

SUBMITTING TO ONE ANOTHER:

Ephesians 5:21-6:9

Virgil Warren, PhD

This portion of Ephesians deals with “household teaching” on the relationship of husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves. Other comparable texts are Colossians 3:18-4:1 and 1 Peter 2:(13-)18-3:7.

1. In regard to each relationship, Paul appeals to interpersonal principles to set the tone for it. In other places, he does the same thing to solve problems that impact practical relationships in the body (languages, 1 Corinthians **12-14**; leadership, 2 Corinthians **10-13**; *etc.*). He can do that because personal relationship is always the context in which further considerations exist and must exist in a way that does not interfere with that context. Paul implies that interpersonalism should carry the process as much as possible. Only when influence for practical reasons is inadequate is there a need to invoke the principle of authority (much less force).

2. Unity, not equality, is the ultimate concept in any group. That concept allows for the practical factors in the situation, particularly (a) the diversity between people and (b) the need for organization to gain efficiency and harness power in a division of labor. The ideal is not a sameness that leads to absolute interchangeability or equal status. Such ideals are unreal to the nature of people operating in group process.

3. Paul brings each human relationship into the context of vertical relationship with Christ:

wives: be in subjection to your own husbands as to the Lord (**5:22, 24**, cp. 23);
 husbands: love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it (**5:25, 29**)

children: obey your parents in the Lord (**6:1**)
 parents: nurture them in the discipline and admonition of the Lord (**6:4**)

servants: be obedient . . . as to Christ (**6:5**) . . . as servants of Christ . . . doing the will of God (**6:6**) . . . as to the Lord (**6:7**)

masters: do the same to them . . . knowing that he who is both their Master and yours in is heaven (**6:9**)

4. Paul addresses the “submitters” first in each case: wives, children, slaves. The same pattern appears in Colossians 3:18-4:1 and 1 Peter 2:13-3:7. There may be no special reason for this pattern—except perhaps custom, but the reason may be that subordination applies to more people. It may also be the harder thing for people to do. Christianity’s emphasis on the worth of the individual only compounds the problem if the worth of the individual is allowed to feed individualism and competition.

5. Paul gives directives to both sides of the relationship, not just to those who should submit. Headship and submission have to occur simultaneously. Problems in that situation

cannot be solved from just one side of it. The positions are correlative; neither side is absolute.

6. In the directives Paul gives to each side, he addresses the weakness that most typically characterizes that side:

wives: defer to your husbands (5:22, 24); respect your husband (5:33)
 husbands: love your wives (5:25-29, 33)

parents: do not frustrate your children; nurture, discipline, and admonish them
 (6:4)

children: obey your parents (6:1); honor them (6:2)

slaves: obey your masters (6:5)
 masters: forbear threatening (6:9)

7. The relationships Paul treats in this household material are not completely alike, or homogeneous. Wife-husband is not the same as child-parent, and neither is like slave-master. Other examples of lists that are not homogeneous include Acts 15:20, 29; etc. The relationships in 5:21-6:9, however, do have important elements in common that allow Paul to treat them as a unit:

- a. they all involve interpersonal relationships;
- b. they all involve interpersonal relationships in the household setting
- c. they all involve mixing the dynamics of headship-deference with those of interpersonalism in the home.

Comments on the Concept of “Mutual Submission” for 5:21

Despite the popularity of the idea, for reasons given below “*submit to one another*” (ὑποτάσσεσθε ἀλλήλοις, *hypotassesthe allēlois*) does not mean mutual submission. That is in fact almost the opposite of Paul’s meaning. The problem he deals with is not the mistaken practice of having domestic order, but the failure to observe it properly because interpersonal qualities are not impacting both sides of the relationships.

a. The meaning of “*submit one to one another*” in 5:21 must fit the whole set of household relationships addressed in 5:22-6:9. If 5:21 is the heading of anything, it is the heading of everything that deals with submitting, not just with the first third of it. The sense in which we understand submission in the case of husbands-wives needs to fit with the cases of parents-children and slaves-masters as well. Mutual submission would mean that children no more obey parents than parents obey children and that slaves no more need to submit to their masters than masters submit to their slaves. (Note also 1 Peter 2:13-17 regarding submission to earthly rulers.) An argument that proves too much does not prove what it seems to prove; consequently, 5:21 should not be used to argue for mutual submission.

b. The sense in which we understand 5:21 must fit with the specific statements inside the husband-wife material itself. Those specific statements include comparisons between husband-wife and Christ-church relationships. The Christ-church relationship is not mutual submission; so neither is the husband-wife relationship. The sense in which the husband is “head of” the wife and the wife “defers” to her husband is the sense in which Christ is head of the church and the church submits to him.

