

Mutual Submission in Marriage
Within the Structure of the Husband's Headship
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Introduction: my title is "Mutual Submission in Marriage within the Structure of the Husband's Headship." Let me begin with three introductory comments keyed to three words.

1) Goal

The point of this paper is to defend the claim that the call for submission of wives to their husbands in **everything** (Eph 5.24) has mutual submission as a balancing principle within the framework of the husband's authority, because, in context, all have the duty of **submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ** (Eph 5.21).¹ Mutual submission is our core interest; the reality of headship is a central assumption of this study.² In other words, it is important that Christian leaders of households find the wisdom to submit to their wives without relinquishing their God-given authority.

2) Need

We often get stuck in definition ruts that are difficult to transcend. To speak of a husband's submission may elicit a knee-jerk reaction from some of you, just as speaking of a wife's normative duty of submission to her husband's headship authority may elicit a knee-jerk reaction from others.³ We tend to reason from mutual submission to the elimination of headship

¹Defense of this outlook will include explanation of Ephesians 5.21 through interaction with those who reject the idea that husbands have a duty of submission to their wives. Finally, for the meaning of these things in a Christian marriage, we will especially consider how *a wife may apply the principle of mutual submission in her role as a helper under authority.*

²A number of considerations from the book of Ephesians, the controlling context of Eph 5.21, support this understanding of headship. 1) The word submit has the usual meaning of subordination to a higher authority. Submission to the husband is a fundamental duty of the wife clearly but indirectly from Eph 5.22 (based on 5.21), from 5.24b (based on 5.24a), and directly from Col 3.18 (wives, submit to your husbands) and 1 Pet 3.1 (wives, be subject to your...husbands, and 3.3: "holy women [showed it]...by submitting to their husbands"). 2) The clear context of authority structures (Eph. 5.22-33) directs us in thought to the core principle of the fifth commandment, the giving of due honor to those who have roles that are "above" us (wives to husbands, parents to children, slaves/employees to masters/employers). 3) The command to wives to "submit *in everything* to their husbands" (Eph 5.24) emphasizes the husband's headship by its comprehensiveness (literally, "in all"). Although "all" is not absolute (it is not all without exception) because no person in authority may require sin from someone under authority (we must obey God rather than man, Acts 5.29), the comprehensive "in all things" shows that in general (as the working principle, as the norm), the wife has the obligation to follow the husband's leading, which is the exercise of headship. In marriage, leadership pertains to the promotion of the wife's well-being, especially to her growth in holiness by healthy spiritual nourishment in a way parallel with Christ's nurture of His church (Eph 5.25-28). 4) That headship entails submission is implicit in the parallel relation of the church to Christ (Eph 5.23-24: **the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church...as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands**). God put all things under the feet of Jesus and gave Him as head over all things to the church (Eph 1.22). A similar relationship of being over (for the husband) and under (for the wife) is indicated in how Paul roots the wife's submission in the church's submission to Christ: **as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in all things** (Eph 5.24, NAU). 1 Cor 11.3 confirms this explicitly and powerfully: **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.**

³The joint principles of headship *and* mutuality constitute a dynamic relationship in marriage that is complimentary and not egalitarian in spirit.

or from headship to the denial of mutual submission. Therefore, to give this notion of mutuality fair consideration, we need a good dose of open-minded humility.⁴

3) Submission

One way to capture the spirit of submission is to consider how helpership leads to the wife's benefit because she helps her husband fulfill *his major headship role* before God of nourishing her in the gospel. This is in parallel with Christ's sanctifying nurture of the church: **in the same way husbands** are to promote the sanctification of their wives, Eph 5.28).⁵

Now let us evaluate the rejection of mutual submission in Eph 5.21.

1A. Evaluation of the rejection of mutual submission in Eph 5.21

Grudem and Piper object to the idea that 5.21 teaches mutual submission of all Christians to one another (and thus of husbands to wives). Instead, it teaches "that we should all be subject to those whom God has put in authority over us –such as husbands, parents, or employers."⁶ Their translation of 5.21 is: "being subject to one another (that is, to some others), in the fear of Christ."⁷ It is not that all have the duty to submit to one another but that all have the duty to submit to God-ordained authority figures.⁸

1B. How do they support this interpretation?

