

Reclaiming Submission

Distinguishing Submission from Subjugation

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Misunderstanding Submission

Submission is one of the most beautiful and dangerous words in Scripture and the church. It is beautiful because it expresses one of the core characteristics of Jesus Christ and one of the central character traits of those who follow him. It is dangerous because it is often co-opted by those who misrepresent Jesus's example and teaching on submission and instead weaponize submission in service to sinful notions of power. How can we reclaim submission from this misunderstanding and misuse? How can we preach and practice submission in a way that honors Jesus?

What Submission is Not

Submission is used to mean various things by different people. When we read "submit" and its cognates in Scripture, our assumptions about the meaning of these words shape our interpretation and application. Defining submission properly is key. Before we define submission, let's first say what submission is *not*. Submission is not subjugation. Subjugation and submission are often confused with each other because they both result in one person's *functional* status being lower than another's; they both involve one person becoming subject to another.





However, beyond this similarity, the words share little in common. Properly understood, subjugation and submission are antonyms, not synonyms. Consider these definitions:

- *Subjugation* is an externally imposed action whereby one person exerts their power, subjecting another to be served by them.
- *Submission* is an internally motivated action whereby one person relinquishes their power, subjecting themselves to another to serve them.

While this exact verbiage doesn't appear in Scripture, the distinction is writ large throughout, particularly regarding relations among Christians. The juxtaposition of submission and subjugation finds one of its most familiar expressions in Jesus's response to his disciples as they jockeyed for power and position in Matthew 20:25–28:

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”¹

Here Jesus contrasts subjugation practiced by “the rulers of the Gentiles” with the submission of those who would be great in his kingdom. His words here remind us that, relative to this world's kingdoms, Jesus's kingdom is “upside-down.” In a world committed to coercion, manipulation, and control, Jesus offers freedom, honesty, and self-control. For those who would be his disciples, Jesus invites them to follow him to the cross through service and self-sacrifice. This is true greatness, power, and privilege. This is the heart of true submission.

Jesus modeled submission throughout his earthly life while his opponents practiced

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subjugation. This is especially evident in Jesus's commitment to non-violence. In teaching and example, Jesus rejected the power of subjugation and embraced the power of submission. Near the end, Jesus was surrounded by an armed mob. When Peter raised his sword and cut off Malchus's ear, Jesus healed Malchus's wound and rebuked Peter for resorting to violence (Matt. 26:50–52, John 18:10–11). Jesus submitted himself to arrest, torture, and death at the hands of those he could have instantly subjugated and destroyed (Matt. 26:53). Jesus used one of his few remaining breaths to pray for the forgiveness of those who subjugated him (Luke 23:34). Submission and subjugation find their greatest juxtaposition in the cross of Jesus Christ.

What Submission Is

Submission is Jesus's way of relating to power. And it is this very approach to power which is commended to Jesus's followers. Jesus instructed his followers to emulate him in love (John 15:12), service (John 13:14–15), and taking the gospel to the world (John 20:21). Peter tells us that we should follow in Jesus's footsteps by suffering persecution from unbelievers peacefully, without retaliation or insult (1 Pet. 2:21–23). Similarly, Paul detailed what it means to imitate Jesus in our relationships within the body of Christ, grounding our way of life explicitly in Jesus's example, leading us to relate to each other in humility and selflessness rather than selfish ambition and vain conceit (Phil. 2:1–8).

Submission and Christians

Tragically, submission is often co-opted and transformed into subjugation in many Christian circles. Submission is weaponized into subjugation in three primary ways through certain popular (mis)interpretations of Scripture:

1. Conflating submission with subjugation.
2. Treating submission as the exclusive responsibility of Christians in “inferior” positions and roles, or of a specific gender.
3. Always connecting authority and obedience with submission.

The Greek word translated “submit” in most English Bible translations is ὑποτάσσω (*hupotasso*). This has two primary meanings: “to put in subjection, subject, subordinate,” and “(passive) to submit, be subject to.”² The first meaning refers to what I'm calling *subjugation* while the second refers to *submission*. The meaning in any given verse is indicated by the voice (passive, middle, or active) and the broader context. Most importantly, we can always observe the difference because subjugation is externally coerced while submission is internally chosen.

Subjugation or Submission?

So, for instance, the demons were subjugated by the disciples through the power of Jesus's name (Luke 10:17; 20), and God subjugated creation in hope that it would be liberated along with the liberation of God's children (Rom. 8:20). Similarly, the prophet's spirits are subjugated to the prophets, thus under their control (1 Cor. 14:32). The most frequent use of subjugation refers to all things being placed under Jesus's authority (1 Cor. 15:27, Eph. 1:22, 1 Pet. 3:22), including the power to resurrect our bodies (Phil. 3:21). Ultimately, in Christ, the world to come will once more be placed under humanity's dominion (Heb. 2:5; 8, cf. Gen. 1:26–28).

