A Christian Understanding of Submission

A Nonhierarchical-Complementarian Viewpoint

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THE INTRODUCTION OF THE WORD “SUBMISSION” INTO A Christian conversation about adult human relations immediately strikes different responses. For some Christians, submission is a happy word describing the proper biblical relation of a wife to her husband or of a woman, whether married or single, to the males in the church congregation.

For other Christians, submission is a bad word. For them it conjures up concerns about possible restriction, discrimination, de-humanization, and even abuse. One wonders, then, whether in this latter context we can even talk about submission or use the word favorably.

Nevertheless, I am going to try to discuss a Christian understanding of submission while remembering that where I walk there are mines on all sides of the path.

To begin on the lighter side, I read with interest a letter sent to the editor in the Chicago Tribune evoked by the Southern Baptist’s revision of their “Faith and Message” statement several years ago. You may recall that the revision added the words, “A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband.” In his letter to the editor, this husband relayed that he and his wife had agreed to a similar relationship when they began their marriage some forty years ago. He was to make all the major decisions and his wife the minor ones. Everything, he said, had worked out quite well over the years with this arrangement. “Incidentally,” he added, “to date, no major decisions have been needed!”

This essay will explore the biblical—and especially the New Testament commands—for submission, with special attention to one of these commands. Second, the relationship between the New Testament issue of submission and the mission of the church will be explored. And finally, I will summarize and suggest without elaboration some possible implications of this study for the church and our present Christian lives in the new millennium.

THE BIBLICAL MATERIALS ON SUBMISSION

Let’s begin with some definitions. In English word usage, “submission” means: “the act of lowering”; from either the Fr. *mittere*, “to send under,” or from the Latin, *missio*, “to lower”: (1) “The condition of being submissive, humble, compliant” (2) “The act of submitting to the authority or control of another.” The word “subordination” means “to order under”: (1) “to be placed in or occupying a lower class, rank, or position: inferior; or (2) submissive to or controlled by authority.” The verbal form, “subordinate” means (1) “to make subject or subservient”; (2) “to treat of less value or importance” (Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, Ninth Edition).

While these Webster definitions do not determine the biblical sense of submission, they nevertheless are very important in assessing how our contemporaries hear these terms in the English-speaking world.

Of more critical importance for our understanding of the biblical concept of submission are the Greek words and their meanings, especially in the context of the New Testament passages where they are used. The main words are the verb *hypotassō*, variously translated as “submit,” “be subject,” “be submissive” and the noun form *hypotагē*, translated as “subordination,” “submission,” “submissive,” “submit,” or “yield.”

By way of background to the New Testament focus, we will look briefly at the ancient classical and the LXX (Greek OT) use of the words. Liddell and Scott’s classical lexicon gives the basic meaning of the word as “to arrange or place under”; in the active voice it means “subject” and “subdue,” in the passive the sense is “to put after” or “to append.” It is also used frequently as a technical term in medical texts. For example, it is the word for the “ulna” bone in the arm (i.e. the bone *under* the radial bone).

There are only two known references outside of the New Testament where the word is used to describe the relationship of wives to husbands. One of these is instructive
since it comes from a pagan writer in the middle of the first century A.D.:

Rich men and princes by conferring honours on philosophers adorn both themselves and the philosophers; but, on the other hand, philosophers by paying court to the rich do not enhance the repute of the rich but lower their own. So it is with women also; if they subordinate (hypotasso) themselves to their husbands they are commended, but if they want to have control, they cut a sorrier figure than the subjects of their control. And control ought to be exercised by the man over the woman, not as the owner has control over a piece of property, but, as the soul controls the body, by entering into her feelings and being knit to her through goodwill. As, therefore, it is possible to exercise care over the body without being a slave to its pleasures and desires, so it is possible to govern a wife, and at the same time to delight and gratify her. (Plutarch, Moralia, 142E. Loeb Series, vol. 2)

There are twenty-three cases of the use of hypotasso in the LXX, the Greek Old Testament. Some of these references relate to God subjecting his enemies to his authority, other references deal with people being subject to God’s rule, but the majority of the cases refer to political rulers who subject others to their rule, or to those who submit to them. As far as the word usage is concerned, there is no passage in the Old Testament where a woman is enjoined to submit to her husband or where a husband is referred to as subordinating his wife under his authority.

