

Exegetical Brief: Ephesians 5:21 A Transitional Verse

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In the *New International Version (NIV)* Ephesians 5:21 reads: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." It stands alone. That is, it is set off from verse 20 and it precedes the editorial heading *Wives and Husbands*. This could give the impression that it is a summary sentence, introducing the instructions for domestic relationships that follow in 5:22 to 6:9. The *New English Bible (NEB)* also allows verse 21 to stand as a one-sentence paragraph. The *Revised Standard Version (RSV)* begins a new paragraph with verse 21, continuing without a break to verse 24.

All three versions seem to reject or ignore the connection of verse 21 with what preceded: "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:18-20). The "submit" in verse 21 translates a present participle, as do "speak," "sing," "make music," and "giving thanks" (in Greek: λαλούντες, ᾄδοντες, ψάλλοντες, εὐχαριστοῦντες). According to grammatical construction ὑποτασσόμενοι is in agreement with the other participles. All are supplementary to the imperative πληροῦσθε (be filled) of verse 18. Alternatively, they may all be regarded as appositional, each modifying the verb form that precedes it.

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" concludes the prescription for Spirit-filled worship. It describes (and calls for) a mutual willingness to subordinate one's own role in public worship to that of others, to submit to the interests of others in worship; and that out of reverence for Christ. Paul gives similar instruction regarding public worship in 1 Corinthians 14:25-34, twice using forms of ὑποτάσσομαι (v 32, 34).

From his exhortation concerning worship (v 19, 20) Paul moves to the Table of Duties, instruction concerning the relationships of wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters (5:22-6:9).

Unlike 6:1, there is no explicit imperative in 5:22. In *UBS* and *Nestle* there is no verb at all. The Byzantine majority text and Codex D (5th or 6th century), plus many versions, read ὑποτάσσεσθε. Codices \aleph (4th century) and A (5th century), plus many versions, read ὑποτασσέσθωσαν. If one follows the testimony of the witnesses to the text, the early and widespread evidence suggests the original text might have included a verb.

Not widespread, but early, are Greek readings that have no verb. They are p⁴⁶ (ca. 200 A.D.), Codex B (4th century), Clement (2nd century), Origen (3rd century), and manuscripts according to Jerome.

If one chooses to decide how to read the text by considering which reading is easier to explain in terms of copyists' and editors' emendations, then the choice is between: the insertion of a verb to "help" the reader, especially in a lectionary; or the deletion of a verb where the absence of a verb creates difficulties. This writer thinks the former more likely and that the imperatives based on ὑποτάσσομαι might have been added to the original for this reason.

Almost without exception, modern English translations have also borrowed the verb from verse 21. Wives are to "submit" or "be subject." Lenski translates literally, supplying no verb: "The wives to their own husbands as to the Lord." He comments: "No verb is needed, an imperative, 'let them subject themselves,' being automatically supplied by the reader."

It seems likely that all these translators saw a connection between verse 21 and the section 5:22-6:9. To see such a connection does not necessarily mean discounting or ignoring the grammatical and logical connection of ὑποτασσόμενοι (v 21) with the participles in v 19,20. It can just as well mean that most translators (and a good many commentators) have understood verse 21 as a swing or transitional verse, concluding the exhortation regarding worship (5:18-21) and beginning the instruction on domestic relations (5:21-6:9). With ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις ἐν φόβῳ Χριστοῦ (5:21) Paul encourages Christians to avoid egotistic self-assertion and self-exaltation in worship (5:19, 20) and in domestic relationships (5:21-6:9).

The question arises whether the relationship of husbands to wives (5:25-33), fathers to children (6:4), and masters to slaves (6:9) can be gathered under the concept expressed in the participle ὑποτασσόμενοι. The

self-sacrificing love of husbands for wives, the training and nurturing with which fathers serve their children, the considerate treatment which masters are to accord their slaves all fit the sense of ὑποτάσσομαι suggested by Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich for the verse in question: "submission in the sense of voluntary yielding in love."

Such submission, such an understanding of submission, does not blur the God-assigned roles of each station in life. It does call on all believers to imitate Christ in their relationships with one another.

To summarize, we have considered three possibilities for understanding the place of Ephesians 5:21 in the context of 5:18-6:9. They are:

- 1) Verse 21 looks backward only, to verses 18-20;
- 2) Verse 21 looks forward only, providing a heading for 5:22-6:9;
- 3) Verse 21 looks in both directions, backward according to strict grammar and sense, but also forward according to sense.

In this writer's view the third option offers the best solution.