

The Federal Husband

by Douglas Wilson

Among the many words which our century has trashed, words like *awesome* or *gay*, the word *federal* most certainly heads the list. The word makes us think of big, centralized things, things that make a collectivist's heart feel warm and cozy. We slap the word on institutions so that little old ladies will deposit their money there. Nobody names his bank *Bob's Sunshine Bank*; the name must be something which exudes solidity and bigness like *First Federal Security* does.

But the word *federal* actually comes from the Latin word *foedus*, which means covenant. Because our federal government is about as uncovenantal as can be imagined, it is not surprising that we have forgotten the original import of the word. We think that *federal* means centralized, and does not refer in any kind of way to any kind of covenant. But classical Protestant theology reflects the biblical teaching in this. The Bible describes the relationship between Adam and the human race as a federal one. That is, God made a covenant with the entire human race, with Adam serving as the representative or covenant head of that race. In the same way, our salvation was accomplished federally. Christ, the second Adam, was sent by God to be the federal head of a new race. His obedience was representative, and was imputed to all His elect, identified as such through their faith. This is why Christ stands in a relationship to the Church which is described as one of headship. This headship is covenantal, which means that it is necessarily a federal headship.

This is all well and good, but what is it doing in a column for husbands? The answer is that husbands are told to love their wives *as Christ loved the Church*. By the very nature of the case, this means that husbands are told to model or exhibit a federal relationship to their wives. The command to husbands is to love their wives as Christ loved His bride. This means that the theology of Christ's love will be determinative of how a Christian wife is loved. How a man understands ultimate covenantal loving will settle how *he* sets about covenantal loving. How he understands the thing to be imitated will determine how he imitates. If our theology is biblical (and thereby federal, or covenantal), then the wife will be loved as Christ really did love the Church. If the theology is either sub-federal or anti-covenantal, then a woman, when she is loved at all, will be loved sentimentally.

In the modern Church, the central intellectual sin regarding marriage is one of definition. We want to assume that marriage is a permanent "roommate" arrangement between two individuals, with certain sexual privileges included. But the Bible describes marriage as a covenant. The adulteress is one who forsakes the companion of her youth, the *covenant* of her God (Prov. 2:17). The men of Israel are rebuked because they abandoned their *covenantal* wives (Mal. 2:14). But we have thought that we could have biblical marriages without even knowing what a covenant marriage is. At the heart of this covenantal relationship is the issue of responsibility. When there is genuine federal headship, the head as representative *assumes responsibility* for the condition of the members of the covenant body. This is why we can say that when Adam disobeyed in the garden, we were there sinning in and with him. And this is why we can say that when Christ obeyed in the garden, submitting to the will of the Father, we were there obeying in and with Him.

Of course, husbands cannot duplicate this in their relationship with their wives. But though we cannot duplicate it exactly, we are commanded to imitate it. Because marriage is constituted as a covenantal institution, and because the relation to be imitated is also covenantal, such imitation will of necessity be federal.

One of the most difficult things for modern men to understand is how they are responsible for their wives. Men come into a pastoral marriage counseling session with the assumption that "she has her problems," and "I have mine," and the counselor is here to help us split the difference. But the husband is responsible for *all* the problems. This is the case for no other reason than that he is the husband.

This does not mean that the wife has no personal responsibility as an individual before God. She certainly does, just as her husband has individual responsibility. They are both private persons who stand before God. But he remains the head, and just as Christ *as the head* assumed all the responsibility for all the sins of all His people, so the husband is to assume covenant responsibility for the state of his marriage.

In reading these words, he may be entirely unsure about what it means to "assume federal responsibility." And given the divine pattern assigned to us for imitation, it is certain that no husband has a complete understanding of what he is called to do. That is why he had better get started.

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