

Concerning Women's Ordination: Mutual Submission



I

In previous essays in this series on women's ordination, I have focused on Protestant objectors, who designate their position as "complementarian," allowing that women and men are equal in status, but who nonetheless insist that they exercise different complementary "roles." The term "complementarian" is misleading, since the sole way in which the roles "complement" one another is that men always exercise authority, and women always submit to male authority. I have focused on the Bible, specifically the creation narratives in Genesis and the teaching and deeds of Jesus and his interactions with women, because the doctrines of creation and Christology are crucial to the debate. I have argued that both Genesis and the gospels actually count against the complementarian position. Nothing in either Genesis or the gospels teaches or implies an essential ontological subordination of women to men.

However, although complementarians appeal to Genesis and the gospels to argue for female subordination, the primary complementarian arguments against women's ordination come from the epistles of the apostle Paul. Paul has no extended

discussion of a theology of the relations between men and women. Instead Paul's views on men and women and how they relate to one another occur in places in Paul's occasional theology in which he writes about men and women in the context of some other issue: household management, worship in the church, whether the single should marry. It is this handful of occasional texts in Paul's letters that have become central to the debate.

Complementarians appeal to two kinds of texts to support their position: (1) texts advocating submission of women to men; (2) texts restricting women's activity in worship, either in speaking or teaching. In addition, in two letters (1 Corinthians and Ephesians), Paul uses the word κεφαλή (*kephalē*), the Greek word translated "head" in English to describe the relation between men and women. This single word *kephalē* is so central to the complementarian position that complementarians regularly use the term "headship" to describe their position, even when discussing passages where the word *kephalē* does not appear. For example, Wayne Grudem refers to "male headship" in his discussion of Genesis 1-3 although the Hebrew word for "head" that would have been translated *kephalē* in the Greek Septuagint appears nowhere in the creation narratives. George Knight entitles the two main chapters of his book on *The Role Relationship of Men and Women*, "Submission and Headship in Marriage" and "Submission and Headship in the Church."¹

Readers of Paul have responded to this handful of Pauline texts in different ways. Complementarians have appealed to them as the definitive lynchpin in support of their position. Secular and liberal Protestant feminists have instead treated these passages as an excuse to dismiss Paul as an irremediable sexist. Other Christians, who recognize the canonical status of Paul's writings and appreciate Paul's crucial significance for Christian theology, especially his account of redeeming grace centered in the cross and resurrection of Christ, the

Christian liberty that is a characteristic implication of his theology of grace (Gal. 5:1), and his affirmation of the fundamental equality of men and women in their unity in Christ (Gal. 3:28), read these passages with a kind of discomfort, perhaps wishing that Paul had not written them, or, in some cases, relieved that he did not.²

In recent decades, however, there have been numerous biblical scholars who have argued that a more careful reading of these passages does not support the subordinationist reading. What Paul writes is not inconsistent with the egalitarian position of Genesis or the gospels, and Paul should neither be appealed to as an advocate of male hierarchy, nor dismissed as a sexist. In the next several essays, I will look again at these controversial passages in Paul's epistles. In this essay, I am going to look at Paul's discussion of the relationship between husbands and wives in Ephesians 5 because it is the key New Testament passage laying out Paul's understanding of the relationship between men and women. Other passages need to be understood in the light of this passage.³

In my previous essay on the gospels, I argued that a proper reading of the gospels entailed a reading of the narrative structure of the texts as narratives rather than reading the texts through the lenses of a prior abstract christology. I identified the themes of christological subversion and voluntary submission as crucial to understanding the significance of the gospels' portrayal of Jesus' mission, and argued that these themes undermined first-century Mediterranean "shame culture" with its hierarchical understanding of the relationships of rulers to ruled, of masters to slaves, and of men to women. In looking at the issue of submission in the gospels, I followed Methodist theologian Alan Padgett in distinguishing between "Submission I" and "Submission II," arguing that the kind of submission that Jesus required of his followers was not the involuntary

submission of a subordinate to a ruler (Submission I), but the voluntary submission in love of one to another, and, particularly, the voluntary submission of those in positions of leadership to those without power (Submission II).⁴

In looking at Paul's theology as a whole rather than focusing exclusively on the handful of problematic passages that have been central to the women's "roles" discussion, we find the same themes. Christology is central for Paul's theology, and he articulates the themes of christological subversion and mutual submission through the category of "cruciformity." Pauline spirituality focuses on the cross. As Michael Gorman writes: "Paul's chief way of 'expounding' his theology of Christ crucified was to show the correspondence between Christ's death and the believing community's life."⁵ Paul uses several "narrative patterns" to reflect on the meaning of Christ's death for the Christian community: (1) Obedience/righteousness/faithfulness: Christ's death was "an act of obedience, righteousness, and faithfulness"; (2) Love: Christ's death was an example of divine love; (3) Grace: Christ's death was an "act of unmerited generosity" by both God and Christ; (4) Self-giving: Christ's death was an act of self-giving and self-surrender, a divine gift; (5) Voluntary self-humbling: Christ's death was an act of voluntary self-abasement, a "descent in status"; (6) Paradoxical power and wisdom: In Christ's death, power is shown in weakness, wisdom in apparent folly.⁶

The "master story" for Paul's cruciform spirituality is Philippians 2:6-11. In this passage, Paul identifies the love of Christ with a renouncing of status, a "self-emptying" (*kenosis* from κενώω, *kenoō*, Phil. 2:7) that prefers others over self, being humbled even to the point of death. In the incarnation, Christ submits himself to a fallen creation by taking on the form of a servant. This "master story" of Christ's self-emptying serves as a paradigm for Christian

service. According to Gorman:

*Paul's . . . chief aim [in narrating the story of the cross] is to form individuals, and especially communities according to these narrative patterns. That is, his goal is formative, not informative; it is spiritual and behavioral, not theological (narrowly understood as convictional) . . . Paul's ultimate concern in narrating the love of Christ is to interpret his own life as a manifestation of that kind of love, on the one hand, and to urge his communities to embody it as well, on the other.*⁷

Love, for Paul, has a “two-dimensional character.” On the one hand, it does not seek its own advantage. It is characterized by self-renunciation. On the other, it seeks the good of others, pursuing their welfare rather than seeking one’s own self-interest.⁸

As Jesus told his disciples that leadership was characterized by voluntarily taking up the position of a slave in respect to others, so Paul echoes the same themes throughout his epistles. Although Paul does not explicitly use the word “submission” in Philippians 2, Paul is clearly advocating what Padgett has called “Type II submission.” Christians are not expected to take up Christ’s self-emptying and exaltation in its fullest sense. After all, only Jesus is the unique Son of God; only the pre-incarnate Christ existed “in the form of God,” only the incarnate Christ died for the sins of the world, and only the risen Christ is exalted to God’s right hand to “receive a name that is above every name.” But Paul does expect Christians to imitate the pattern of Christ’s self-abasement: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus . . .” (Phil. 2:3-5).⁹

This pattern of voluntary mutual submission, modeled on Christ's "cruciform love" appears throughout Paul's writings. In Gal. 5:13, Paul exhorts Christians: "Through love serve [i.e., be slaves to] one another." This is also the model that Paul uses for his own ministry: "I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved." (1 Cor. 10:33). Paul describes the mission of an apostle as: "proclaim[ing] not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." (2 Cor. 4:5). Paul understood himself as a servant of Christ who imitates Christ's cruciform self-emptying on behalf of those to whom he ministered:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. (2 Cor. 4:7-12).