1) The meaning of "submit" (subject oneself, obey) seals the claim for them

The primary argument is the meaning of the Greek word translated submit or be subject to, which cannot mean "be thoughtful and considerate; act in love [as some think]... because the term *always* implies a relationship of submission to an authority."⁹ Examples abound: Jesus to His parents (Lk 2.51); citizens to the state (Rom 13.1, 5); especially, wives to husbands as the church to Christ (Eph 5.24). Never is the relationship reversed! The word never has the sense of

⁴This is something easier to talk about than to practice. I use "open-minded humility" to refer to a cluster of Christian graces that are necessary for godly arguing that does not descend to sinful quarreling. In summary, open-mindedness has the following ingredients: willingness to compare my view with other views, to do so empathetically over time in dialogue with an objective posture (i.e. "correct me where I am wrong as I give you my reasons for..."). Humility has these ingredients: recognition of the problem of sin ("I have difficulty being true to myself, I tend to hide me from myself"), a seasoned distrust of myself, willingness to take the risk of being wrong, and love; these qualities of love are the opposite of pride. Love prevents a) scorn, making others feel small or worthless around you. Some people exude a radius about themselves that says "you are not worthy to come into my presence." Humble love prevents b) an arrogance that says, "I have all the answers, no one else's opinion is worth consideration." We should have answers (1 Pet. 3:15) but we must always give due consideration to other views (to other people and their views). And love prevents c) a leveling spirit or destructive criticism. What happens when you tear other people down? You lift self up! If criticism is necessary, and often it is, it will emerge from self-criticism (doing something about the telephone pole in one's own eye) and will be gentle (with a speck of dust in the other person's eye; the analogy here concerns the eye with all its sensitivity, Matt. 7:3-5).

⁵Spouses need to see this clearly; we lose sight of it too often. Submission is not a bad thing; it is not a four-letter word. To use a quip from the movies (with some modification): A dominating and sly wife says, "He may be the head, okay, but I am the neck that turns the head." In the spirit of submission, if she claims to be the neck, it not for control but for support in the role of helpership relative to headship; especially to help him be her *spiritual* leader for nourishment toward the goal of holiness.

⁶*Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, fn6, 493-94

⁷Ibid 493.

⁸Ibid 494; those in authority in 5.22f. are husbands, fathers, and masters.

⁹Ibid 493 (italics mine).

mutuality, “it is *always one-directional* in its reference to submission to an authority.”¹⁰ In no case is one in authority told to submit to one under authority. Without submitting, those in authority ought to be loving and thoughtful, but there is no mutuality in 5.21.

2) The implication of “one another” confirms this understanding of submit

The mutuality view, they claim, depends on the assumption that the pronoun “one another” must be completely reciprocal, that is, it must mean “everyone to everyone.” Everyone to everyone is the case in some uses, but that is not how it is always used. There are many cases where the idea must be “some to others.” For example, Gal 6.2 (bear one another’s burdens) does not mean that “everyone should exchange burdens with everyone else” but “some...more able should help...others ... less able.”¹¹ Moreover, the context *following* 5.21 along with the meaning of “submit” requires that “one another” in 5.21 means “some to others.”¹²

2B. What can we say in response to this interpretation?

We should note that this argument rests on the idea that the word submit is *always* used in a one-directional way of submission to authority. Thus, even though “one another” *may* indicate a bi-directional relationship, it cannot do so *here* because of the meaning of the word submit along with the flow of context that *follows* 5.21. In evaluation, note three contrary claims for discussion.

1C. Contrary claim one: submit does not always have a one-directional meaning

The context of 1 Cor 16.15-16 indicates that “submit” is not always one-directional.

