books, maintaining a healthy weight and looking attractive are part of being a submissive wife (Andelin 2007, 390–93; Cobb and Grigsby 2002, 188). As Doyle puts it, “until you get your self-care in, you’re not going to be much fun to live with, and you certainly won’t have the energy to surrender” (2001, 75).

Finally, the ideology of wifely submission claims that it will lead to an increased libido. For Doyle, sexual desire requires masculine men and feminine women — what she calls high gender contrast. When a woman is not very feminine, she explains, it sets the gender contrast on low: “Your husband will respond to you with low contrast too, so that he matches you. That means he’s going to be less attractive to you because he’ll seem more feminine. For years we’ve said that we want men to be more sensitive, but as soon as they start talking about their feelings, we’re not as attracted to them” (Doyle 2001, 200). Insisting that “women typically want . . . a manly man,” Doyle advises women to “come to the

bedroom as female as possible. That means being soft, delicate, and receptive. . . . It also means pretending that you never knew the meaning of ambition, aggression, or . . . control” (p. 201).

Many advocates of wifely submission testify to having a renewed sexual connection after many years of marriage (Doyle 2001, 209). As Kelley insists, “I can’t tell you the number of testimonies I’ve read of those who say CDD has saved their marriage, brought them closer together as a couple, or renewed the romance in their relationship, but it is very frequent.” People report that “CDD enhanced their sex lives. . . . No one knows exactly why CDD seems to work so well to restore romance and vitality to marriages, but according to testimony after testimony, it does just that” (Kelley 2007a, 11–12). While Kelley may not understand why the ideology she espouses works, MacKinnon has provided one persuasive explanation: In a male-dominated society, “sexuality is socially organized to require sex inequality for excitement and satisfaction” (1989, 243). Many women, as well as men, have internalized cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity that equate them with dominance and submission, respectively, and that is one significant reason why CDD works and why desire remains a central problem for feminism.

DISCIPLINE AND SEXUALITY

On the surface, the practices of wifely submission and CDD might seem similar to the practices of dominance and submission, sadomasochism, and consensual spanking that occur within the BDSM community (Brame, Brame, and Jacobs 1993, 164–83); however, DD groups, particularly Christian ones, vehemently differentiate themselves from BDSM (LDD 2007).⁴ What makes CDD/DD different is the use of corporal punishment for behavior modification and marital harmony, rather than (or in addition to) pleasure (Markham 2007, 27).⁵ For example, the Discipline and Love Website claims that it is “not about erotic role-playing or sado/masochistic pleasure, but about the serious and meaningful use of domestic discipline as a means to improve and enhance a loving relationship” (D&L 2008). As Kelley insists, “Wanting

4. The acronym BDSM combines bondage and discipline (B&D) with sadomasochism (SM or S&M). The DS in the middle can also represent dominance and submission (D/s or D&S).

5. Some BDSM practitioners take the consensual nonconsensuality approach as well – including those into “lifestyle D&S” and Master/slave relationships (Brame, Brame, and Jacobs 1993, 164–183, 80–82).

CDD does not make you a masochist. You simply want him to have true authority in your marriage. Living in the roles God has created for you is the real attraction of CDD, not the pain/punishment. Spankings/punishments are necessary but may not be enjoyable for either party” (2007a, 63). In fact, according to Kelley “most CDD wives hate punishment spankings” (p. 40).

Despite the attempt of Kelley and others to differentiate between discipline and sexuality, however, the boundaries are not always so clear. For example, even as Kelley insists that “most CDD wives hate punishment spankings,” she also recognizes that discipline may be erotic:

It concerns many women that their husbands want to make love directly after they've spanked her, but I see this as a natural and maybe even inevitable consequence. First of all, he has been recently focused on her (probably bare) bottom. This alone causes most red-blooded men to want to make love to their wives. But more importantly, he is probably aroused by her submissive and trusting gesture by placing herself into a position to receive discipline from him. Remember, God created us to be most content in the roles He created for us, and He created erotic feelings to be enjoyed inside a marriage. It seems natural that we would be aroused by these roles in their most basic form. There are probably few things that punctuate our most basic roles in marriage more than the dominance and submission of a discipline session. (Kelley 2007a, 56)

While “many wives have no desire to make love just afterwards, but would rather have time to calm themselves and reflect on what has occurred,” she continues, “that doesn't stop many of them from finding themselves unable to keep their hands off their husbands in a couple of hours!” (p. 57).

