

February 17, 2013

Colossians 3:18-21 / Ephesians 5:21

Submission: To Christ and To Each Other out of Reverence for Christ

Today we've come to the verse that will launch us into one of the most disliked of all paragraphs in the Bible -- especially among women -- the verses about wifely submission. And because it is so disliked, and a bit controversial, I have wrestled with for years -- trying to understand what Paul is really teaching, as opposed to what many believe or say he's teaching.

So what I share with you today is not simply the result of one week's sermon preparation. This is the result of years of trying to understand this text -- so I can teach it and apply it correctly.

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And because we have so much ground to cover in order to correctly understand what Paul is saying, I want to dive right into this pivotal verse which sets the stage, supplies the topic, and lays the groundwork for everything that will follow from vv. 5:22 - 6:9. In fact, I dare say one cannot understand that entire section, if they don't understand this one verse (v. 21) and how it fits into the context.

And to help you understand it, have to do some explaining and lead you through some translation work -- which I KNOW is NOT the most loved of tasks -- when it comes to a sermon. Yet, because so much hangs in the balance of an accurate translation of the text -- I have to do it. I can't get around it. (Though I hope I can make it interesting to you in the process!)

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So grab the insert in your bulletin with the 4 translations on it, and let's look first at the NIV translation, since that's the one we're following. Because the **FIRST** thing I need point out is that v. 21, which says, "**Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ**" -- should never have been set off by itself, made to stand alone, or be separated from the verses that precede it, and especially the verses that follow it (as is the case here in the NIV).

NIV Translation

<sup>17</sup>Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. <sup>18</sup>Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual

songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, <sup>20</sup> always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>21</sup>Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

#### Wives and Husbands

<sup>22</sup>Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.

<sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

<sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup>to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup>and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. <sup>28</sup>In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup>After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church— <sup>30</sup>for we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup>“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” <sup>32</sup>This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup>However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

To separate v. 21 off by itself (as the NIV does) really does mess up the entire flow of the passage & inhibits people from coming to a correct interpretation & application of the passage.

The way the NIV translates the text, can't help but lead people to think: **1.)** That Paul wrapped up the previous section (on the fruits of being filled with the Spirit) in v. 20. **2.)** Threw in an additional verse about mutual submission between church members as somewhat of an afterthought. And then **3.)** Begins an entirely new section dealing with the roles of husbands and wives in marriage. That's what one would be led to believe simply by looking at this text in their Bible.

In fact, that's the reason I've given you FOUR alternative translations of the Greek text on your bulletin insert for this week. Because how you translate the text has a lot to do with how you interpret and apply the text.

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Then **SECONDLY**, you need to know there are two basic opinions in regard to v. 21. The **1st**) opinion suggests that the phrase, "**Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ,**" concludes the previous section and doesn't carry into vv. 22-33 at all. That comes out in the way the Holman Christian Standard Bible Version translates it on your handout.

## Holman Christian Standard Bible

<sup>17</sup> So don't be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. <sup>18</sup> And don't get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless actions, but be filled by the Spirit:

<sup>19</sup> speaking to one another  
in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,  
singing and making music from your heart to the Lord,  
<sup>20</sup> giving thanks always for everything  
to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
<sup>21</sup> submitting to one another  
in the fear of Christ.

### Wives and Husbands

<sup>22</sup> Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord, <sup>23</sup> for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of the body. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so wives are to submit to their husbands in everything.

<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her <sup>26</sup> to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word. <sup>27</sup> He did this to present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless. <sup>28</sup> In the same way, husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> For no one ever hates his own flesh but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, <sup>30</sup> since we are members of His body.

<sup>31</sup> For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.

<sup>32</sup> This mystery is profound, but I am talking about Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> To sum up, each one of you is to love his wife as himself, and the wife is to respect her husband.

This version makes v. 21 end the paragraph. And then, by putting in the heading: "Wives and Husbands" before starting verse 22 as a new sentence, it leads one to believe that idea of mutual submission (stated in verse 21) has no connection to what follows in vv. 22-33. (The NKJV, NASB, and ESV do the same thing.)