⁵ **Now I urge you, brothers- you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints- ¹⁶ be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer.** We must grant that this text is part of the debate. Grudem and Piper simply align it with the duty “of church members being subject to church leaders.”¹³ However, it is surely reasonable to discern a unique use of “submit to authority” in 1 Cor 16.15-16. “**Be subject to such as these**” refers to people who devote themselves to serving the saints in a manner similar to how the household of Stephanas served the saints. His household members are included in those to whom submission is required. These devoted servants of the saints, and others like them in devoted service, are not leaders who have some “official” ruling capacity. Then Paul adds, **and to every fellow worker and laborer** (v. 16). Surely, the people in view include more than authority figures in the churches. Deacons, for example, are fellow workers, but are they authority figures? They are not rulers. The idea here is best taken as a reference to those in the churches who take up their partnership in the gospel with devotion, as did Euodia and Syntyche, women who labored side by side with Paul **together with Clement and the rest of [Paul’s] fellow workers** (Phil 4.2-3). The point is not submission to those in authority but submission of workers in the church to other workers in the church: “you who are workers, submit to your fellow workers.”¹⁴

¹⁰Ibid 493.

¹¹Ibid 493-494.

¹²Some examples are Rev 6.4 (men slay one another is not “everyone kills everyone” or “people being killed would mutually kill those who were killing them”); Gal 6.2 (bearing one another’s burdens is not “everyone should exchange burdens with everyone else” but “some who are more able should help bear the burdens of others who are less able”), and 1 Cor 11.3 (waiting for one another to eat means “*some* who are ready early should wait for *others* who are late”); hence the paraphrase: “those who are under authority should be subject to others among you who have authority over them” (Ibid 493-494).

¹³Ibid 493; they put 1 Cor 16.15-16 with 1 Pet 5.5, **Younger ... submit to the elders.**

¹⁴Calvin: “We cannot live together without mutual assistance” (*Sermons on Ephesians* 561).

Therefore, in the family of God, the relationships between devoted saints are to include mutuality of submission. The power of the word “submit” applies in a distinct way in the new family. It means that *Christians submit to one another in a way reflective of submission to higher authority*. This goes hand in hand with each taking on the attitude of a servant to the other and with esteeming others better than oneself! The point is *the spirit of submission* not a legalistic letter. In a similar way, our text (Eph 5.21), calls for Christian to Christian submission.¹⁵

2C. Contrary claim two: what comes *before* 5.21 is contextually critical and decisive

Grudem and Piper only work with the context following 5.21 to press the claim that the one directional use of “submission” of wives to their husbands in 5.22-24 governs the meaning of submit in 5.21.

However, there is substantial reason to take 5.21 as a link back in context to the teaching of 4.20-5.20, as well as a transition forward. This look back leads to a bidirectional reading of submitting in 5.21. It does so notably because “submitting to one another” stands at the end of a series of participles, all of which depend on the main verb of this section, which is the command to be filled with the Spirit in 5.18:

Be filled with the Spirit, 5.18

Addressing one another, 5.19

Singing, 5.19

Making melody, 5.19

Giving thanks, 5.20

Submitting to one another, 5.21.

Mutual submission (5.21) has an unbreakable bond with the command to be filled with the Spirit because these participles cannot stand alone. In turn, the command to be filled with the Spirit is a capstone that summarizes what it means to learn of Christ, progress in spiritual renewal, and grow in the graces of the Christian life.¹⁶

Therefore, we must read 5.21 as a sanctifying duty that is fundamental in spiritual renewal governed by everything in 4.20-5.20. In this context, looking back, we must understand the submission of 5.21 as Christian to Christian. Also, looking forward, this mutuality must apply

¹⁵It does so in a way that does not destroy or eliminate the authority structures represented by government, headship (Eph 5.22-24), or pastoral authority. Two passages confirm the coexistence of authority with mutual submission. a) 1 Pet 5.5 speaks first in the usual “one directional” way calling the young of the church to submit to the elder-rulers of the church: **Younger ... submit to the elders**. Then, Peter says, **Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another** (v. 6). It is important to note how the elders are included in “all of you” and how they have the duty to humble themselves toward the younger (toward one another). How can we avoid the implication that mutual submission goes hand in hand with submission to authority? The younger humble themselves by submission to the elders and the elders “submit” themselves to the younger by humbling themselves to them. In this connection, Lincoln says, “There is an interesting parallel in 1 Pet 5:5, where the exhortation “you that are younger be subject to the elders” is followed immediately by the further appeal “clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another.” The latter admonition was not meant to cancel out the former. Rather, the writer holds that there is a general sense in which elders are to serve their flock, including its younger element, in a submissive attitude, but that mutuality goes along with a hierarchical view of roles. Thus, there is a specific sense in which the flock in general and the younger in particular are to be obedient to the elders” (*Ephesians*, 366). b) Peter (1 Pet 3.1) calls for submission of wives to their husbands and then he calls for humility from “all of you” (3.8). It is difficult to escape the conclusion that husbands have a duty of submission to their wives in a general sense that does not rule out the duty of submission of wives to their husbands in the specific sense of helpship in relation to headship.

