

## **Submission: Chauvinist Plot or Misunderstood Freedom?**

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By Lesley Ramsay.

I read a cartoon the other day where a horrified and offended mother was talking to another mother from her church, and she said "I'll have to talk to Katie's SS teacher. She came home last Sunday saying the 'S' word."

The word 'submission' for women is often more offensive than the 'F' word. Do we have just cause to be offended? Is submission a chauvinist plot to keep women, particularly Christian women, under control and silent?

I suspect there are many of you who are reading this who have struggled, and still struggle, with their role as a wife. It may even have taken you to the point of divorce. There will be those who are not yet married but would like to be, or hope to be, and are wondering how a modern 21st Century woman can ever make that promise expected in a Christian marriage service, to honour and submit to a man.

### **Misconceptions about submission**

I think that submission is a very misunderstood concept, and hopefully this article can confront some of those 'mis-conceptions' and begin to reorientate our thinking.

A word before I begin: there are things I will say by way of explanation or application that you may disagree with. But in the end, the big idea of submission comes from God and his word, and at some point you have to do business with God. Will we believe or accept what God has to say or not?

So what are these misconceptions? Let me just state them, and hopefully by the end of the article you will see their flaws.

- 1) Submission means being a doormat. My husband gets to walk all over me. He makes all the decisions – I just carry them out.
- 2) Submission belongs to a former era, the age before feminism, when men and women had vastly different roles than what they have now. Submission has nothing to do with the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- 3) Submission implies a violation or denial of a wife's rights and equality – a right to have a 50/50 relationship.
- 4) Submission implies inferiority of the wife; the husband has greater intelligence and wisdom, and therefore ought to be in authority.

5) Submission is related to personality, ie a quiet, docile wallflower wife can be expected to submit, but an extroverted, intelligent, wife with an opinion cannot.

### **Defining the issue**

Here is one possible definition: **"Biblical submission is the voluntary placing of yourself under another person's authority which has been delegated to them by God."**

*Voluntary*: this means that you make a choice to submit. It is not submission if it is forced out of you or demanded of you. Your personal attitude becomes: I willingly do this. So, in relation to husbands and wives, a husband cannot say "You must submit to me."

*Another person's authority*: submission goes hand-in-hand with authority. You are not called upon to submit to anyone or everyone, but only in those relationships where the other person has rightful authority.

Here I think is where we find our major problem with submission. We do not like authority. The Bible says we are by nature rebellious. We want to be independent and run our own lives. But we need to recognise that it is authority...

*Delegated by God*: this changes everything. All authority belongs to God (Romans 13:1). He is the rightful King and Ruler of this world, and he decrees that certain relationships in his world will be worked out in hierarchical structures.

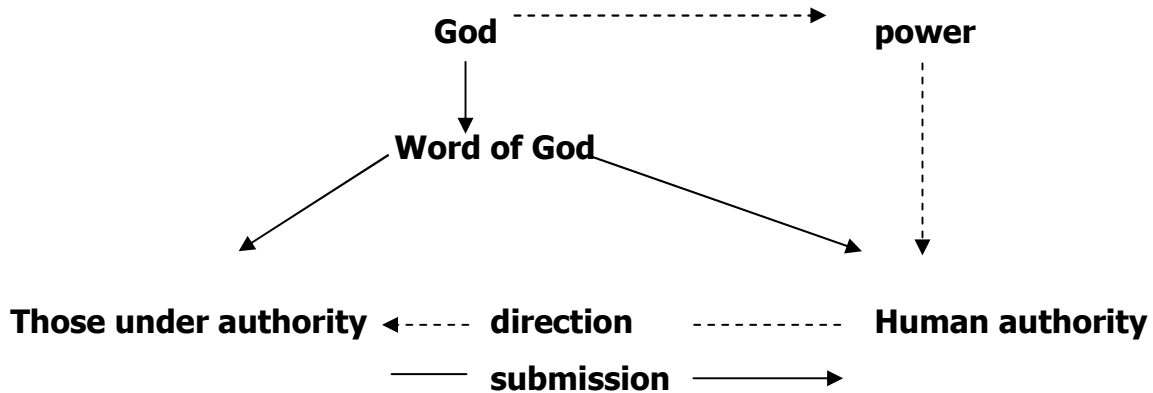
### **Submission is writ large in God's world**

A hierarchical structure is where one party has authority over another.

In God's world, all people of necessity come under his authority. He exercises that authority through his word. As Christians we place ourselves under its authority and are responsible for our response to that word. So in terms of our spiritual privilege and our responsibility before God we are equal. But sometimes, God ordains that that equality is played out within hierarchical relationships in which one party is to lead and give direction, while the other submits.

