

Mutual Submission in the Marriage Union

“Marriage is that relation between man and woman in which the independence is equal, the dependence mutual, and the obligation reciprocal.” (LOUIS K. ANSPACHER)

Abstract. Mutual submission and selfless love are the basic principles of Christian family life. Many young adults are beginning a family of their own. They need to model their marriage after the instructions of scripture. Adults can find help in strengthening their marriages by applying scriptural principles.

In recent decades we as a culture have fallen away from the ethical and moral bases that defined the family as the basic organizational unit of our society. People use divorce as a solution to their problems, destroying existing families. Sexual promiscuity has produced a population where 25% of all babies (over 50% minority babies) are born to teenage, unwed mothers. Many millions of prospective mothers live with the doubt and guilt that follows a voluntary abortion. The very principles necessary to create family relationships are no longer considered. Often people who marry do so to meet their own needs, rather than those of the one who should be their best friend, their mate. The scripture reveals guidelines for successful marital and family relationships. Some of these are found in Ephesians 5:21-6:4. The following exposition on these verses will present a theological perspective of the marriage union and other family relationships that is based upon the consistent scriptural principles of selfless giving of one to another.

An understanding of these principles is essential to one who is called to minister to others in any form of pastoral setting.

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Relationships in the Home

Eph. 5:21 (NIV) Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Who is to be submissive to who in the marriage union? Often the few verses following Ephesians 5:21 are taken out of context in order to demand a unilateral submission of the wife to her husband. Such a position comes from centuries of male-dominated culture. Aristotle wrote, “The rule of a household is a monarchy, for every house is under a head.” Following Aristotle, “many Greek and Roman authors wrote about household management based on this principle of the male monarch.”¹ “The patriarchal norms of the Greco-Roman world, built into the rules and regulations for everyday life and relationships, clearly demanded a wife’s submission to the authority of the husband.”² Because of such a cultural bias, commentators and teachers have perpetuated the teaching that a wife is to be unilaterally submissive to her husband. This is clearly not what is stated in Ephesians 5:21, where the first half of the sentence is ignored, and the second half of the sentence in 5:22 is abused by so many to subjugate women. Submission is clearly made to one another.

In addition to the cultural bias, there is also a basis for misunderstanding of the application of such submission promoted by an inaccurate, more legalistic definition of the English word that is used for “submit,” rather than basing such a position on the Greek text. The Greek word for submit, *hupotasso*, is a military term which refers to an

equal placing of oneself in subjection to another for the benefit of all concerned, literally placing the needs of others higher than your own. This form of submission is not to be unilaterally applied. Such submission is to be “to one another.” Just as the woman is called to place her husband above herself, the husband is to place his wife above himself.

Up to this point in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he has been writing about being filled with the spirit, and expressing agape love as a normal and correct manifestation of that filling. It is through this expression of agape love that a desire for *hupotasso* is fully realized. The second part of this verse identifies that we must be applying this form of submission under God's authority and in obedience to Him.

The Old Testament account of the creation of man also describes the relationship of the woman to the man, and does so without the subjugation of the female. Genesis 2:18 describes the woman as a “helper” to the man, implying to those who wish to diminish the role of women an inferior position to that of the man. Again, closer inspection of the text, in this case Hebrew, reveals a more complete, and quite contradicting meaning. The expression *helpmeet*, that is used in some older manuscripts, actually translates two Hebrew words. The second, *neged*, means “corresponding to” or “equal to” him.³ “The word rendered ‘help,’ *ezer*, is used of God in several places in the Old Testament: Exodus 18:4; Deuteronomy 33:29; Psalm 33:20; 70:5, 115:9, 10, 11. This would suggest that the helper envisioned in Genesis 2:18 is not inferior in essence to the one helped. Rather, the helper is to be thought of as a coworker or enabler.”⁴ Some would even argue that the position of the helper is superior to the one helped. “Being a helper is not a Hebrew way of being equal.”⁵ The word *helper* is used in the Old Testament of God himself as one who helps His people.⁶ This word “does not suggest

the idea of inferiority because it is joined to the word often translated, ‘meet,’ which could be translated as ‘suitable,’ or ‘appropriate.’ The woman is to be a helper who corresponds to the man. She fits, she is capable. She stands with the man and helps him to accomplish what he could never accomplish on his own. She adds dimensions that are equally important. Together they make an able team to accomplish, through God’s strength, what he has purposed for them.”⁷ There is no textual basis for a doctrine of female subjugation. “Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground. (Gen. 1:28).” Note carefully that God gave this command to the man and the woman. Not just to the man, alone.

