



Nitroglycerin is extremely unstable. When they were blasting through mountains to build the railroad, they would send young Chinese men into the tunnels to pour out the nitro to prepare it for blasting. A change in temperature could set it off, bumping it, shaking it. It took almost nothing to start a deadly explosion. Many Chinese lost their lives this way.

This is sort of how I feel about verse 21—*submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ*. You may not know that it is nitroglycerin, but you should understand why it is such a volatile verse. The controversy surrounds how verse 21 relates to what immediately follows in the next few verses. *Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*

I believe and our church follows what is known as the Complementarian view of Scripture. This would be considered the traditional model because it has been taught for over 1900 years. This view teaches that husbands and wives are complements to one another. They are fully equal in worth and dignity but they each have different roles. We believe the plain teaching of verse 23—*the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior*. There are other Scriptures that teach the same thing but we will be limiting most of our focus to Ephesians chapter five.

There are evangelicals who argue that verse 21 invalidates what follows. They teach the opposing viewpoint to Complementarianism which is Egalitarianism. The Egalitarian viewpoint holds to the equal worth and dignity of men and women but they do not see separate roles for each. So they would flat out deny that the Bible teaches that husbands are the head of their wives. They argue that since verse 21 teaches a mutual submission to one another, this de facto rules out any possibility of wives being subject to their husbands. It's obvious to them that in light of verse 21, husbands also have to submit to their wives.

At face value, the argument seems to have some merit to it—at least if you ignore the other Scriptures that support the traditional model. Let me show you how important verse 21 is to the Egalitarian view.

“Most importantly, Paul frames his entire set of instructions (5:21-6:9) by enjoining mutual submission: submitting to one another (5:21)”¹

Even were we to strike Ephesians 5:22 from our Bibles, Ephesians 5:21 still exists: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ"²

“Whenever I hear submission expounded from Ephesians 5 as a duty meant only for wives, there are two things I say, if possible. The first is that verse 21 is there and does not read this way: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, except husbands do not ever need to submit to their wives.”³

“The call to mutual reciprocal submission in Eph. 5:21 establishes the framework for the instructions to wives and husbands that follow.”⁴

“Being subject to one another is only possible among equals. It is a mutual (two-way) process that excludes the unilateral (one-way) subordination implicit in the concept of subjection without the reciprocal pronoun.”⁵

“As to submission in marriage, I’d heard many sermons on wives submitting to husbands, but never heard anyone deal with the fact that in Ephesians 5:21, submission is to one another; in other words, husbands were to submit to wives as well.”⁶

It’s quite clear what they are doing. They are pitting verse 21 against the rest of the passage and claiming that the teaching on mutual submission completely invalidates male headship.

This last quote was written by a renowned Bible scholar, who went home to be with the Lord in 2015. He was best friends with Randy Alcorn and was, by all accounts, a Godly and wonderful man. I don’t know the other writers, but I would not bring their faith or sincerity into question. But all of these quotes came from the website of Christians for Biblical Equality, which is the leading organization that promotes egalitarianism. I feel this is a very fair representation of the opposing viewpoint. To a person, they all rely on Ephesians 5:21 as their linchpin argument. If this does teach mutual submission, then it lays a heavy blow on the traditional model.

Just so you know, I was helped a lot by a chapter written by Wayne Grudem called *The Myth of Mutual Submission*.⁷ A few of my points were taken from his chapter.

1. Submission is bound up in what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is what I have been saying for the past three messages. There are lots of things that are tied up in what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit but it is obvious that submission is one of four things in this passage.

Look carefully then how you walk:

not as unwise

but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

Therefore do **not** be foolish,

but understand what the will of the Lord is.

And do **not** get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery,

but be filled with the Spirit

- addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs
- singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart
- giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ
- submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

By itself, this does not prove the traditional model. It's neutral in terms of that argument. But if you are convinced of the traditional model—and I hope you will be at least from Ephesians chapter five by the time I am done—then submission takes on a higher priority. Not walking in submission to all authorities that the Bible lays down—such as to your parents—would be quenching the Spirit.

