



EMBODIED SUBMISSION IN CHRIST

Bruna Santini



Whenever I read the word “submission,” one of the first images that comes to mind is the “umbrella of authority” (or “protection”).¹ The well-known image features umbrellas stacked from largest to smallest: Christ at the top, the husband beneath him, then the wife beneath her husband, and, finally, the smallest umbrella covering their children. The umbrellas represent layers of authority, each shielding the one below like nested covers against the rain. This picture, popularized in the mid-twentieth century, became so familiar in Evangelical circles that it eventually spread internationally. Despite its fame, however, the umbrella image is extremely problematic. These nested umbrellas lead us away from the real meaning of biblical submission and authority, replacing another more powerful and more accurate image found in the New Testament.

As with all symbols, the umbrella of authority does more than try to illustrate a theological concept. It carries its own message that creates meaning and changes our perception, speaking to our theological imagination. An umbrella is an *object*: inert, mechanical, designed to keep something out from above; the umbrellas in this image frame authority as likewise impersonal and functional. In contrast, every time Scripture depicts the relationship between authority and submission, it



reaches for something *alive*: a body (1Cor 12:12–27, Rom 12:4–5), a vine (John 15:1–5), a shepherd with his flock (John 10:11–16). The images are never inorganic or isolated; they always involve connection, dependence, and shared *life*. By replacing those living images with images of an inanimate object, we are teaching a fundamentally different theology. Reclaiming the biblical imagery of submission is a theological imperative because it helps us ground our imagination on “divinely authorized metaphors.”² Ensuring that we understand these metaphors, the imagery, and the symbols used by the Bible to explain submission can illuminate its meaning and protect us from distortions. So what does it mean when Paul uses the metaphor of a body and its head when explaining the church’s submission to Jesus and of wives to husbands? How can we understand this embodied submission? What does submission look like within this reality of being in Christ?

UNION WITH CHRIST AND THE METAPHOR OF THE BODY IN EPHESIANS

When Paul teaches the Ephesians about submission, he starts with a general exhortation: “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21). He then addresses wives, calling them to submit to their husbands “as you do to the Lord” (v. 22).³ Here the bodily language starts: the reason why wives must submit is that “the husband is the *head* of the wife as Christ is the *head* of the church, his body, for which he is the Savior” (v. 23). Now, we might pause to ask ourselves: “Wait a minute. Why is there such a jump from marriage to church? What does one have to do with the other?” Sadly, many people stop at the verse about Christ and husbands being the “head of the body,” but this is only the beginning of Paul’s rich imagery.

In verse 32, Paul exclaims: “This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.” He draws the parallel between Christ and the church and marriage because they primarily rest on the same foundation: a *covenantal bodily unity*. The believer’s union with Christ becomes the paradigm not only for holiness, as Paul taught earlier in the chapter, but also for how marital relationships should be. When Paul addresses marriage in Ephesians 5, he’s doing more than giving instructions for husbands and wives: he’s also reaffirming one of the most precious realities we possess—our union with Christ. We cannot understand submission without grounding ourselves first in that. So, what does it mean to be in union with Christ?

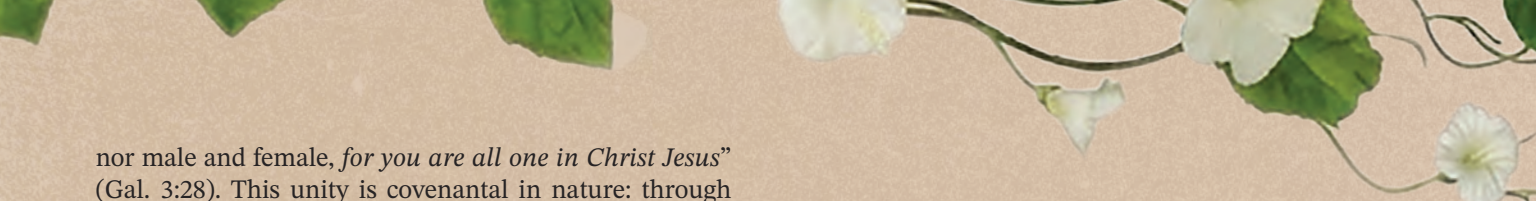
At its core, union with Christ is the spiritual reality that what is true of Jesus becomes true of us. When we are saved, the Holy Spirit incorporates us as living members into the one body of Christ. We share his death, his resurrection, and his life (Rom. 6:3–4). This is the foundation of everything Paul teaches about the Christian life. In Ephesians, Paul opens with a breathtaking declaration of what God has given us, and every single blessing is anchored in the phrase “in him” (Eph. 1:3–13). Redemption, forgiveness, inheritance, the seal of the Holy Spirit—all of it flows from our union with Christ.

This union shapes more than our identities; it shapes our relationships too. Because of this mystical union, we are all members of the body of Christ. To be united to Christ means a shared participation that binds believers to one another, and being in union with Christ represents a life-giving commonality with him and with others. For that reason, Paul can declare: “There is neither slave nor free,



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nor male and female, *for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal. 3:28). This unity is covenantal in nature: through our union with Christ, we are joined to one another in a shared life that redefines how we belong, relate, and respond to each other.