But the New Testament situation is somewhat more varied. Here we find thirty-eight references to the verbal form, hypotasso, and four references to the noun form, hypotage. Without mentioning every instance of usage, it may be helpful to categorize a number of ways the word is used. Nine of the verbal uses refer to God and all of creation being subject to him (Rom. 8:20; 1Cor. 15:27 [twice], 28; Eph. 1:22; Phil. 3:21; Heb. 2:5, 8 [twice]). Of the remaining cases, there are some that refer to the proper attitude of believers to God (James 4:7), of the subordination of evil spiritual forces to the disciples (Lk. 10:17, 20), of various beings to God (Rom. 8:7, 20; 10:3; Heb. 12:9), of the temporary subordination of Christ to God (1Cor. 15:28), and of the spirits of prophets to the prophets themselves (1Cor. 14:32).

However, the New Testament references to the “submission” of various people to one another are more pertinent to this essay. Christians are to submit to the civil authorities (Rom. 13:1, 5; Tit. 3:1; 1Pet. 2:13), slaves are to be subordinate to their masters (Tit. 2:9; 1Pet. 2:18), younger men are to be subordinate to the older men (1Pet. 5:5), women are to be subordinate (1Cor 14:32-34, but to whom? Probably to the congregation.) and to their own husbands (Eph. 5:22; Tit. 2:5; 1Pet. 3:1, 5), Jesus as a child is subject to his parents (Lk. 2:51), the church is subject to Christ (Eph. 5:24), and the Corinthian believers are to submit to such people as the household of Stephanas who “devoted themselves to the service of the saints” (1Cor. 16:16). Finally, all believers (men and women) are to submit themselves mutually to one another (Eph. 5:21).

The noun form, hypotage, is used four times. Paul refuses to “acquiesce” or “yield” tactically to the Judaizing false teachers (Gal. 2:5); the Corinthians show their submission to the gospel of Christ by their generous gift to the believers in Jerusalem (2Cor. 9:13); women are to conduct themselves in all submissiveness (1Tim. 2:11); and finally church leaders at Ephesus are to keep their children submissive and respectful (1Tim. 3:4).

With the early church fathers, other than the exegesis of New Testament texts mentioned above, the principle emphasis is on maintaining the unity of the church by its members yielding to the presiding leaders of the church and honoring the older men in their congregations (1Cl. 1:1; Eph. 2:2). Additionally, wives are exorted to “perform all their duties with a blameless and serious and pure conscience, cherishing their own husbands, as it is fitting. And... staying in the boundary of subjection (hypotage) they should manage the affairs of their household in seemliness, with all discretion” (1Cl. 1:1).

Further, this same first-century author, Clement of Rome, appeals to Christians to submit to one another mutually: “Let each one be subject to his neighbor according as he was appointed with his special gift” (38:1). It is beyond the scope of this essay to probe further into the teaching and practice of the medieval church and following periods concerning the subjection of women. There are other resources to study this history with more depth (see Tucker and Liefeld, Daughters of the Church).

In summary, while the precise sense of the verb and corresponding noun will vary depending upon the context, it is important to note the wide variety of relationships in the first century world where Christians were called upon to submit. It is not just with God and to their brothers and sisters in Christ that they were to act in this way, but to non-

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Christian authorities as well. It is important to note that in all these relationships those who are in submission are to yield to those who are viewed to be in positions of authority or preeminence (except possibly 1 Cor. 16:16).

Does this include male and female relations whether in the home or in society? The answer seems to be yes. What seems to emerge from the word usage in the New Testament is that Christians were to follow outwardly the patriarchal patterns of honor, respect, and shame and comply with authorities in the social system of the society at large. We may ask what this might involve with regard to the expectations of the behavior between men and women in a patriarchal culture? It is perhaps difficult for us to realize how extensively such a cultural system differs from a western mindset.

By patriarchal, I mean the cultural pattern of “the institutionalized male dominance over women and children in the family and the subordination of woman in society in general” (Anthony Fletcher, Gender, Sex & Subordination in England, 1500-1800. [Yale University Press, 1995]: xv); Or in Webster’s language, “A social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line” (New Collegiate Dictionary, Ninth Edition).

Unlike modern western cultures, especially in North America (but more like Asian cultures such as China and Japan), the ancient Mediterranean world had in place an elaborate honor-shame code governing the public and private behavior of men and women. In Jewish settings, women and especially wives were generally secluded at home and kept separate from males except to shop at the markets where they were not to speak to any men (Ilan, 1995:129). Similarly, women in ancient Greek tradition were to be secluded at home and to practice the virtues of chastity, silence, and obedience in subordination to their husbands (Torjesen, 1993: 122). In Roman times, the same system was in place but practiced with less rigor.