¹⁶But that is not the way you learned Christ! ...and were taught in him... ²² to put off your old self ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. ²⁵ Therefore... let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor...be kind to one another...forgiving one another...addressing one another with psalms and hymns...submitting (4.20-5.20; cf. the “one anothering” and “togethering” of the parallel text, Col 3.1-4.4).

to the headship and helpership roles of marriage because 5.22 gets its verbal idea from 5.21¹⁷ indicating that Christian to Christian spiritual renewal is foundational to the authority structure of marriage. This means that mutual submission goes hand in hand with headship.¹⁸

3C. Contrary claim three: previous context confirms a rich use of submit

We ought to understand the submission in 5.21 as Christian to Christian in a two-directional way because 5.21 gives a unique summary of the relationships between all members of the church *with each other* (speaking truth to one another, forgiving one another, and so forth). It is reasonable to conclude that the one another texts in 4.20-5.20 govern how we are to understand “one another” in 5.21. “One another” must therefore indicate mutuality and this confirms the bidirectional sense of “submit” in 5.21.¹⁹ Of course, this does not mean that the headship nature of submission in 5.22-24 is eliminated, *but it does qualify it* in important ways that reflect the newness of the Christian life (4.24).²⁰

¹⁷Notably, 5.22 does not have the verb, “to submit.” It has no verb but the idea of submission is present in the participle of 5.21. Thus, on one hand, Christian to Christian submission (i.e. the mutuality principle) must apply to a Christian marriage. On the other hand, submission to the husband’s authority is not altered because 5.22 speaks of the wife to the husband and 5.24 explicitly relates submission of wives to headship on a par with the submission of the church to the headship of Christ who is given to the church in the capacity of Sabbath king and head over all things (Eph 1.22).

¹⁸Calvin captures both types of submission by distinguishing between *a general and universal submission to one another* and *a closer bond of submission according to “the various conditions of life” and “respective callings”* so that “where love reigns, mutual services will be rendered” (*Commentary on Ephesians*, Baker, 1979) Vol 21, 316-317 (italics mine). In his *Sermons on Ephesians*, he says, “it does not seem fitting that a father should be subject to his children, the husband to his wife, or the magistrate to the people whom he governs, or even that they also who are equal in status should be subject one to another. But if we examine all things well, we shall find that St. Paul has not without reason put all Christians under this subjection. And why?...it is the very sauce that we will give us a taste for this doctrine...that if we fear God and have a care to submit ourselves quietly to his will it must not grieve us, nor must we think it irksome and strange that each of us should serve them whom his is bound to serve, and in that way so maintain his rank that we may all join together under our Head, Jesus Christ, and attain the heavenly glory he has purchased for us” (Banner of Truth, 1973) 560-563.

¹⁹Other texts point in the same direction. The mutuality of serving one another in the church (through love serve one another, Gal 5.13b) is surely the kind of mutual submission that Paul has in mind in Eph 5.21. Moreover, in Phil 2.3-4, Paul gives a powerful call to disregard one’s own rights with selfless regard for others. The power is in the example of Christ who did not insist on His own rights, status, or authority when He became a servant.

²⁰In the context of spiritual renewal, the word submit has a rich usage that is something to this effect: “in their learning of Christ, husband and wife, in a bond of headship authority and helpership submission, and as sinners being renewed in the image of God, are to learn how *to submit to each other.*”

Conclusions: 1) per 5.21 husbands have a duty of mutual submission to their wives built into their headship authority, 2) by implication from mutuality, wives may call their husbands to submission as a principle that is built into their helpership submission.

