

5th. Evaluation of Grudem/Piper on Eph 5.21 continued (3-7-10)

Note these contrary claims for discussion:

1A. 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.**

Observations

1) We must remain open to the possibility that even if *all other places* in Scripture use a word in a particular way, the text in front of us could have some related but distinctive usage. For example, consider how the towns of Israel “always” refer to particular cities with precise location in the land of Palestine. Nonetheless, the context of Matthew 10 indicates that the phrase “the towns of Israel” has a figurative usage in prophetic metaphor. “Always” has to be qualified. We must cover every example with careful attention to context knowing that all (or most) terms have a range of meanings and usages.

2) The context of 1 Cor 15.15-16 suggests that “submit” is not always one-directional

We must grant that this text is part of the debate. GP simply align it with the duty “of church members being subject to church leaders” (493). They put it with 1 Pet 5.5, “**Younger ... submit to the elders.**”

However, it is surely reasonable to discern a unique use of “submit to authority” in 1 Cor 15.15-16. “**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. This is not speaking of the leaders who have some “official” 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 such as apostles and elders. 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 (Phil 1) in the gospel with a distinct devotion. 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 member workers, submit to your fellow member workers.”

Therefore, in the family of God, the relationships between devoted saints are to have a 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), taken figuratively, calls for Christian to Christian submission in a way that does not destroy or eliminate the authority structures represented by government, headship (Eph 5.22-24), or pastoral authority.

3) Consider how the context may indicate that submit is bi-directional.

a) For example, 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. 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 the submission in view is mutual? The younger humble themselves by submission to the elders and the elders submit themselves to the younger by humbling themselves to them (so Lincoln, *Ephesians*).

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).¹

2A. Context must include what comes before 5.21

GP only work with the context following 5.21 to press the claim that the one directional use of “submission” of wives to their husbands that is clear 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. This look back leads to a bidirectional reading of submitting in 5.21.

1) Notably, “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. We must grant this bond because participles (ing verbal forms) 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: **²⁰ But 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 (4.20-25).**

2) Therefore, as to impact, 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. This must apply to the headship and helpership roles of marriage² 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.

3A. Furthermore, per the previous context, “one another” confirms a figurative use of submit

We ought to understand the submission in 5.21 as Christian to Christian in a two-directional because 5.21 gives us a unique capstone and completion 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 bi-directional sense of “submit” in 5.21.

Of course, this does not mean that the headship quality of submission in 5.22 is eliminated, *but it does qualify it* in important ways that reflect the new level of life to which the people of God are to aim as they are being renewed in the image of God in holiness and righteousness (4.24). In the context of spiritual renewal, the word submit has a figurative usage that is something to this effect: “sinners being renewed in the image of God in their learning of Christ are to learn how to submit to each other with the attitude that other Christians have authority over them, that is, figuratively speaking.”

¹Some may want to accent the difference between submission and humility to avoid a notion of mutuality in conjunction with submission. It may be simply semantics on one level if they call for authority figures to exercise authority in a humble way, but does it not serve clarity and avoid potential abuses of authority to note how the interfacing of authority with humility points to mutual submission without destroying headship? The submission of wives to their husbands clearly involves submission to them as authority figures by God’s appointment. That is clearly the norm, but in the exercise of authority, husbands also submit themselves humbly to their pastors, their employers, their governing officials, to their fellow Christians, and to their wives.

²Notably, 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).