As Paul imitates Christ in becoming a slave to those to whom he ministers, so he expects those to whom he ministers voluntarily to become slaves to one another. It is in this context of seeking the advantage of others rather than the self that Paul counseled: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." (1 Cor. 10:33-11:1). Padgett writes: "Type II submission is a central ethical teaching in the New Testament, and it is typically mutual – that is, it applies to every member of the body of Christ."¹⁰

Ephesians 5: Standard Interpretations

With this background of Type II submission in mind,

voluntarily taking on the role of a servant in relation to others that is patterned on Christ's own kenotic self-abasement, we turn now to Ephesians 5. Why Ephesians 5? Ephesians 5 has been crucial to the discussion about relations between men and women, first, because of verses 22-23, which standard English translations typically translate as does the English Standard Version: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 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. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands." In what would seem to be a straightforward reading of the passage, Paul commands that wives should "submit in everything to their husbands." This would seem to give husbands absolute authority over their wives. What else could "in everything" mean? Moreover, Paul says that husbands are "heads" over their wives, and draws a parallel between this "headship" and Christ's own "headship" over the church. As Christ as "head" has absolute authority over the church, so the husband as "head" has absolute authority over his wife. Moreover, at the end of the passage (v. 31), Paul echoes Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man shall leave his mother and father and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Accordingly, the passage has been read as teaching a hierarchical subordination between husbands and wives that is absolute (wives are to submit "in everything"), parallels the absolute authority that Christ as "head" has over the church as his body, and is grounded in creation itself (Gen. 2:24).

Is this a correct reading of the passage? In what follows, I will argue that it is not. The passage is not best interpreted in such a straightforward manner as might first appear from standard English translations. The passage has been interpreted in at least five different ways, not just one.

(1) The "patriarchal" interpretation sees the wife as being subordinate to the husband and affirms this subordination.

This is the interpretation of complementarians such as Wayne Grudem.^{[11](#)}

(2) The “radical” view agrees that the text affirms a hierarchical subordination of wives to husbands, but rejects the text as patriarchal and oppressive. This would be the view of many self-identified feminist theologians.

(3) A third view reads the text as advocating a “qualified patriarchy” or “love patriarchy.” The passage reinforces the patriarchal hierarchical understanding of marriage, but, at the same time, hierarchy is challenged by Paul’s appeal to Christ’s love as the paradigm for the husband’s behavior toward the wife.

(4) A fourth view views the passage in terms of “revolutionary subordination.” While the subordinate persons in the hierarchy (wives, children, slaves) are called to “submit,” the submission is voluntary, and the dominant member of the hierarchy is challenged to submit to subordinates as well, in effect, undermining the hierarchical structure without overthrowing it.

5) A fifth view argues that Paul is actually affirming an egalitarian relationship between husband and wife.^{[12](#)}

In what follows, I will focus on the last two readings (“revolutionary subordination” and “egalitarian”) as getting closest to what Paul was actually saying. It is my contention that the first two readings are simply misreadings. While the third reading (“love patriarchy”) is moving in the right direction, it does not take seriously enough just how radically Paul challenged the hierarchical and patriarchal structures of first-century Mediterranean culture.

Household Codes

Most Christian exegetes in recent decades discuss Paul’s

exhortations in Ephesians 5 in the light of the so-called “household codes” of antiquity (*Haustalfen*).¹³ Such codes occur in Aristotle, among other pagan writers, and also among Jewish writers. In Aristotle, they address the same three relationships we find in Ephesians: those between husbands and wives, fathers and children, masters and slaves.

Aristotle wrote:

The parts of household management correspond to the persons who compose the household, and a complete household consists of slaves and freemen. . . . [T]he first and fewest parts of a family are master and slave, husband and wife, father and children. We have therefore to consider what each of these three relations is and ought to be: I mean the relation of master and servant, the marriage relation (the conjunction of man and wife has no name of its own), and thirdly, the procreative relation (this also has no proper name).¹⁴

Concerning masters and slaves Aristotle writes:

[I]n the arrangement of the family, a slave is a living possession . . . The master is only the master of the slave; he does not belong to him, whereas the slave is not only the slave of his master, but wholly belongs to him.¹⁵

Concerning the roles of husband and father, Aristotle writes:

A husband and father . . . rules over wife and children, both free, but the rule differs, the rule over his children being a royal, over his wife a constitutional rule. For although there may be exceptions to the order of nature, the male is by nature fitter for command than the female, just as the elder and full-grown is superior to the younger and more immature. . . . [Concerning] the relation of the male to the female . . . the inequality is permanent.¹⁶

Aristotle believed that the rule of the master over slaves, the husbands over wives, and fathers over children is rooted in inherent qualitative differences:

*[T]he freeman rules over the slave after another manner from that in which the male rules over the female, or the man over the child; although the parts of the soul are present in all of them, they are present in different degrees. For the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature.*¹⁷

Typically, the purpose of these codes is to instruct the master of the household (the male husband, father, slave owner) in his duties toward those subordinate to him, as we see in Aristotle above. Note that Aristotle addresses no instructions to subordinates, but only to masters. He says nothing about the master's duties to his subordinates, but only of the master's responsibility to rule over the subordinates. The master is "to rule his slaves like a despot, his children like a king, and his wife treating her as a rational being but one without inherent authority."¹⁸ Insofar as the household codes are concerned with subordinates at all, they are concerned with the exclusive obligations of the subordinates to submit to those in positions of authority over them.

What is unusual about Paul's discussion of household codes is not that he includes a discussion that has similarities to pagan and Jewish material, but the way in which he subverts the logic of the traditional codes. (In my previous essay on Jesus and the gospels, I have discussed what I called the principle of "christological subversion." We see it here in Paul as well.) First, the purpose of the codes in Paul is not about how the male master of the household is to act authoritatively toward his subordinates. To the contrary, Paul's entire discussion subverts that understanding.

Specifically, there are the following differences between Paul and pagan household codes: First, Paul addresses the subordinates in the household first, addressing them as responsible moral agents. In contrast, typical household codes addressed the master of the house, instructing him in his duties to order the behavior of his subordinates. Second, when Paul addresses the male of the household (the husband, father, and slave owner), he challenges the male figure who is more powerful in the relationship to act with gentleness and kindness toward the traditional subordinates in the household. While Paul in Ephesians addresses each one of the traditional subordinates only once, he addresses the traditional patriarch or *paterfamilias* three times, each time exhorting the more powerful figure in the family to act with love and consideration toward traditional subordinates. Finally, in each case, the commandments of the code are given a theological warrant that, in effect, transforms them in the light of the gospel.¹⁹ In comparing what Paul writes in Ephesians to the pagan household codes, Ben Witherington uses the language of “social engineering,” and suggests “a significant equalizing of relationships within Christian marriage, altering the usual character and direction of a patriarchal marriage situation.” Witherington states: “[I]f anything is the primary purpose of this code, it is to both ameliorate the harsher effects of patriarchy and to guide the head [sic] of the household into a new conception of roles that Christianizes his conduct in various ways and so turns marriage into more of a partnership and household management more into a matter of actualizing biblical principles about love of neighbor and honoring others.”²⁰ Richard Hays states that “the exalted ecclesiology of Ephesians must deconstruct static patriarchal notions of marriage.”²¹ Far then from upholding the traditional understanding of the authority of the *paterfamilias* in ancient Mediterranean culture, Paul rather undermines it. In the words of Carrie Miles: “[I]f Paul paralleled any Greco-Roman household code, it was in order to

stand it on its head. Far from advocating the status quo of patriarchy, Paul, like Jesus, sought to overturn it.”²²

Revolutionary Subordination

Recognizing the significant difference that Paul’s transformation of the household codes makes for understanding the logic of Ephesians 5, there have been two slightly different approaches to reading Paul here. The first is the reading of “self-sacrificial love” or “revolutionary subordination.” The term “revolutionary subordination” seems first to have been used by Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder in his book *The Politics of Jesus*,²³ but this reading is characteristic of a number of New Testament scholars: Marcus Barth, Craig Keener, Richard Hays, I. Howard Marshall, David deSilva, and Ben Witherington, among others.²⁴ Advocates of “revolutionary subordination” tend to make the following arguments.