Therefore, as we approach all of the verses to follow, we should note that the motivation for the expression of *hupotasso* is true agape love, a motivation that inspires the decision to place others first for the benefit of both parties. Only when we see these verses in the context of an agape-based, or spirit-filled relationship, can we truly see what is being stated in Paul’s words.

If the basis for a Godly marriage is agape love, what is the first prerequisite for the creation of a Godly family? The parents must both be Christians, which means that Jesus must be the supreme authority in their marriage. Supreme authority in the home is neither given to the husband or the wife. They must be Christians who seek to be obedient to God’s will. Only then will the partners be able to understand and apply these truths to their lives; only then will the partners be “equally yoked.” Eyrich describes this concept of an equal yoke as a progression of four necessary commitments:

1. Each partner must have a professed faith in Jesus Christ.

2. Each partner must have a commitment to Jesus as Lord.
3. Each partner must have a commitment to a Biblical order of marriage.
4. Each partner must have a commitment to Biblical problem solving.⁸

The equality of this “one-flesh” description of the marriage relationship “needs to be worked out in practical love and faithfulness.”⁹ Only then will the true meaning and expression of mutual submission in the marriage covenant be realized.

Eph 5:22 (NIV) Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.

Reverence by the Wife.

“Most ancient writers expected wives to obey their husbands, desiring in them a quiet and meek demeanor; some marriage contracts even stated a requirement for absolute obedience. This requirement made sense especially to Greek thinkers, who could not conceive of wives as equals.”¹⁰ This position of cultural sexism has been a distinctive of Western culture ever since its Greek foundations were laid, necessitating that any doctrine of women’s equality be met with immediate resistance both within the church and without. Only in contemporary history have real objections to such a male-centered autocracy been seriously heard. Consider, for example the position of Charles Hodge. “The sentiments, therefore, which lie at the foundation of the marriage relation, which arise out of the constitution of nature, which are required by the command of God, and are essential to the happiness and well-being of the parties, are, on the part of the husband, that form of love which leads him to cherish and protect his wife as being himself, and on the part of the woman, that sense of his superiority out of which trust and obedience involuntarily flow.”¹¹ Hodge simply states that the wife will involuntarily

choose to obey her husband as the superior of the two when the husband cherishes and protects her. It may be true, but the scriptural basis for such a position is nonexistent.

Much of modern doctrinal opinion was shaped by both Charles Hodge and Matthew Henry, whose conservative, and very opinionated, commentaries were readily embraced and promulgated by a male-dominated church culture. On this verse, Henry states, “The duty of wives is, submission to their husbands in the Lord, which includes honouring and obeying them, from a principle of love to them.”¹² His “honor” and “obey” conclusion shaped the very tradition of the wedding ceremony where the woman was called upon to promise to both honor and obey. No such profession was expected of the man.

In the Greek text, Ephesians 5:21-22 are one sentence that literally states, “Submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ, the wives to their own husbands as to the Lord.” This is not a one-sided, advantageous arrangement for the husband. In a mutually applied, *hupotasso*-based relationship, the husband’s will is also to be subject to that of the wife.

What God has done here has been to define stability and direction for the wife within the context of the home. Prior to marriage, the responsibility for the woman is placed in her father. Something very special takes place in the marriage ceremony that many people may completely overlook. The father's giving away of the bride is no trivial matter. Tradition may have robbed us of the real meaning here. When given away, the bride is charged to place herself in a position where the husband now takes over the responsibility for her care; a responsibility that was up to this point reserved for her father. One of the advantages of a wife’s *hupotasso* with her husband, is that she is as

safe and secure with him as she has been with her father. Of course, this statement presupposes that the wife's home-life was also Christ-centered. "Each partner in a marriage has a privilege. The husband's privilege is to put his wife first, as Christ put us first when He died for us. The wife's privilege is to set the tone of submission by being responsive and caring. Neither is "over" the other; each ministers to the other in his or her special way."¹³

If a woman's relationship to her husband is as to the Lord, observe at what she receives in return for her submission. That is, how does the Lord respond to us in return for our submission?

