

Beware of Authority That Submits to No Authority

When talking about men and women in the church, we sometimes talk about mutual submission. Sometimes we talk about a woman's desire to usurp authority over the man. But whatever you think about those two subjects, I would like to talk instead about the mutual lust for autonomy that both male and female exhibited in the Garden, a mutual lust for independence that is still evident today.

The problem with interpreting Genesis 3:16 to teach that women more than men have a desire to control is not that women don't often act independently of God, but that, first, that's not what this verse is saying, and two, men struggle with such lust for autonomy as much if not more than women. But who gets rebuked for rebellion in most modern Christian dialogue?

Who gets instructed to obey their authorities? Have you heard an argument for submission lately that doesn't focus on wives to husbands, kids to parents, or church members to elders? In my little neck of the woods, discussions on submission get aimed at these groups. Period. Today, I want to talk about our mutual lust for autonomy and the widespread need in the body of Christ for submission that transcends gender. Who, oh husband, parent, pastor or judge, are YOU submitted to? Who can tell you NO?

Ephesians 5:21—submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

If I use the words "mutual submission," most think of an egalitarian approach to marriage. "Mutual" indicates that something is done between two parties in equivalent ways. What I want to explore is not exactly mutual submission, though it's clear in Scripture that authorities are to serve those

under their care, which does look a lot like mutual submission. But there are distinctions.

The similarities between submission and service are good to recognize, but the distinctions are every bit as important. The Greek word for “submit” (*hupotasso*) is a term that is used of military/government authority and indicates lining up behind someone in authority. Note that Jesus “was subject” to His parents according to Luke 2:51, using this same word from Ephesians 5. Jesus’ example sets our notions of submission on its side and demands of us a thorough examination of any teaching on biblical submission.

Here are principles I don’t hear emphasized on this subject:

1. **Everyone submits to someone.** Note that everyone doesn’t submit to everyone, which gets into an egalitarian understanding and application of submission. But everyone does submit to someone. And everyone submits to someone ON EARTH. Even Jesus, perfect Savior and now our King, submitted not just to His Father in heaven but also to His parents on earth (Luke 2:51). Instead of mutual submission, I call this global submission.

2. **The line of submission to authority is actually not a line!** Jesus circled around and submitted to His parents even as He was becoming King of the universe. God’s authority structure is more like a complicated Venn diagram than a straight line from general to lieutenant to soldier in the field.

As someone who values submission, I now understand how missing these principles sets us up for failure. Consider the particular example of submission to parents. We can look at parents and children and extrapolate for other relationships involving *hupotasso*.

Jesus’ submission to His parents is telling. If Jesus had to submit to His parents, we should be cautious around any leader who makes an argument for dismissing his. Jesus was greater

than His parents, more righteous than His parents, and wiser than His parents. AND He was subject to His parents. There are all kinds of thought-provoking issues here. Now, every parent who also is submitted to Scripture knows that parental authority changes when children become adults. We see this in Jesus' life as well. Yet, there is no expiration date on the command to honor our parents. Again, Jesus' example reinforces this.

But when does submission to parents break down? For Jesus, it broke down when His parents didn't understand properly the authority (God) that they and Jesus were both under (Luke 2:49). If it was a choice between doing what His parents expected and being about the work of His ultimate authority, God the Father, Jesus did what the ultimate authority asked. However, immediately after this moment of discrepancy between His earthly authorities and His heavenly One, Jesus stepped right back into *hupotasso* with His parents (Luke 2:51).

Submission breaks down most clearly when immediate authorities are not themselves submitted to anyone. In terms of *hupotasso*, the implication of the word is a linking of authorities—not always a straight line, but one entity deriving authority from another. A parent's authority breaks down when they break the law. Parents' authority breaks down when they won't submit to their own church authorities. Parents' authority breaks down when they won't submit to the Word. Parents' authority breaks down when they don't honor their own parents. We need to understand WHY authority and submission break down. And then we need to understand what to do in response.

In the case of a parent who breaks the law with their children, we usually agree that the parent has lost their authority over that child. Authorities rightly stand in place of the parents in that case. The brother who sees his sister beaten by his dad and intervenes is making the right choice. He is submitted to an ultimate authority greater than his parent that says abuse must be stopped—who says it is wrong to

look away. The state that takes those kids away from the abusive parent is doing right as well. This too is *hupotasso* (Rom. 13:1).

Extrapolate these principles to pastoral authority, family authority, work authority or government authority. In any scenario, submission breaks down when an authority demands submission that they do not practice themselves—when an authority demands submission *to* themselves but autonomy *for* themselves.

Submission breaks down when there is not a higher authority to which one can appeal when an authority misuses their influence. In church history, this truth has been embraced in the form of presbyteries. Many believers today are returning to denominations with historic accountability structures not because they don't value submission but because they realize that submission fails without authorities who are also in submission.

Scripture gives us sober warnings about our global desire for autonomy and its ugly outworkings. **Authorities who lust for their own autonomy rebel against God by the very act of lording their authority over those in their care.** God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble, and that applies to both parent and child, boss and employee, husband and wife, and pastor and church member. God's universal instruction is to "listen to counsel and accept discipline, that you may be wise the rest of your days" (Prov. 19:20).

Beware the authority that submits to no authority, and understand in that moment that your Venn diagram of godly authority structures gives you options. The answer to ungodly use of authority is not to dismiss all authority. If Proverbs is to be believed, we all need authoritative voices speaking into our lives, and it is wisdom for us to put away our lust for autonomy and embrace instruction from those God has given

in His graciousness to guide us. No, **the answer to ungodly authority is godly authority**. Autonomous authorities are tools of Satan, but those who are submitted themselves are gifts from God for the good of the church.

*Adapted from **Wendy Alsup's** blog, . Wendy has authored three books including By His Wounds You are Healed: How the Message of Ephesians Transforms a Woman's Identity. She is also a wife, mom and college math teacher who loves ministering to women.*