Further blurring the boundaries, an examination of Internet posts by women who advocate CDD and DD reveals that many of them also engage in erotic spanking. Many have experimented with BDSM but felt uncomfortable with the nontraditional mores dominant in that community (e.g., pansexuality, polyamory, casual relationships). Others still practice BDSM. Remarkably, many CDD and DD folks incorporate “maintenance spankings” into their relationships, given regularly (sometimes daily), regardless of behavior (Kelley 2007b, 42; Markham 2007, 59–61), often because the spankee enjoys it (Markham 2007, 111). Thus, while a distinguishing feature of CDD/DD is corporal punishment for behavior modification, spanking provides pleasure as well.

Consent

While it is often hard to draw a firm line between CDD and BDSM, these two lifestyles actually provide radically different ways of contextualizing women's desires for submission and/or spanking, with nonreligious versions of DD falling somewhere in between. One important point of differentiation is the status of consent within those communities. BDSM is explicitly based on consent; the community's standard mantra is "safe, sane, and consensual" (Brame, Brame, and Jacobs 1993, 49), although some edgier participants prefer the slogan "risk aware consensual kink." In any event, activities and relationships are carefully negotiated beforehand to ensure consent, and practitioners generally use "safe words" through which an activity can be slowed or halted if the submissive party says a predetermined word (p. 50). Consent is a vitally important concept for the BDSM community because the presence of consent is what differentiates BDSM from abuse (pp. 52–53).

In contrast, DD relationships in general might be best described as "consensual nonconsensuality, meaning the condition in which one wills the circumstances of one's own domination" (Wingrove 2005, 5). Domestic discipline of all sorts sets up a situation in which a woman is truly being punished for an actual offense, and punishment is ostensibly something she does not want. While DD practitioners emphasize that a woman must consent to be in a relationship in which she will be disciplined, it is understood that she cannot retract consent to avoid a particular punishment because that would render the power relationship inauthentic. Although many practitioners report that they also engage in erotic spanking, they insist that a punishment spanking differs from an erotic spanking; they like the latter but do not like the former, mostly because of the psychological distress of having disappointed their husbands.

Most practitioners of DD in both its forms scorn the use of safe words (Kelley 2007a, 50; Markham 2007, 42). Both Kelley and Markham stress that husbands should not let their wives get away with trying to avoid punishment. Kelley notes that "often a woman will try to 'back out' of the agreement just at the point when she is to be punished. This should not be allowed to happen or it will derail the whole arrangement" (2007a, 50). Even if a woman cries, begs, and struggles during a punishment, which many women do (p. 50), husbands are advised to keep spanking until she moves beyond anger and resistance (p. 47). As Markham emphasizes, DD "is not a game. Once you sign up to the

lifestyle approach . . . dispense with safe words or anything else. A sensible couple will leave the HOH to administer the discipline and then talk about things afterwards. The HOH should be prepared to listen and adapt accordingly,” but only during subsequent punishments (2007, 42).

When biblical literalism forms the foundation of a domestic discipline relationship, however, the concept of consent becomes peripheral. That is, if God has commanded wives to submit, then the issue of consent is moot. While a woman must choose whether or not to follow God’s commandments, she cannot righteously refuse to submit. The woman consents to her husband’s authority on her wedding day; after that she is morally bound to obey him for the rest of her life (Mark 10:2–12). That is why Kelley does not believe that the wife’s consent should be required for discipline. She says:

It is interesting to note that *Biblically*, a man’s right to chastise and discipline his wife is strongly implied. Just as a parent would never stop to ask permission to chastise his child, a husband should not have to obtain consent to discipline his wife; however, our legal system has put him in the position of having to do so. Just as our culture is turned upside down in so many other things, the traditional Christian marriage in no exception. (Kelley 2007b, 5)

Kelley does not say whether she advocates any changes in the American legal system, but she clearly rejects the principle of consent that is central to it.

In addition, consent is not required within the theology of wifely submission because it essentially reduces a woman to the status of a child vis-à-vis her husband, and traditionally at least, children are not considered capable of forming consent. Like a perpetual child, the submissive Christian wife is always under her husband’s authority and requires his ongoing guidance and permission. In a CDD marriage, the husband sets rules for his wife’s own good and provides the discipline necessary for her to obey. The frequent use of “corner time” in conjunction with spanking seems to reinforce a parent-child dynamic (Kelley 2007a, 26; Markham 2007, 73–75). While it is important to note that some people who are into BDSM incorporate spanking, corner time, and age play into their adult sexual relationships and do not experience these practices as infantilizing (Brame, Brame, and Jacobs 1995, 237–38), a significant difference exists. BDSM, unlike CDD, does not claim that women are designed by God to live under the

authority of their husbands because they are in need of guidance, even during adulthood.