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And what tends to be the result? The idea of, "**submitting to one another**" (or mutual submission) is seen as true between believers, but not in marriage. Verse 22 (according to this understanding) lays the entire obligation to "submit" on wives, while husbands are seen as entirely exempt from any type of submission in relation to their wives. They need only submit to GOD by obeying the command to love their wives.

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That's the way more traditional, conservative, patriarchal-type-people tend to interpret and apply the text. They place ALL the stress on wives needing to

submit to their husbands, and fight tooth and claw against any reciprocal form of submission for husbands -- which is somehow seen as de-meaning their manhood.

And I know this is not typical of all in that school of thought, but it does fit into that camp: I have a recording of a well-known preacher (speaking on this verse) who equates the need for wives to submit to their husbands with the woman being a horse who needs to have a bridle placed in her mouth, where the husband must occasionally pull back hard on the reins and forcing the wife to "submit."

Now in my opinion, that type of talk (or interpretation) leads to domestic abuse, and is precisely why many women have a problem with this text -- because they were taught that that's what Paul meant. Men are the ones who give the orders / and women are the ones called to obey those orders. And here I must admit that I myself would have a problem with the text if I thought Paul meant us to take it that way -- because it does lead to abuse.

Yet, as we will go on to see, that's NOT what it means, and that's NOT how it should ever be taken. That (in my opinion) is the interpretation adopted by insecure men, who are on a power trip, and take the concept of biblical headship to mean a dictatorship, and not a form of loving, holy, servant leadership.

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**And LISTEN: *I don't reject this interpretation for personal reasons, I reject it for grammatical reasons. It's simply NOT how the text should be translated.***

And let me add: Any interpretation of this text that makes men think they can use intimidation / or physical force to get their wives to submit (or comply with their whims or wishes) not only shows a gross misunderstanding of the text, but dishonors Christ and the Christian faith.

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Then, the **2nd**) understanding of the text is that verse 21 is actually the springboard which serves to set the stage, and supply the topic, which Paul will flesh out in numerous relational contexts in the next section.

That is, verse 21 doesn't end the previous section, but rather, it actually supplies the topic which launches us into the next section -- a section where Paul shows us how "**submitting to one another**" is carried out not only in the Church, but between husbands and wives, children and their parents, slaves and their masters (or we could say, in our current context, employers and employees).

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Then **THIRD**, how does one come to this understanding of the text? And the answer: By realizing there are two unalterable facts given to us in the Greek text.

**1st)** All the action words - speaking, and singing in v. 19 / giving in v. 20 / as well as submitting in v. 21 -- are ALL participles which tie verses 19-21 together as being one continuous, unbroken sentence. And in this sense the Holman Standard Bible I just mentioned (as well as the NKJV and the ESV) have it right by showing us that "submission to one another," like speaking and singing and giving thanks, are all connected to or act as signs that a person is Spirit-filled.

As Harold Hoehner notes: "***The practice of mutual submission to one another in the fear of Christ must not be relegated merely to a church service, but rather, it is to be applied in daily life whenever and wherever they meet. It may be at a church service, at the workplace, at home, or at a social gathering of two or more believers.***"

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In fact, as he goes on to say -- and rightly so: "***Although this verse describes the concluding characterization of a believer filled by the Spirit that was begun in 5:18, it [also] serves as a hinge verse to the entire following section. The idea of submission will now be developed in the next section of 5:22-6:9. This is a critical verse,***" he says, "***for [it shows] the submission of any believer is really dependent on being filled with the Spirit.***"

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That's why I can say there was never a time when this topic was both popular and universally accepted. Because as Paul implies, the willingness to submit does not come from culture, or some traditional ethic, or high-pressure tactics, or the enforcement of rules, or a description of roles. It comes as the fruit of a reverence for Christ and being filled (or full) of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, I find it very interesting that in Alexander MaClaren's Expositions on Scripture (in the volume containing his sermons on Ephesians), where he has messages on nearly every passage in the Ephesians -- skips over this passage entirely! He preaches on nearly every section right up to chap. 5:20 / skips over this entire section on "submission" which goes from 5:21 - 6:9 / and then picks up again in chapter 6:13-24.

