



HUSBANDS AND WIVES AT HOME AND IN THE CHURCH (PART ONE)

EPHESIANS 5:22-24

SAM STORMS
JUNE 28, 2026

When you hear Paul speak of a **submissive wife**, what picture comes to mind? Do you see a drab, colorless, excessively compliant, overly timid, passive, unthinking, repressed woman, who rarely opens her mouth to express her opinion? God forbid!

I want to say that up front lest anyone think that Paul's use of the word "submit" justifies abusive behavior of women and wives on the part of men. Ladies, hear me well. **Never, ever submit to an abusive bully.** If it happens in your marriage, please come to Michael or me or any of our Elders. We will believe you. We will protect you. I want to say this once again as clearly and as forcefully as I possibly can. **There is never, ever an excuse for a husband to appeal to the concept of submission in order to justify bullying his wife.** Never! Ladies, if your husband is a tyrant, or ever treats you as an inferior, do not submit to him! Come to the Elders of this church and report his sinful conduct. Irreparable damage has often resulted from following the counsel of someone who says that you should remain passive and silent when being bullied or abused by your husband.

I find it indescribably tragic and undeniably sinful that a professing Christian man can at one moment behold the beauty of Christ Jesus and the glory of his gospel, and then, immediately thereafter, demean the dignity, value, and gifting of the woman whom Christ loves and values.

The Controversy

There's simply no way to escape the fact that the question of women in ministry and leadership and the way male and female relate to each other in both the home and church is an issue of considerable controversy and importance. Convergence's position on this issue is known as **Complementarianism**, a word that may be unfamiliar to you. In a moment I will define it.

What grieves me almost as much as the theological differences between Egalitarians and Complementarians is the inexcusable disdain with which each side treats and speaks of the other. May I begin with a plea for **Christian civility** in our discussion with one another? May I suggest that we expend every effort to portray the other side in the best possible terms, that we avoid caricature, sarcasm, and misrepresentation? May I suggest that we respectfully disagree with each other without calling into question the other's orthodoxy or love for God? May I ask that we commit ourselves to the sort of dialogue that will honor Christ and enhance rather than tarnish the image of the church in a society that already regards us as our own worst enemy?

I'm not suggesting or asking that anyone embrace and articulate his/her beliefs with any less intensity of conviction than you feel is warranted by Scripture. In other words, what I'm saying is not designed to invalidate or undermine fervent and heartfelt interaction. I'm just asking that we speak the truth, however we conceive that truth, in genuine love.

Are there Complementarians whose primary motivation is self-serving, who insist upon male headship in church and home as a way of compensating for their own insecurity and holding on to the power and resources of the church? Yes. Tragically.

Are there Egalitarians whose commitment is driven by a radical feminist political agenda and who bristle with resentment at the mere thought that men and women, by God's design, may be different, and are opposed to any form of authority, even when it is done in a humble and Christ-like way? Yes. Tragically.

I'm not so naïve as to think that none of us is tainted by unbiblical and self-serving motives. I'm simply calling for mutual generosity and patience as we together explore God's best for those created in His image.

Foundational Principles

Let me begin by articulating five foundational principles that must govern all dialogue on this topic, and then provide a brief summary of Complementarian beliefs.

- (1) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians agree that men and women are equally created in the image of God, and that neither is more or less the image of God than the other.
- (2) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians agree that men and women are equal in personal dignity, that neither is more or less worthy or of more or less value as human beings.
- (3) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians agree that men and women should treat each other with kindness and compassion and love, and that any and all forms of abuse or disrespect or dishonor must be denounced as sin and resisted.
- (4) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians believe that women should be actively involved in ministry. Complementarians agree with Egalitarians and celebrate the fact that women, for example, served as “co-workers” with Paul and held the office of deacon.
- (5) Where Complementarians and Egalitarians disagree is whether women can serve as the Senior Pastor or as a Ruling Elder in the local church, what I call **senior governmental authority**. Egalitarians believe the Bible permits women to hold such positions of leadership, while Complementarians do not.