To round off this study, we need to try to capture how this works in daily conduct. To that we now turn by narrowing our focus to a specific theme, namely, principled non-submission.

2A. Application of the coexistence of mutuality and headship

A fundamental problem is the continuing presence of sin. Although spouses are being restored in the image of God, a Christian marriage is a bond for life of two sinners. Along the way, each spouse fails the other. Wives often lack in helping submission and husbands often lack in loving leadership. Thus, when there is failure, real or perceived, does the wife only consider her role of submission and does the husband only consider his role of headship?

Eph 5.21 gives us guidance here. When a husband perceives failure in his wife, one important spiritual tool at his disposal in the exercise of headship is the duty that he has of mutual submission.²¹ When a wife perceives failure in her husband, one important spiritual tool at her disposal in the exercise of helpership is the principle of mutual submission. By implication, therefore, a wife may call her husband to loving submission.²² She *may* do so by

²¹The spirit of mutual submission relates to multitudes of day to day little issues that add up in a big way. In submission for his wife, the husband will often say, “no, you; no, not what I want, but what you want.” In this way of love his wife, by seeking to fulfill her wants over his, and by doing this wisely and righteously, the husband exercises his authority by exemplifying submission.

²²Calling the husband to mutual submission is not necessarily direct as in “now it is your turn to submit”, but it might be as in “in this tension we have over x, you know that you have a duty to submit to me at times too.” It may be much more subtle as when a young mother hands the baby to the father who would rather watch the game. She says, “your daughter is craving for some time with her father.” He may not want this at the moment, but he ought to adjust and submit in heart as well as in active attending to the baby (or older child). A help for him is this call to the clueless dad (we are that way all too often). He has Eph 5.21 as a reminder that he has a duty to Christ to submit to his wife as the head of the home; such submission is a huge part of how he exercises his authority as head of the home. Some may raise the point that “calling” the husband to his “duty” of mutual submission is inevitably polarizing, even if it is a reasonable implication. In reply note the following: a) first, this “call” may not be explicit; it may arise in the flow of things as when a young mother hands the newborn to the father and says, “your daughter misses you.” The husband may want to, even be determined to watch a tennis match on TV, but he submits to his wife...if he is loving and wise. b) Second, the tone of an explicit call to the husband to submit is critical if a wife seeks to maintain the spirit of his headship authority over her. Then she does not demand but guardedly reminds the husband that he has the duty of submission to her too, even though he is the head of the home. Third, sometimes the thickheaded husband who is being unreasonable may be called to submit by the godly decling of his wife. Fourth, as to how this all comes about, husband’s need to ask themselves, “how do I call my wife to submit to me?” How does a helpership to headship posture come into a marriage in first place and how is it maintained, when at times things seems to go too far to the left or right? To put the shoe on the other foot: how husbands do this wisely, that is how wives ought to do so as well. In fact, wives learn how to call to submission by the example of their husbands! Thus, the golden rule ought to govern: husbands who expect submission ought to display it in exceptions to the rule (though it may be quite often); wives who, at times, expect submission ought to display it as the general rule.

principled-non-submission.²³ Declining to submit is a stronger step beyond “calling” the husband to loving leadership and humble submission.

In 1 Cor 7, we have some things that compliment our study of Eph 5.21. First, the fact that it speaks of mutual authority in the conjugal bond of marriage does not eliminate (ought not to be used to eliminate) headship authority. Second, mutual authority implies mutual submission, which also does not eliminate headship. Third, being under authority and responsible to submit allows principled non-submission because a wife may say no when she has a headache, while remaining fully committed to her conjugal duty. Who will object?

Accordingly, a wife may decline to submit to her husband in some things.²⁴ Of course, she must decline a call to sin, but mutual submission opens a wider door. In her endurance of unreasonable demands, a wife has the option to set a limit and decline. The following list is a provisional attempt to apply the mutual submission of 5.21 within the structure of headship by focusing on principled non-submission.

1) The wife may respectfully decline for the sake of wisdom and holiness

She is not to use her freedom to excuse sin, particularly, the sin of usurping headship. She must emphasize the place of the husband as head of the home and her commitment to it. She must continually seek and find ways to uphold the authority structure of the Christian home. This must be her attitude of heart *before God* and it ought to be expressed in word and deed *to her husband*.

