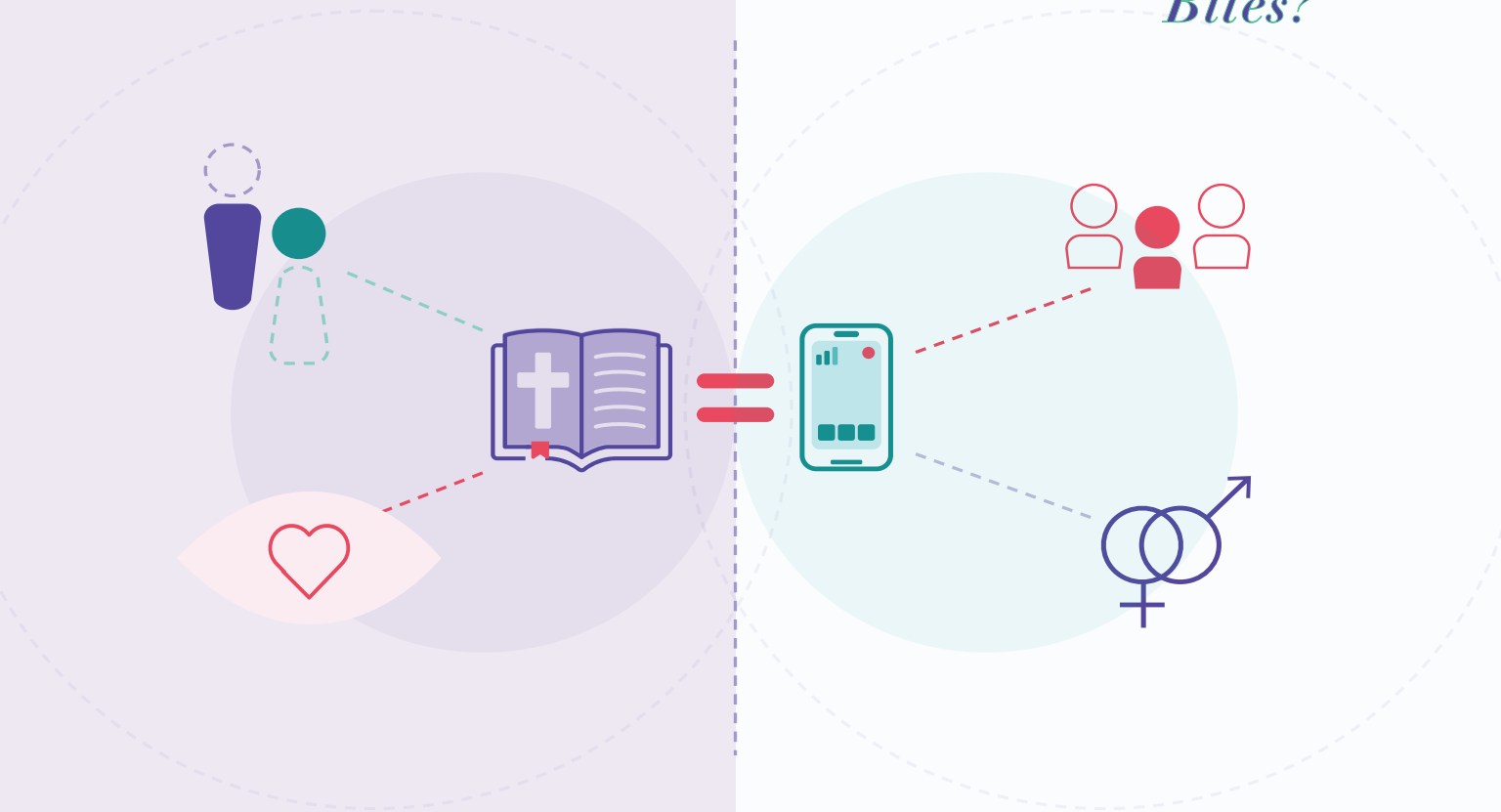


SUBMISSION

Sound Principles or Sound Bites?



Lauren Roberts Lukefahr

In the world of social media, sound bites serve as teachers. Posts, threads, and video clips instruct us and shape our perspective on a variety of topics. Memes enter our collective conscience and slogans become policy. Catchy phrases about submission—particularly unilateral submission of women to men—have been “going viral” for years. Recently, men demonstrating masculinity in the “manosphere” and women reclaiming femininity as “trad-wives” shape rhetoric online.¹ And many Christians, perhaps without even realizing it, confuse catchy but simplistic sayings with theological truth.