Let me make a quick side note about the traditional model. You might be concerned that this is a hard-hitting defense for strong patriarchy. If you don't know me very well, you might worry that I will demean women and only defend men. First off all, I have not done any of that in the seventeen years I have been your pastor. Once we dig into the husband and wives relationship, you'll see that I will probably come down harder on husbands than I ever would on the wives. Second, my chief and only concern is that we get this right Biblically. I don't care about labels or tradition or anything other than what the Bible says. If I was convinced that the Egalitarian position was Biblically correct, I would defend it with just as much certainty and passion. But not only do I think it is wrong, I think it can be harmful to relationships and to churches. More on that in later sermons. But for now, I'm just asking you to trust where I am headed and use Scripture as your guide, as I am trying to do.

So let me give you three reasons why this message is so important. I'm just giving you the reasons now and I will explain them at the end of the message.

1. Biblical faithfulness and integrity (which I addressed above).
2. Eph. 5 presents the theological solution to all marital problems.
3. The integrity and proclamation of the gospel.

2. Submission in this passage is always one-directional.

The context has four relationships where one party is submissive/subordinate to the other. Wives are called to be submissive to their husbands. Children are commanded to be submissive to their parents. Bondservants are to be submissive to their masters. The church is commanded to submit

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.

Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

to Christ in everything. It never goes both ways.

Husbands are never commanded to be submissive to their wives.

Parents are not supposed to submit to their children.

Bondservants never submit to their masters and most painfully obvious of all,

Jesus never submits to the

church. I have never heard anyone argue that these last three relationships can be reversed in terms of submission. But in order to be consistent, this is how you would have to apply the verse. If mutual submission reverses the husband-wife relationship, then it would have to equally apply to the other three relationships. No one has ever made that claim because it is just nonsense.⁸ I believe the only reason they want to reverse the husband and wife relationship is because they don't like what it says.

3. The one-directional submission of all of these relationships is attested everywhere in Scripture.

I could list dozens of Scriptures that demonstrate that not only are these relationships not reversed in Ephesians five and six, they are not reversed anywhere else in all of the Bible.

4. The word submit is always used for submission to an authority.

If all else fails, change the meaning of the word. I have heard people define the wrath of God and make it mean the opposite of what you and I think it means, so no surprise that they would try it with the word authority. Here's an example.

Some Bible translations recognize that *hupotassō* (submit) has more than one use. For example, The Message Bible translates Ephesians 5:21 as "be courteously reverent." The New Century Version translates *hupotassō* as "cooperate" rather than "submit" in 1 Timothy 2:11 and 3:4. Andrew and Judith Lester, authors of *It Takes Two: The Joy of Intimate Marriage*, suggest a better translation is "be supportive of," "tend to the needs of," or "respect the needs and desires of."⁹

Honestly, if you have to make your case based on The Message Bible, you don't have much of a case. Here are multiple examples of the same word, submit.

- Jesus was subject to the authority of His parents (Luke 2:51).
- Demons were "subject to" the disciples (Luke 10:17).
- Citizens are to be "subject to" the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1, 5; see also Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13).
- The universe is "in subjection" to Christ (1 Cor. 15:27; see also Eph. 1:22).

- Angels and other spiritual beings have been “subjected to” Christ (1 Pet. 3:22).
- Christ is “subjected to” God the Father (1 Cor. 15:28).
- Church members are to be “subject to” the elders in the church (1 Pet. 5:5-10).
- Wives are told to “submit to” their husbands (Eph. 5:22, 24; Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:5).
- The church “submits to” Christ (Eph. 5:24).
- Servants are to be “submissive to” their masters (Titus 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18).
- Christians are to be “subject to” God (Heb. 12:9; Jas. 4:7).