Males on the other hand were to excel in the public sphere and develop the virtues of courage, justice, and self-mastery, the latter being evidenced by becoming a noble warrior and an active participant in the Greek city. A woman’s honor interestingly was her shame: Her honor was her good reputation and chastity; but understanding this required a sensitive consciousness of her (alleged) sexual weakness and vulnerability as she exercised modesty, i.e. being discreet, shy, restrained, timid, and subordinate to male authority.

While boys were socialized to be aggressive sexually, girls were to be passive and “feminine,” and their sexuality was surrounded with a sense of shame. A wife’s avoidance of all appearances of sexual indiscretion was her honor and also the honor of her husband (Torjesen, 1993: 138).

Males also competed for greater honor with other males that often included plotting ways to destroy the sexual purity of the daughters and wives of other men over whom they sought to gain more honor. When occasionally women entered the public arena (e.g. teaching) they were seen as competing as males for male honor (using the male virtues as cited above). Interestingly, when women were attacked as “teachers” or “leaders” in the early church, the strategy was to impugn their private, “feminine” virtues of chastity, silence, and obedience (Torjesen, 1993: 145-146). Plutarch’s first century “Advice on Marriage,” is instructive on the expected role of a wife in such a society: “A wife should speak only to her husband or through her husband, and should not feel aggrieved if, like a piper, she makes nobler music through another’s tongue. . . . She should be shy with her speech as with her body, and guard it against strangers” (deSilva, 2000: 183).

Christians living under such a widespread social system were expected, as Christians, to follow the rules that were essential to the patriarchal social order, including the strict honor-shame observance. They were also given strong arguments from biblical texts and Christian theology for doing so. This applied even to the attitude and behavior of Christian slaves who were, in submission, to serve their masters. But note well, however, that the ultimate reason for submitting was not to endorse the validity of the status inequality of slaves to masters, but to yield to their masters because by so doing they were serving Christ (Eph. 6:5-8). Wives also were to honor their husbands and submit to them. But, again, not to endorse the validity of male superiority and rule over wives, but as submitting to Christ (Eph. 5:22).

But is this the whole story? Not at all. If it were, modern advocates of the ancient patriarchal order structures might have more credibility. However, the New Testament itself also contains the command for Christians to “submit to one another in the fear of Christ” (Eph. 5:21). This emphasis on “mutual submission,” to my knowledge, is not found in the pagan and patriarchal world order of the first century. “Mutual submission” is a unique practice related to Christ, the Christian community, and the gospel realities. It is to this aspect of New Testament teaching that I want to now turn.

There is no doubt that Eph. 5:21-33 is the key passage

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“It is important to note the wide variety of relationships in the first century world where Christians were called upon to submit.”
dealing with both a wife’s submission and also mutual submission. In looking more closely at this passage, I want to interact with a little-known recent scholarly study on the passage by a British professor named Gregory Dawes. The book is entitled, The Body in Question: Metaphor and Meaning in the Interpretation of Ephesians 5:21-33 (Brill, 1998). While I would want you to read Dawes critically, there are a number of features of his work that I see as attractive. Part I deals extensively with the question of metaphor and concludes that “head” (kephalē) as a live metaphor has different senses in different contexts. Accordingly, he argues that there can be a plurality of meanings for the same metaphor depending on the context. This is a point that has not been sufficiently noted in the debate over the meaning of “head.”

If a word such as “head” is a live metaphor, then its sense cannot be determined by word usage studies, since these only trace the established, regular sense of the word and not its live metaphorical meaning. This live metaphorical meaning of an author’s use of a term can be determined, then, only by the contextual usage.

In a chapter on “head” (kephalē) as in “The husband is the head of the wife” (Eph. 5:23), Dawes concludes that “whatever other [metaphorical] senses the word kephalē may have had, the context in which it is used in Eph. 5:22-24 demands that the meaning “authority over” be adopted. For in verses 22-24 the word is used . . . to reinforce the case for the “subordination” of wives. It can only fulfill this function if it carries with it some sense of authority” (p. 134). However, he criticizes both the patriarchal-traditionalists for their one-directional interpretation of an author’s use of a term can be determined, then, only by the contextual usage. Moreover, he criticizes the egalitarians who refuse to see “authority over” as the potential meaning of “head” in Eph. 5:21-33.

Dawes also argues that while hypotassō “in itself is not quite synonymous with “obedience” (hypakouō), the two terms are closely associated in 1 Peter 3:5-6 . . . and in Titus 3:1” (p. 212). What then, he asks, can be made of the peculiar expression in Eph. 5:21, “be subject to one another” (hypotassō allēlois)? Dawes believes that this expression when correctly exegeted means, “mutual subordination,” and that “it helps to undermine the (apparently) ‘patriarchal’ ethic of the following verses” (p. 213).