2) If she declines, it ought to arise willingly, thoughtfully, and purposively from a posture of submission that is normative. Her regular practice is to submit; that is her commitment to God’s will regarding helpship in relation to headship.

3) Accordingly, the wife may decline obedience *at times*.

The implication of mutual submission (5.21) is that there are times when the give and take of mutuality will call the husband to submit to the wife when she decides not to follow him on something. Her decision to not follow him on something might be right or wrong. Either way, the husband has at his disposal the duty of mutual submission that now comes to rest on his shoulders in a pointed way. Submission to his wife is a divinely given principle of action that is available to him; it is always available to him not just when she declines. Accordingly, he ought to seek wisdom to apply the rich principle of mutual submission to the need of the moment.

²³On the surface, declining seems counterintuitive to the fundamental principles of headship and helpship in which there is no command to refuse to submit, to call the husband to submit, to decline, or to simply say no, even at times. Granted, there is no explicit command along these lines. The point is that the duty of mutual submission contains these “applications” implicitly. In one sense, it is a matter of common sense. The example of conjugal mutuality in 1 Cor 7 (where the word submit does not occur) should help us here. The wife does not have authority over her own body, the husband has this authority; the husband does not have over his his own body, the wife has this authority (7.4). The apostle approaches this subject with an accent on who has authority. Nothing is said of yielding to the other, explicitly. Nothing is said of refusing or declining, explicitly. Nothing is said of mutual submission, explicitly. Still, who cannot see that because both have equal authority, then mutual submission is implicit, and a wife, for example, may say no when she is not feeling well or has a headache. That this occurs does not necessarily mean that she disregards the authority of the husband over her body, not when she actually has a headache, recognizes the authority of the husband, intends to abide by that authority before God wholeheartedly, and prayerfully seeks to grow in the grace of helpship for the sanctification of her husband. Declining can be principled and that is the essence of principled-non-submission that calls for submission from the other.

²⁴ Surely, there is consensus on the point that the duty to “submit in everything” is not an absolute universal. In “all” does not mean all without exception. A wife is not obligated to submit to a husband’s request to sin. Thus, Paul’s injunction speaks to the rule of headship: a wife has the position of being under authority in a comprehensive way. Principled non-submission is an attempt to articulate how it is that a wife may refuse to submit in some particular things in a way *that does not set aside but upholds the norm of headship*.

Put another way, a godly wife will often submit to unreasonable demands. She will choose her battles wisely. When unreasonableness persists, a point may be reached that triggers a decision to call the husband to his duty of submission. She has this option before Christ, but because He put her under authority to her husband, she endures much before she declines at times.²⁵

4) Declining on weighty matters ought to be on the order of *a last resort*

She declines with commitment to her duty to uphold the authority of her husband. A Christian wife cannot decline lightly; she must first appeal for discussion and give her basis for opposing something or for offering some alternative. She needs to have compelling reasons to decline the leading of her husband. Some reasons might be found in the principles of avoiding excess, legalism, and the trivializing of her role as a person being renewed in the image of God. She may decline for the sake of holiness and improvement of the husband's leadership; this too upholds his office in spirit while declining in letter.

5) She must decline guardedly with some flexibility of negotiation

As the husband may make mistakes in leading, the wife may make mistakes in following: she may follow when she ought not, she may not follow when she ought to. So, she must maintain a due sense of her own sinfulness and not harden her heart into stone. Declining should be provisional though firm when well grounded and viewed as necessary for the good of the husband and household.