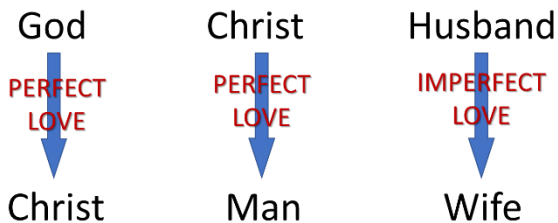
In addition to this Biblical evidence, Wayne Grudem makes an excellent point.

In all of this controversy over roles for men and women, no one has yet produced any examples in ancient Greek literature (either inside or outside the New Testament) where *hypotasso* is applied to a relationship between persons and where it does not carry the sense of being subject to an authority. I have been asking a particular question in one form or another... (since I first asked it in the plenary sessions of the 1986 meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society in Atlanta, Georgia), and I have not received an answer yet.¹⁰

That’s 32 years since he asked the question and no one has ever given proof—and The Message Bible does not count!—that the word submit meant anything other than submission to an authority. Making up new definitions for words will always get you into trouble.

1 Corinthians 11:3

But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.



5. Jesus is submissive to the Father.

1 Corinthians 11:3 is such a helpful text. Let me take it a phrase at a time. *But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ...* If you are a believer, you certainly would not argue with this. We are in submission to Christ. We may not always feel submissive but that does not change the reality of our submissive state. We are in subjection to the Lord Jesus Christ.

the head of a wife is her husband... This is the controversial phrase. The same people who try to redefine the word authority have spent reams of paper trying to redefine the word head. They want it to mean something other than ‘authority over.’ This is the controversial phrase but it does help to see the exact same teaching reaffirmed in other parts of Scripture.

and the head of Christ is God. For me, this is the slam dunk part of this verse. This is what is called the doctrine of the functional submission of the Son to the Father. I covered this when we were working our way through John 5. Jesus himself stated it this way. *19 So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.* If Jesus is submissive to God the Father, then I have no trouble believing that wives should be submissive to their

husbands. Again, none of this answers exactly how this headship and submission ought to look. That part is messy and really hard. We'll start to tackle that next Sunday. But what I am driving at in all of this is the plain reading of Scripture. It's very clear and it means what it says.

6. 'One another' does not always mean 'one another'.

OK Maurer, now I know you must have hit your head, because that sounds crazy. How can one another not mean one another? To make me sound even crazier, a few weeks ago I showed you this representative list of the 100 "one anothers" in the New Testament. These sure seem like they mean one another.

- Be devoted to one another in brotherly love (Romans 12:10)
- Live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16)
- Instruct one another (Romans 15:14)
- Serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13)
- Carry each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2)
- Be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32)
- Forgiving each other (Ephesians 4:32)
- Do not lie to each other (Colossians 3:9)
- Encourage one another daily Hebrews 3:13)
- Spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24)
- Build each other up (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- Admonish one another (Colossians 3:16)
- Stop passing judgment on one another (Romans 14:13)
- Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you (Romans 15:7)
- Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21)

I agree that most or all of these are mutual actions, truly one to another. But this same word can sometimes mean "some to others."

Revelation 6:4—*And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another.*

It's obvious what this means. Some people were slaying other people. Everyone was not slaying everyone else. That doesn't make any sense.

Matthew 24:10—*And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.* Some people betrayed and hated other people. It was not the case that everyone betrayed and hated everyone. Again, that would not make sense.

Luke 12:1—*In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.*

Are you getting the point? Only some people trampled other people, not everyone trampled everyone. When you combine it with all of the other facts, you can see that "submitting to one another" could mean some people submitting to other people. And of course, this is exactly what we have in Ephesians five and six. As we have already seen, it's utter nonsense to reverse the

roles. Jesus will never submit to the church so it must mean that some people submit to other people. It does not have to be a mutual submission and in some cases, it turns the passage into absurdity.