- First, God loves us. The husband is to have that same love for the wife, a love that places her needs above that of his own.
- Second, God provides for us. Not only does the husband recognize that providing for the needs of his wife is important, he strives to meet those needs using the resources at his disposal.
- Third, God's Lordship is not a dictatorship. God's authority is one that allows a freedom of conscience; a freedom in the Spirit. Jesus continually demonstrated that to be in authority is to be the servant of all, not the slave driver of any.

If we are abiding in Christ (John 15:5), and understand that God has provided what is best for us, then we can agree with the Holy Spirit within us that this ordinance is good and true. God has defined what He in his wisdom has determined as the proper form of relationships within the family.

Eph 5:23 (NIV) 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.

Here the husband described here as the “head of the wife.” Again, taken as an isolated statement, this can be construed to place upon the husband a position of autocratic, unilateral authority. However, the entire sentence must be read in order to understand the entire imperative. “The relationship between the husband and wife is viewed as analogous to that between Christ and his church.”¹⁴ The husband is to lead the wife as Christ has led the church. What special responsibilities and obligations does Christ have to the church? Such responsibilities and obligations are an archetype of the same as applied to the wife by the husband. The implication is that the husband is responsible for the spiritual welfare of his family. The husband must exhibit Spirit-led, spiritual leadership, as well as a spirit of sacrificial giving. As Christ gave Himself for the church, the husband is to give of himself for the wife. Herein we see *hypotasso* in action. Authority is given to the husband, but only within the context of a Christ-like spirit-led leadership role wherein the husband humbles himself to be the servant of his wife. This is the ideal, and this is what Paul is trying to describe.

Eph 5:24 (NIV) Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

This is a tall order, more so for the man than the woman. The husband is to be in relationship to his wife as Christ is to the church. When he is like that, the wife can be submissive to his leadership in all things just as the church is in submission in all things to Christ. Often the question is asked, "Should I obey my husband when his demands are clearly ungodly"? Some would use these verses to demand her submission in this case, but such a conclusion is not consistent with the context of these verses. Ephesians 5:24 presupposes a Christ-like leadership on the part of the husband. We as Christians are free

from the law. We do not treat the Bible as a book of law, because we do not communicate with it that well. When used as a book of Law for purposes of exacting judgment, it is often molded to support the paradigms of the judge. It is then subjected to the redactive application of a presupposition-filled hermeneutic. As a Christian, one can listen to the Spirit of Christ, (the one whom James refers to as the Spirit of Liberty), on a regular basis to find the real answers. This requires a Godly response on the part of the wife, where her actions are preceded by prayer and a regular desire to be obedient to Christ. With that resource such decisions can be made. The Spirit can give the woman a clear understanding of how she should respond to events that effect her relationship with her husband. To blindly follow an ungodly edict from an uncaring and selfish husband solely based upon a legalistic interpretation of Ephesians 2:24 is an error. The wife's (and the husband's) primary allegiance is to God.

3. Responsibility from the Husband

Eph 5:25 (NIV) Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

There are two commands given to the husband in verse 25: 1) Love your wives as Christ loves the church, and 2) as Christ gave himself up for it. Consider the first part of that. In what way does Christ love the church? What would Christ's response be when he feels the church has not lived up to what it should be? What would Christ's response be when the church betrays him? Note that his love for the church is unconditional. The husband's love for his wife must be totally unconditional. Is there ever any conflict between the church and Christ? How do you suppose Christ responds? Is there ever any conflict between the wife and the husband? How do you suppose the husband should

respond? All answers to this litany of questions reveals the necessity that the relationship of the husband to the wife is as the relationship of Christ to the church. Jesus taught a doctrine of selfless giving and demonstrated it as he gave his life for the church. Jesus never took on an autocratic role as the Messiah, but rather He humbled himself and took upon himself the form of a servant.