Hopefully, this diagram helps:

**Diagram 1**



Some specific examples of hierarchical relationships present in the Bible are: children and parents; slaves and masters (not ordained by God); citizens and government; believers and elders; wives and husbands; church and Christ; Christ and God. (See Ephesians 5:22-6:9; 1Peter 2:13-5:5.)

We operate under other similar relationships but they are not mentioned in the Bible: teacher and student; boss and employee; Bible Study Group leader and member; sporting coach and team member.

Notice several things:

- Citizens submitting to government includes all the mandates and sub groups within a government. So when I drive down the street and come to a red light, I stop. I am submitting to the direction of the RTA at that point. I can choose not to submit, but there may be dire consequences if I don't.
- Submission is for everyone, every man, woman and child. Nobody escapes submission. Everyone has to do it.
- You will be on different sides of the diagram at different times in your life: sometimes you will be the one in authority and giving direction (as a mother, as a boss or supervisor in your employment, if you are a policewoman or a teacher); sometimes you will need to submit (as when you were a child, as a driver on the roads, as a member of your church to the elders, and as a wife.)
- Authority and submission has nothing to do with superior intelligence or social status or personality. When John Howard or Kerry Packer drive down the street, they have to submit to the 'lollipop lady' at the school pedestrian crossing. It has got to do with authority delegated by God to a whole range of individuals.
- Every human society operates within hierarchical structures. There would be anarchy, and society would completely break down without it. We only have to look at how thin the veneer of socially acceptable behaviour was in New Orleans when authority was withdrawn during the time of Hurricane Katrina in September, 2005.

### **But we have a problem here....**

In the Garden of Eden these hierarchical relationships would have worked beautifully. The one we do observe in the Garden, Adam and Eve, DID work beautifully. But because we are now sinful human beings, the potential for those in authority to be corrupted and abuse their position is huge.

And they do abuse – we see it all the time. Overbearing and abusive parents and bosses, tyrannical leaders like Robert Mugabe, church ministers who 'lord' it over their congregations AND abusive husbands. This has led many, including feminists, to reject the Bible's teaching on authority and submission in hierarchical relationships.

The feminists' concern is valid. And God has the same concern. He has commanded those in authority to exercise that authority with love, humility and justice. Jesus taught that the purpose of authority was for serving other people, not so you 'can lord it over others'. They are to be considerate and make decisions in the best interests of those they lead.

### **Limiting abuse**

So, in the New Testament, God speaks to both groups in our diagram. To those in authority in human relationships he gives commands to counteract potential abuse.

*Parents:* do not exasperate or embitter children (Col 3:21, Eph 6:4); *masters:* treat slaves well, don't show partiality, provide what is right and fair, don't threaten them (Col 4:1, Eph 6:9); *husbands:* be considerate, treat your wives with respect, don't be harsh, love as Christ loved (1Pet 3:7, Col 3:19, Eph 5:25-29); *elders:* don't 'lord it over' your flock, be examples, lead by serving (1Peter 5:3-5).

To those under authority, he says: don't let your sinful tendencies get in the way either – don't be rebellious or disrespectful. Willingly submit and respect. those over you.

We can't expect unbelievers to behave like this (often they do!), but God expects Christians to transform their relationships because of the grace they have been shown in the Lord Jesus

But God does not remove hierarchy, authority and submission from his world because of potential or real abuse. He tells Christians to show the world how it ought to be, to be light in this dark world by the way that we exercise authority and submit to that authority. Look at **Titus 2:3-10**

### **Jesus and submission**

For me the greatest incentive to submit in those relationships where I am called upon to do that (and submitting as a wife is certainly the hardest) is the example of the Lord Jesus. There are two things that are important here.

1) The first is that we learn something very important about submission from the Trinity. You will know from your reading of the Bible that within the Trinity, within the Godhead, God reveals himself as three persons – God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. All are equal, all are God, none more important than the other.

Yet within the Godhead, there is direction and submission. 1 Corinthians 11:3 says, *"Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God."*

The word "head" refers to one who is in a position of authority over the other. Here, God declares that he is the "head of Christ".

How is he head? John 3:16 says that God 'gave' his Son to the world, that he 'sent' his Son into the world (see also John 3:17, 34, 4:34, 8:42, Galatians 4:4). Jesus, in response to his Father, submits to his father's will. He comes to do "the will of Him who sent me" (John 4:34, 6:38). In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night before the crucifixion, Jesus prays *"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."* (Matt 26:39)

Philippians 2:5-11 is one of the greatest passages in the Bible. It speaks powerfully of Jesus' submission.