In their book Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, Wayne Grudem and John Piper question the idea of mutual subordination in the expression “be subject to one another.” If it were strictly mutual, they argue, we would have to translate the expression, “be thoughtful and considerate; act in love.” This is so, they claim, because the word hypotassō “is never ‘mutual’ in its force; it is always one-directional, therefore a translation of mutual submission would be impossible (pp. 493-94). Dawes counters by affirming that even though hypotassō implies a relationship of submission to an authority, it is not true that there are no other ways to correctly translate the expression than “be thoughtful and considerate; act in love.” He suggests that a number of other translations are possible, such as “defer to one another,” that retain the sense of submitting one’s own will to that of another, without losing the possibility that such submission may be reciprocal. In this sense, it is no more contradictory than the demand of Phil. 2:3 that Christians should “in humility regard others (allēlois) as better than themselves.” Furthermore, the word hypotassō in itself is neither one-directional nor reciprocal. The way in which subordination is to be exercised is entirely dependent upon the context of its use.

I will add a few additional examples. Rom. 12:10, while not using the exact expression, seems to be an equivalent, “Honor one another (allēlois) above yourselves” (NIV), as does Philippians 2:3. In fact we might argue with the position of C.E.B. Cranfield who suggests in his commentary on Romans that all three of these expressions are essentially equivalent: “Be subject to one another” (Eph 5:21); “‘Regard others as better than themselves’ (Phil. 2:3); and “Outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom. 12:10). Cranfield quotes Calvin on Eph. 5:21 to the same effect: “God has so bound us,” he [Calvin] says, “to each other, that no man ought to avoid subjection. And where love reigns, there is a mutual servitude. I do not except even kings and governors, for they rule that they may serve. Therefore it is very right that he [Paul] should exhort all to be subject to each other.” Cranfield concludes, “The problem of ‘submitting to one another’ in Eph 5:21 is solved not by attempting to explain away the idea of reciprocity, but by recognizing that ‘submit’ here does not mean ‘obey.’ In the New Testament ‘to submit to someone’ can denote the recognition that the other person, as Christ’s representative to one (cf. Matt. 25:40,45), has an infinitely greater claim upon one than one has upon oneself and the conduct which flows naturally from such a recognition” (p. 662). Or as Cranfield paraphrases Calvin, “For a king, if he be a Christian, ought to regard his meanest subject as superior to himself in the sense of having a greater claim on him than

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he has on himself, since his meanest subject is Christ’s representa- 
tive to him” (Romans, 1979: II, 662).

To the above, we could also add the passage (though the word is different) in 1Peter 5:5, “All of you should clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another.” We also find in the first century writer, Clement of Rome, as mentioned previously, the appeal to Christians to mutually submit to one another: “Let each one be subject (hypotassô) to his neighbor according as he was appointed with his special gift” (38:1).

Finally, is there any reason to restrict the meaning of the word “one another” (as meaning, “everyone to everyone”) to mean “some to others” as Grudem and Piper advocate? Dawes argues that the context shows that the exhortations, beginning with Eph. 5:19, where we find a series of five participles (speaking, singing, making melody, giving thanks, and submitting to one another), are all dependent upon the command to “be filled with the Spirit” (v. 18) and give no reason to believe that any of the five participles are directed to only some Christians and not to others. Furthermore, verse 21, with its call to mutual submission (and from which verse 22 gets its verb), cannot be limited to the relationship between husband and wife, but it must be taken as a general Christian ethic addressed to every believer. Mutual submission applies to all Christians, and it can be applied to Christian married couples also because they too are members of Christ’s body.

Dawes then turns to a careful exegesis of Eph. 5:22-33. Why, he asks, does the biblical writer turn from the general Christian exhortation to mutual submission to a section where only one member of the marriage relationship is asked to submit? He basically finds no ready explanation based on the text itself. As to the command to love that is given to the husband, Dawes argues convincingly that the command is reversible because of the “one flesh” argument the author of Ephesians himself uses as the reason why the husband should love his wife. “If husbands are bound to ‘love’ their wives, on the same grounds wives are bound to ‘love their husbands’ [p.223]. In fact this is the command that we find in 5:1-2, an exhortation to love one another that applies to all Christians. This is more explicitly taught in other passages in the New Testament such as Titus 2:4, “…teach the young women to love their husbands.” Therefore both commands in Eph. 5:22-33—the command to be “subordinate” (v. 22) and the command to “love” (v. 25)—are within the epistle itself and in the New Testament as a whole, given to all Christians without regard to gender and therefore, to both husband and wife.

