

A Guide to Cross-Centered Submission

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The word “submission” elicits a strong and often negative reaction in our culture. For many, it provokes images of oppression, slavery, or abuse. Submitting sounds like giving in, or giving up. But submission has always been an important part of Christian theology. After all, salvation flows through Christ’s submission to God on the cross.

When Christian egalitarians argue that God does not intend for women to submit to men in all situations at all times, or for wives to always submit to husbands, we are often accused of failing to practice Christian submission of any kind. Egalitarian women just want power, some accuse. We want to be “like men.” We want to avoid all the negative images that “submission” conjures, so we run from it.

But Christian egalitarians don’t hate submission. We love submission. In fact, our faith is built not only on Christ’s submission on the cross but on our submission to God, to Scripture, and to our sisters and brothers in Christ. We part ways with complementarians over the definition of biblical submission. Let’s start by defining what biblical submission is not.

Biblical submission is not:

Subjecting ourselves to abuse

Each person on earth has infinite value as an image bearer of the almighty God. The Bible does not call anyone, man or woman, to submit to any type of abuse—physical, spiritual, sexual, or emotional. Calls to

submit to abuse for a season or to stay in an abusive situation are not biblical, and moreover, are not from the heart of God.

Following without question

Romans 12:2 reads “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” God does not ask us to blindly submit to others without question. Instead, we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We are to seek God’s will above any human’s will because God’s will is always good, pleasing, and perfect. Biblical submission never asks us to follow any leader, pastor, spouse, or person without question. And biblical submission never asks us to ignore our best spiritual judgment simply because a leader, pastor, spouse, or any person directs us elsewhere. God’s will is good and pleasing—Scripture invites all believers to test that.

Based on gender, race, or social status

The Bible does not teach that we must submit to people of a certain gender, race, or social status. In fact, it teaches the exact opposite. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. Galatians 3:28–29 reads “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” This idea is central to our new life in Christ; all believers have the position and authority of heirs. The family of Christ stands on level ground.

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Biblical submission is something quite different.

Biblical submission is:

Mutual

Biblical submission is mutual submission—the foundation of Christian community. After teaching Ephesian Christians about unity in the body of Christ and living as Christians, Paul writes: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21). He then goes on to address the Greco-Roman household codes, which demanded the submission of wives, children, and slaves to husbands, parents, and masters. Paul shines the radical light of Christ on these codes, transforming them with a mandate for mutual submission (v. 21), and a call to unity through and with Christ. Mutual submission was a radical concept for Paul’s audience, but biblical submission is rooted in our identity as image bearers of God and our status as joint heirs with Christ. While the cultural norms of many cultures and communities often give power to one group or another, Paul reminds us that we are all part of the body of Christ and we submit to one another.

Bearing good fruit

The will of God bears good fruit: “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit” (Matt. 7:18). Biblical submission will bring forth love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). It will honor the image of God in each person and help him or her to pursue his or her calling in Christ. When we submit to each other as Christ leads in each circumstance, we are walking in the perfect will of God and we will bear good fruit. Submission that bears bad fruit is not biblical submission.

Centered on Christ

Biblical submission always pulls us toward the cross. The cross points to an upside-down, inside-out gospel ethic. The power of Christ comes in weakness and eternal life comes through Christ’s death. Submission requires us to give up power. Whether our power is physical, social, or economic, we all have to let go of our strength at times.

When we demand power based on gender or any other social identity, we are not living in the example of Christ. Christian egalitarians believe that we are called to different roles based on the gifts we have been given

by Christ through the Holy Spirit. And we submit to each other based on those gifts, as Christ directs. “Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11). Submission is always centered on Christ and never on gender.

Christian egalitarians love biblical submission because it is part of God’s perfect will. It reflects the love of Christ. It uplifts and honors the gifts and calling of others. It unifies and glorifies. It bears very good fruit. Christian egalitarians believe that wives should submit to husbands, and that husbands should submit to wives. We believe that biblical submission strengthens marriages and fosters stronger mutual partnerships. And we celebrate the inevitable result of cross-centered submission: good fruit, deeper love, more joy, and greater faithfulness.



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