In 5:22-6:9 Paul does not say here or anywhere else that husbands, parents, or masters should submit, but he does say that wives, children, and slaves should. So, he does not mean reciprocal submission.

d. The meaning of “*submit to one another*” must fit with what the New Testament teaches elsewhere. Other comparable texts do not prefix an element like “*submit to one another*.” They begin directly with statements about wives deferring to husbands: Colossians 3:18; 1 Peter 3:1; Titus 2:5; cp. 1 Corinthians 11:3-10; 14:14-35. None of these examples have any contextual aspect to change their obvious meaning in the direction of what is often proposed for Ephesians 5:21. So, we should take “*submit to one another*” in Ephesians 5:21 in a way that fits with free-standing usages of “*submit*” rather than *vice versa*. Scripture never tells a husband to submit to his wife as he does in a straightforward way tells wives to “*defer*” to their husbands as he does in Titus 2:5; so interpreters should not try to take advantage of the wording in Ephesians 5:21 to make it say something never said anywhere else.

Peter’s material on submission begins with an even wider application than household submission. It starts with submission to temporal authority (1 Peter 2:13-17), then proceeds to slaves (2:18-25) and then wives (3:1-6). This fact adds temporal authority to parent and masters as three cases that are not reciprocal out of the four cases of submission.

e. We should choose the meaning for “*one another* [ἀλλήλων, *allēlōn*]” that fits with the kind of the subject addressed here. “*One another*” has two meanings, not just one. In group settings where the nature of the case allows, “*one another*” means A to B, X to Y, etc. (one-directional between various sets of individuals within the group); it does not have to mean A to B to A (two-directional between the same two individuals).

The latter meaning shows up in statements like “*love one another*.” Person A loves person B, and person B loves him back. Loving (1 Thessalonians 4:9), forgiving (Ephesians 4:32), greeting (2 Corinthians 13:12) can be done back and forth between the same two individuals. The former meaning shows up in Mark 4:41; 8:16; 9:34; Luke 2:15; 4:36; 7:32; 8:25; 24:22; John 4:33; 6:52; 11:56; 16:17; 19:24; Acts 2:7; 4:15; 26:31; 28:4; 11:33; Revelation 6:4 (“*kill one another*”), and perhaps other cases (Matthew 24:10 “*betray one another*”; Luke 12:1; John 5:44; 13:14; Acts 7:26; 19:38; 1 Corinthians 7:5; James 5:16 “*confess your sins to one another*”). Ephesians 5:21-6:9 is a group setting comprised of the total family, not just a statement about two individuals—a man and a woman.

f. By the nature of what submission is, mutual submission would be self-contradictory, something like a male mare. “*Submit*” normally means deferring to authority. By the nature of what authority is, “*mutual*” submission is not possible. If we suppose a figurative application of the term, the concept is still not very clear. Two people cannot submit to each other in the same sense at the same time and it still be submitting. Person A could submit to person B in one respect while person B would submit to person A in some other respect. But that meaning of the phrase would not eliminate hierarchical (vs. egalitarian) arrangement in marriage and the home, which is the goal in wanting to take

“*submit to one another*” as mutual submission. Dividing up individual items so that husbands submit to wives on some matters while wives submit to husbands on others is apparently eliminated by the expression submitting to husbands “*in everything*” (5:24). The apostles evidently means “*as the overall structure of things*” in a marriage. Submitting back and forth in the same sense could occur in acts of submission occurring at different times; in that case “*submit to one another*” becomes a loose expression for interpersonalism comparable to the situation in 1 Corinthians 7:4, but where we do find such a meaning associated with ὑποτάσσομαι (*hypotassomai*)? Mutual submission as an English expression may not seem self-contradictory, but that does not make it the intended meaning of the Greek term in Ephesians 5:21. An interpretation is not true because it cannot be disproved. “*The burden of proof rests on the affirmative,*” we say. An interpretation can be considered true when adequate evidence can be given for it; that is not something accomplished by appealing to an—at most—ambiguous passage.

g. In all the history of biblical interpretation, no one ever supposed such a meaning as “mutual submission” for Ephesians 5:21 until the secular women’s liberation movement started influencing the church and consequently biblical interpretation.

Paul writes this section of Ephesians to discourage “bucking the system” out of self-interest. Interpreters confuse his point about order with the more basic interpersonal setting in which order does take place and which should serve as the corrective for abuses in headship-deference. Paul’s appeals to interpersonal items like love and mutual respect are not calculated to remove headship-submission, but to qualify the manner in which it takes place. A skewed concept of headship creates a skewed concept of deference. Headship is not domination, but responsibility; so, submission is not self-negation, but respect for the other’s responsibility.

At best, “*submit yourselves to one another*” is an ambiguous expression. But proper interpretation calls for taking the ambiguous in light of the clear. One clear way of interpreting this expression equals the uniform household teaching everywhere else in the New Testament. That is how we should take it here: people should be deferring to the ones they ought to defer to. Christianity’s emphasis on interpersonalism does not give us an excuse to rebel against authority for self-interest. Rather, it establishes the manner in which we cooperate with those in positions of responsibility and the manner in which responsible people use their authority with people they have responsibility for.

One Final Note

In the work of biblical interpretation and personal application, distinct issues should be kept distinct. The first issue here is (1) what Paul means by the expression “*submit yourselves to one another*.” That is a separate matter from (2) whether we even believe what he said, or (3) whether Paul’s commands apply to cultures beyond his own. That last item is where the question about present-day marriage and home relationships belongs. But whatever we decide on that point has nothing to do with what Paul meant when he wrote to the Ephesians in the first century.