

Exegetical Brief: Does Scripture Teach A Mutual Submission?

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When the subject of mutual submission is mentioned the first passage that comes to mind is Ephesians 5:21 and the first word that comes to mind is *ὑποτάσσω*. But does this passage teach a mutual submission? And does the word *ὑποτάσσω* allow for such an interpretation?

First, it is important for us to define what we mean by "mutual submission." Egalitarians would define it as a complete equality not only in status but also in roles. They would argue that Ephesians 5:21 makes it clear that God has not established different roles for husbands and wives in marriage or for men and women in general. An advocate of this view would be Craig Keener who states, "Mutual submission will be expressed in different ways from one culture to another, since husband and wife roles vary from one culture to another." He then adds,

I am not saying that it is necessarily wrong for the man to lead in a household; I am suggesting that it is wrong for him to demand the position of leadership without his wife's consent. Given the educational and vocational status of women in our culture, an egalitarian marriage must be permitted as a viable option.¹

Keener would see Ephesians 5:21 as setting down the principle of mutual submission and the instructions given in Ephesians 5:22-24 and elsewhere in Scripture as simply cultural applications. Since they are cultural applications, one would have to decide whether they apply in a particular culture. Yet in his opinion they are not applications of the order of creation principle that apply across the board. They only applied to some areas of the Mediterranean world at that time, specifically to those cultures where men were more educated than women. Whether or not they apply today would depend on the culture one is facing.

The Bible does not support such an egalitarian form of mutual submission. When Paul tells wives to submit to husbands, he is not saying this should be the case in some cultures. He is saying this should happen in all marriages.

But is there a type of mutual submission that Scripture does encourage? Going back to Ephesians 5:21, there are some commentators who feel this verse is setting down a broad principle which does not cancel out God's established roles but does stress the spirit in which husbands and wives are to carry out their different roles. George W. Knight III suggests this understanding of Ephesians 5:21:

In the admonition "submit to one another," the verb (*ὑποτάσσω*) has as its basic meaning "to subject or subordinate." Here Paul's use of the middle voice focuses on what one does to oneself: one submits oneself to others. The Bauer-Arndt-Gringrich-Danker *Greek-English Lexicon* rightly describes this as "submission in the sense of voluntary yielding in love." This voluntary yielding to others is a characteristic of the Christian community and is urged elsewhere in the New Testament. Compare, e.g., "In humility consider others [*ἀλλήλους*, the same word as in Ephesians] better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3). This admonition is based on the example of Jesus (Philippians 2:5), who insisted on a servant mentality in imitation of him: ". . . whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:26-28).

Furthermore, the Apostle Peter, like the Apostle Paul, both urges particular people (younger men) to submit to particular people (elders) and all to submit to one another: "Young men . . . be submissive to (*ὑποτάγητε*) those who are older. All of you, clothe your selves with humility toward one another (*ἀλλήλοις* again) . . ." (1 Peter 5:4,5). Similarly, Paul urges masters to "Treat your slaves *in the same way*" (*τὰ αὐτά*, Ephesians 6:9) as their slaves were to treat them, i.e., "with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart"

¹ Keener, Craig, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), p. 135.

(verse 5). This implies reciprocity between masters and slaves. The exhortation to Christians in Ephesians 5:21 is thus, like these other passages, a general exhortation of mutual submission to "one another."²

Some would challenge Knight's view of mutual submission in Ephesians 5:21. Their concerns would focus on the verb ὑποτάσσω and the phrase "to one another." Wayne Grudem argues against any idea of mutual submission in this verse by stating that "this is not a legitimate meaning for the term ὑποτάσσω, which always implies a relationship of *submission to an authority*."³ Grudem does raise a valid concern regarding Knight's interpretation of the Ephesians passage. Scripture does support Knight's statement that "voluntary yielding to others is characteristic of the Christian community." Yet one has to wonder whether his conclusion that "Ephesians 5:21 is thus, like these other passages, a general exhortation of mutual submission to one another" is supported by the usage of the word ὑποτάσσω.

