

The myth of “mutual submission”¹

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HOW DO EGALITARIANS AVOID THE FORCE of Ephesians 5:22, “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord”? Easy: they just look at verse 21, which says, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Then they say, “Of course wives are to be subject to their husbands, but husbands are also to be subject to their wives.”

The result is what they call “mutual submission,” and in their view that means that there is no unique authority or leadership role for the husband in a marriage. They redefine “submission” to mean something like “considerateness, thoughtfulness, an attitude of love toward one another, putting the other person’s interests above your own.”

Of course no one can object to the ideas of mutual considerateness, thoughtfulness, and love! These are clearly taught in the New Testament. But are these ideas what this verse, Ephesians 5:21, really means?

I do not think so. In fact, I think that the whole idea of “mutual submission” as an interpretation of “be subject to one another” in Ephesians 5:21 is a terribly mistaken idea. It can be advocated only by failing to appreciate the precise meanings of the Greek words for “be subject to” and “one another.” Once these terms are understood correctly, I think the idea of “mutual submission” in marriage will be seen to be a myth without foundation in Scripture at all.

1. The meaning of “be subject to”

The first reason I think “some to others” is a better understanding of Ephesians 5:21 is the meaning of the Greek word *hypotassō* (“be subject to, submit to”). Although some have claimed that the word can mean “be thoughtful and considerate; act in love” (toward another), there is no hard evidence to show that any first-century Greek speaker would have understood it that way, for the term always implies a relationship of submission to an authority.

Look at how this word is used elsewhere in the New Testament:

- Jesus is subject to the authority of his parents (Luke 2:51)
- demons are subject to the disciples (Luke 10:17: clearly the meaning “act in love, be considerate” cannot fit here!)
- citizens are to be subject to government authorities (Rom. 13:1, 5; Tit. 3:1, 1 Pet. 2:13)
- the universe is subject to Christ (1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:22)
- unseen spiritual powers are subject to Christ (1 Pet. 3:22)
- Christ is subject to God the Father (1 Cor. 15:28)

¹ Grudem, W. (1995). “The Myth of Mutual Submission” in *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 1.4.

- church members are to be subject to church leaders (1 Cor. 16:15–16 [cf. 1 Clement 42:4]; 1 Pet. 5:5)
- wives are to be subject to their husbands (Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:5; compare Eph. 5:22, 24)
- the church is subject to Christ (Eph. 5:24)
- servants are to be subject to their masters (Tit. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18)
- Christians are subject to God (Heb. 12:9; Jas. 4:7)

Here is the point: None of these relationships are ever reversed. Husbands are never told to be subject (*hypotassō*) to wives, nor the government to citizens, nor masters to servants, nor the disciples to demons. Clearly parents are never told to be subject to their children! In fact, the term *hypotassō* is used outside the NT to describe the submission and obedience of soldiers in an army to those of superior rank (see, for example, Josephus, *War* 2.566, 578; 5.309; compare the adverb in 1 Clement 37:2). The *Liddell-Scott-Jones Lexicon* even defines *hypotassō* [passive] to mean “be obedient” (p. 1897).

Of course, the exact form submission takes, the way it works out in practice, will vary greatly as it applies to soldiers, to children, to servants, to the church, and to wives. Within a healthy Christian marriage, there will be large elements of mutual consultation and seeking of wisdom, and most decisions will come by consensus between husband and wife.

For a wife to be submissive to her husband will probably not often involve obeying actual commands or directives (though it will sometimes include this), for a husband may rather give requests and seek advice and discussion about the course of action to be followed (compare Phlm. 8–9). This is probably why Paul used the broader term “be subject to” when speaking to wives, rather than the specific word “obey” (*hypakouō*), which he used for children (6:1) and for servants (6:5).

Nevertheless, a wife’s attitude of submission to her husband’s authority will be reflected in numerous words and actions each day which reflect deference to his leadership and an acknowledgment of his final responsibility—after discussion has occurred, where possible—to make decisions affecting the whole family.

But in spite of all these different forms of submission, one thing remains constant in every use of the word: it is never “mutual” in its force; it is always one-directional in its reference to submission to an authority.

So my question is this: Why should we give *hypotassō* a meaning in Ephesians 5:21 which it is nowhere else shown to have? But if *hypotassō* always means “be subject to an authority,” then it is certainly a misunderstanding of Ephesians 5:21 to say it implies “mutual submission.”

2. The rest of the context

The “mutual submission” interpretation also fails to adequately take account of the context. In Ephesians 5:22–24, wives are not told to be subject to everyone else, or to all husbands, or to other wives, or to their neighbors or children, for the Greek text clearly specifies a restriction, “Wives, be subject to your own husbands (*idiois andrasin*).” Therefore what Paul has in mind is not a vague kind of “mutual submission” where everybody is “considerate and thoughtful” to

everybody else, but a specific kind of submission to an authority: the wife is subject to the authority of “her own husband.”