Trading sound principles for sound bites becomes concerning when familiar, appealing phrases are accepted without careful evaluation.

For instance, many Christians describe their view as complementarian, saying “God designed men and women to complement each other.”² On the surface, this language resonates with many believers and sounds affirming. Yet most complementarians also believe that men and women should have different, relatively fixed roles. Positions of leadership, such as pastoral leadership or leading the family, are presented as distinctly male, while concepts like submission are presented as distinctly female.³ Thus, many complementarians believe—but may not say—that men and women exist in hierarchy, with men at the top in roles in the church and home. Language that initially seemed straightforward carries assumptions about gender roles and submission that are not always made explicit.

Words Matter

Why take time to dissect pithy platitudes on submission? First, because the Bible reveals that words matter. The tongue can bring death or life, and we ingest the consequences of what we speak (Prov. 18:21). Sowing the wind and calling it biblical will not prevent us from reaping the whirlwind (Hos. 8:7). Ignorant words obscure God's plans (Job 38:2). The first word spoken on a matter sounds right until someone examines it closely (Prov. 18:17).

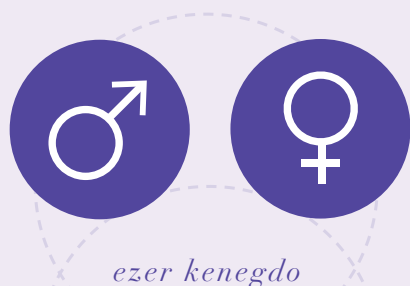
Neuroscience supports Scripture and reveals that the language we speak shapes reality, including the physical structure of our brains.⁴ Repeated words and sounds create neural pathways; unfamiliar words and phrases tend to fall off the path. Words about submission reflect beliefs that tangibly affect how people spend their hours, perform their jobs, and engage in relationships. Rhetoric shapes and sometimes limits opportunities, career paths, and ministries based simply on gender. For example, a pastor says, "Women cannot teach men." If true, how does this play out? Can a woman speak biblical truth within earshot of a man in her small group? Must a

mother stop sharing instruction with her son beginning on his eighteenth birthday? What does this mean for men, who increasingly attend church and view religion as a meaningful part of their lives?⁵ Can a man listen to a podcast where a woman teaches the Bible? Can he read books containing theological truth authored by women?

Distilled statements often fail to answer the nuanced questions of real life. We need sound principles that accurately reflect God's heart for both genders and bear up under the weight of responsibly teaching them.

Submission Sound Bites and Sound Principles

Certain sound bites regarding the one-way submission of women to men are particularly problematic and warrant further evaluation. Some people internalize these beliefs as quickly as they hear them, and both men and women repeat the refrains. But it doesn't have to be this way. We can pair careful analysis and interpretation of Scripture with multiple scholarly perspectives to yield an informed, biblical understanding of submission.



Submission Sound Bite #1

"Male headship and female submission is God's beautiful biblical design."

A Sound Principle:

God created men and women with equal dignity and purpose.

Gender equality is God's design. Genesis chapters 1–2 describe God's creation before sin entered the world. God created men and women in his image (Gen. 1:27). God gave men and women alike the blessing and command to be fruitful, to fill the earth, and to govern or reign over it (Gen. 1:28). The suggestion that one gender would desire to rule over the other only emerges after the fall, as a consequence of sin (Gen. 3:16).⁶

Some people rely on the English translation "a helper suitable for him" as evidence that women are to submit to men (Gen. 2:18). But in the original Hebrew language, *ezer kenegdo* means something closer to "a strength opposite but corresponding." Elsewhere, Scripture uses the term *ezer* to describe God himself as a strong helper who comes to the aid of his people (Psa. 121:1–2). In this instance, the helper is stronger than the one needing help. Men and women are equal in dignity because they are equally created in the image of God. Equal dignity is not just a spiritual concept, but a truth to be embodied. Claims of equal dignity that result in separate spheres of life and authority mirror a "separate but equal" logic—affirming equality in name while withholding it in lived reality. Woe to those who call sinful, fallen behavior "God's beautiful design."

Submission Sound Bite #2

“Men and women have different roles.”

A Sound Principle:

Godly living transcends gender.