First, Paul’s own approach is contrasted to that of the “household codes,” emphasizing how Paul both transforms and challenges the cultural values of ancient Mediterranean culture. As noted above, subordinates are addressed first, as those who exercise responsibility. The subordinate person is thus treated as a moral agent, as someone who has the freedom to choose how to respond. The fact that subordinates are addressed as moral agents presumed that the content of the Christian message included an understanding that challenged their subjection. In contrast, the traditional household codes addressed only the householder, with the focus being on his responsibility to enforce obedience on his subordinates.²⁵

Second, there is a mutual reciprocity between householders and subordinates. Only after subordinates are addressed is the master addressed. The dominant partner in the relationship is the one who is primarily addressed, and addressed in such a way as to challenge the household codes; the master is

expected to change by becoming the servant of his servants. The husband is called to loving self-sacrifice toward his wife, with Christ as his model. The father is called to not anger his children. The slave owner is to recognize himself as a fellow slave with his slaves. This contrasts considerably with the pagan notion of the father as the *paterfamilias* who exercises a monarchical role over the household. The householder “is here cast as a patient pedagogue, a servant of the household educating the children.”²⁶ As Witherington notes:

*[T]he Greco-Roman discussion is about how the master of the house should manage and exercise authority in his household – he is to rule his slaves like a despot, his children like a king, and his wife treating her as a rational being but one without inherent authority . . . But the Christian household codes “are not about how he should act authoritatively . . .” . . . In short, the Christian code is about everyone in the household and treats everyone as moral agents, even the children. It is not all about the head of the household any more.*²⁷

Third, it is pointed out that the commands are not general commands indicating a hierarchical relationship between men and women as such, but are specifically related to the household. Women are not called to submit to men in general, but only to their husbands.²⁸

Fourth, the order of the household rule is modified by reference to Christ. All motivations for both subordinates and householders are related to Christ. Moreover, Christ is chosen as example precisely in his decision to voluntarily take on the role of servant. The wife submits as submitting to Christ (5:22-23). Children obey their parents “in the Lord” (6:1). Slaves obey their masters “with sincere heart, as you would Christ . . . as servants of Christ” (6:5-7). Thus, for subordinates, “[T]he meaning of [the household roles] was

changed in substance by the stance of servanthood derived from the example and teaching of Jesus himself. His motto of revolutionary subordination, of willing servanthood in the place of domination, enables the person in a subordinate position in society to accept and live within that status without resentment.”²⁹ Similarly, the householder’s role is also challenged by Christ’s servanthood. The notion of “headship” is transformed by the model of Christ’s self-sacrificial death: “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” The husband is head of his wife only in the same way that Christ is head, as one who loves, provides for, nourishes her, and sacrifices himself for her.³⁰ The husband is “head” as one who “‘go[es] ahead’ by loving his wife and by paying gladly whatever the appropriate price.”³¹ Although the household hierarchy may not be eliminated, the instructions to husbands make it clear that it is lived out in terms of servanthood as modeled by Christ. The husband is not told to command his wife, but to love and serve her. The model for this loving is the self-sacrificial love of Christ.³²

Finally, advocates of “revolutionary subordination” speak of a “trajectory” when it comes to interpreting what Paul is doing in Ephesians. This trajectory is seen in two ways. First, as we have seen, a comparison of Paul’s modification of the household codes to the usual way that they functioned in antiquity points toward an undermining of their hierarchical aspect, and a move in the direction of equality. Ben Witherington writes:

[T]he trajectory and contextualizing of the argument here are as important as the details of what Paul says. What we see here is an attempt to provide a significant equalizing of relationships within Christian marriage, altering the usual character and direction of a patriarchal marriage situation.

*[T]he emphasis on the modified behavior required of the head of the household (who receives the bulk of the exhortations, as husband, parent, and master), especially in loving and acting in a Christian manner with family members, has the rhetorical effect of setting up a trajectory or momentum in a direction of a more egalitarian approach to the marital situation.*³³

Richard Hays embraces a similar position. Paul's model of marriage as parallel to the relation between Christ and the church deconstructs patriarchal notions of marriage:

*[I]f marriage is a metaphor for the relationship between Christ and the church, the exalted ecclesiology of Ephesians must deconstruct static patriarchal notions of marriage. The church, in Ephesians, is not dominated by Christ; rather, in unity with Christ, it is nurtured into full maturity, into "the measure of the full stature of Christ" (4:13). What, then, must the telos of marriage be?*³⁴

The second way in which a trajectory is seen in this passage is by a comparison of what Paul says about marriage and what he says about slavery. Craig Keener notes both similarities and differences between Paul's admonitions to wives and his admonitions to both children and slaves, although unlike children and slaves, wives are not told to "obey." Given the evident parallels, however, Keener notes an uncomfortable dilemma for those who argue for contemporary subordination of wives to husbands: "Modern writers who argue that Paul's charge to wives to submit to their husbands 'as to Christ' is binding in all cultures must come to grips with the fact that Paul even more plainly tells slaves to 'obey' their masters 'as they would Christ' (6:5). If one is binding in all cultures, so is the other."³⁵ During the abolitionist debates of the nineteenth century, there were those who argued for the

continuing existence of slavery as a Christian institution, and appealed to Paul's writings for support.³⁶

Keener points out that, as a missionary, Paul's intent was to change the world where he could, by demanding that Christians should love and respect one another as themselves. Although Paul did not call for the overthrow of slavery, the moral principles that Paul lays down "ultimately challenge the moral right of structures such as slavery to exist. . . . By saying that slaves and masters are equal before God, *and* that masters should keep this in mind, Paul is saying that slavery is not part of God's purpose."³⁷ Moreover, in Philemon, "Paul has begun to deconstruct the very notion of brothers or sisters being kept as slaves."³⁸ The parallel with the patriarchal hierarchy of ancient Mediterranean culture is evident. Although Paul did not explicitly call for the abolition of patriarchy any more than he did the abolition of slavery, the implications of the manner in which he transforms the household codes is evident: "Those who today will admit that slavery is wrong but still maintain that husbands must have authority over their wives are inconsistent."³⁹

An Egalitarian Reading

I find what the "revolutionary subordination" reading says about Paul's subversive transformation of ancient household codes to be convincing, and this was the reading I myself long held. However, more recently, I have become convinced by a number of scholars that "subversive transformation" or "revolutionary subordination" does not go far enough toward understanding what Paul is doing in Ephesians. Recently I have become convinced that only an egalitarian reading of Paul is adequate to account for what he is doing in Ephesians 5 and 6. The reasons for this are as follows.

First, a reading of the Greek text makes clear that the usual English translations of the text misleadingly suggest that

Paul is advocating a one-sided top-down subordination of husbands to wives. As noted above, the ESV translation is typical: “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 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. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.” (Eph. 5:22-24). Such English translations begin with a new sentence at verse 22, but the verse is actually a continuation of verse 21. This is necessary because there is *no verb* in verse 22. The verb “submit” that the ESV supplies as an imperative in verse 22 (“Wives, *submit* to your own husbands”) does not occur in 21 at all, but is actually a continuation of a participial phrase in verse 21, “being subject to one another,” or “submitting to one another.”⁴⁰ Moreover, grammatically, verse 21 is a continuation of verse 18. Paul’s thought thus follows a logical progression: “Be filled with the Spirit . . . by being subject to one another in the respect of Christ – wives to your husbands . . .”⁴¹ My own very literal translation follows:

Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as also Christ loved (ἠγάπησεν, ēgapēsen) you and gave himself up on our behalf, a sacrifice to God as a sweet-smelling offering. . . [B]e filled with the Spirit, by (1) speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and psalming with your heart to the Lord, (2) giving thanks always for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father, (3) being subject/subjecting yourselves to one another in the reverence (φόβῳ, phobō) of Christ, (3a) wives to their own husbands as to the Lord, because a husband is head of the wife in the same way that Christ is also head of the church, himself Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so in the same manner, wives to their husbands in everything. (3b) Husbands, love (ἀγαπᾶτε, agapate) your wives as also Christ loved (ἠγάπησεν, ēgapēsen) the church and gave himself up on behalf

*of it . . . Each of you [husbands] must love (ἀγαπάω, agapatō) his wife even as he loves himself, and the wife should respect (φοβῆται, phobētai) her husband.*⁴²