This is the distinctive and redemptively transforming ethic of the Christian community. While it does not abolish the patriarchal system of the first century Mediterranean world with its strict shame-honor duties, it nevertheless subverts it internally so that both marriage partners virtually have the same responsibilities vis-à-vis the other. However, Dawes does not address the fact that in Eph. 5:21-33 the author makes the command to submit and the command to love asymmetrical (each relating to only one gender). I will now attempt to address this matter.

**SUBMISSION AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

In passages other than Eph. 5:21-33, the general context and explicit statements make it clear that Christians were to follow—outwardly, at least—the culturally expected norms of social behavior for the times and places where they lived, except when those norms conflicted with God’s expressed will. In a number of these texts we are told explicitly that the reason this should be done is so that the gospel missionary witness of the church would not be hindered in the surrounding non-Christian culture. For example, slaves were to be compliant with their master’s wishes in everything and “regard them as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed” (Col 3:22; 1Tim 6:1).

In the same way Peter can direct believers in their cultural situations, “For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish” (1Pet. 2:13-15). These passages strongly suggest that the missionary witness of the church could be damaged if the cultural expectations of submission to various authorities are ignored by Christians.

But does the New Test-ament extend this missionary principle to the patriarchal structure of male dominance and
female subordination in general, and in particular to the home and family? We believe the answer should be yes. In my opinion as well as others (Thiselton, 2000: 803, 811, 832-842), a strong case has been made recently, though generally unknown, by the evangelical scholar Judith Gundry-Volf of Yale that this is precisely the intent of Paul’s argument in 1Cor. 11:2-16. While it would require another essay to set forth her arguments carefully as we have briefly with Dawes, perhaps a few of her conclusions could whet your appetite to study her work. Unfortunately her work is currently available only in some rarified and generally unknown scholarly publications.

Gundry-Volf argues that in 1Cor. 11:2-10 Paul uses creation materials to root out the practices of both men and women at Corinth who would bring social shame on the congregation’s witness to the surrounding non-Christian culture. In her words: “Creation provides him [Paul] the motif of glory which he uses to define gender identity and roles, and also with notions of gender difference and hierarchy, which are key components in the definition of shame and honor in the ancient Mediterranean world. Gender differences and hierarchy, however, are not themselves the goals of Paul’s argument, but the necessary means to his goal of avoiding social shame” (Gundry-Volf, 1997: 157).

But then, immediately following such creation arguments in the same passage in vv. 11-16, Paul bursts out of the patriarchal social structure as he advocates the reciprocal exercise of authority and submission in the redeemed community’s worship, where men and women alternate in leadership and in submission as they pray and prophesy. Paul’s advocacy of the practice of men having short uncoiffed hair and women with longer, properly coiffured hair, allowed the public meetings to be socially respectable to a patriarchal culture that identified males and females primarily by these hair conventions (not likely veils). At the same time he allows the expression in the worship services of the church of the new gender social equality “in the Lord” (cf. Gal. 3:28, [Gundry-Volf, p.169]).

Gundry-Volf explains that Paul does this because he has the mission of the church to the world as his primary goal, especially its mission to an ingrained patriarchal culture (cf. 1Cor. 9:19-23; 10:33; 14:23). This is Paul’s solution of how to make the Gospel message present within a particular (fallen) culture. She calls her approach “enculturation” and sees this as a positive practice needed in every culture where Christians live out their lives. They should seek to be as socially non-offensive as possible in order to present the gospel without moral compromise and yet within the structures and conventions of a specific culture (Gundry-Volf, 1999: 285-287).

In addition to citing 1Cor. 11:2-16 as evidence that the biblical writers are concerned about living out their relationships as male and female “in Christ” with deference to and sensitivity to how the mission of the church is affected, we might also note the following passages. In the familiar text of 1Pet. 3:1, wives who have non-Christian husbands are encouraged to submit to their husbands’ authority (something expected in a patriarchal culture), so that the husband might be won to Christ as he sees the pious worship of the true God in her behavior, especially her sexual purity, which was his honor.

Again, Paul instructs Titus how the older women should teach the younger women to “love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, chaste, good managers of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands so that the word of God may not be discredited” (Titus 2:4-5). When cultural conventions and expectations change (as they have in the passage of time between New Testament culture and today), to remain static in our ethic as Christians, bound to older cultural expectations, we may discredit the Gospel.