Subjugation for None; Submission for All

Jesus and the apostles *never* instructed Christians to subjugate others or taught that certain people are *inherently* subjugated to others. Indeed, as we turn to the relationships of people, we find that submission to others is always a choice we are asked to make as an overflow of our submission to God. This pattern is evident in every instance of the word *hupotassō* which instructs Christ's followers to submit or be in submission. This includes submission of everyone to governing (Rom. 13:1; 5, Tit. 3:1, 1 Pet. 2:13) or church (1 Cor. 14:34) authorities, of wives to husbands (Eph. 5:22; 24, Col. 3:18, Tit. 2:5, 1 Pet. 3:1; 5), and of slaves to masters (Tit. 2:9, 1 Pet. 2:18). Interestingly, these references to submission to authorities figure prominently, if not exclusively, among those who misunderstand submission and weaponize it as subjugation. Meanwhile, the most important commands regarding submission are often minimized or ignored.

Those who weaponize submission typically insist that it is for subordinates, not those in authority. They refer to passages like those above and Hebrews 13:17 (which uses a cognate of *hupotassō*) to instruct believers to “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account.” To be sure, Christians must submit to

those who serve as leaders; but leaders must submit as well. This is because all believers are expected to submit to God (Heb. 12:9, Jas. 4:7) and Christ (Eph. 5:24), as well as to one another (Eph. 5:21).

Consider 1 Corinthians 16:16 where the entire congregation is instructed to submit to the household of Stephanas and all those who similarly devote themselves to serving God's people by laboring in gospel work. And observe how this broad principle of submission is specified in Romans, where the entire congregation is told to assist Phoebe, deacon of the church in Cenchrea, in whatever business she has (Rom. 16:1). Paul then lists numerous other workers by name. He notably describes women after the fashion of 1 Corinthians 16:16 as those who labor hard in the gospel work, including Priscilla (v. 3), Mary (v. 6), Junia (v. 7), Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis (v. 12). First Corinthians 16:16 indicates that the believers in Rome should submit to these faithful workers as well. Similarly, Peter instructs elders to shepherd and watch over believers, "... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock," (1 Pet. 5:2–3). He then pivots to the younger believers and, after instructing them to submit to their elders, immediately says, "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another," (5:5).

Mutual submission occurs as believers willingly submit to one another in reverence for Christ and in recognition of one another's service. It is "out of reverence for Christ" that all believers are commanded to "submit to one another," (Eph. 5:21) a command which connects instructions for the entire congregation to instructions for households. The fact that v. 21 supplies the verb "submit" to v. 22 indicates the inextricable connection between mutual submission of all believers and the submission of Christians to their spouses. Following Jesus's teaching, the instructions for husbands to love their wives in sacrifice and service after Christ's example (5:25–30; 33) must be understood as a way in which Christian husbands submit to their wives, just as wives respecting their husbands demonstrates submission to them (5:22–24; 33; cf. Col. 3:18–19). Mutual submission and humility are after the example of, and in submission to, Christ. This is the way all believers are instructed to relate to one another.

Submission, Authority, and Obedience

Those who conflate submission with subjugation often insist that submission is always commanded in subjection to authority and always involves obedience. However, submission is evidenced in loving service and sacrifice, regardless of the presence of authority or

obedience. Notably, obedience is *only* commanded in connection with certain forms of authority which are explicitly identified—as in the case with governing and church authorities, masters, and parents—and is always conditioned on that obedience being compatible with Jesus's commands and his character. Though mutually submitted to each other, neither wives nor husbands are ever told to obey each other.

Further, Jesus's example insists that we often submit to those over whom we have authority, lowering ourselves before them in humble service (John 13:1–5). While children and slaves are commanded to "obey" those in authority, Christian parents and masters are commanded to submit to God through their humble, loving, sacrificial concern for children and slaves (Eph. 6:4; 9, Col. 3:21; 4:1, cf. Phi. 16). Jesus was never subject to his disciples' authority and never obeyed them; yet from his position of ultimate authority, he continually submitted to them in service and sacrifice. Authority has its rightful place in the church, and obedience to loving leaders who give righteous instructions is vital. But the only way to follow Jesus is to practice authority and obedience in the context of mutual submission of all believers regardless of age, gender, title, or position. Timothy's young age did not limit his authority in Ephesus (1 Tim. 4:12) just as Priscilla's gender didn't prevent her from teaching Apollos in the church that met in her home (Acts 18:26; Rom. 16:3–5).

Elders (1 Tim. 5:19–21), leaders (Heb. 13:17), and teachers (Jas. 3:1) were held to a higher, not lower, level of accountability in the church, which is responsible for judging all its members—regardless of their position—righteously (1 Cor. 5:1–6:3) as they follow Jesus's example of service and sacrifice. Jesus is the God who serves his creation, the king who humbles himself to his subjects, the teacher who washes his disciples' feet. Jesus's way is one of service and sacrifice which leaves no place for subjugation in the Church but invites mutual submission of all believers in reverence for Christ.

Notes

1. All Scripture quotations from the New International Version.
2. "ὑποτάσσω (hupotassō)" word analysis in Step Bible.



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