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And Spurgeon does the same thing! In his huge 15 Volume Expository Encyclopedia -- a collection of over 750 sermons or 15 years worth of sermons - there isn't a single one dealing with any of the verses between Ephesians 5:21 and 5:33.

And I so wanted to see what they believed about submission in general, and in marriage in particular -- in the 1860's - 80's! But they're nowhere to be found -- not even in two of the most popular and prolific preacher/authors of the 1800's -- which left me to ask if it wasn't because teaching on this whole issue of submission was as problematic and controversial back then, as it is today.

You see, there was NEVER some idyllic age when people didn't struggle as believer to believer, and spouse to spouse, and children to parents, and slaves to masters, to submit to one another. Because as Paul points out, the willingness to yield to another came from loving Jesus, revering Him, and being full of the Holy Spirit.

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And the **2nd**) unalterable fact that helps us better translate (and thus better understand and apply) the text is that the word "submit" does not even appear in v. 22 in the Greek text! In the Greek v. 22 simply says, "**wives to your husband's as to the Lord...**"

The thought of submission in verse 22 is taken from the participle in verse 21, where mutual submission is spoken of!

Which means, if you are going to bring down the thought of "submission," it must be the thought of "mutual submission" because that's the only type he mentions! **And THAT changes the whole understanding of the text!**

This understanding helps us realize that the concept of mutual submission spoken of in v. 21, not only carries over into this section on marriage, but is actually the basis for everything Paul speaks of right down to chap. 6, verse 9!

And believe me, I have fought tooth and nail on this issue with people who have said: **"No! The issue of mutual submission ends in verse 21. It deals only with church relationships and not the marriage relationship. In marriage,"** they say, **"it is only the wife who is to submit. There is no sense in which the husband submits to his wife. The concept of mutual submission is for church relationships not the marriage relationship."**

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But can I say the GREEK TEXT does not allow for such an understanding? And this is where I'll ask you to look at the Literal Version of your handout.

### Literal Version

<sup>17</sup>Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. <sup>18</sup> Do not become drunk with wine, which leads to debauchery, but let yourselves be continually filled with the Spirit,

<sup>19</sup>speaking to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs;

singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord;

<sup>20</sup>giving thanks always, for all things, to the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ;

<sup>21</sup>submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ, <sup>22</sup>wives to their own husbands as to the Lord, <sup>23</sup>for a husband is head of the wife, just as Christ is head of the Church, His body, of which He is the Savior. <sup>24</sup>As the Church is submissive to Christ, so also the wives [should be submissive] to their husbands in everything.

<sup>25</sup>Husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, <sup>26</sup>that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup>so that He might present her to Himself as a glorious Church, without spot or wrinkle or any such things, but that she may be holy and blameless. <sup>28</sup>Husbands ought also love their wives as their own bodies. The one who loves his own wife, loves himself. <sup>29</sup>For no one ever hated his own body, but [instead] he nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the Church -- <sup>30</sup>for we are members of His body...

Here in the literal translation verses 21-22 go this way (and you can follow along on your handout): **"Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ, wives to your husbands as to the Lord..."** Which means that ONE CANNOT SAY that the idea of mutual submission does NOT carry over into marriage, when it's v. 21 -- *with its emphasis on mutual submission* -- which not only supplies the idea of submission that we find in verse 22, but acts as the spring-board from which Paul launches into how to apply it to other relationships as well.

By using the participle in v. 21 and not even repeating it in verse 22, Paul's intent was to keep the thought of mutual submission flowing as one continuous, unbroken thought -- straight through to chap. 6, v. 9. The relationship between a husband and wife is simply the primary relational context in which believers are to practice mutual submission.

