

Submission in the New Testament (Ephesians 5)

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Introduction

The verb *hupotassō*—“to subject,” “to put in subjection,” “to subordinate”—is found 40 times in the NT either in the active or the passive voice. It describes subjection to God, to Jesus, to God’s law, civil authorities, church leaders, the church, etc. We are interested in those cases in which subjection to individual human beings is indicated. The respective texts are Lk 2:51; Eph 5:21,24; Col 3:18; 1Tim 2:11; 3:4; Tit 2:5,9; 1Pt 2:18; 3:15.

I. Submission in Eph 5:21-33

Eph 5:21 and 22 are part of a longer sentence which starts in vs. 18.¹ The passage consists of admonitions addressed to church members. Vs. 21 challenges Christians to be subject to each other. Then the attention is drawn to wives (5:21-33), children, and slaves (chap. 6). The structure of the passage can enlighten the understanding of submission. Eph 5:21 may be a kind of a heading introducing examples of submission while at the same time being an integral part of the preceding passage.

SUBMISSION (*HUPOTASSŌ*) TO EACH OTHER (5:21)

1. *Wife and Husband* (5:22-33)
 - a. Submission of the wife to her husband (5:22-24)
 - (submission) of wife to husband (5:22)
 - analogy: submission of church to Christ (irreversible) (5:23-24a)
 - submission (*hupotassō*) of wife to husband (5:24)
 - b. *Self-sacrificial love of husband toward wife* (5:25-33)
 - the love of the husband toward his wife (5:25a)
 - analogy: love of Christ toward church (5:25b-27)

- the love of the husband toward the wife (5:28-31)
 - analogy: Christ and the church (5:32)
- c. *Summary* (5:33)
 - husband loves wife
 - wife respects husband
 2. *Children and Parents* (6:1-4)
 - a. *Children obey (*hupakouō*) their parents* (normally irreversible)(6:1-3)
 - b. *Fathers have to bring up children properly* (6:4)
 3. *Slaves/Servants and Masters* (6:5-9)
 - a. *Slaves/servants obey (*hupakouō*) their masters* (normally irreversible)(6:5-8)
 - b. *Masters treat slaves/servants well* (6:9)

Obviously, Eph 5:21 is linked to the preceding paragraph. At the same time, this verse seems to introduce the next section. However, although church members are called to be submissive to each other, this is not true for the succeeding groups. Submissiveness extends in one direction only. The analogy Christ-church used for the relation between husband and wife shows that a reversal is not possible and not allowed for. The word submission is not used for husbands in the NT. However, husbands are called to lay down their lives for their wives if necessary.

The term *hupotassō* is not used for children and servants in this context. However, the terms *hupotassō* and *hupakouō* seem to be used interchangeably in Pauline writings.

II. Submission in Pauline and Petrine Writings

1. Colossians

Colossians contains a section resembling the passage in Eph 5 and 6, although it is much shorter. Here is an outline of this part:

¹A finite verb form is found in vs. 18. Vss. 19 through 21 are added by the use of participles. Vs.23 is a subordinate clause.

- a. *Submission of the wife to her husband*
 - submission of wife to husband (*hupotassō*) (3:18)
 - love of husband toward wife (3:19)
- b. *Obedience of Children to their Parents*
 - Children obey (*hupakouō*) their parents (Col 3:20)
 - Fathers should not provoke their children (Col 3:21)
- c. *Obedience of Slaves/Servants to their Masters*
 - submission (*hupakouō*) of slaves/servants (Col 3:22)

This passage parallels the one in Ephesians with the exception that the clause to be submissive to each other is missing. Since this passage uses the same terms and employs the same structure as does Eph 5, yet omits the call to be submissive to each other, it may shed additional light on the interpretation of Eph 5:21. The phrase to be submissive to each other in Eph 5 should not be extended to husbands. The wife is asked to be submissive. The husband is asked to love in a self-sacrificial way.

2. First Timothy

In 1 Tim submission is briefly mentioned again. 1Tim 2:11 speaks of the submission (*hupotagē*) of women. In 3:4 the submission (*hupotagē*) of children is referred to. This time the same word family is used. Thus, the term “obedience” may contain the idea of submission.

3. Titus

In Tit 2:5, the apostle expects women to be submissive (*hupotassō*) to their husbands. The slaves/servants must also be submissive (*hupotassō*) to their masters (2:9). Instead of *hupakouō*, as found in Eph 5, Paul uses *hupotassō* here. The two words seem to overlap in meaning.

4. First Peter

The same pattern is found in 1 Peter. Thus, Paul’s understanding is shared by Peter and probably the other NT writers. In 1 Pt 2:18 slaves/servants are admonished to be submissive to their masters (*hupotassō*). Wives are called to be submissive to their husbands (*hupotassō*) (3:5).

Summary

It is questionable if husbands are asked to be submissive to their wives. The only text that could be understood this way is Eph 5:21. However, the context as well as Paul’s use of the term hardly allows for such a conclusion. This is reinforced by Peter. However, even if husbands are not asked to be submissive to their wives that does not mean that they are allowed to rule over them. On the contrary, they are asked to love like Jesus loves and to be willing to go to the extreme of that love, and that may be even more demanding than being submissive.

4/21/05