6) She declines with hope

²⁵Some problems with the one-directional understanding of submission in marriage are the following. 1) This understanding of wife to husband submission runs the very real risk of promoting excessiveness and extremes of a sinful husband to which a wife has no stopgap once the husband refuses her appeals. Of course, she, like all Christians, may have to endure injustice. But, to cite some examples, she has no recourse and must submit to excessiveness and extremes such as: the insistence of a husband that she wear only long dresses always in public, wear a veil over her face in public, use no make up, never cut her hair, keep the house in perfect order with nothing ever on the kitchen counters, participate in sex whenever he insists, submit to oral or anal sex despite her complaints that these things are repulsive to her, and wash clothes every day rather than once a week. To be sure a loving husband will not be so unreasonable, but if he is of such disposition as a perfectionist that lacks growth in sanctification in these areas, and if he insists on these things, on the one-directional reading, the wife must submit to be a faithful Christian wife. At least that is one way to interpret the text in what may be rightly called reading the letter but failing to read the spirit of the command to obey. These considerations call the rigid one directional view in question because per this view the wife has to comply; none of these things break God's word. Moreover, an overly rigid view of submission on the part of the wife may prevent her from helping the husband correct his extremes. 2) The one directional and universal reading of the passage furthermore does not due justice to the liberty of a Christian wife being renewed in the image of God. At the least, it appears that her freedom in Christ, which is not to be used as a license to sin or in this case to deny the headship authority of her husband, is turned into a form of legalism. In this legalism, the wife is always duty bound to live by the rules (laws) her husband lays down, no matter what those rules may be. Granted, she is not called to disobey a command of God, but on the other hand, she is locked into obedience to all the commands of man regarding multitudes of little things no matter how unreasonable they may be. Is it not more in keeping with the spiritual renewal of married Christians to claim that the wife ought to always follow her husband as he follows the Lord? Then it is not simply that she obeys her husband in all things that do not break a command of God. Instead, the great duty here is that she obeys her husband in all things that God commands in accord with the principles of Eph. 4.20 to 5.21, including the implications of mutual submission. To be locked into this duty is part and parcel of her freedom in Christ. 3) Closely related to Christian liberty is the reality of Christian dignity. The wife's dignity is not eliminated by the fact of wife to husband submission. It is not denied by the fact that she has that role by God's appointment for her good and His glory. She is to live under his loving rules in obedience. However, it seems to be a suppression of her dignity as an image bearer of the Lord and joint heir in Christ to call her to do the trivial, unreasonable, and excessive. Of course, all believers will suffer injustices and must submit to them, but is there no place for a wife, while ever mindful of her place under the authority of her husband, to responsibly and wisely promote her dignity as a person being renewed in the image of God, and as a joint heir in Christ? Yes, Eph 5.21, in the context of 4.20-5.20, points the way to wisdom in spiritual renewal.

In commitment to mutual submission, Christian to Christian, her hope is that her husband will recognize that she has the right at times to respectfully decline what he demands, decides, and wants. He ought to take her declining as a call to examine his demands to see if they truly rest in Scripture so that his leadership will be truly characterized by reasonableness, submissiveness, and understanding of the wife's dignity as an image bearer being renewed in holiness of the truth.²⁶ Her hope is that this give and take will help him learn how to lead lovingly and wisely. This will make him a better leader and cause her to be a better follower. A godly wife will have this sanctifying hope always before her as she submits most of the time. Her submission is a general rule with exceptions. Thus, she chooses her battles wisely when she prayerfully and “submissively” declines to submit for the sake of holiness.

Summary

We can summarize by reference to a caricature that Grudem and Piper present. They note how ludicrous the idea is of everyone bearing everyone else's burdens per Gal 6.2.

However, they lose something in this excessively wooden way of reading the reciprocity. If we factor in the dynamics of life, it is reasonable to understand that we bear one another's burdens in a way that accords with necessity: I am to bear your burdens (help you with mine) when you are in need and I am able to help, and you are to bear my burdens (help me with them) when I am in need and you are able to help me. As Calvin aptly puts it, “It is highly proper that all should be exhorted to be subject to each other *in their turn*.”²⁷

There is a lesson here regarding the clustered nature of evangelical praxis, that is, of gospel rooted conduct within marriage. Christian to Christian conduct of both spouses pertains to the dynamics of daily life and the fact that there are seasons of failure by sin along with stages of growth in holiness. Mutual submission is not an absolute nor is it an answer for all problems. It is a Christian duty that spouses have in conjunction with a cluster of duties; it is a grace among a cluster of graces. It means that within the structure of headship and helpship spouses have the responsibility to submit to the other as circumstances call for it, when one is in need and the other is in position to meet that need.