Similarly, parents and children aren’t told to practice “mutual submission,” but children are to be subject to (“obey”) their parents (Eph. 6:1–3), and servants are told to be subject to (“obey”) their masters (Eph. 6:5–8). In each case, the person in authority is not told to be subject to the one under authority, but Paul wisely gives guidelines to regulate the use of authority by husbands (who are to love their wives, Eph. 5:25–33), by parents (who are not to provoke their children to anger, Eph. 6:4), and by masters (who are to give up threatening their servants and remember that they too serve Christ, Eph. 6:9). *In no case is there “mutual submission”; in each case there is submission to authority and regulated use of that authority.*

This clear evidence in the context is why people didn’t see “mutual submission” in Ephesians 5:21 until feminist pressures in our culture led people to look for a way to avoid the force of Ephesians 5:22, “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord.” For centuries, no one thought mutual submission was there in Ephesians 5:21, for they recognized that the verse teaches that we should all be subject to those whom God has put in authority over us—such as husbands, parents, or employers. In this way, Ephesians 5:21 was rightly understood to mean, “being subject to one another (that is, some to others), in the fear of Christ.”

3. The absence of any command for husbands to submit to wives

There is one more fact that egalitarians cannot explain well when they propose “mutual submission” as an understanding of this verse. They fail to account for the fact that, while wives are several times in the New Testament told to be subject to their husbands (Eph. 5:22–24; Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1–6), the situation is never reversed: *husbands are never told to be subject to their wives. Why is this, if Paul wanted to teach “mutual submission”?*

The command that a husband should be subject to his wife would have been startling in an ancient male-dominated culture. Therefore, if the New Testament writers thought that Christian marriage required husbands to submit to their wives, they would have had to say that very clearly in their writings—otherwise, no early Christians would have ever known that that was what they should do! But nowhere do we find such a command. It is surprising that evangelical feminists can claim that the New Testament teaches this when it is nowhere explicitly stated.

4. The meaning of “one another”

So what reason can people give to argue for the “mutual submission” interpretation in Ephesians 5:21? Their argument is based on the expression, “one another” (the Greek pronoun *allēlous*). Here interpreters say that the pronoun must mean “everyone to everyone” (that is, that it must be “exhaustively reciprocal,” which means that it refers to something that every single person does to every single other person). To support this view, they quote a number of verses where *allēlous* does take that sense: we are all to “love one another” (John 13:34) and “be servants of one another” (Gal. 5:13).

But here is the crucial mistake: interpreters assume that because *allēlous* means “everyone to everyone” in *some* verses, it must mean that in *all* verses. When they assume that, they simply

have not done their homework—they have not checked out the way the word is used in many other contexts, where it doesn't mean "everyone to everyone," but "some to others."

For example, in Revelation 6:4, "so that men should slay *one another*" means "so that some would kill others" (not "so that every person would kill every other person," or "so that every persons being killed would 'mutually' kill those who were killing them," which would make no sense!). In Galatians 6:2, "Bear *one another's* burdens" means not "everyone should exchange burdens with everyone else," but "some who are more able should help bear the burdens of others who are less able." In 1 Corinthians 11:33, "when you come together to eat, wait for *one another*" means "some who are ready early should wait for others who are late."

There are many other examples where the word simply cannot mean that "everyone does something to everyone else," because the sense of the context simply won't allow that meaning (see Matt. 24:10; Luke 2:15; 12:1; 24:32; etc.). In these verses *allēlous* means, "some to others." (The KJV often translated these passages, "one to another" or "*one for another*," as in 1 Corinthians 11:33, "When ye come together to eat, tarry one for another." Following this pattern, the KJV translated Ephesians 5:21, "submitting yourselves *one to another*.")

5. Conclusion

What then does "one another" mean in Ephesians 5:21? It means "some to others," not "everyone to everyone." The meaning of *hypotassō*, which always indicates one-directional submission to an authority, prevents the sense "everyone to everyone" in this verse. And the following context (wives to husbands, children to parents, servants to masters) shows this understanding to be true.

Therefore, it is not "mutual submission," but submission to appropriate authorities, which Paul is commanding in Ephesians 5:21. The idea of "mutual submission" in this passage is just a myth—widely believed, perhaps, but still a myth.

Is this important? Just ask yourself how important the idea of submission to authority is in the New Testament. If *hypotassō* can be emptied of any idea of submission to authority, the New Testament's ability to speak to our lives will be significantly impeded. This egalitarian misunderstanding of Ephesians 5:21 carries with it a very large price.²

² Grudem, W. (1995). "The Myth of Mutual Submission" in *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 1.4, 1–4.