Barth's and Gorman's own translations make clear that submission in this context is not something that is being asked uniquely of wives to husbands, but is rather an example of a mutual submission that is expected of all Christians one to another. Gorman's participial translation makes this particularly clear. All Christians are to be filled with the Spirit (1) by singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, (2) by giving thanks to God the Father, (3) by being subject to one another. Wives are not uniquely to submit to husbands anymore than only some Christians should sing psalms and hymns or give thanks to God the Father. The submission that is asked for in verse 21 is a mutual submission of all Christians. As Gorman writes, "It is as if the responsibility of wives to their husbands is presented as the first example of the meaning of mutual submission within the believing community. . . . The wife's marital responsibility may have particular manifestations, but it is essentially the same obligation that she has to all members of the community."⁴³ The subordination is mutual – not simply of wives to husbands, children to fathers, and slaves to masters, but of husbands to wives, of fathers to children, of masters to slaves. Similarly, Barth writes:

*[T]he call to mutual subordination seems to relativize, if not blur and destroy, any clear notion of authority and subservience. . . . [T]he subordination of wives is an example of the same mutual subordination which is also shown by the husband's love, the children's obedience, the parents' responsibility for their offspring, the slaves' and master's attitude to one another.*⁴⁴

The two key words in verse 21 are ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις (*hypotassomenoi allēlois*, “submitting yourselves to one another”). The root word υποτάσσομαι (*hypotassomai*)

is in the middle voice. It literally means “to place oneself under.”⁴⁵ Complementarian exegetes argue that the verb “always implies a relationship of submission to an authority.” They write that Ephesians 5:21 “does not teach mutual submission at all, but rather teaches that we should be subject to those whom God has put in authority over us – such as husbands, parents, or employers.”⁴⁶ Padgett’s distinction between “submission I” and “submission II” is, again, helpful here. Context determines meaning. The verb can mean involuntary submission to an authority – what Padgett calls “submission I.” However, the context of Ephesians is quite different from the military or political context associated with “submission I.” The entire context of the passage understands submission as the voluntary taking up the role of a servant that Padgett identifies as “submission II.”⁴⁷ The model for such submission is the cruciform love of Christ himself (more on this below). *Hypotassomai* does not mean “obey” and it is neither in the active voice (a command given) nor in the passive (a command received). Paul is not urging Christians to exercise power over other Christians or asking Christians to submit to those in power. Rather, he is calling for them to voluntarily subject themselves to one another, to “opt out of the power struggle.”⁴⁸

The second key word is the pronoun ἀλλήλους (*allēlous*, “one another”), which means not that some Christians submit to others, but that all Christians submit to one another. Paul uses the word in Ephesians 4:2 (“bearing with one another in love”), 25 (“we are members of one another”), 32 (“be kind to one another”) as well. In each case, context makes clear that the behavior is mutual, and that the context is the “servant love” and “mutual submission” that all Christians exercise for

one another, and which is modeled on Christ's own self-sacrificial giving of himself for the church.⁴⁹ It is clear then that Paul is asking not for a submission of some Christians to others, but of all Christians to one another. Paul is deliberately challenging the traditional top-down hierarchy of the ancient "household codes."⁵⁰

Second, as Gorman points out, the principle verbs addressed to husbands and wives are drawn from the general imperatives addressed to all believers in the passage. They are not specific duties addressed to husbands and wives.⁵¹ (The following comparison is taken directly from Gorman).

Wives

5:21 All must be subject to one another in the respect (fear) of Christ (ἐν φόβῳ Χριστοῦ, *in phobo Christou*).

5:22, 24 Wives, [being subject] to your husbands as to the Lord . . . Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives [are to be subject] to their husbands in all things.

5:33 . . . a wife should respect (φοβῆται, *phobētai*) her husband.

Husbands

5:2 All must walk in love (περιπατεῖτε ἐν ἀγάπῃ, *peripateite in agapē*) as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.

5:25 Husbands must love (ἀγαπάτε, *agapate*) their wives as Christ loved the church by giving himself up for it.

In each case, the responsibilities of husbands and wives to one another are no different from the responsibilities of all Christians to one another: "[W]ives and husbands alike are being called to act out in marriage the same type of self-sacrificing, respectful, submissive love they would in any and

all relationships within the believing community.”⁵²

Third, there is a Christological moral model that is provided as the paradigm for each of the members of the household addressed, and the model is not that of Christ in glory (*Christus Pantokrator*), but the self-abasement of the crucified Christ who voluntarily took on the role of a servant, who loved the church and gave himself up for it. Ephesians 5:2 provides the warrant for everything else that follows: “And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us . . .” This verse makes clear that mutual submission and love are used as synonyms for the kind of self-abasement that characterized Jesus’ own servanthood, a servanthood that is expected of all his followers.⁵³ So all Christians are urged to “submit themselves to one another,” taking on the same role of servanthood that Christ assumed himself. Wives, in particular, are encouraged to imitate Christ’s servanthood in relation to their husbands. Husbands are encouraged to love their wives as “Christ loved the church,” by giving himself up to death. Children are called to obey their parents “in the Lord,” and the counsel of fathers to “not provoke their children” and bring them up in the “discipline and instruction of the Lord” places fathers in the role of servants even to their children.⁵⁴ Slaves are encouraged to obey their masters “as servants of Christ,” and masters are called to recognize that they too are servants who share a common master with their slaves. The paradigm for all Christians in their relationship to one another is that of the mutual “self-submission” of voluntary servanthood characterized by Gorman as “cruciformity” and by Padgett as “servanthood II.” The moral model of Christ as servant undermines any notion of one-sided hierarchy where some always give orders and others always obey.

Headship

This notion of cruciform mutual submission brings us to the

famous analogy that Paul uses comparing the relationship between husband and wife to that of Christ and the church. (This passage is often read at weddings.) Crucial for the discussion is the meaning of the word “head” (κεφαλή, *kephalē*). The reason for the wife’s submission to her husband – what we have argued is an example of the mutual submission of all Christians to one another and of both husbands and wives to each other – is that “a husband/man is head (*kephalē*) of the wife/woman as also Christ [is] head (*kephalē*) of the church, himself Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives to their husbands in everything.” (5:24, my literal translation).

In the Greek of Paul’s time, as in modern English, “head” was used as a metaphor. The key exegetical question is: what did Paul mean by this metaphor when he wrote that the husband is “head” of the wife? In modern English, “head” used metaphorically often means authority, as the CEO is the “head” of the company or the commanding officer is the “head” of the platoon. Complementarian exegetes assume that “head” in Paul means “authority,” and, as has been noted above, complementarians regularly identify the relationship between men and women as that of “headship.”

However, it is not exegetically sound to assume that the use of a metaphor in modern English necessarily corresponds to its meaning in another language in another culture and time.⁵⁵ There have been numerous studies in recent decades reassessing Paul’s use of *kephalē* as a metaphor and challenging the meaning of “authority.” The key discussion concerns Paul’s use of *kephalē* in 1 Corinthians 11, and the next essay will discuss that chapter, where I will treat the modern discussion of *kephalē* in more detail. In what follows, I will summarize a few key points that will be developed to argue that *kephalē* does not mean “authority” in Paul’s discussion of marriage in Ephesians.

Much of the discussion has centered around the LXX translation of the Hebrew Old Testament and examples of the use of “head” metaphors in ancient culture. Numerous scholars point out that when the LXX translators translated the Hebrew word for “head” (*rosh*) where it is used literally, they regularly used the Greek word *kephalē*; however, when used as a metaphor for “leader,” they rarely did so, and used the word ἀρχή (*archē*) instead, implying that native Greek speakers did not normally understand the metaphor “head” to mean “leader” or “authority.”⁵⁶

Crucial for the discussion in Ephesians, however, is not how the metaphor might or might not have been used in military or political settings – which are not the context here – but how it was used in reference to the family, and how it is used in reference to Christ. Significantly, scholars know of only one use of “head” in a family context prior to the New Testament.⁵⁷ Aristotle wrote: “The rule of a household is a monarchy, for every house is under one head.” (*Politics* 1255b). The context here is not referring to the relationship between husbands and wives, however, but between masters and slaves. Aristotle goes on to refer to a “science for the master and a science for the slave.” The relationship is not necessarily one of gender, since female masters could rule over male slaves.