Therefore, the wife *may* appeal to the husband for submission. As a professing Christian, sometimes she ought to do this with principled-non-submission. The husband, the one in authority, ought to acknowledge his duty of submission to his wife in principle and practice it. His wife may be wrong in her declining or she may be right. His judgment of her conduct may be wrong or it may be right. How he conducts himself at these points in their relationship (and there will be many such points) is a matter requiring the wisdom of the Spirit. His walk in the Spirit and growth in grace is vital to his decision making when called to the duty of humble submission. Pride may get in the way. In Calvin's words, submission is “irksome” to us all because “everyone one of us is so wedded to himself that we cannot submit.”²⁸ Mutual submission in marriage in conjunction with meaningful headship and helpship is the practical equivalent of humility, a grace of the Spirit in spiritual renewal.

Therefore, the process of applying mutuality between husband and wife (as Christian to Christian) promotes balance, Christian liberty, and human dignity for both husband and wife as

²⁶ Or, if she is an unbeliever, he focuses on her need of restoration in the image of God.

²⁷ *Commentary* 317 (italics mine).

²⁸ *Sermons on Ephesians* 560.

sinner on the road of renewal together. It is a stopgap where abuse is present because of unloving leadership,²⁹ but it is much more than that. It is integral to spiritual renewal. This process of one anothering love per Eph 5.21 drives spouses back to all the principles of 4.20 to 5.20 (and to the parallel expression of these things in Col 3.1-4.6). The husband must love his wife by growing in grace in his fight with sin; the wife must submit to her husband by growing in grace in her fight with sin as well. One summary way that they engage this fight together is by helping each other through the one anothering love of mutual submission.³⁰

The two truths, mutual submission and submission to headship, are like two ropes hanging before you half way down in a well. If you try to ascend to the light above by grabbing onto only one of the ropes, you will go down instead of up because the ropes are actually a single rope circling a pulley above the well. Looking up to the light, it is not always clear how things fit together, but knowing that they fit together is radically important. A key to upward progress is to hold firmly to both mutual submission and submission to headship, both **out of reverence for Christ** (5.21).

In the end, the key to loving helpship and headship for both husband and wife is to look to Christ and follow His example. Husband, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and follow His example of headship. Wife, trust in the risen Savior and follow His example of submission. This is the key to a loving marriage that makes praxis evangelical and thereby glorifies God.

²⁹For example, if a husband insists on sexual intimacy in a way that is insensitive to the wife's feelings, the wife can justifiably decline (for example, the call to not defraud, 1 Cor. 7, does not stipulate a number; declining at times is not defrauding). This stopgap ought to awaken the husband to his insensitivity at the same time that it prevents her, say, from the indignity of what is repulsive to her, even if it is not repulsive to other women in similar situations, even if participating would not be a violation of God's commands (for example: the practice of oral sex). The submission of the husband to his wife in such cases (this one and those like it) means that he backs off from his insistence, rethinks it, takes on a forgiving posture, seeks the truth, and uses this as an opportunity to better understand his wife in order to learn how to love her better than ever before. The process of mutuality between husband and wife as Christian to Christian promotes balance, Christian liberty, and human dignity for both husband and wife as sinners on the road of renewal together.

³⁰From Calvin again in *Sermons on Ephesians*, he teaches that submission of husbands and fathers ought to be so flooded with a principle of mutual submission that *he includes submission of fathers to their children* along with husbands to their wives. Mutual submission is a requirement for Calvin for wise and loving exercise of authority. Otherwise, he is patently clear in maintaining headship and all authority structures. He distinguishes between a universal submission one to another and a closer bond of submission. For Calvin, universal one-anothering submission and a closer bond of submission to higher authority coexist. In his view, the duty of husbands and fathers to submit to their wives and to their children is part of how they fulfill their roles as authority figures. He sees this as a matter of service. God gives authority to some over others for the good of those under authority. Those in authority promote that good by subjecting themselves under obligation and service to those under authority. Pride is a central problem: it is what prevents those in authority and any of us from submission. A husband may not like this idea the least bit, but he will submit to his wife out of reverence to Christ as part of his loving headship.