I should point out that some would broaden this debate to whether or not women should be involved in any form of ministry, whether that be the leading of worship or personal evangelism or church planting or celebrating the sacraments. You should know from the start where I stand on such matters.

I am extremely reluctant to place restrictions on anyone of either gender or any age in the absence of explicit biblical instruction to that effect. In other words, if I am going to err, it is on the side of freedom. In my opinion, the only restrictions placed on women concern what I call **senior governmental authority in the local church**. I have in mind, as noted above, (1) the primary authority to expound the Scriptures and enforce their doctrinal and ethical truths on the conscience of all God’s people, and (2) the authority to exercise final governmental oversight of the body of Christ.

Therefore, unlike a number of other Complementarians, as long as the principle of male headship is honored in the above two respects, I believe women can lead worship, can lead small groups, can assist in the celebration of both baptism and the Lord’s Supper, can serve as deacons (or deaconesses), can chair church committees, can lead in evangelistic and church planting outreach, can (and should) be consulted by the local church Eldership when decisions are being made, and can contribute to virtually every other capacity of local church life. Women should be encouraged to pray and prophesy in corporate church meetings (1 Cor. 11) and should be given every opportunity to develop and exercise their spiritual gifts.

So, when I ask and answer the question below: “What do Complementarians believe?” you should understand that I am speaking only for myself. I am not speaking for Michael, although you should know that he and I are in complete agreement on this issue.

What do Complementarians believe?

Complementarianism asserts that God has created both men and women (1) in his image, of equal value and dignity as human persons, but (2) with a distinction in the roles and responsibilities each is to fulfill in both church and home.

Complementarianism asserts that (1) and (2) above are perfectly and practically compatible with each other. Complementarianism asserts that **functional differences** between men and women in church and home, as expressed in the biblical terms “headship” and “submission”, do not diminish or jeopardize their *moral equality*.

Complementarianism believes that submission to rightful authority, whether wives to husbands or children to parents or Christians to elders in the church or all citizens to the state is a noble and virtuous thing, that it is a privilege, a joy, something good and desirable and consistent with true freedom, and above all honoring and glorifying to God. Of course, the endorsement of rightful, humble authority can be exploited and turned into an excuse to bully people and silence them.

The Meaning of Submission

"Submission" (Gk., *hupotassō*) carries the implication of **voluntary yieldedness to a recognized authority**. Biblical submission is appropriate in several relational spheres: (1) the wife to her husband (Eph. 5:22-24); (2) children to their parents (Eph. 6:1); (3) believers to the elders of the church (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12); (4) citizens to the state (Rom. 13); (5) servants (employees) to their masters (employers) (1 Pt. 2:18); (6) each believer to every other believer in humble service (Eph. 5:21).

Misconceptions about the Nature of Submission

Submission is not grounded in any supposed superiority of the husband or inferiority of the wife. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28; 1 Pet. 3:7). The concept of the wife being the "helper" (Gen. 2:18-22) of the husband in no way implies her inferiority. In fact, the Hebrew word translated "helper" is often used in the OT to refer to *God* as the "helper" of mankind. Surely *HE* is not inferior to us! Rather, this passage means that (1) the husband, even before the fall into sin, was *incomplete* without his wife; (2) the husband will never reach his full potential apart from the input of his wife.

Submission does not mean a wife is obligated to follow should her husband lead her into sin. The biblical principle that we owe obedience to God first and foremost applies to Christian wives as well. If there must be a choice between obedience to God and obedience to the state, God is to be obeyed (Acts 5:29). The same would apply in a marriage. A young married lady to whom I ministered several years ago was conflicted. She wanted to submit to her husband, but she did not want to watch pornography with him. I told her in no uncertain terms: "If he demands you sin with him, get up and walk away. Don't ever submit to anyone's call to violate God's Word."

Submission does not mean the wife must sacrifice her freedom, as if she is somehow enslaved to her husband and can never think for herself.

Submission does not entail passivity. See Prov. 31. Note especially the emphasis on her initiative, creativity, tireless industry, etc. There is no biblically prescribed "personality" for wives, any more than there is one for husbands. ***Husbands who exercise godly leadership can be introverts and wives who submit can be extroverts.***

Submission does not entail silence. A quiet spirit does not keep a wife from speaking. The woman of Proverbs 31 knows how to open "her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (Proverbs 31:26).

