**Role of the Submissive Wife**

Heidi Hall, The Tennessean 7:32 a.m. EST March 5, 2014

Sarah Palin ran for vice president, Hillary Rodham Clinton ran for president, and the nation's Christians are still talking about about [what it means to be a submissive wife](http://www.tennessean.com/article/20140304/NEWS06/303040124/Nashville-Christians-authors-debate-role-submissive-biblical-wife).

In fact, the subject is popping up even more these days, preached from the pulpit, pontificated about in a spate of new book releases and prominent on the agenda of an upcoming Southern Baptist leadership summit. All seek to answer the question of whether wives are 100 percent equal partners or whether "biblical womanhood" means a God-given role of supporting their husbands — and, in turn, knowing their husbands are honor-bound to die for them, if necessary.

It's another battle in America's culture wars, one evangelical churches find themselves facing more often as a new kind of parishioner fills the pews, said Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

"There was a day that many churches could assume they were living in Mayberry and seek to apply texts to pictures that people in the pews already had in their minds," Moore said. "That day is over, due to the changing family structure and divorce culture."

**'Able to submit'**

Two references are increasingly entering the Christian lexicon: the Ephesians 5 Family and the Proverbs 31 Woman. The first compares husbands leading their households to Christ leading the church. The second is a lengthy recitation of what the ideal woman would be doing with her time.

Nolensville authors Adonis and Heather Lenzy take up the topic in their new book "Dating in Black & White," which they wrote after a number of Oasis Church members asked for instruction on successful dating and marriage. Adonis Lenzy is an associate pastor there.

Some of the phrases in the book would make feminists blanch. "Even though she has a strong personality, she is able to submit to her husband," one reads. And another: "The fact is that God made us to submit to our husbands, whether we're housewives or the big bosses at work."

"I didn't like (the word 'submission') at first because I was independent, but I wanted something different because I had been married before, and I didn't want to go through another failed marriage," Heather Lenzy said. "I learned it wasn't to boss me around or hurt me. It was for my own good."

Even some new religious books that advocate for women to take on careers couch that advice in terms of the Proverbs 31 woman. "Real Women Leading: With Proverbs 31 Values" encourages women to make the most of their skills, whether as a home-school instructor for the kids or a CEO, like its Ohio-based author, Dawn Yoder. Her husband works for her in the office, but home is a different story, she said.

"If I submit to my husband, and my husband loves me like Christ loves the church, it's really not an issue. When one of those two people are not operating out of that, we have conflict," Yoder said.

**A different take**

On the other side are books with a different reading of Scripture, including one by a Tennessee evangelical author that hit The New York Times best-seller list in 2012. Southern Baptist-run LifeWay bookstore refused to carry it. Before writing "A Year of Biblical Womanhood," Rachel Held Evans tried taking biblical texts on women literally, including Proverbs 31. The book ultimately advocates for egalitarianism.

Reading texts about "biblical womanhood" means considering the historical context, says Cynthia Rigby, an Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary professor who's writing the book "Shaping Our Faith: A Christian Feminist Theology." In a world where women couldn't own property and could be divorced by their husbands saying the word three times, holding wives up as "holy and without blemish" was a radical idea, she said.

"I don't think it's possible to have Christian community without submission, but I believe the biblical witness makes the case for mutual submission," Rigby said. "That's difficult with a text used to teach women they're inferior."