7. Submission is done out of reverence/fear of Christ.

We must not ignore the last phrase of verse 21—*submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ*. The Greek word translated as reverence is *phobos*. What does that word sound like? It's where we get our English word phobia, which means fear. The ESV translates *phobos* as reverence but most other decent translations chose the word fear as the proper English translation. And I strongly agree.

ESV/NIV—submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

NASB—and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

KJV—Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.

Homan Christian—submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.

The Message—Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another.

This is not a holy terror kind of fear, but neither should we downplay the strength of the word, which is used several places in Scripture to define the Christian's relationship to the Lord, such as Acts 9:31. *So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.*¹¹ As one commentator put it, "The fear of the Lord is no empty rhetorical phrase here... In the light of Christ's power and holiness believers will be subordinate to those who are in authority over them."¹²

I hope you can see how wrong it is to attempt to redefine verse 21 to mean mutual submission. It simply cannot be done. So why is this so important that I would spend an entire sermon on one verse. Let me give you three main reasons and more will follow in later weeks as we move in verses 22 to the end of the chapter.

1. Biblical faithfulness and integrity demand that we get this right.

In light of the overwhelming evidence I have presented in these seven points, my belief is that people want verse 21 to mean mutual submission so they create justification to make it say what they want it to say.

Here's a basketball analogy. Ethan just finished his last tournament in Prairie du Chien. In the same tournament last year, a coach from another team displayed an appalling lack of integrity. At one point, his team had six guys on the court instead of five. Everyone in the stands was yelling, "There's six players on the court!" One of his players quickly sat down on the bench and somehow, the officials did not notice. But they heard the crowd so one official walked up to the coach and asked, "Did you just have six players on the court?" He lied. In front of his team and in front of everyone. And these are supposed to be Christian teams playing in a church sponsored tournament. Hopefully the young players on his team understand how wrong that was but when they get in a tough spot, every one of them will be more likely to cave because they saw their coach cave under pressure.

This is precisely what happens when you see this sort of Bible distortion going on. It eats away at you slowly. Little by little it undermines the faithfulness and integrity of the word of God. You may not feel it all at once, but it seeps into your thinking. If you can make this crystal clear verse say the opposite of what it says, then there is no end to Scripture twisting

2. Eph. 5 presents the theological solution to all marital problems.

This is a simple matter of obedience. If you do not understand what the following passage on marriage means, you cannot obey what it says. I do believe, rightly understood, that this is the theological solution to all marital problems. That it, if we could follow what it says, our marital struggles would begin to disappear. This is what we will be covering in the next few weeks as we go deeper still into the theological understanding and practical applications of marriage. I'm telling you that it's going to get messy. Applying what we know to be right in this area is perhaps the most difficult type of obedience in the Christian life. But the good and hard struggle is well worth our time and effort.

3. The integrity and proclamation of the gospel.

Ephesians 5:22-33 is about the gospel with an application to marriage. Therefore, our marriages can be a type of gospel proclamation. That's how important this topic is. May God give us grace.

Rich Maurer
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¹ <https://www.cbeinternational.org/blogs/case-mutual-submission-ephesians-5>

² <https://www.cbeinternational.org/blogs/mutual-submission-response-cbmws-soap-bubbles-submission>

³ <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resources/article/mutuality/mutual-submission-gods-plan>

⁴ Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 164.

⁵ Beyond Sex Roles, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 154.

⁶ <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resources/article/mutuality/male-superiority-mutual-submission>

⁷ <http://cbmw.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Grudem-Wayne-Biblical-foundations-for-manhood-and-womanhood.pdf>, p. 221.

⁸ Although I did find one Lutheran theologian who was willing to make this claim!

<https://cbmw.org/uncategorized/egalitarian-argues-in-ets-paper-that-christ-submits-to-the-church/>

⁹ <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resources/article/priscilla-papers/fresh-perspective-submission-and-authority-marriage>

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 227.

¹¹ And...

2 Corinthians 5:11—Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others

2 Corinthians 7:1—Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God

¹² O'Brien, P. T. (1999). [*The letter to the Ephesians*](#) (p. 405). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.