The second part of this verse refers to the sacrifice that Christ made for the church. The husband is directed to love his wife to the point of the same type of sacrifice. He is to give himself up for her. Marriage means to the man that he is no longer the sole consumer of his time, resources, or person. It is now shared. If he treats the needs of his wife (and children) greater than his own he will go without things that he might obtain for himself otherwise, but that is not only reasonable, it is scriptural. What kind of sacrifices do we see the husband can be making to the benefit of his wife and children? Is it not even reasonable, outside of the Holy-Spirit's direction that a wife could place herself under the leadership of a husband like this? With the Holy Spirit's direction such a relationship can, indeed, thrive.

Eph 5:26-27 (NIV) to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

An additional responsibility is given to the husband in verses 26-27. The husband is ultimately responsible to present his wife as holy and clean before the Lord. If this is true, who is given responsibility for the spiritual welfare for the family? The husband is. How is the husband to make her holy? By washing her with the Word of God. Just as the church has been commissioned to make disciples and immerse them in the name of the

Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:18ff.), the husband is to immerse his wife in the same.

“Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways. ²You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours. ³Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table. ⁴Thus is the man blessed who fears the LORD. (Psalm 128:1-4, NIV,)”

In order for the husband to immerse his wife in the word of God, he first must be saved. The husband must have taken that step to accept Jesus Christ as Lord. Jesus is the ultimate authority in the home, not the husband. “To be God’s kind of husband and father, you must be a man who fears God. An appropriate fear of God will make you an unusual blessing to your wife and children... You will become an effective husband and father.”¹⁵

Second, the husband must be knowledgeable of God's word. He must spend time with it, studying it, meditating on it, placing himself under the teaching of it. He must also pray with it. God's word, applied through his Holy Spirit is the only true and perfect resource that the husband has as he seeks to fulfill his responsibility to make his wife holy.

Third, the husband must pray for her. The welfare of his wife, both spiritual and physical, should be of paramount importance to the husband. How often do husbands take time to pray for their wives? This one discipline alone can form the basis for obedience in all other areas. True and sincere prayer for his wife can open up his heart to the prompting of the Holy Spirit for guidance in establishing true mutual submission.

What is the future of a marriage relationship that is based on mutual submission that is motivated by agape love? In view of these verses, let's look at the opposite

situation. Consider the husband who is unsaved. He has placed little or no priority in his life in being obedient to God. He is not knowledgeable of God's word, and spends little or no time with it, is not concerned much for it, and has no interest in applying its authority over his own. He doesn't feel a need to pray for his wife. He sees his own needs as more important than hers. Such a marriage relationship is going to be characterized by the conflict of two individuals who are trying to occupy the same space (the one flesh), but lack the resources to submit to one another so that this space can be shared. Selfish desires will have a foundation upon which to grow. Pride and prejudice will be unbounded when the Holy Spirit is ignored.

Eph 5:28-30 (NIV) In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church-- for we are members of his body.

Scripture states here that the husband and wife are "one body", and repeats the parallel to the body of Christ.

Matt. 19:4-6 "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' (Gen 1:27) and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh,' (Gen 2:24) ? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

As a man loves his wife he loves himself because they are one body. In such a relationship that which hurts the wife also hurts the husband. When the wife feels joy, so does the husband. In this context, the husband is not going to maliciously inflict pain on his wife and he is not going to make demands of her. Instead, the husband's love for his wife will be expressed in two words that are used here: nourisheth (feed, nourish) and

cherisheth (cares for). Just as Christ seeks to nourish and care for the church, so the husband is to nourish and care for his wife.

Eph 5:31-32 (NIV) "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." (Gen 2:24) This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church.