FEMINIST RESPONSES TO THE EROTICIZATION OF MALE DOMINANCE

How should feminist theory respond to the desire of women for male dominance? The feminist movement has not always had a very productive approach to dealing with women's attraction to dominance and submission. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, conflict over the desire of some lesbians to engage in SM (SAMOIS 1981) played a large role in the sex wars that split feminism in the early 1980s into so-called pro-sex and anti-sex camps. During those heated days, some radical feminists openly mocked or ridiculed women who were into consensual sadomasochism (Linden et al. 1982, 96, 106, 131) — and the issue at stake was not even women submitting to men, just women submitting to other women and only in negotiated situations.

Back then the debate was framed as “pleasure” versus “danger,” but today the options might be better depicted as “choice” versus “judgmentalness.” In light of what seems to be irreconcilable differences among women, the liberal solution that distinguishes between personal choices and public policy has important points to contribute. First, women do and should have the right to live their personal lives as they choose, even if others find their choices offensive. Second, conservative Christian ideologues like Kelley and LaHaye need to understand that in a liberal democratic society, the separation of church and state prohibits the enactment of particular religious mandates into law (Rawls 2005). While none of the sources examined in this article (except LaHaye) explicitly suggests any legal changes, the Christian Right actively advocates a law based on literal interpretation of Christian Scripture (Snyder 2006). Insisting on the principle that in a free society, we should not attempt to regulate what consenting adults do in their homes, even if we do not approve of it, remains an important principle.

At the same time, however, the liberal solution has serious limitations for feminism because it takes what happens at home off the table of political discussion. As feminism notes, however, the personal is political. Traditional gender roles chosen at home reinforce the material and ideological conditions of male dominance. As Susan Okin argues, when women have to take or expect to take primary

responsibility for home and family, this affects their willingness and ability to pursue educational and career opportunities, ceding money and power to men (1989, 142). The choice not to work or to work part time reduces women's earning power, which, in turn, gives them less leverage in their marriages vis-à-vis their husbands. Economic dependence renders them more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, and their lack of job skills makes them less able to support themselves in the case of divorce (Okin 1989, 152). Personal choices have political ramifications.

Conversely, our most personal desires may come from the internalization of societal norms, which are often rooted in structures of inequality. In a male-dominated society, the social construction of sexuality can lead to an eroticization of male dominance and female submission (Benjamin 1988; MacKinnon 1989). Women come to desire their own domination. Yet just because our desires are socially constructed does not mean that they can be changed easily or at will (Cornell 1995). As Lori Marso (2006) argues, even feminist women struggle with what she calls the "demands of femininity," the cultural dynamics and internalized desires that keep women tied to a sex/gender system they seek to transform. For many women, sexual desire is central to how they understand themselves as sexed beings (Cornell 1995, 6); they feel their desires deeply and have no wish to change what gives them fulfillment and makes them who they are, even if their choices reinforce ideologies that support male dominance.

A vision of feminism that emphasizes the right to choose as its guiding principle makes it difficult to get at the problem of desire because the invocation of "rights" and "choices" often functions to shut down critical discourse that seeks to delve into the reasons why women make particular choices. In response to this problem, Linda Hirshman calls for feminism to return "to its early, judgmental roots" (2005, 4), and this is exactly what the women on the third-wave blog *feministing.org* did when they discovered Kelley's Website. They reacted with judgmentalness and ridicule — calling CDD "sick," "wacko," "disgusting," and "ridiculous," among other things (*Feministing.org* 2007). That reaction is understandable. Because the discourse of wifely submission romanticizes patriarchy and stands diametrically opposed to the feminist goal of ending gender oppression, many feminists will no doubt find it patently offensive. Yet the reaction is also surprising, given that third-wave feminism in general defines itself as the heir of the nonjudgmental, pro-sex side of the sex wars (Snyder 2008).

Standing in judgment of other women's choices, however, is not a productive approach, and it will most likely do more harm than good to feminism, playing into commonly accepted caricatures of the movement. Many submissive women already feel marginalized by what they perceive as hegemonic feminist norms — which is what all the marriage manuals are contesting. Judgmentalness does not make desire go away. In fact, a position of condemnation or ridicule will probably push submissive women toward the theological discourse that validates their desires — a discourse that potentially undergirds an antifeminist, Christian Right agenda. While many submissive women vehemently oppose feminism and embrace conservative politics, that is certainly not the case across the board, even among evangelicals (Gallagher 2003, 9). As Christel Manning (1999) found, conservative evangelical women often support gender equality in the workplace, relegating submission to the realms of home and church only, and they sometimes embrace the discourse of wifely submission while behaving in accordance with more egalitarian ideals. Most people are not ideologues, even if they find a particular ideology appealing. People can be swayed one way or another, depending on how the issues are framed.