And this relationship of direction and submission is not only between the Father and the Son, but also between the Father/Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father and the Son SEND the Spirit. He does not act independently (John 16:7-15). Never are the roles reversed in the Bible. The Father does not do the will of the Son; the Spirit does not send the Father or the Son. The relationships do not change – they are eternally fixed: differences within equality. We can see this in the first box in Diagram 2.

**Diagram 2 (submission)**



And that relationship within the Trinity becomes a model for the way that authority and submission work within marriage (the second box). There is complete equality between husband

and wife (just as there is between the Father, Son and Spirit) but one will submit to the other, because both submit to God. In a word, if Jesus is God and he can submit, then so can I.

Let me add a word of caution here. There are some theologians who do not like the parallel that the Bible draws between the Trinity and marriage. They are teaching that Jesus' submission to his Father was restricted to his time on earth and that before the incarnation and after he returned to the Father, there was not, and is not any hierarchy in the Trinity. They claim that there is mutual submission within the Trinity, that on occasion the Father will submit to the Son

But the Bible will have none of that...

1 Cor 11:3 "the head of Christ **is** God". Not **was**.

1 Cor 15:24-28 Jesus reigns over all, except the Father.

1 Cor 8:6-7 All things were created by the Father, working through the Son. Nowhere in Scripture is that reversed.

They are on very dangerous ground here. What is at stake here is much more than the meaning of one or two words in the Bible, much more even than how we live in our marriages. What is at stake is the very nature of God Himself! So deep is their commitment to an egalitarian view of husbands and wives in marriage, that they will modify the doctrine of the Trinity and remake the Trinity in their own image.

2) The second important thing here is that in 1 Peter 2:13-3:6 Jesus is held up as the very model of submission. We have been called to submission, even when it is hard, because Jesus is our great example.

### **An indepth look at Ephesians 5:15-33**

There are many passages that we could look at, but we will look at this one in particular.

In Ephesians, Paul has been urging his readers to understand **how** they got to be where they are, and **why** they are there. The **how** is that despite their being dead in their sins, God has shown them extraordinary grace and made them alive through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The **why** is that they have been called to live a life worthy of that grace they have been shown and therefore to be imitators of God. In other words, **be what you are!** (4:1, 17, 5:2, 8, 15)

In chapter 5:15-21, Paul is explaining that living as a wise person means understanding the Lord's will and being filled by the Spirit. Verses 18-21 are really one long sentence spelling out what it means to be filled with the Spirit: "speaking..., singing..., giving thanks..., submitting..."

So submission characterizes the Spirit-filled life! In our relationships with each other in this world, we will be people who will be submissive, not rebellious, or retaliatory, but acknowledging authority delegated by God. For we will do it out of reverence for Christ.

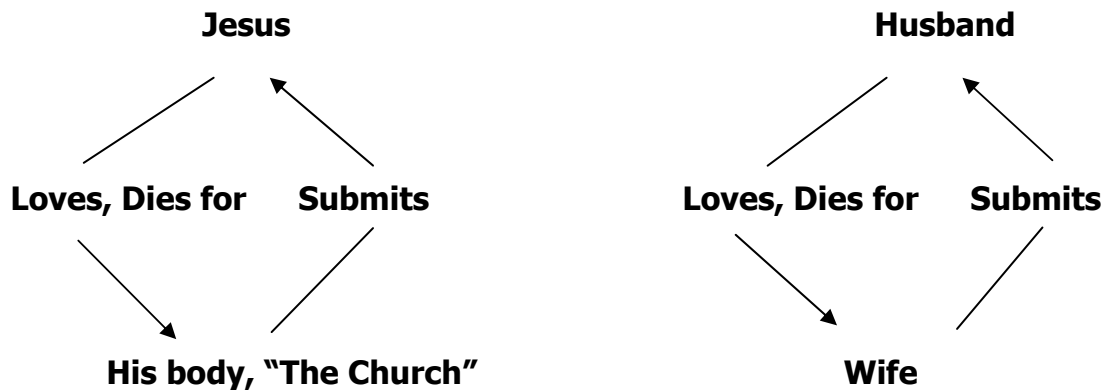
Then follows a list or table of **how** that submission works out in different relationships: husbands/wives, parents/children, masters/slaves (5:22-6:9).

Let me make some comments about vv 22-33.

1) "Submit.. as to the Lord" – she will submit to her husband in the same way that she submits to Christ. A wife's submission is not just a social constraint, it is part of her submission to Christ, part and parcel of the way that she serves the Lord Jesus.