Paul’s usage here is unique. He is the first to use headship language for marriage. He is the first to suggest that the husband is “head” of his wife, and the “wife” is his body.⁵⁸ Paul is also the first to make a comparison between husband and wife and Christ and the church. The only way to understand what Paul means by “headship” is to examine the context in which he himself uses the metaphor.

There are numerous places where Paul uses the metaphor of “head” in relationship to Christ. Interestingly, although Paul certainly understood the risen Lord Jesus Christ to have authority over the church and over all creation (Philippians

2:10), he tends not to use language of authority or lordship when using the metaphor of “headship.”

For Paul, “head” (*kephalē*) and “origin” (*archē*) seem largely equivalent. Christ is the beginning or source of the church as its body, and also the one from whom it receives its nourishment. In Colossians 1:18, Paul writes that Christ is the “head (*kephalē*) of the body, the church; he is the beginning (*archē*), the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.” In Colossians 2:19, Paul speaks of those who do not hold fast to the “head” (*kephalē*), “from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows together with a growth that is from God.” This is parallel to the way that Paul speaks of Christ’s headship of the church as his body in Ephesians 4:15; Paul states that “we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head (*kephalē*), into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” In the one passage in which Paul does associate Christ’s “headship” with authority, he contrasts Christ’s relationship with his body, the church, with those over whom he exercises authority: “And [God the Father] put all things under his feet and gave him as head (*kephalē*) over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” (Eph. 1:22). “Head” in reference to those who are “under [Christ’s] feet” contrasts with “head” in reference to the church, his body, which is not, under his feet, but whom he “fills all in all.”⁵⁹

This notion of “headship” as giving life to the body, and as a source of nourishment, seems to be the key to Paul’s understanding of Christ as “head” in 5:23: “Christ [is] head of the church, himself Savior of the body.” “Savior” and “head” are in apposition, and thus identify what Paul means by “head.” The context is not a notion of “authority over” or a top-down giving of orders, but of mutual love and care,

nourishment and protection. The head and body language focuses on the one-flesh union between Christ and the church as his body and the one-flesh union between the husband and wife (5:31). In the immediate context, Christ acts as head of the church by nurturing the church. Christ also unites the church, and brings it together. Finally, Christ gives himself sacrificially to the church. The husband is being asked to be the “head” over his wife in exactly the same way that Paul is describing Christ’s headship over the church, in terms of sacrificial love: “In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his own body.” (5:28-30).⁶⁰ The passage is not about authority of husbands over wives, but about self-sacrificing love of husbands for their wives.⁶¹ At no point are husbands told to command their wives, or wives told to obey their husbands. Paul does not use such words as “authority” (ἐξουσία, *exousia*) or “lord” (κύριος, *kurios*), when describing the relationship between husband and wife, but “head,” and the context makes clear that the model of the husband’s “headship” is Christ’s self-abasement and self-sacrificial cruciform love by which he gave himself up for the church.

In conclusion, Paul’s discussion of the relations between husbands and wives, fathers and children, and master and slaves in Ephesians 6 is an example of “Christological subversion.” Paul does not directly overthrow the *paterfamilias* patriarchal structure of the first-century Mediterranean family. He does not explicitly tell Christians to free their slaves. He does not explicitly advocate egalitarianism between men and women. But he modifies the ancient “household codes” (*haustafeln*) in such a way that the implications are subversive. The *paterfamilias* is addressed more than anyone, and in each case he is called not to exercise authority, but to give sacrificially, to love his

wife as Christ loved the church, to become a servant to his servants. The subordinates are addressed in light of the story of redemption. They are not commanded to “given in,” but to voluntarily “submit themselves,” that is, to opt out of the power struggle.⁶² All are called to live lives of cruciform love, voluntarily submitting to one another, following the model given them by the Lord who emptied himself to become a servant by dying for them. Far from endorsing top-down understandings of hierarchical authority of husbands over wives, of domineering parents over children, and masters over slaves, Paul undermines them. Christians are not masters demanding obedience from one another, but servants of one another who voluntarily yield to one another out of love.

Objections

Complementarians have raised a number of objections against the kind of egalitarian interpretation of Paul’s teaching that I have given above, and some of these will now be addressed.

(1) Are egalitarians inconsistent by reading Ephesians in terms of both mutual submission and as not explicitly rejecting patriarchy?

Wayne Grudem criticizes Craig Keener for what he considers to be an inconsistent argument concerning “mutual submission” in Ephesians. Keener’s position is slightly different from the one I have advocated, in that he upholds a variation of the fourth position I have identified – “Revolutionary Subordination.” Keener argues that Paul taught “mutual subordination” in Ephesians 5, but also suggests that Christian adaptation of “household codes” served an apologetic purpose – “to show that Christians were good members of society who did not seek to radically overturn Roman social structures.”⁶³ Grudem complains: “But if Keener thinks Ephesians 5:21 teaches mutual submission in a way that nullifies a husband’s authority in the marriage then he no

longer can argue that Paul's teaching is meant to gain the approval of pagan Roman men who wanted to preserve authority over their wives."⁶⁴

Whether Grudem's complaint is an accurate assessment of what Keener argues is questionable. Keener certainly does not argue that Paul "nullifies a husband's authority in marriage," which rather begs the question of whether Paul believed that a husband had the kind of authority in marriage that Grudem wants him to have. Grudem clearly misses the point of what I have called "christological subversion."⁶⁵ First century Mediterranean culture – both Jewish and pagan – was an "honor culture," in which status, authority, and group identity were paramount. Jesus challenged this culture not by rebelling against it or by overtly challenging it but by advocating an alternative form of honor, one which depended on one's status before God, and one's membership in the new community of the church. One's status in this culture was tied to a new path of servanthood rather than self-seeking, what Padgett has referred to as "submission II," voluntarily taking on the role of a servant rather than "submission I," forcefully imposing authority on others in order to enhance one's own status. As we have argued in this essay, Paul's theology echoes Jesus' understanding of servanthood in promoting a spirituality of "cruciformity." Like Jesus, Paul did not deliberately seek to overturn the structures of Mediterranean culture, whether Jewish or pagan. For example, although Paul argued against Gentile converts accepting circumcision in Galatians, he himself practiced Jewish law when visiting Jerusalem in order not to give offense to Jews (Acts 21:21-26).

Similarly, Paul does not advocate the overthrow of slavery in Ephesians 6. Yet his re-interpretation of the relationship between slaves and masters by reminding masters that they too are servants of a common Master undermines the logic of slavery. In Philemon, Paul provides evidence of how he dealt with the concrete problem of slavery among Christians. Paul

returns a runaway slave to his master; Paul does not command that Philemon liberate Onesimus, but one does not have to read too much between the lines to understand what he is requesting: "I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will. . . . that you might have him back forever, *no longer as a slave* but more than a slave, as a beloved brother . . . Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that *you will do even more than I say.*" (Phil 16, 21, my emphasis).

As with slavery, what Paul writes about marriage can say more than he explicitly says. Paul does not explicitly advocate the overthrow of the patriarchal structure of first-century marriage. His transformation of the household codes follows the traditional order found in Aristotle: husbands, wives, children, slaves. Yet Paul's *transformation* of the household codes is indeed a transformation. As I have argued, a close reading indicates that Paul is engaging in "christological subversion." Paul's call for "mutual submission" subverts first-century assumptions about the authority of the *paterfamilias*, and implies an egalitarian understanding of Christian marriage.