We may be familiar with these words, as they are another part of the marriage ceremony. As the wife leaves the security and protection of her father she comes under the security and protection of her husband. However, there is much more taking place than the simple moving from one position to another. As the two partners were previously separate, when married they become one individual entity in the sight of the Lord. The word "joined" used here is the same word that refers to joining two pieces of wood in the production of a piece of furniture. When such a joint is produced, both parts contribute a part of themselves to the joint, the joint is anointed with glue, and stress is applied to the joint as the glue cures. Each partner contributes the best part of their lives to the joint, including their wants and desires, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. A marriage requires sacrifice on the part of both members. The glue that holds them together is their agape love for each other (not phileo or eros since they will soon lose the power that they held when the relationship was new). The stress that is applied to the joint can consist of the myriad of experiences that test and grow the marriage partners (James, Chapter 1.)

If a wood joint is correctly made, and the wood parts come under stress, one or both of the wood pieces can be hurt, but the joint remains. Often the joint is incorrectly fabricated. One or both members may not be willing to sacrifice their own wants, desires,

strengths, and weaknesses as is necessary to contribute to the union. The glue that holds them together can be weak. Without that agape, God-given love, there is only eros and phileo to depend on. When placed under stress, the marriage union can break. When placed under stress, the mutual submission that is their strongest asset is replaced by mutual self centeredness, resulting in conflict.

A marriage based on phileo will get tiring when real work is required to keep it going. A marriage based on eros will be challenged by the lusts that can be embraced when another potential partner passes by. Only a marriage based on agape will weather the storms in a way which will honor God, and can then be presented to him as holy, without spot or blemish.

Verse 32 refers to this as a profound mystery. Paul often uses this word that refers to something which was once hidden but is now an open and revealed secret. Truths of God's word fall into this concept of mystery since they are only understood in the context of the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual things are foolishness to a non-believer. Paul makes a point in showing that the institution of marriage is in that same way an open secret. When viewed in the light of God's word, the institution of marriage takes on a new light. It is illuminated with meaning out of confusion. It is illuminated with order out of chaos.

When a man and woman marry, each brings a unique personality to the marriage. Sometimes these personality differences complement each other and blend into a mutually compatible relationship. Often marriages take on personalities of their own, each of which can have strengths and weak points.¹⁶

Husbands should consider some of the following questions: What do you need to do to place your relationship with your wife in the context of mutual submission? Do you need to pray that your love for your wife will be as full as shown in these verses? Do you need to become more spiritually sensitive, and ultimately more spiritually mature? Do you need to take on the spiritual responsibility in your home? Have you placed yourself in a position that makes it difficult or impossible for your wife to choose to be submissive in the manner discussed here?

Wives should also consider some of the following questions: What do you need to do to put your relationship with your husband within the context of mutual submission? Can you accept from your husband both his love and his protection? Can you accept from him the leadership in the home that God requires? Do you need to help him in his quest to become the husband that he can be by loving him, supporting him, and encouraging him? Do you pray for him regularly?

Eph 5:33 (NIV) However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

In a home where the husband loves the Lord and seeks to be obedient to him, loving his wife and seeking to care for her, where he nourishes her, prays for her, to present her to the Lord as holy and pure; in a home where the husband is loved by his wife, where she supports him, prays for him, and is submissive to the position of leadership God has required of him, in a home where they are indeed one flesh, there will be a strength and a purpose that will weather any storm. The marriage union may experience hurt and anguish when under stress, but it will not be destroyed. It will be a marriage that will grow in love, and see ultimately more joys as the days go on until the

final day when they meet Jesus and we will again experience a new marriage as Jesus declares to God for us, "They are mine. They are part of me."

It is imperative for all who are involved in the counseling and teaching of young people to present a clear and consistent, scripturally sound doctrine of mutual submission in the marriage covenant. Pastors, teachers, and counselors all will spend time counseling married couples through times of difficulty. Consider how much heartache and anguish can be spared if the couple learns the doctrine of mutual submission early in their relationship, preferably prior to the wedding ceremony. Premarital counseling should be instituted whenever possible, and such counseling should place a considerable focus on this doctrine. Churches can offer "marriage enrichment" seminars when these verses can be taught. It is clearly God's desire that our families are obedient to him, and that they experience the joy and peace that comes from a close relationship with him. It is much easier to find that joy and peace in a union that is Christ-centered, in a union that practices mutual submission.

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