The banner of “different roles” is often a euphemism for “women submit to men.” Proponents usually believe men are called to be teachers and leaders in the church and elsewhere, while women are called to find fulfillment as mothers in the home, or that that men are designed to lead and women to follow.⁷

But Scripture portrays a variety of ways for women and men to live godly lives, often in opposition to gender stereotypes. From the Old Testament to the New, Scripture affirms women who lead, prophecy, minister, and proclaim the risen Jesus. Deborah led the nation of Israel (Judg. 4–5) and Huldah prophesied (2 Kings 22:14–22). In Luke 8, Jesus travels with women who support his ministry financially, and he tells a man to go back home to his family. He compares himself to a mother (Matt. 23:37) and sends Mary Magdalene to tell her brothers of his resurrection (Matt. 23:37). Jesus commissions his followers to carry out God’s mission *according to his commands*, not gender (Matt. 28:18–20). Women and men both receive the Holy Spirit and prophecy accordingly (Acts 2; Joel 2:28–32). Later Paul describes men and women, including Phoebe, Priscilla, and Junia, as deacons, co-workers, and outstanding among the apostles (Rom. 16). Throughout the Bible and in the early church, women and men worked together, both leading and serving, to declare and magnify the good news of God’s kingdom come.

Submission Sound Bite #3

“Men are the protectors and providers.”

A Sound Principle:

All individuals come to Christ by grace through faith; children of God share equal spiritual standing and should be free from relationships that subjugate.



The benign-sounding “men are protectors” mantra often hides the belief that, to receive protection, a woman must come under a man’s authority.⁸ Or, as the popular umbrella image depicts: Jesus leads men; men lead women; women lead children; each keeps the one below it “safe.” Proponents hold up as anecdotal evidence Christian men who protect and provide well. The only problem they see with submission is with sinful men who lead poorly, not with the faulty structure of unilateral submission. A structure that subjugates women to men often leads to more opportunities for abuse, not more safety. Not all hierarchical relationships are abusive, to be sure, yet abuse can be more easily justified, hidden, or prolonged in systems characterized by power imbalance and reduced agency. God never asks men to mediate his grace or restrict women. The only mediator between God and people is Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5–6). There are also biblical precedents that depict women as protectors and providers. Jochabed, Miriam, and Zipporah delivered Moses through womb, water, and wilderness (Exod. 2:1–10; 4:24–26). Rahab protected the Israelite spies who, in turn, protected her (Josh. 2:1–21; 6:22–25). Esther risked her own life to save her people (Esth. 4:10–16; 7:1–10). The ability to give and receive protection and provision are human conditions—not gendered ones.

Submission Sound Bite #4

“As a wife, your body belongs to your husband.”

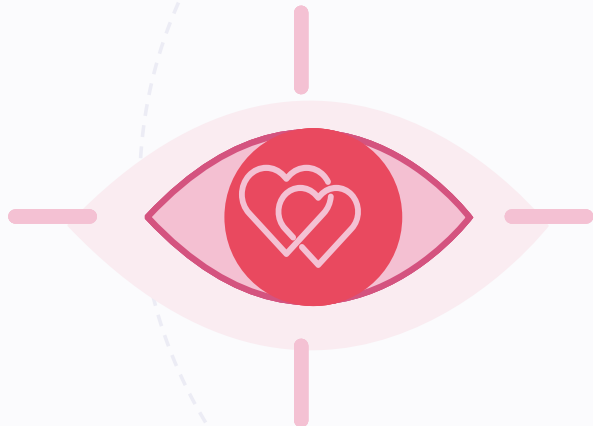
A Sound Principle:

Jesus sets submission as the way for all his followers—men and women, husbands and wives.

Requiring a wife to submit her body to her husband’s preferences—from hairstyle to waist size to frequency of intimacy—removes her agency. As Shelia Wray Gregoire reveals, “If you can’t freely say no, then you can’t truly say yes either.”⁹ Such a mindset reflects coercive control, not the upside-down kingdom of God ushered in by Jesus. Instead of claiming authority, Jesus’s followers are commanded to serve. Whoever would be the greatest must serve the most (Mark 10:41–45). Paul instructs husbands and wives to yield their bodies to each other (1 Cor. 7:3–5). Can a person conform to the image of Jesus while requiring submission from, but not yielding in submission to, their spouse? When a marriage is a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity, versus authority, husbands and wives submit to each other out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21). Both “follow God’s example and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us,” (Eph. 5:1–2).