In fact, of all the translations out there, the "New Living Translation" actually does the best job I found in conveying this idea when it translates it: "***And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. For wives, this means (that is, this mutual submission means) submit to your husbands...***"

And then in v. 25 it says: "***For husbands, this means (again, this mutual submission means) love your wives...***" What a great translation!

For it shows that the idea of mutual submission does indeed carry over into v. 22-33 -- the only difference being the way in which each spouse submits to the other.

#### New Living Translation

<sup>17</sup>Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do. <sup>18</sup>Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit, <sup>19</sup>singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts. <sup>20</sup>And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>21</sup>And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

<sup>22</sup>For wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup>For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of his body, the church. <sup>24</sup>As the church submits to Christ, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything.

<sup>25</sup>For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her <sup>26</sup>to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word...

And we could go on: "***For children this means... For parents (fathers) this means...***"

And again, "***For slaves this means... For masters this means...***"

Because that's what v. 21 does. It starts a lengthy section on mutual submission. See the flow chart below.

## Flow of Ephesians 5:18-6:9

<sup>18</sup> Do not be drunk with wine, which leads to debauchery, but let yourselves be continually filled with the Holy Spirit -- <sup>19</sup> **speaking** to one another in psalms, hymns, spiritual songs .... **singing** and making music in your heart to the Lord...  
<sup>20</sup> **Giving** thanks always to God the Father for all things... <sup>21</sup> **Submitting** to ONE ANOTHER out of reverence for Christ.....

To **ONE ANOTHER** in the **CHURCH** (v.21)



**Believer**

Seeking to Meet Needs

**Believer**

Seeking to Meet Needs

To **ONE ANOTHER** in **MARRIAGE** (5:22-33)



**Wives;**

Respect

**Husbands;**

Love

To **ONE ANOTHER** in **FAMILIES** (vv. 6:1- 4)



**Children**

Honor / Obey

**Parents (Fathers)**

Do Not Be Harsh / Exasperate

To **ONE ANOTHER** in **EMPLOYER / EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIPS** (6:5-9)



**Slaves**

Respect / Obey

**Masters**

Respect / Do Not Threaten

So, what Paul is doing in vv. 22-33 / is explaining what mutual submission looks like / in terms of the wife / and then in terms of the husband. The wife "submits" to her husband (as is summed up in verse 33) by respecting him and honoring his role as head of the family, and the husband "submits" to his wife by loving her and willingly laying down his life for her. THAT is what mutual submission looks like in marriage.

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And listen: This "mutual submission" is based on mutual need-meeting. The wife "submits" (that is, stops fighting) her husband's need to function as head of the home and be respected in that role, and the husband (weak ego issues or not) "submits" to his wife's need to be loved and cared for and cherished as the one who has become one flesh with him.

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That's what we must understand! These aren't just rules or roles. Phrasing it that way makes it so cold, unbiblical, and contrary to the intent of the text. This is cooperative, healthy, relational, need-meeting, where each spouse -- out of love for the other -- is called to meet a deep inner need in their spouse.

It is husbands and wives -- out of their love for each other -- mutually submitting (even when they don't feel like it) to meeting each other's needs.

MEN have a need to be respected and WOMEN have a need to be loved, as Emerson Eggerichs has so masterfully pointed out in his book and video series, entitled, "Love and Respect" -- a series based on this text! And we need to see that or this text will make no sense whatsoever.

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Why mutual submission? Because no relationship can be healthy without it. Even in relation to a child's need to submit to his or her parents (6:1-3) there is also a sense in which a Father must submit to his children's need not to be exasperated -- that is, with discipline that's too severe or expectation levels so high the child could never meet them (chap. 6, v. 4).

That's right dad's! Your children ARE called to honor and obey you. But it's not one-sided. For Paul also calls fathers to submit to the need of their kids not to have a dad who exasperates, abuses or discourages them. There needs to be a submission on your part to the need of your child to have a dad who is NOT harsh, cruel or overbearing.

Because it's a relationship, and all healthy relationships are two-sided. Which means Christian relationships are never dictatorships!