Just as God’s word might have been dishonored in New Testament times, could it not be dishonored today when outsiders come into male-dominated church services and organizations and perceive that women seem to be silenced and suppressed? If we are determined to perpetuate a patriarchal male dominant sub-culture in the evangelical church when the broader culture has largely shifted to a non-patriarchal system, may this not invite shame and discredit upon the gospel mission, as the opposite did in Paul’s day? I regularly check out the church bulletins when I visit churches on vacations. Rarely do I find women listed along with men in positions of leadership ministry!

Shortly after the Southern Baptist Convention’s revision of its “Faith and Message” statement, which appears to embrace a patriarchal social order, a Jewish law professor at Northwestern University wrote to the Chicago Tribune and said,

Though I yield to no person in my commitment to the accepted tenets of gender equality, I actually took some satisfaction in the Baptists’ pronouncement since it implicitly repealed their controversial

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1996 resolution to preach conversion to the Jews. What, after all, is more likely to drive Jewish females away from evangelists than raising “submissiveness” to a religious requirement.

I do know a thing or two about Jewish women (including the one to whom I have been happily married for 20 years). And while she is extraordinarily gracious in many situations, you can be absolutely assured that “submission” is entirely absent from her behavioral repertoire. . . . My good, assertive, outspoken, forceful Jewish wife will simply never be fodder for conversion to a creed that expects her to be submissive, graciously or otherwise. There is no submission in our family and not much “servant leadership” either. What we have instead, in a tradition dating back to our matriarchs, is debate, disagreement, dialogue and then more debate. I always thought that approach made our marriage happier, stronger, and certainly more interesting. Now it has the added benefit of making us immune to proselytization. (Steven Lubet, 6 September 1998)

Finally, to return to the question posed earlier, why does Paul seem to embrace both a patriarchal approach and a mutuality of gender subordination in the same passage in Eph. 5:21-33? While I cannot be sure, I believe that the NT references just cited elsewhere point us in the right direction for understanding this passage as well. Though there is no immediate statement that his asymmetrical command to wives to submit is enjoined to avoid offense to the mission of the church, the context of the passage in Ephesians 5 suggests that this is quite possible. The beginning of the section that includes the exhortation to mutual submission (v. 21) and the house-rules for wives and husbands (vv. 22-33), children and fathers (6:1-4), and slaves and masters (6:5-9), is found in 5:15. This verse reads, “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.” While not explicit, could this not suggest sensitivity to the non-Christian cultural system as a part of what constitutes living carefully and wisely in the world?

I have argued briefly in this section that the command to submit in various areas and relationships of life, including the patriarchal social order, had relevance to the mission of the church to the surrounding ancient Mediterranean culture. Christians were urged to live as much as possible without social offense in respect to these cultural expectations. I have also raised the question as to what may happen to the credibility of the gospel when cultural authority structures change, but the evangelical church insists on enforcing ancient or traditional patriarchal cultural systems as the inspired word of God for today.

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PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

Where does this long complex journey lead us in terms of the practical implications for the Christian practice of “submission” today? Let me begin with the language itself. As I indicated in the introduction, the very mention of “submission” or “subordination” in certain modern contexts evokes fears of restriction, discrimination, de-humanization, and even abuse. I would like to suggest that the language of “deferring” or “yielding” is much more acceptable in the modern western context and at the same time does not lose the essence of the meaning conveyed by the original word hypotassō (submission).

Do we then believe in “yielding” or “deferring” to others who represent authority structures over us as inherent to our Christian understanding of responsibilities and relationships? Most certainly yes. Christians are to “yield” in a Christian way to all legitimate claims of authority over us within the culture in which we live. But Craig Keener’s thoughts may inform us as we consider how to apply this concept:

Wives were to submit in a Christian way to those in authority over them in that [New Testament] culture, but neither the authority structures nor the expressions of submission are the same in all cultures. Although we respect governments and those in authority, we do not try to reinstate the monarchy so we can obey New Testament demands that we submit to the king; nor would we reinstate slavery so slaves can submit to their masters. Neither should we reinstate old authority roles in marriage and thereby ignore the kinds of authority structures now standard in our culture. . . . Paul is addressing the authority structures of his day, not mandating the same structures for all periods. Paul does call
on us to submit to those in authority, though he qualifies that authority by summoning those in authority to respect those under them as their equals. This is hardly the same as giving an unqualified license to those in authority or saying that we must submit to the same structures in the same ways as people did in the Greco-Roman world, simply because that was the culture in which Paul happened to dictate his letter. (Women and Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry, 1992: 210-211)

Traditional hierarchical complementarians need to pay closer attention to this teaching that “mutual yielding” is the key to the Christian understanding of human relationships. Nonhierarchical complementarians, on the other hand, must understand that “deferring” to others is not a dirty word. For them it need not imply hierarchy, when those to whom they “defer,” “defer” reciprocally also to them, exemplifying mutual love in unity. But another word of warning is needed here. Again Keener is helpful, “When we speak of ‘mutual submission,’ we are speaking of submission under reasonably normal circumstances, not in cases of flagrant abuse or criminal behavior” (p. 230).

