

Mutual Submission Is Biblical



Christians who support women's submission and male authority have often emphasized the differences between men and women to justify that view. One well-known Christian leader, for example, argued that male leadership rests on God-given biological distinctions between the sexes. Christians familiar with meta-analyses, however, have challenged this claim, noting that men and women share many overlapping abilities, including in math and language.¹ More importantly, Scripture rarely emphasizes these differences. Instead, the opening chapters of Genesis describe God's purposes for both woman and man.

In the first creation account, we learn that Eve and Adam are both created in God's image—an identity that is inseparable from a shared destiny: to govern the world side by side. And this, God says, is "very good" (Gen. 1:27–31). The shared rule of man and woman is noted again in the second creation account as Adam's aloneness is declared the only "not good" in a perfect world (Gen. 2:18). Governance of Eden requires Eve's partnership. The help Eve brings is clarified by God as a strong rescue. This is how God describes woman—an *ezer*—a Hebrew term meaning "to be strong" and "to rescue." Used 21 times in the Old Testament, *ezer* most often refers to God's rescue of Israel. Psalm 121:1–2 reads, "I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help, my *ezer*, comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." Given that God sends Eve as a rescuer for Adam, a sinless world includes *not* Eve's unilateral submission to Adam but his need for her strength and rescue. It is only as Adam and Eve disobey God that women are subjected to male rule (Gen. 3:1–7, 16).

Man's authority over woman was not part of God's sinless world. Rather it was the result of the disobedience of man and woman. Eating the forbidden fruit was not based on male leadership or female submission but was an act that demonstrates the freedom and mutual agency God gave Adam and Eve. Tragically, both man and woman freely chose to disobey God, and the consequence ruptured their oneness, mutuality, and the shared rule of man and woman. It was an evil intrusion into God's perfect world (Gen. 3:16b). Yet, despite their disobedience, God had a plan to redeem humanity (Gen. 3:15–16), in which a Savior would be born of a woman. Mary will bear Christ, and he will crush evil and the gates of hell. Through Mary and the Holy Spirit, Christ was born, and through the cross humans have

access to forgiveness of sin and the Spirit's power to resist and oppose prejudice and domination of male over female, of ethnic groups, and of rich over poor.

The mutual submission between men and women, rich and poor, and ethnic groups was memorialized in Christian baptism and carved on ancient baptismal fonts. When Paul said that Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, male and female are one in Christ, he sent these words to a world where nearly half of the population were slaves and women. In a profound way, Galatians 3:28 is one of the most radical social statements made in the first century given that authority was determined by gender, race, and class. Yet Paul boldly asserts that our identity and mutual service are not shaped by human birth but by our spiritual rebirth in Christ. And the early church served accordingly.

Slaves, Gentiles, and women served equally, not only in ministry as evangelists, apostles, house-church leaders, and teachers, but in the home as well. Mutual submission was documented in Christian marriages among leaders like Priscilla and Aquila and couples cited in Romans 16. Their example demonstrates the power of Christ to redeem and free Christians from submissiveness to those born male, wealthy, or to an ethnically dominant class. While secular culture may presume and assert authority based on the presumed superiority of gender, race, and class, marriages and churches flourish when all believers submit mutually and equally to each other out of love and respect based on scriptures like Gal 3:28—a text foreshadowed in the creation account.

Notes

1. Gal 3:28: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ are also clothed in Christ: There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, there is no male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."