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And believe it or not, in relation to the antiquated practice of slavery, where most would never even dream of the concept of mutual submission: Paul tells slaves to respect their masters (6:5-8), and then tells the masters to, "***treat your slaves in the same way.***" It's mutual submission, because it's a relationship!

And in ALL healthy, functional, Christian or godly relationships, there is always a sense of give and take in meeting the needs the other person and having our needs met -- no matter what status, or rank or position of social authority you hold.

No relationship is exempt from the need for mutual submission, precisely because it's a relationship, and relationships are not one-sided! At least, healthy, godly, loving relationships that desire to be known as Christian are never one-sided.

And here I say primarily to the men (because men are often the one's who fight me on it): Any man who does not see the need to submit to his wife's need to be loved and cared for (because he struggles to see hear the word "submit" applied to himself in relation to his wife) -- as if it somehow demeans his sense of manhood -- doesn't know what it means to be a man.

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In fact, although we are to submit to God, it is also true (odd as it sounds) that God submits (by virtue of His love for us) to meet our needs. He's under no obligation to do so. There's nothing that says He must, or has to. Yet He does it.

Why? Because we have entered into a covenant relationship with Him -- which is, in many ways, similar to the marriage relationship. Yet with this one (rather large) exception: God has no needs that need to be met! God is self-complete!

He lacks nothing and overflows in everything. He does not need us, but He will receive and use anyone who comes to Him in faith.

As Acts 17:25 states in speaking of God: "**He is not served by human hands, AS IF HE NEEDED ANYTHING, because He himself gives all men life, and breath, and everything else.**" He gives to all out of the overflowing abundance of His own self-completeness, for He is the inexhaustible Source of all life.

We need Him, but He does not need us. We are to submit to Him as God because He is worthy (because by His grace He has won our hearts). Yet wonder of all wonders, He also submits Himself -- on the basis of the promises He's made to us as His chosen and redeemed people -- to meet our needs, even though He has none that need meeting.

We submit to Him because He's worthy, not because He has needs that He somehow needs us to meet! A God who needed humans to meet needs in Him wouldn't be God!

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And how is all this connected to the theme of holiness (since I've proven grammatically that this section is a continuation of what comes before, and thus an extension of that same theme)?

It's really very simple: "*mutual submission*" has to do with love, and love is the greatest expression of holiness. "**Whoever does not love, does not know God, for God IS love,**" says the Apostle John in 1 John 4:8.

God is MORE than just loving, He is Himself love! He doesn't just give us love, but rather, He Himself is the love that's poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which He has given to us (Rom. 5:5). And thus the person who is "continually filled with the Holy Spirit" is filled with the presence of God who is love!

As David Wilkerson once said: "**The baptism with the Holy Spirit is a baptism in or with divine love.**" He's right. To be filled with all the fullness of God is to be filled with love, because it's to be filled with Him who is love.

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Which brings me to my **FINAL CONCLUSION**: That this text teaches mutual submission throughout, because it addresses relationships throughout, and all HEALTHY relationships are two-sided, and not one-sided, be it relationships in

the Church, the relationship between husbands and wives, the relationship between parents and children, and the relationship between slaves and their masters. That's what I've shown you from the text.

There is a mutuality of submission in every one of those relationships, including our relationship with God. If you don't see that you have missed the major emphasis of this text.

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And remember: Submission looks like something different for each person or group. For example: For children "submission" to parents looks like obeying and honoring. / While for parents "submission" obviously doesn't include obeying your children! As the old saying goes, *"When the children rule, the man's a fool."*

No, for parents, the way you submit to your children's need is to refuse to be harsh, unrealistic, abusive, and so forth.

And how do the specifics of this mutual submission work out for spouses? That's what I'll get into next week, when I cover what mutual submission looks like for the wives; followed the few weeks after by looking at what mutual submission looks like for the husbands.

So, ladies, don't skip out next week! And you men, don't skip out the few weeks that follow that, since the section pertaining to you is 3 times as long as the section for women -- 8 verses for the men, as opposed to 2 verses for the women.