

5th. Applications of the coexistence of mutuality and headship with some help from Calvin
(For discussion on 3-14-10)

Is there such a thing as principled non-submission? Some reflection on a knotty problem in marriage will help us see the reality of principled non-submission as it helps us untie a complicated knot. The problem is the continuing presence of sin. Although continually 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?

Ephesians 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. When a wife perceives failure in her husband, one important spiritual tool at her disposal in the exercise of helpfulness is the principle of mutual submission. By implication, therefore, a wife may at times call her husband to loving submission. She may do so by principled-non-submission, but before we describe it, we should say something about declining to submit.

On the surface, this seems counterintuitive to the fundamental principles of headship and helpfulness 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. 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 helpfulness 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. On one hand, the equal authority of conjugal mutuality shows that mutuality is not the enemy of authority; it does not eliminate the basic authority structure of helpfulness to headship. On the other hand, the text shows how authority is not destroyed by principled non-submission

It is at the core of what makes praxis evangelical because conduct that flows from repentance and faith in the gospel Christ involves a cluster of Christian graces. Accordingly, a

wife may decline to submit to her husband in some things.¹ The following list is a provisional attempt to apply mutual submission within the structure of headship.

1) She 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. That is her regular practice.

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 an “ought” that he must find the wisdom to apply the general, but rich, principle of mutual submission to the need of the moment.

4) Any declining of obedience must be on the order of something *like a last resort*

She declines with recognition and commitment to her duty to uphold the authority of her husband. She 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

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. 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.² Her hope is that

¹ 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. She must obey God rather than man when that circumstance occurs. Thus, Paul 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 more fully how it is that a wife ought to refuse to submit in some particular things in a way that does not set aside but that upholds the norm of headship. In one sense, this simply amounts to the application of the give and take of Christian to Christian mutual submission.

² Or, if she is an unbeliever, he focuses on her need of restoration in the image of God.

this give and take will teach him how to lead lovingly and wisely. This will make him a better leader and cause her to be a better follower. A godly wife (and godly husband) 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 will often submit to unreasonable demands choosing her battles for holiness wisely; she will have this hope in mind when she wisely, 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 them) 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.

There is a lesson here regarding the clustered nature of evangelical praxis (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 (a grace among a cluster of graces). It means that within the fundamental principles 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. The wife may appeal to the husband for submission; one way she may do this is by principled-non-submission. The husband, the one in authority, ought to acknowledge his duty of submission to his wife (per Eph 5.21 and other texts) 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. 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 sinners on the road of renewal together. It is a stopgap where abuse is present because of unloving leadership, 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 Eph 4.20 to 5.20 (and to the parallel expression of these things in Col. 3.1-4.1). 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 capstone way that they engage this fight together is by helping each other through the one another love of mutual submission.³

In the end, the key to loving helpfulness 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.

³In *Sermons on Ephesians*, Calvin 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; there is no relinquishing 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.