No easy solution exists to the problem of patriarchal desire, and not all women support gender equality. Nevertheless, I would argue that feminists should respond to submissive women in a way that increases the possibility that they will move toward feminism, an approach that has three components. First, feminists should continue to engage in cultural production with the goal of expanding the possibilities of the imaginary domain — the psychic space in which people construct themselves as persons (Cornell 1995, 8). We need to expand the possibility for women to imagine themselves outside the box of male dominance and female submission by offering images of alternative relationships, genders, and sexualities. For me, the problem is not so much that this or that particular woman desires patriarchy but rather that at a certain point, an aggregation of individual choices could render male-dominated relationships hegemonic once again, possibly even with the support of the law, as in the nineteenth century. Encouraging a multiplicity of relationship types should help mitigate that danger.

When advocates of wifely submission tout the benefits of patriarchal marriage, feminists need to respond with a compelling alternative vision. For example, women concerned about their marriages need to know that a recent study reveals that men and women with feminist partners report having more stable and satisfying relationships and better sex lives

(Rudman and Phelan 2007). Accessibly written, popular press books would help communicate feminist principles to the general public. On the bright side, it is a sign of progress that many women see feminism as hegemonic and believe patriarchy needs defending. On the other hand, the receptiveness of women to the ideology of wifely submission indicates that the conservative backlash is working.

Second, feminists should seek to engage women in critical discussions about their choices, rather than simply accepting them as sacrosanct or condemning them as deluded. Nancy Hirschmann stakes out this middle ground in *The Subject of Liberty* (2003): “Feminist freedom requires that women’s decisions be respected,” she begins, “regardless of what they choose; feminists must support, in principle if not politically, women’s choices to oppose abortion, stay with abusers, not report rape or sexual harassment, or become full-time mothers and housewives” (Hirschmann 2003, 237–38). At the same time, however, feminist freedom also requires that women ask each other questions, “that we continue a critical engagement with the foundation and meaning of desire and choice” (p. 237). We need an open space of dialogue in which women on both sides of contentious issues can engage each other with respect rather than judgment and ridicule. As Marso (2006) argues, all women grapple with the “demands of femininity”; some do this by pushing the boundaries of societal norms. Others struggle to find a functional place of comfort within those norms. Whatever the case, however, only the woman herself “can come up with the answers” to vexing questions about desire; “nobody else can answer those questions” for her (Hirschmann 2003, 237). Walking the line of respectful engagement is difficult, but it is what feminism requires.

Finally, although legal solutions cannot solve the problem of women’s desire for male dominance, law and public policy do have a role to play. Despite the limitations of consent (MacKinnon 1989), the concept remains vitally important. We need to protect laws concerning domestic violence and marital rape from erosion by those who see them as a threat to the conservative family or to their personal practices. Though imperfect, domestic violence laws help protect women from abuse. The possibility of arrest should play a positive role in curbing the desires of those men who seek to impose CDD on unwilling wives — which some men on the Internet claim they do. Indeed, the commandment of submission has been used by evangelical men to justify abuse (Gallagher 2003, 165–66). Spanking a woman against her will or insisting on sex when she is not ready currently does and should continue to constitute

domestic violence and rape, respectively. Men who dominate women must be vigilant in making sure that their partners really do want to be dominated; women should be able to call the police for help if necessary.

Feminists also need to enhance the conditions for consent by supporting a wide array of policies designed to ensure that women have the right and the ability to exit marital relationships at will (Benhabib 2002). We should oppose Christian Right attempts to enshrine covenant marriage as a legal option because it could potentially trap a woman in an unhappy or abusive marriage. We need social policies that lighten the load on working families, help women balance work and family responsibilities, and protect them from economic destitution upon divorce – higher wages, flextime, high-quality child care, and so on – so that they are not in the position of accepting any kind of treatment just to stay married. In addition, laws that protect gender and sexual minorities – which the Christian Right opposes – protect the viability of a variety of genders and sexualities beyond the traditional two, making it easier for women to live alternative lifestyles outside the bounds of patriarchy. While not a panacea, these policy recommendations should help increase the possibility that women will truly be able to self-actualize, and that is probably the best we can hope for at this point.

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