(2) *What about slavery? Do egalitarians wrongly draw a comparison between the abolition of slavery and a "trajectory" that implies equality in marriage?*

As noted above, Paul argues that masters are also slaves, and so must "serve" their slaves. In time, the implicit logic of Paul's argument led to the abolition of slavery in the modern Western world, and Christian abolitionists such as Anglican William Wilberforce were leaders of this anti-slavery movement. Grudem and other complementarians argue that the comparison between slavery and hierarchical marriage is not apt. Grudem states that "Slavery is very different from marriage and from the church. Marriage was part of God's original creation, but slavery was not. The church is a

wonderful Creation of God, but slavery was not.”⁶⁶

One can only agree with Grudem when he asserts that the New Testament never commanded slavery, but merely provided principles to regulate it. However, one can find passages in the New Testament where slaves are commanded to obey their masters, as in Ephesians 6:5. It is the overall thrust of Paul’s discussion that subverts the logic of slavery by challenging masters to understand themselves as fellow slaves, redeemed by Christ.⁶⁷

Gruden’s argument that slavery is not a creation order, but that marriage is, simply begs the question. The question is not whether marriage is a creation order. It is. The question is whether hierarchical dominance of men over women is a creation order. I have argued elsewhere that it is not.⁶⁸

(3) What about 1 Peter 3:1-7 and the Pastoral Epistles?

In 1 Peter 3:1-7 and Titus 2:4, we find admonitions given to wives and slaves that are very different from what we have found in Ephesians 5-6. 1 Peter 2:13 begins with a general command to “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors . . .” In 2:18, slaves are told: “Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.” Finally, in 3:1, we read: “Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives – when they see your respectful and pure conduct.” (1 Peter 3:1-2). There is little of the mutuality that we find in Ephesians. Generally, the corresponding balancing address to husbands is missing, although 3:7 states, “Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.” There is no

mention of mutual submission, and the theological moral motivation rooted in Christ's self-giving cruciformity is less evident – although slaves are told to follow the example of Jesus, “because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.” (2:21).

Similarly, Titus 2:4 suggests that “young women [are] to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.” Corresponding advice to slaves is found in verse 9: “Slaves are to be subject to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative . . . so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.” Again, the commands are one-sided. There are no corresponding instructions for husbands and masters. The self-sacrificial cruciform example of Christ is strikingly absent.

What is going on here? Alan Padgett suggests that what appears to be a one-sided Type I submission in contrast to the Type II submission of the gospels and Ephesians can largely be explained by a different social setting. 1 Peter, in particular, is a letter written to a persecuted church undergoing suffering. Where Ephesians is an “in-house” document, addressed entirely to Christians without concern for outsiders, the motivation in 1 Peter is largely concerned with the way that the church comes across in its dealings with outsiders. Under persecution, the concern to submit to political authorities is “not so much political as it is evangelical and apologetic.”⁶⁹ The author writes, “For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.” (1 Pet. 2:15).

Masters are not addressed here because presumably the masters who are causing their slaves to “suffer unjustly” (2:18-19) are not Christian masters. The Christian slave who serves an unjust master is encouraged to follow the example of

Christ. Finally, the premise of wives' subjection to their husbands presumes an apologetic motive – “be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives – when they see your respectful and pure conduct.” (3:1). Although there is an admonition to husbands that has some resemblance to what Paul says to husbands in Ephesians, the general focus is on Christian wives submitting to non-Christian husbands. It is this vastly different political context that explains the one-sided submission described in 1 Peter.

Similarly, the exhortations in the pastoral epistles seem primarily concerned about the church's stance toward outsiders. Concerning slavery, 1 Timothy 6:1 states, “Let all who are under a yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, *so that* the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled.” Titus 2 suggests that young women should be submissive to their husbands “*so that* the word of God may not be reviled.” (v. 5). Similarly, young men are to be “self-controlled . . . models of good works . . . *so that* an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.” (v. 6-8). Finally, slaves are to be submissive to their masters “*so that* in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.” (v. 10).

As Padgett points out, this appearance of one-sided submission reflects a particular social situation in a church under persecution at a time when it was a small movement and frequently slandered. These specific responses to a specific situation “do not lead to a universal call to *external submission* for either slaves or wives.”⁷⁰

Wayne Grudem complains that such a reading is an example of “the ultimate ‘bait and switch’ sales technique.” Grudem suggests that, on this reading, “first-century evangelism was a deceptive maneuver in which the Word of God told people to use a morally deficient pattern of behavior simply to win

unbelievers.”⁷¹ Grudem’s comment ignores the actual textual differences between Ephesians and 1 Peter. Ephesians does speak of “mutual submission” in a way that 1 Peter does not. Ephesians is addressed to Christian households in which the householder who is simultaneously husband, father, and slave owner is presumed to be a disciple of Jesus who is called to recognize himself as a fellow servant of Christ. 1 Peter presumes that the husbands and slave owners of the text are *not* Christians. A comparative reading of the two texts indicates different concerns. At the same time, 1 Peter is also an example of “submission II” operating in a different cultural situation. Christian slaves and wives are called to submit themselves willingly in order to witness to non-Christian slaveholders and husbands. Contrary to Grudem, this is not an example of “bait and switch,” but of Christological subversion, taking on the form of a servant to win others to Christ.

(4) What about trajectory hermeneutics?

The expressions “trajectory hermeneutic” or “redemptive-movement hermeneutic” is most associated with the work of William Webb.⁷² Webb’s basic argument is that there is a parallel between the example of slavery in the Scriptures and the hierarchical subordination of women. Slavery as a practice existed in both the Old and New Testaments, and was never explicitly condemned. At the same time, there are places in the Bible in which the evils of slavery are ameliorated. In comparison to other Near Eastern cultures, the biblical practice of slavery was more humane, both in the Old Testament and in the New, e.g., Paul’s modifying of the traditional “household codes.” Similarly, Webb argues that in both the Old and New Testaments, as with slavery, there was a modifying of ancient patriarchy that led to more rights and freedom for women than in surrounding cultures. As with slavery, Paul’s transformation of the “household codes” leads to a greater freedom for women. Webb argues that this modification of both

slavery and patriarchy points to a trajectory that does not yet find its fulfillment in the New Testament, but anticipates eventual emancipation for slaves and egalitarianism for women. What Webb calls a “Redemptive-Movement” hermeneutic interprets Scripture with an eye to its contemporary application that, to a certain extent, goes beyond the literal text of Scripture to the redemptive direction in which it is pointing. While not in agreement with every detail of Webb’s argument, there are similarities between his position and the fourth position we have described above, “revolutionary subordination.” As noted, writers such as Ben Witherington and Craig Keener use the language of “trajectory” in their interpretations of Ephesians 5, and make similar comparisons between the eventual liberation of slaves and full equality for women.

Grudem has two primary objections against the “trajectory” hermeneutic – first, that it locates authority not in the teaching of the New Testament, but the goal to which it thinks the New Testament is going; second, that moral discernment in a “trajectory” hermeneutic is “a subjective and indeterminate process that will lead to ethical chaos among Christians.”⁷³

Grudem’s first objection is at bottom an objection against the hermeneutic process itself. Since contemporary Christians do not live in the first-century Mediterranean world, any attempt to apply Scripture in our own current situation necessarily engages in a process of imaginative construal where we have to ask how what the Bible meant in its own time and culture speaks to our own very different situation. Standard contemporary discussions of hermeneutics make this point.⁷⁴ But it was also a point made by traditional theologians such as Martin Luther in *The Freedom of a Christian* and Richard Hooker in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. Traditional hermeneutical distinctions between moral, ritual, and civil law presume that not everything in Scripture is permanently binding for all times and in all situations. Grudem’s objection would equally have been an objection against

Christians of the nineteenth century who argued for the abolition of slavery.

Second, a “redemptive hermeneutic” is not “subjective” in that what is being argued for about the equality of men and women is based on the explicit teaching of Scripture. The basic argument is that one of the goals of redemption is to restore men and women to God’s original intentions for them in creation – that the subordination of women to men is not part of God’s intention in creation, but a result of the fall into sin, that Jesus’ treatment of women as equals, and his calling of women to be his disciples, is an initial sign of this redemption, and that Paul’s cruciform spirituality points to a mutual self-giving service that frees both men and women to be loving servants of one another as equals in Christ. Far from being “subjective” and “indeterminate,” a redemptive hermeneutic involves seriously listening to the internal logic of Scripture rather than simply endorsing either the “shame culture” of the first-century Mediterranean world or the male-centered values of much Western culture and then reading those values back into the Bible.