At the same time, though, one also wonders whether Grudem's contention that ὑποτάσσω "always implies a relation of submission to an authority" can be established with such certainty. One passage in particular that would give us pause would be 1 Corinthians 15:28. The apostle Paul is speaking about a time when "the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all." Bauer's suggestion that sometimes this word has the more general meaning of "a voluntary yielding in love" would seem to capture the thought of what Paul is saying better than "submission to an authority." There's no doubt Grudem has done some scholarly work in his study of the word ὑποτάσσω in both classical and koine Greek. But what may be contributing to Grudem's use of the word "always" is that he holds to a form of subordination of the Son to the Father that goes beyond the external works of the Trinity (*opera ad extra*) and includes the internal works (*opera ad intra*). In his *Systematic Theology*, he states, "Though all three members of the Trinity are equal in power and in all other attributes, the Father has a greater authority."⁴ It appears that his understanding of the inner workings of the Trinity allows him to make such a statement about the word ὑποτάσσω, even as it is used in 1 Corinthians 15:28. There is no doubt that submitting to someone who is in a position of authority over us is the most common meaning for the word. But whether this is how this word is always used is open for debate.

The other phrase in Ephesians 5:21 that could be understood differently is "one another." The Greek word ἀλλήλοις is not always used in a reciprocal sense but could also mean "one to another." Peter O'Brien tells us:

The pronoun "one another" is not always fully reciprocal. Although advocates of the mutual submission interpretation assume that the relationships expressed by the Greek pronoun are always symmetrical (and so must mean "everyone to everyone"), this depends entirely on the context. On occasion, the pronoun does have a fully reciprocal significance. But in other contexts a symmetrical relationship cannot be in view. For example, Revelation 6:4, "so that men should slay *one another*," cannot mean that each killed the other at precisely the same time as he or she was killed. Likewise, Galatians 6:2, "Bear *one another's* burdens" does not signify that "*everyone*" should exchange burdens of others who are less able.⁵

Getting back to our original question, we ask, "Does Scripture teach mutual submission in a general sense, that is, a voluntary yielding in love, even as it establishes roles for husband and wife and for others in this life?" We would have to answer in the affirmative. In Philippians 2:3,4 the apostle tells us, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." Jesus also warns us not to lord it over others but rather to follow his example as the humble servant. As the Savior he "came not to be served but to serve and

² Knight, George W., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossways Books, 1991), p. 166.

³ Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), p. 465.

⁴ Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology*, p. 459.

⁵ Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), p. 403.

to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). These are but a few of the many passages where God encourages a voluntary yielding in love.

The concept of a mutual submission in the sense of voluntarily yielding to one another in love is certainly taught in Scripture. But there are some who would question whether Ephesians 5:21 can be used as a proof passage for this concept of mutual submission. As we have seen, good arguments lie on both sides of the debate. The concept is certainly taught in Scripture. But whether it uses the word *ὑποτάσσω* to teach this concept is questionable. The good thing is that both sides ultimately end up in the same place. They respect the roles God has established for husband and wife in marriage, but also stress that Christians will exercise these roles with a humble attitude and a spirit of service.

As Christians we find ourselves in various roles in life. A young pastor is called upon to show honor and respect to his older members. Yet those same members are called upon to respect their young pastor as their spiritual leader. A young woman is called upon to respect older men and women with whom she works. Yet these same people may be called upon to show respect for her as their supervisor at work. The Lord instructs wives to submit to their husbands. Yet as a husband fulfills his role as the head, he will also voluntarily yield in love to his wife. He will consider her interests and not only his own. He will value her opinions and sometimes recognize them as being better and wiser than his own. He will honor and value the partner the Lord has given him in marriage and remember that she has equal status before God and is a coheir of eternal life. Yet as both husband and wife yield to one another in love, they will also be aware that while God has given them equal status, he has also given them equally important yet different roles. The husband is the servant-leader; the wife is the servant-helper. Both will use their roles to glorify God and serve each other.