Many mistakenly think a wife is unsubmitive if she ever:

criticizes her husband (constructive criticism that is lovingly motivated and corrective in nature is not inconsistent with godly submission)

makes requests of her husband (in particular, that her husband and family act responsibly in private and public; ***submission of the wife is not an excuse for sin or sloth or sloppiness in the husband***)

teaches her husband (cf. Prov. 31:26; Acts 18:26; it is not inconsistent with godly submission that a wife be more intelligent or more articulate than her husband; on a personal note, I've probably learned more from my wife than from any other living soul)

Submission does not mean that everything a wife does must be directly dependent upon or connected to her husband. Submission does not mean the wife can never do anything for her own benefit or for the benefit of others or that she should never become involved in activities or ministries outside the home. "It does mean, however, that she ought never to do anything which would be detrimental or harmful to her husband or that would cause her to neglect her primary ministry of helping her husband [Prov. 31:12]" (Wayne Mack).

Men, submission does not give you the right to ignore your wife's understandable and perfectly legitimate request that you take out the trash or pick up your dirty socks and underwear. Her submissive attitude does not give you the right to be a slob!

Identifying the Essence of Submission

Submission is the disposition to honor and affirm a husband's authority and an inclination to yield to his leadership. John Piper puts it this way:

[Submission] is an attitude in which the woman says, "'I [the wife] delight for you [the husband] to take the initiative in our family. I am glad when you take responsibility for things and lead with love. I don't flourish when you are passive and I have to make sure the family works.' But the attitude of Christian submission also says, 'It grieves me when you venture into sinful acts and want to take me with you. You know I can't do that. I have no desire to resist you. On the contrary, I flourish most when I can respond creatively and joyfully to your lead; but I can't follow you into sin, as much as I love to honor your leadership in our marriage. Christ is my King.'"

Submission is fundamentally an attitude and act of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. See Eph. 5:22. In other words, "submission 'as to the Lord' grounds a wife's voluntary self-yielding in her devotion to Christ. It is an expression of her Christian commitment" (Campbell, 247).

Submission is a commitment to support one's husband in such a way that he may reach his full potential as a man of God. This may involve several things:

- making the home a safe place, free from the sinful influence of the world
- striving to be dependable and trustworthy (Prov. 31:11-12)
- providing affirmation and encouragement
- building loyalty to him in the children (differences of opinion about discipline should be settled in private, away from the children, lest she be seen as taking sides against her husband)
- showing confidence in his decisions

Submission of the wife is never an excuse for her to submit to a bully, who threatens her or perpetrates physical violence.

Submission when the Husband is an Unbeliever

It should be noted that this does not mean a woman should marry a man who is not a Christian. The NT envisions the possibility of two unbelievers getting married, only one of which (the woman) later coming to faith in Christ. See 1 Peter 3:1-7.

Submission does not mean she must agree with everything her husband says.

1 Peter 3:1 indicates that she is a believer and he is not. Thus, she disagrees with him on the most important principle of all: God! Her interpretation of ultimate reality may well be utterly different from his.

This indicates that submission is perfectly compatible with independent thinking. The woman in this passage has heard the gospel, assessed the claims of Christ, and embraced his atoning work as her only hope. Her husband has likewise heard the gospel and "disobeyed" it. She clearly exercised independent thinking and acted on it. Nowhere does the NT say she should deny her faith or seek a divorce simply because her husband has rejected the gospel.

Submission does not mean giving up all efforts to change her husband. The point of the passage is to tell a wife how she might "win" her husband to the Lord. Strangely enough, Peter envisions submission as the most effective strategy in *changing* the husband.

Submission does not mean putting the will of one's husband above the will of the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter in no way suggests she should abandon her commitment to Christ simply because her husband is an unbeliever. This wife is a follower of Jesus before and above being a follower of her husband.

Submission to an unbelieving husband does not mean a wife gets her personal, spiritual strength from him. When a husband's spiritual nurturing and leadership is lacking, a Christian wife is not left helpless. She is to be nurtured and strengthened by her hope in God (v. 5).

