

Introduction

GP object to the idea that 5.21 teaches mutual submission of all Christians to one another (and thus of husbands to wives as well as wives to husbands). They claim “it does not teach mutual submission at all, but rather teaches that we should all be subject to whose whom God has put in authority over us – such as husbands, parents, or employers.” Their translation of 5.21 is: “being subject to one another (that is, to some others), in the fear of Christ” (493) and they paraphrase it thus: “those who are under authority should be subject to others among you who have authority over them” (494, i.e. wives to husbands, children to parents, and slaves to masters). 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.

1A. How do they support this alternative interpretation?

1B. The meaning of “submit” (subject oneself, obey)

The primary argument is the meaning of the Greek word translated submit or be subject to (493). Submit cannot mean “be thoughtful and considerate; act in love [as some think]...because the term *always* implies a relationship of submission to an authority” (493, italics mine). They claim that “submit” is always unilateral or one-directional and never bi-directional.

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

Thus, there is no mutuality in 5.21. In 5.22-24, wives are not taught to submit to everyone or to all husbands but to their own husbands. Should we not read 21 in light of 22-24 as one-directional?

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

The mutuality view 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” (as we take it in 5.21): 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”).

Moreover, the context following 5.21 and the meaning of “submit” require that “one another” in 5.21 means “some to others.” Hence the paraphrase: “those who are under authority should be subject to others among you who have authority over them” (494) and the conclusion: in view is “not mutual submission but submission to appropriate authority.”

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

We should note that in a fundamental way this argument rests ultimately 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 (494) along with the flow of context that follows 5.21.

They do not elaborate on what it is in the flow of context following 5.21 that requires this, so clearly, they rest everything (99.9 %) on the meaning of the word submit. To evaluate this view, we need to consider the matter of context carefully and analyze the word submit critically.

Note these contrary claims for discussion:

1) Submit does not always have a one-directional meaning: cf. debate on 1 Cor 15.15-16: 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.**

2) Context must include what comes before 5.21 (note why and its impact) and this argues for mutuality in 5.21 in the use of “one another.”

3) “One another” in context, moreover, argues for (and confirms) a mutual reading of “submit.”