When we return to Ephesians 5, we see Paul drawing this spiritual reality into the marriage covenant. He reminds his readers that the same mystical and embodied union that binds believers to Christ also shapes the marital relationship. In verse 28, Paul exhorts husbands to "love their wives as their own bodies," grounding marital love in bodily unity. He then reinforces this logic by invoking the language of Genesis, reminding them that husband and wife are now "one flesh" (v. 31). So if marriage participates in the same embodied logic of union that defines the church's life in Christ, then submission within marriage must also be understood through that same living imagery.

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AN EMBODIED SUBMISSION

When Paul speaks of submission, he does not envision a chain of command operating at a distance, *but a living body responding to itself*. In the biblical imagination, submission is always embodied. A body responds to its head as one single, unified organism, animated by shared life. The head does not stand apart from the body's pain, nor does the body act independently of the head's care; What affects one member is felt by the whole. Neither head nor body is complete without the other, a biological example of physical mutuality and interdependence.

This is why Paul's language of headship must be read carefully. In Ephesians 5, "head" does not describe domination or unilateral control, but a life-giving, responsive relationship within a single body. Christ's headship over the church is defined by his self-giving love and how he nourishes, sustains, and gives himself for the body (Eph. 5:25–29). Authority, in this framework, is inseparable from care. Submission, likewise, is inseparable from shared life. When discussions of submission focus almost exclusively on headship as a synonym for authority

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while neglecting the significance of the body in Paul's metaphor, the result is often a partial reading that misses the relational and embodied logic of the text.

This embodied logic becomes especially clear in marriage. When Paul exhorts husbands to love their wives "as their own bodies" (Eph. 5:28), he makes a covenantal claim: to love one's spouse is to recognize that their well-being is inseparable from one's own. The language of "one flesh" echoes the same reality as "one body": a unity in which pain, responsibility, and decision-making are shared. Even where spouses take on different tasks based on needs and gifting, they do so *within* unity, working together. Seen this way, submission in marriage is a commitment to shared responsiveness shaped by embodied covenantal life.

For this reason, submission cannot be required where the covenantal bond itself has been violated by violence, coercion, or persistent harm. I have written elsewhere about the devastating consequences of confusing submission with enduring abusive marriages, particularly in contexts where women are taught that faithfulness requires remaining in relationships that have become covenants of harm. In those cases, the language of submission has been severed from the biblical imagery that gives it meaning. When the body is replaced by abstract ideals of sacrifice or hierarchy, women are often left to suffer alone, which contradicts the shared life Paul envisions. Reclaiming submission as an embodied, covenantal reality goes beyond a theological task to a pastoral necessity, one that helps the church distinguish between Christlike self-giving and the quiet normalization of destruction.⁴

Taken together, Paul's imagery for submission does not support absorbing harm alone or enduring in silence. A healthy body does not "take the hit" in isolation; if one part suffers, the whole responds. Models of submission that measure faithfulness by silent endurance abandon this biblical metaphor, shifting submission away from participation and toward isolation. Unilateral submission

that puts the head as a detached authority over the body misses the head's dependence on the body. By contrast, submission grounded in union with Christ calls believers into attentiveness, responsiveness, and mutual responsibility within shared life. Both head and body work in interdependence as one unit for the health and benefit of the whole.

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CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING BIBLICAL IMAGERY

The way the church teaches submission depends on the images it chooses to inhabit. When mechanical diagrams replace the living metaphors Scripture gives us, submission is easily reduced to endurance, hierarchy, or silence. But when we return to Paul's embodied imagery—body, flesh, union—we discover a vision of submission grounded in true commonality. Our union with Christ reframes submission as participation, attentiveness, and mutual responsibility within covenantal bonds that are

meant to preserve life. Reclaiming these biblical images is a necessary act of faithfulness. It reshapes how authority is understood, how relationships are lived, and how the church protects those entrusted to its care. If submission is to reflect Christ, it must be taught and practiced as something living, never isolating, never destructive, and always oriented toward the flourishing of the whole body. A living body, not an umbrella!

Notes

1. Bill Gothard created and popularized this illustration through his Institute in Basic Life Principles (IBLP).
2. Stephen Clark, "Union with Christ: Towards a Biblical and System of thematic Theological Framework for Practical Living," in *In Christ Alone: Perspectives on Union with Christ*, ed. Stephen Clark and Matthew Evans (Mentor Imprint, 2016), 278.
3. As the word "submit" is carried over from earlier in the passage, some argue that including it here under a new section header places undue emphasis on instructions to wives as if it were a distinct command, rather than an example of the mutual submission mentioned earlier in the passage.
4. Bruna Santini, "Yes, You Can End an Abusive Marriage," *Christianity Today*, May 24, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/05/domestic-violence-divorce-abuse-brazil-wives-pastor-leaders/>.



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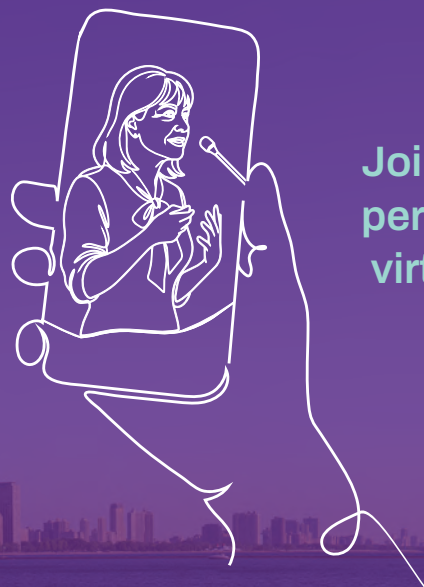
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