2) There is headship and hierarchy built into a marriage relationship, just as there is headship and hierarchy in the relationship between Jesus and the church (vv23-30) So we have this pattern:

**Diagram 3**



3) This is a beautiful pattern. Husbands loving and dying, wives submitting. It is not always like that, is it? Husbands get it wrong, wives get it wrong. But it is what God has built into people from creation.

4) Some people have read v21 as saying that everyone in the relationships in the following verses will mutually submit to each other at different times. But can you now see why the relationship between a husband and wife is not mutual submission? Now you can see why it is not mutual submission. The very pattern or model that Paul uses can't be reversed. It would be a blasphemy to say that Jesus submits to the church!

5) What is the mystery of v32? Mystery in Bible is something that was once hidden but has now been revealed. We have always known about Genesis 2:24 (v31) - the two becoming one flesh. Now, Paul is saying, God is revealing what he has hidden up to now, that the marriage relationship is the visual aid (or type) of the relationship between Jesus and the Church! What Jesus did to form the church, what he's doing now to cleanse it and sanctify it, is a profound mystery, but wonderful when you understand it!

6) This is why marriage is so important. When you or I relate in our marriages like this, God is saying to the world, "This is what my relationship to my people, my body, my church is like. Look and be amazed." It's much bigger than you or I, and whether we get miffed at our husbands or not, and whether we like the whole idea of submitting or not. It's got to do with God and his plans and purposes for the world, and with Jesus and his death. It is not cultural, it is not just for the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It is for all time. It's a big deal!!

7) Paul concludes by repeating the responsibilities to husbands and wives in a slightly different way (v33). Husbands: love your wives; wives: respect your husbands. Which brings us to....

### **Some practical considerations**

1) A common question about submission is: what does submission look like in practice? That's a very hard question to answer, because at its core submission is an attitude. An attitude that says: submission is hard, but I want to do it, because I love Jesus and I want to obey Him. My husband will not always love me as he should, look after me as he should, but that's his problem. God has given me this man, and charged him with the responsibility of leading our family. My responsibility before God is to submit.

Your attitude will be seen in:

- allowing your husband to lead you and your family, encouraging and nurturing that leadership in him
- not resisting his attempts at leadership
- not stepping in when he is not doing it right
- not saying when he gets it wrong... I told you so!
- being your husband's No 1 fan – not making fun of him, or putting him down, or correcting him in public. I think this is what Paul means about respecting your husband. As Christians, we should shun the great blood sport when women are out with their friends – telling jokes about their husbands, putting them down.
- be proud of him, tell him what you love and admire about him. Build him up, don't tear him down.
- not nagging. This is our particular thing, isn't it? Proverbs 21 says that it is better for a husband to live on the corner of a roof than to share a house with a nagging or quarrelsome wife!

2) When it comes down to it, when a decision needs to be made and agreement can't be reached – God gives the responsibility to your husband to make that decision. Submission means accepting that - even when he's wrong!

Most of the time you won't even be aware of that difficulty. A husband and wife will talk over the issue, both will have input, offer their opinions, give their reasons for acting this way or that, pray about it together. A good husband and wife will not be acting selfishly, but will want to please the other. But eventually, a decision has to be made and responsibility taken. To be quite honest, I'm glad that that responsibility belongs to my husband, not me.

Having come to that decision, then make it yours. Use the language of 'we' to promote oneness. What you decide is less important than how you come to that decision.

3) Probably the most difficult question is: when does a wife say, "NO"? Remember, Romans 13:1 tells us that there is no authority except that which God has established. A husband only has authority because it has come from God. There may come a time when a wife will choose to **not submit** because of her prior commitment to Christ.

In Acts 5:29, the Jewish court had ordered Peter and the other apostles to stop teaching about Jesus. They replied "*We must obey God rather than men*". A wife will not submit to a husband when it is clearly sinful – to lie for him, to watch pornography with him. A wife will want to protect her children from harm – physical and emotional. She may need to say no. A wife is not bound to stay in a violent marriage.

4) Part of the difficulty of submission is that we as wives submit to sinful husbands. My husband sometimes gets it wrong and does not love me as Jesus loves the church – that makes it hard for me to submit to him. But I'm sinful too. I get it wrong; I resist his leadership and make it hard for him to love me. We both live in a sinful world. We both sin, both need to repent, both need to say sorry, both need forgiveness. But both of us, as a Christian man and a Christian woman must submit ourselves to the Lord Jesus and his word. For Jim, that means putting his selfishness to one side and leading me and loving me, literally unto death! For me, that means putting my rebellious nature to one side, and submitting and allowing myself to be led.

We can do it, by the grace of God