In conclusion, leadership and submission are not gender-based roles. Mutual and loving submission is the privilege and responsibility of *all* Christ followers. All believers are called to take a lowly position for themselves, submit to God and others, and steward their God-given gifts. Claims suggesting otherwise deserve careful examination.

We are each responsible for thinking critically and evaluating the content we consume and spread. Scripture tells us to test everything that is said and hold to what is good (1 Thess. 5:21). But testing requires more than a quick scroll and share. Testing demands discerning answers to hard questions: Does this align with Scripture's full counsel? Does it reflect God's character? Does it dignify the image-bearers it describes? If, in honest evaluation, we realize our words fail to accurately depict God's heart regarding submission—or worse, that they harm rather than heal—we must change the way we speak.



Lauren Roberts Lukefahr advocates for gender equality in evangelical spaces. She esteems God's Word and cares deeply about how God's daughters are treated in His house. She is a mom, a Learning and Development professional, a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, and a Bible Study teacher at her church.

Notes

1. "Going viral": To spread extensively and rapidly through social media and other internet platforms, in reference to a post, image, or video. "Manosphere": A network of male-centered websites, internet communities, and other digital media regarded collectively as espousing anti-feminist views, typically involving misogyny and associated with far-right ideologies. "Trad-wife" or "tradwife": A married woman that embraces traditional gender roles; also a movement on social media that idealizes and romanticizes traditional gender roles and purity culture. *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/>.
2. The term "complementarian" was originally used by theologians affirming biblical equality. "Egalitarian evangelicals had long before this date embraced this term as the best way to designate the male-female relationship. Paul Jewett, in his seminal 1975 book, *Man as Male and Female*, argued for "a model of partnership . . . where man and woman are properly related when they accept each other as equals whose difference is mutually complementary in all spheres of life and human endeavour" (62). In my 1977 book I argued that the church needs for its well-being both men and women in leadership, for the church is impoverished when more than half of its members are excluded from leadership. I did not explicitly use the term "complementary," but I did speak of "the distinctive contribution that is made by men and women" in the church and in marriage (63). What is more, I repeatedly described ministry in the church and marriage as a "partnership" where each sex adds to what the other brings. I was surprised on re-reading the book that I had not explicitly used the word "complementary," for the idea was presupposed in all that I said. However, in my 1985 book, *Created Woman: A Fresh Study of the Biblical Teaching*, I explicitly wrote of the "complementarity of the sexes" and constantly described their relationship in this way." See Kevin Giles, "The Genesis of Confusion: How 'Complementarians' Have Corrupted Communication," *Priscilla Papers*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2015. <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/genesis-confusion/>.)
3. The Danvers Statement, <https://cbmw.org/about/the-danvers-statement/>. The Danvers Statement reflects the belief that "distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order" and that the fall "inclines women to resist limitations on their roles."
4. Kara C. Martin, W. T. Ketchabaw, and Peter E. Turkeltaub, "Plasticity of the Language System in Children and Adults," In *Handbook of Clinical Neurology*, vol. 184, 2022, 397–414, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-819410-2.00021-7>. This article explores the relationship between plasticity and language, including how language exposure shapes the brain.
5. Frank Newport and Lydia Saad, "Rise in Young Men's Religiosity Realigns Gender Gaps," *Gallup.com*, April 23, 2026, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/708410/rise-young-men-religiosity-realigns-gender-gaps.aspx>.
6. Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 241. Though some people appeal to passages of Scripture to silence women, Scot McKnight corrects: "What we see in this desire to silence women is the desire to rule over women, a desire that pertains to the fall, not to the new creation. . . . The Spirit creates mutuality. Always."
7. Denny Burk, "The Roles of Men and Women," *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-roles-of-men-and-women/>. Burk describes complementarians as believing "God calls the husband to be the head of his wife." He agrees with the Danvers Statement's resounding nevertheless: "In the church, redemption in Christ gives men and women an equal share in the blessings of salvation; nevertheless, some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men."
8. Heather Matthews, *Confronting Sexism in the Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2024), 6. Matthews points out that "benevolent patriarchy still leads to unequal treatment and discrimination against women."
9. Sheila Wray Gregoire and Keith Gregoire, *The Marriage You Want: Moving beyond Stereotypes for a Relationship Built on Scripture, New Data, and Emotional Health*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2025.