Submission to an unbelieving husband is not to be done in fear but in freedom. See v. 6b.

Does the New Testament teach “Mutual Submission” in Ephesians 5:21-33?

Many egalitarians push back on everything I've said by pointing to Ephesians 5:21. They argue that whatever submission exists in a marriage relationship is to be ***mutual***, not only wives to husbands but also, and equally, husbands to wives.

“giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ ***submitting to one another*** out of reverence for Christ.²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”

Their argument is that if Paul calls for ***mutual submission***, he obviously cannot be advocating that this is only the responsibility of the wife. There are several reasons why I find this interpretation inadequate.

1. The context of Ephesians 5 specifies the kind of submission Paul had in mind: wives to husbands (5:22-23), children to their parents (6:1-3), bondservants to their masters (6:5-8). These relationships are never reversed. Ephesians 5:24 makes clear that the kind of submission wives are to exercise is like the submission of the church to Christ. The latter is not mutual submission. The church is submissive to Christ's authority in a way that Christ cannot and never will be submissive to us.

2. We should also be aware of the absence of any command that husbands are to be submissive to their wives. While wives are often told to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1-6), ***the situation is never reversed***. If mutual submission were so essential to Paul's or Peter's or John's view of the marital relationship, it is stunning that neither they nor any other biblical author explicitly or directly instructs husbands to submit to their wives

3. The word “submit” or “be subject to” (*hypotassō*) is always used for submission to an authority. e.g., Luke 2:51; 10:17; Rom. 13:1,5; 1 Cor. 15:27-28; 1 Pt. 3:22; 5:5; Eph. 5:24; Titus 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18; Heb. 12:9; James 4:7. The submission is always one-directional.

4. No one has produced an example in ancient Greek literature where *hypotassō* (“submit”) is applied to a relationship between persons and it does not bear the sense of “be subject / submissive to” an authority.

5. The word translated “one another” (*allēlois*) in Eph. 5:21 need not mean “everyone to everyone” but often means “some to others”. See, e.g., Rev. 6:4; Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 11:33; Matt. 24:10; Luke 2:15; 12:1; 24:32). In this case it would be wives to husbands, as Eph. 5:22 makes explicitly clear.

6. In other texts where wives are exhorted to be submissive to their husbands, nothing is said about submitting to one another. See Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1.

7. Even if Paul meant complete reciprocity (wives to husbands and husbands to wives), this doesn't mean husbands and wives submit to each other in the same way. Their “mutual submission” would be expressed in ways consistent with their distinctive roles and without compromising the headship of the husband.

What about the Analogy with Slavery?

Is not the argument for why wives should submit to husbands the same as the argument for why slaves should submit to masters? If we insist on the abolition of the latter, should we not also insist on the abolition of the former? Again, the answer is No. There are several reasons why we can insist on the abolition of slavery while retaining the submission of wives to their husbands.

First, Scripture is known to regulate undesirable relationships without condoning them as permanent ideals (see Matt. 19:8; 1 Cor. 6:1-8). Paul's recommendations for how slaves and masters relate to each other do not assume the goodness of the institution.

Second, the institution of slavery is not grounded in creation but is a distortion resulting from the fall. Marriage and male headship, on the other hand, are part of the original created order that precedes the fall.

Third, on several occasions the seeds for the dissolution of slavery are sown. See Philemon 16; Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2. Nothing in the NT, however, suggests that the same was envisioned for the relationship between husbands and wives.

Fourth, if the argument from slavery is used to invalidate a wife's submission to her husband, would it not also invalidate a child's submission to his/her parents? Observe how the relationship between husbands and wives, parents and children, and bondservants and masters are all addressed by Paul in Eph. 5-6.

Fifth, no permanent moral command or moral absolute is used with reference to slavery in Paul's instructions to slaves.

Sixth, Paul explicitly envisions and endorses the possibility of a slave obtaining freedom (1 Cor. 7:21). He never says anything comparable to this with regard to wives and submission to their husbands.



THANK YOU FOR JOINING US!

SCAN THE QR CODE TO GET CONNECTED!