Finally, what are some areas to which we might profitably apply the substance of this essay? Quite relevant is the relationship of husband and wife in marriage. Perhaps related to this might be the issue of the wife’s work outside the home. Parents’ relationship to children and children’s to parents are also important areas to consider. Another obvious area is our relationship to civil authority structures. Consider social authorities that impinge upon us such as teacher-student relations, employer-employee relations, relations of majority races to minority, younger to older, and quite importantly today, the whole area of how men and women carry on the worship and ministries of the church, to name a few. Let me explore a few thoughts on some of these areas before concluding.

1. Marriage. I will quote a true story shared with me by a friend, Scott Bartchy, professor of ancient history at The University of California at Los Angeles. Scott writes,

A friend of mine has become persuaded that Ephesians is the greatest letter in the New Testament. He seems never to tire of studying this document and reflecting upon it, and he has been especially fascinated by chapters five and six. When I first came to know him he had just “discovered” in chapter five the three commands to agape-love his wife, which led him to the further insight that his spouse was, after all, his “sister in Christ.” That insight led him, as he reported it, to begin to treat his wife with a new sense of respect and deference, for he realized that he had been more sensitive to his “sisters in Christ” in their congregation than he had in many ways been to his wife. Both he and she were grateful for his sudden awareness provoked by Ephesians 5.

About a year later this same friend made a further discovery while meditating on Ephesians 5. He began to feel that if he were to treat his wife as Christ treated the church, he would have to find significant ways to “die” to certain role expectations he had for his wife that he had previously taken for granted. He planned to take responsibility for various aspects of the “house-work” in order to free his wife to follow more of her own interests and ministries. They were both pleased by this new impact of Ephesians 5 in their life together.

About six months later I heard him tell their congregation that he had just begun for the first time “to really understand” God’s word to him in Ephesians 5. For he now saw that if he were to respond to the admonition to treat his wife as Christ treats the church, my friend needed to go beyond “releasing” his wife from his expectations of her to also becoming her advocate by encouraging her growing senses of freedom and responsibility. It was not enough, he argued, to “get out of the way” of one’s spouse. Christ wanted husbands to be cheerleaders for their wives’ growth and development into persons mighty in the Lord, full of the Spirit’s fruit. Both my friend and his wife rejoiced that “listening” intently to Ephesians 5 had brought them to such a high level of partnership as “brother and sister in Christ” and as husband and wife who subordinated themselves to each other “in awe of Christ.” For my friend each fresh “reading” of Ephesians 5 created an increased ability to “see” the meaning in the text. (Bartchy, 1984: 30-31)

This relationship between the spouses is best understood as a friendship love, patterned after the love of Christ for the church (John 13) and ultimately rooted in the love that exists in the Trinity between the persons of the Godhead. Our response to such love brings us into intimate friendship with the triune God. This same friendship love which requires mutual yielding (Christ toward us, us toward him) is the friendship love shared by spouses.

Such love requires “the superior [the community director] to be on a plane of equality with the inferior. For they do not rightly develop friendship who do not preserve equality,” writes the twelfth-century English Cistercian monk, Aelred of Rievaulx, and at a time when there was no women’s movement. Also in commenting on the creation of woman he says, “How beautiful it is that the second human being was taken from the side of the first, so that nature might teach that human beings are equal and, as it were, collateral, and that there is in human affairs neither a
superior nor an inferior, a characteristic of true friendship” (Aelred, 1974: 115,117,63).

2. A wife’s work outside the home. “One parent staying home with the child all day has not marked most homes even in the history of western culture, as important as a healthy amount of parental attention is. The model of the wife staying at home to engage mainly in child-rearing while the husband is in the work force is an ideal of the relatively leisureed, nineteenth-century U.S. middle-class and was not common through most of Western history, including recent Western history” (Keener, 1992: 227).