Finally, the basic argument of an egalitarian or redemptive trajectory hermeneutic is that women in Christ enjoy the same freedom as men in Christ. This does not mean that there are no “gender differences” between men and women. Only men can be husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers. Only women can be wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters. Neither is it denied that there are legitimate places for authorities. Parents have authority over children in a way that children do not have over parents. Teachers have authority over students in a way that students do not have over teachers. Government officials have authority over the governed in a way that is not reversed. And, of course, there is an inherent difference between clergy and laity, and there is a certain kind of authority attached to ordination. But there are no gender-specific hierarchical roles in the sense that certain

individuals alone always exercise authority over other individuals, and those roles are never reversed. Moreover, the gospels and the epistles challenge what it means to be an authority. The leadership demanded of Christians in the New Testament is a "servant-leadership" that is countercultural to the traditional notions of leadership in "shame cultures." Those in authority lead by voluntarily becoming servants of those who follow. Those who follow voluntarily "submit themselves" without succumbing to coercion. And, of course, roles of servant-leadership are not gender-specific. It is not the case that men always command and women always obey.

That such notions of Christian equality and voluntary servitude lead to worries about "subjectivity" and "moral chaos" for complementarians perhaps says something more about the fears of complementarians than anything else. As I have mentioned in a previous essay, the notion of specific "gender roles" among complementarians is a euphemism for the denial of specific activities (involving leadership and teaching) only to women.⁷⁵ For complementarians, men can exercise all roles. They can be followers as well as leaders. They can be students as well as teachers. They can be laity as well as clergy. It is only women who exercise a "role," specifically the "role" of being excluded from positions of leadership or teaching. Unlike men, women are always followers and never leaders, always students and never teachers, always laity and never clergy. One does not find complementarians expressing concern that the exercise of such freedom by men will lead to subjectivity and moral chaos. It is puzzling, or rather, revealing, that the assertion is made that women exercising the same kind of freedom that men have always exercised, will do so.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004) 108-110; George W. Knight, III. *The Role Relationship of Men and Women: New Testament Teaching* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed

Publishing Co., 1977, 1985).

2 Some exegetes have argued that 1 Cor. 14:35 must be a non-Pauline interpolation because it seems so at odds with the general direction of Paul's theology. Others have appealed to the generally accepted historical-critical position of the non-Pauline authorship of the Pastoral epistles to dismiss 1 Timothy 2:12 as a later falling away from Paul's own more positive attitudes toward women. One of the earliest books in the modern discussion, Paul Jewett's *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), suggested that Paul was inconsistent, not following through on the radical implications of his theology that men and women are equal in Christ. Karen M. Elliott, *Women in Ministry in the Writings of Paul* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2010) dismisses 1 Cor. 14:33b-36 as a non-Pauline interpolation, and writes concerning 1 Timothy 2:8-15, "Paul did not write this." She writes concerning the authors of the Pastoral epistles, "In this instance it would seem they did a poor job of representing Paul's thought." (64-65). Theologically, the question of Pauline authorship of these passages is secondary. Both are part of the church's received canon of Scripture.

3 Many New Testament scholars assume, for various reasons, that Paul is not the author of Ephesians, but that it is the writing of a later disciple or successor of Paul, writing in Paul's name. For the purposes of this essay, I assume that Paul is the author. Ephesians is one of Paul's more profound letters. If Paul did not write it, one has to posit an unknown disciple of Paul, who was at least as profound as Paul, but who nonetheless wanted to conceal his or her identity. I find such an assumption unlikely.

Most New Testament scholars note the parallels between Colossians 3:18-19 and Ephesians 5 and consider Ephesians 5 to build on the Colossians material by expanding it. Because it is lengthier and provides more theological warrant than the

Colossians passage, I will discuss only Ephesians. Readers can look to standard treatments such as that of Ben Witherington's commentary (cited below) to see treatments of both passages.

[4](#) See Alan Padgett, *As Christ Submits to the Church* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2011).

[5](#) Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 76.

[6](#) Gorman lists these and other "patterns of cruciformity," 82-86.

[7](#) Gorman, 177

[8](#) Gorman, 160.

[9](#) Padgett, 46, 48.

[10](#) Padgett, 40.

[11](#) Readings along this line would include George W. Knight, III. "Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church: Ephesians 5:21-33 and Colossians 3:18-19," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 165-178; Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), 188-199. Grudem writes: "Paul explains . . . that wives are to be subject to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22-23), children are to be subject to their parents (Ephesians 6:1-3), and slaves (or bondservants) to be subject to their masters (Ephesians 6:5-8). These relationships are never reversed. . . [W]hile wives are several times in the New Testament told to be subject to their husbands . . . *husbands are never told to be subject to their wives.*" Grudem, 190, 191 (Grudem's emphasis).

[12](#) Gorman identifies four types of interpretation (263). I have identified five interpretations by distinguishing between

the “love patriarchy” position of someone like the Feminist scholar Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and the “revolutionary subordination” position of the late Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder.

[13](#) The term *Haustafeln* seems to have originated with Martin Luther. Given its prevalence in standard commentaries, it is odd that “complementarian” authors provide absolutely no discussion of the topic of ancient household codes.

[14](#) Aristotle, *Politics* 1253b, in Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941).

[15](#) *Politics*, 1253b, 1254 a.

[16](#) *Politics*, 1259b.

[17](#) *Politics*, 1260a.

[18](#) Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 320.

[19](#) On how Paul’s discussion transforms and undermines the logic of the traditional household codes, see David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 229-237; Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 65; Witherington, *Ephesians*, 183-188.

[20](#) Witherington, *Ephesians*, 184, 314, 323.

[21](#) Hays, 65.

[22](#) Carrie A. Miles, *The Redemption of Love: Rescuing Marriage and Sexuality From the Economics of a Fallen World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 84.

[23](#) John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, 1994).

[24](#) Appeal to John Howard Yoder is problematic in any discussion of women in the church because of the sexual misconduct that finally marred his career. Despite Yoder's own inconsistency in his personal relationship with women, his exegesis still stands. And, of course, Yoder's personal failings have no bearing on the work of scholars such as deSilva, Hays, Keener, or Witherington. On the Yoder scandal, see, among others, Paul Oppenheimer, "A Theologian's Influence, and Stained Past, Live On," *The New York Times*, Oct. 11, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/12/us/john-howard-yoders-dark-past-and-influence-lives-on-for-mennonites.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[25](#) Hays, 65; Witherington, *Ephesians*, 320; Yoder, 171-172, 175-176.

[26](#) de Silva, 233; Hays, 65; Witherington, *Ephesians*, 314, 319. Yoder, 177-178.

[27](#) Witherington, *Ephesians*, 320.

[28](#) "Does Paul thus want to force all women into submission to men? The Greek speaks not of females and males in general, but only of 'wives' and their 'husbands.' Eph 5:22 does not affirm that females (women) are inferior to males (men) and must on all societal and professional occasions take and retain the second rank. Paul discusses only the special relationship between husband and wife. . . . Paul announces a drastic restriction of women's subordination: it is due only to her husband . . . This corresponds to his subordination to her (vs. 21) which consists of a love measured after Christ's self-giving love for the church. . . . Paul does not use the verbs 'obey' and 'serve' as synonymous for the 'subordination' expected of wives. He does not stipulate a legislative,

juridical, and executive power of the male.” Marcus Barth, *Ephesians: Translation and Commentary on Chapters 4-6* (Garden City, NY: 1974), 610-611.

[29](#) Yoder, 186.

[30](#) “Clearly, the loving self-sacrifice of the husband is depicted as the same sort of subordination, the same sort of stepping down and serving others, that Christ engaged in, and if Christ is the model of subordination and service, not only in his relationship to the Father, but in the way he chooses to serve his church, then there is nothing particularly patriarchal about the concept here. Rather subordination has been broadened to describe the relationship of all Christians to each other, including all relationships within the Christian household.” *Witherington, Ephesians*, 323.

