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For Grandparents, Parents and Seniors

By Rick Shrader

The Stewardship of Submission

Submission is a corollary of headship. It follows that if “the head of every man is Christ” (1 Cor. 11:3), then every lesser submission is a part of our stewardship to Christ our ultimate Head. All of these submissions come from the word *hupotassō* which always means submission to an authority.

Submission in Creation (Heb. 2:8). In a wide sense, the creation was put in submission to mankind, and as man is subject to Christ, so we are stewards of His creation. At the same time, being part of creation, we are ourselves in the bondage of corruption (Rom. 8:20). The angels are in submission to Christ (1 Pet. 3:22).

Submission in Society (Rom. 13:1; 1 Pet. 2:13). In society we are to submit to the civil authorities that apply to us. The servant, or employee, is to be in submission to his master, or employer (Tit. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18). The youth in a society ought to be in submission to the elders (1 Pet. 5:5) in the same way that all children are subject to their parents (Eph. 6:1-3) according to the 5th commandment.

Submission in the Home (Eph. 5:22; Col. 1:18). The submission “to one another” (Eph. 5:21) is taken to mean the one that applies to you and in the way it applies to you. Wives are to submit to their “own husbands,” not to someone else’s husband. The man is never said to submit to his wife, but his stewardship (under Christ) is to love his wife as Christ loved the church. As in all submissions, the authority flows one way. The wife submits to her husband but the husband is not said to submit to his wife. Even the word “serve” (in all its forms) only shows that we are servants of Christ with various household stewardships. At

the fall (Gen. 3) we learn that the penalty for sin is that the wife will desire to control the husband and the husband will, in return, rule harshly over the wife.

Children are told to submit to their parents (1 Pet. 5:5) and are to “obey” (listen to) them. The training and admonition that comes from parents is to be accepted by children as long as they are under their authority (Heb. 12:9-10; Tit. 1:6). Honor lasts for life.

Submission in the Church (Eph. 5:24; Heb. 12:7, 17). The church, universal or local, submits to Christ as its Head. Congregationally, the church follows the will of Christ when all members are walking in the Spirit. The verses in Hebrews show that members also submit to those elected leaders whom God has placed in authority. This always must be in accordance with God’s revealed will for the church. It is not meant to be blind submission. The epistles are written to the church.

Within the church, women are not to usurp authority over the men in teaching and leadership (1 Tim. 2:11-14). Paul specifically attributes this to Eve’s disobedience in the garden (also 2 Cor. 11:3). In the church the wife should show her stewardship of submission by a quiet and submissive demeanor (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11; 1 Pet. 3:4). Children should also show their stewardship to Christ by their submission to parents and elders (1 Pet. 5:5; Tit. 2:3-5).

Submission in Eternity (1 Cor. 15:27-28). When all is said and done in earth’s history, all things will be subject to Christ and to God. Because Christ is the Head of all believers, we will eternally find our fulfillment when all things are finally under His feet. “Who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence (Col. 1:18).

Is there “Mutual Submission?”

In the most extended passage in the New Testament on marriage, Paul writes, “Submitting to one another in the fear of the God” (Eph 5:21). In the next verse he writes, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord” (5:22), but it is not until vs. 25 that Paul writes, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it.” Is this mutual submission? The wife obviously is to submit to her own husband, but the husband is only said to love his wife. The meaning of mutual submission became an issue especially since the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) was organized in 1988. It was from that conference that the term complementarianism was coined and supported as opposed to egalitarianism. There were other controversial issues involved, especially the role of the eternal Godhead in submission, that are not our concern here.

One finds in older writers a more free use of the term “mutual submission.” For example, H.A. Ironside, writing in 1937 on *Ephesians* says that Paul “is calling for mutual loyalty, mutual respect, mutual submission” (p. 278). However, the rise of feminism in Christian circles throughout the 20th century caused conservative writers to be more careful though the term was still used. As late as 2000, John MacArthur wrote, “There is to be a mutual submission among all parties, with the family as a whole submitting to the father’s leadership” (*What the Bible Says About Parenting*, p. 161 & 162). Yet, MacArthur is anything but an egalitarian. In 2002, Wayne Grudem (who was vitally involved in CBMW as a complementarian) wrote,

I affirm at the outset that people can mean different things by *mutual submission*. There is a sense of the phrase *mutual submission* that is different from an egalitarian view and that does not nullify the husband’s authority within marriage. If mutual submission means being considerate of one another, and caring for one another’s needs, and being thoughtful of one another, and sacrificing for one another, then of course I would agree that mutual submission is a good thing.

However, egalitarians mean something so different by this phrase, and they have used this phrase so often to nullify male authority within marriage, that I think the expression “mutual submission” only leads to confusion if we go on using it” (*Biblical Foundations For Manhood and Womanhood*, p. 223)

Since that time, however, A LOT of feminist, egalitarian, non-binary, LGBTQ+, social engineering water has gone under the bridge. And Grudem was right, egalitarians use this phrase to nullify any authority differences between husband and wife in marriage, church, and society. Therefore, more recent writers (including Grudem) object to the term on any biblical basis. Andreas Köstenberger, in 2010, wrote on Ephesians 5, “This runs counter to the notion of ‘mutual submission’ within the context of identity of gender roles” (*God, Marriage, and Family*, p. 59). Writing again with his wife, Margaret, he says, “Paul’s command for husbands and wives to submit to each other doesn’t necessarily imply identity of roles or mutual submission” (*God’s Design for Man and Woman*, p. 183). In 2021, Kevin DeYoung points out (as do others) that the word *hupotasso* (submit) is used “always with reference to a relationship where one party has authority over another” (*Men and Women in the Church*, p. 104). Therefore, he says, mutual submission doesn’t fit Ephesians 5.

Three things are left to be noticed about mutual submission. 1) Nowhere in the New Testament is the husband said to submit to his wife, a real problem for egalitarians. Also, in every place *hupotasso* (submit) is used, it is nonreciprocal, i.e., it is one-directional: Christ to the church, slaves to masters, citizens to government, angels to Christ, and wives to husbands. Love, respect, and help are reciprocal but submission is not. 2) The phrase “one to another” (*allelous*) in Eph. 5:21, doesn’t necessarily mean everyone to everyone. It more often means everyone to a proper authority. That is why the wife is to submit to “her own husband,” not to every husband. Headship implies that one submit to one’s proper head, whether Christ to God or the church to Christ. 3) Male headship and a complementarity between husband and wife are not a result of the fall into sin. Some try to make the case that submission in the family (or later, the church) came as a result of sin but wasn’t part of God’s original plan. Adam, however, was clearly made first with dominion while Eve was made as a “helper” for him.

Headship and submission are part of God’s plan for human beings especially within marriage. This is where marriages thrive and husbands and wives find their true joy and fulfillment in life.