3. Parents’ relationships to children and children to parents in the home. While children in the home occupy a temporarily inferior position, similar to an apprentice in training, the Christian parent will still relate to them as a brother or sister in Christ in some form of mutual yielding that engenders a sense of equality without at the same time relinquishing their responsibility for their children’s ultimate welfare. Children likewise must honor their parents’ roles as their guardians until they reach maturity, but also relate to them as brother and sister in Christ who are commanded to defer to one another.

4. Civil authority structures. The way Christians yield to governing authority structures within a democratic authority model can be a challenge. While we cannot expect non-Christians to understand the basis of our understanding of “mutual deference,” holding the authorities responsible as “servants” of the people is ingrained in the very nature of public office in the Western world. When Christians themselves are in positions of civil authority, it is incumbent upon them to transform their understanding of their relationship of superior to inferior to one of equality.

5. Social authorities and mutual deference. Are there ways that I, as a Christian teacher, can see my power over students transformed by the friendship-love of Christ, so that I yield to them as well as direct them in their learning? What about employer-employee relations and employee-employer? Can the Christian relate mutual yielding in love to other dominant versus minority social situations such as race or age or privilege (money, education, social class, etc.)?

6. Men, women, worship, and the ministries of the church. Paul seems to argue in 1Cor. 11:2-16 that both men and women have equal responsibility in the worship service to engage in “prayer and prophesying.” There is to be a mutual yielding and mutual leadership as males alternate in leading with women yielding to their ministries, and then women lead and males yield to their ministries. This is the outworking of true mutuality and reciprocity, as each without respect to gender, minister the gifts that they have been given by the Spirit, as long as each observes the cultural markers of their gender and shows proper social respect as their cultures may expect.

7. Wedding Vows. “I Christina take thee Stephan to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward; for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health; to love, cherish and to obey until death do us depart” (dated 1549). This vow of obedience still found in some marriage services, while ancient, is different than other marriage vows in two ways: (1) only the bride makes the promise to obey; and (2) it is difficult to argue that this vow (unlike others) is a biblical marriage vow.

In patriarchal culture both before and, to some extent, after New Testament times, the submission of the wife to the husband was inextricably tied to the wife’s sexual morality, as I argued earlier in this essay. To omit the obedience vow (a form of moral instruction) in any cultural context where this social system was true would have invited the charge of sexual immorality and would have been a hindrance to the furtherance of the gospel witness. Today it would be difficult to argue this wife-submission-moral-sexual connection in western societal systems. Therefore, it is not necessary to teach submission of the wife only in marriage.

“In my opinion, any Christian bride should be allowed to make a vow of submission, but no bride should be forced to do so. If a bride chooses to make that vow, the groom should be encouraged to make the same vow of submission to his bride” (David Instone-Brewer, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context. [Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2002.], p.237).

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to argue that true Christian “submission” is not a dirty word, but fully supported by New Testament teaching. I find it helpful to think of submission as “yielding” and “deferring.” Christians have the obligation to “defer” in a Christian way to others who have rightful claims upon them. All Christians are commanded to be
“mutually subordinate” to all other Christians in a friendship
love patterned after the triune God’s inner relations and as evidenced by Christ’s relation to his people.

The Christian husband and wife are both to “defer” and to “love” one another not only as one flesh but also as members of Christ’s body, the church. All other relations of superior-inferior, ordinate-subordinate are to be transformed by this unique Christian concept of “mutual yielding to one another in the fear of Christ.” I am just beginning to experience this more fully after 48 years of marriage to the same woman! You see, I am rather slow to learn.

Texts in the New Testament that emphasize only the wife’s subordination are to be understood as reflecting the patriarchal social order of the times, a system that the church was concerned not to offend outwardly because it would hinder its gospel mission priority. These texts, when read carefully, show that the principle of “mutual yielding” effectively subverts the unequal patriarchal social arrangement of earlier ages without bringing discredit on the gospel of Christ. “Now should anyone draw profit from reading this treatise, let him/her give thanks to God and ask for Christ’s mercy upon my sins. But if anyone deems what I have written superfluous or impractical, let him/her pardon my unhappy position whose occupations forced me to put limits on the thought I could give to this meditation.”

–Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1167).

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1. The photo portrays a sculpture titled “The Dance” by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, now displayed in the Musee d’Orsay, Paris.

RESOURCES RELATED TO THIS ESSAY


deSilva, David A. Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity. Unlock-


FOR FURTHER STUDY


Thiselton, Anthony C. The First Epistle to the Corinthians, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). Materials related to comments on chapter 11:2-16 (pp. 800-848).