[31](#) Barth, 619.

[32](#) deSilva, 232.

[33](#) *Witherington, Ephesians*, 314.

[34](#) Hays, 65.

[35](#) Craig Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992, 2004), 184.

[36](#) So, for example, Philip Schaff, *Slavery and the Bible* (Chambersburg, PA: Kieffer & Co., 1861). In this tract, Schaff seemed to hope for an eventual emancipation of slaves, but in the meanwhile, argued for a more humanitarian treatment of slaves. He was opposed to abolition as giving to slaves an immediate freedom for which they are not yet prepared. Until then, he wrote, “We should never ungratefully forget, amidst all the exciting passions, criminations and recriminations of political parties, that in the hands of Providence and under the genial influence of Christianity this American slavery in

spite of all its incidental evils and abuses has already accomplished much good. It has been thus far a wholesome training school for the negro from the lowest state of heathenism and barbarism to some degree of Christian civilization, and in its ultimate result it will no doubt prove an immense blessing to the whole race of Ham." (p. 32).

[37](#) Keener, 186, 205.

[38](#) Witherington, *Ephesians*, 317, note.

[39](#) Keener, 207.

[40](#) Gorman, 265.

[41](#) Gorman's translation, 265.

[42](#) Compare this to translations in Barth, *Ephesians*, 554-55, 607, and Gorman, 263, 264, 265.

[43](#) Gorman, 265.

[44](#) Marcus Barth, *Ephesians*, 610. That mutual subordination is what is being asked for by Paul is recognized by numerous contemporary writers:

"Paul could easily have said to submit to those in charge of the congregation, but he does not do so. He says 'submit yourselves' (no limitation as to who is involved) 'to one another' (no limitation as to who is involved)." Witherington, *Ephesians*, 316, note.

"Paul is not rejecting the concept of hierarchical order in authority relationships here. For example, as an apostle, he exercised such a role over his converts. What he is rejecting is the notion of a gender-specific hierarchical order, such that one set of adult persons in the audience should do the submitting and others the ordering or leading." Witherington, *Ephesians*, 317, note.

“Clearly, the loving self-sacrifice of the husband is depicted as the same sort of subordination, the same sort of stepping down and serving others, that Christ engaged in, and if Christ is the model of subordination and service, not only in his relationship to the Father, but in the way he chooses to serve his church, then there is nothing particularly patriarchal about the concept here. Rather subordination has been broadened to describe the relationship of all Christians to each other, including all relationships within the Christian household.” Witherington, *Ephesians*, 323.

“With many biblical scholars today, I would argue that Paul is enjoining a mutual submission between husband and wife in this passage. While there is no explicit command for the husband to submit, it is implied in the following admonitions: [v. 21, 25, 28, 33]” Padgett, 60.

“Submission, then, not just to God but to each other, is the fitting response to the gift of our redemption.” Miles, 85.

“Elsewhere . . . reciprocal duties are laid down for believers. The key passage in Paul is Galatians 5:13, where believers are said to be slaves to one another (even stronger than ‘being submissive’!) in love. Similarly, in Philippians 2:3-4 they are to consider others better than themselves and to look to the interests of others . . . If this is to be true of Christian relationships in general, it must surely include the marriage relationship. . . . It follows that all believers should place themselves under other believers in this spirit of mutual humility, even if this is the only place where the verb *hypotassomai* is so used. Ephesians itself provides a context that includes toward this interpretation in this particular verse: Paul uses the pronoun *allēlous* in Ephesians 4:2, 25, 32, thus establishing a presumption in favor of its use here for church members in general. What Paul is doing, then, is to teach the need for a concern for another’s interests and a mutual submission in the church which provides a new context for the one-sided submission that was expected

within certain relationships at that time. He is doing something new, even startling, with the language here.” I. Howard Marshall, “Mutual Love and Submission in Marriage: Colossians 3:18-19 and Ephesians 5:21-33,” *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds. (Downers, Grove: IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 197.

[45](#) Padgett, 38-40.

[46](#) Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 493 note.

[47](#) Padgett, 60-61.

[48](#) Miles, 86-87, Padgett, 60-61.

[49](#) Padgett, 62. As Padgett writes, “ ‘One another’ in Ephesians 4 and 5 does not refer to just a few Christians but to the whole church.”

[50](#) To the contrary, Grudem writes, “What Paul has in mind is not a vague ‘mutual submission’ where everybody is considerate and thoughtful of every body else, but a specific kind of submission to an authority” Referring to Paul’s use of what most scholars have called the “household codes,” Grudem writes, “In no case is there ‘mutual submission’; in each case there is submission to authority and regulated use of that authority.” Grudem, 190. Against Grudem, I would say that the context makes clear that in every case there is mutual submission.

[51](#) Gorman, 265.

[52](#) Gorman, 265.

[53](#) “Paul understands this love of Christ to have consisted in refusing to exploit status for selfish gain, freely renouncing such status, and preferring over self by emptying himself in ‘incarnation’ (to use a later theological term) and by

humbling himself to death. . . . Paul's . . . use makes it clear that he sees the hymn's narrative as both a story of Christ's love, especially in his crucifixion, and a paradigmatic story about love to be followed by those in Christ." Gorman, 169.

"Whatever else 'mutual submission' or 'being subject to one another' means (v.21), it is here set forth as the hallmark of the entire transformed, believing community . . . It must be understood, therefore, as another way of saying 'live in love, as Christ love us by giving himself up for us . . . (This equation of the terms 'love' and 'being subject' is confirmed by their use in 5:21-33." Gorman, 263.

"The model for loving now available to the Christian [husband], however, is the self-sacrificial love of Jesus, who gave himself for the church. This certainly raises the level of nourishing and tender caring for the wife to a new height. Indeed, this specifies the way in which a husband is to be subject to his wife, as he recalls the Lord who came 'not to be served but to serve, and to give his life' (Mk 10:45)." deSilva, 233.

[54](#) "[T]he specific injunction not to 'provoke your children to anger' . . . guards against a pre-Christian or non-Christian equation of the paterfamilias with monarchical rule of a household. He is here cast as a patient pedagogue, a servant of the household educating the children." deSilva, 233.

[55](#) "[T]he confusion over its meaning arises because head has meanings in English that it did not have in first-century Greek." Miles, 95

[56](#) Gordon D. Fee, "Praying and Prophecy in the Assembly," *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 150, n. Fee points out that of the 180 times in which *rosh* is used as a metaphor for "leader," it is translated *kephalē* only six times.

[57](#) Fee, *ibid.*

[58](#) “[N]o evidence has yet been produced from literary or other sources that anybody near or far from Paul’s environment held the opinion, ‘The husband is his wife’s head,’ and, correspondingly, ‘The wife is his body.’ . . . ‘The husband is the head of his wife’ must be understood as original with the author of Ephesians. In consequence, it has to be explained by the context of Ephesians in which it is found, and not by contemporary or later prejudices in favor of, or in opposition, to a special responsibility entrusted to the husband for his wife.” Barth, 618.

[59](#) Alan F. Johnson, “A Review of the Scholarly Debate on the Meaning of “Head” (*kephalē*) in Paul’s Writings,” *Ashland Theological Journal*, 2009, 35-36; Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman: One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 293-290.

[60](#) “[Christ] is the head of the church in a distinct fashion (1:19-23). In 4:15-16 the modality of his headship over the church was unfolded: Christ the ‘head’ enables the church to grow; he knits her into a unity; he nourishes her by caring for each member; he gives her strength to build herself up in love.” Barth, 614.

“In Colossians and Ephesians the term is used of Christ as the supplier of guidance and power to the body; the body must hold fast to the head from which it grows (Col. 2:19) and must grow up into the head (Eph 4:15-16). . . . The statement that Christ is the Savior of the body favors such an understanding of the husband as essentially the provider, the one who cares for his wife. There is nothing more to the analogy than that. The wife is not her husband’s body (as Eph 5:28 makes clear) and the Christ-church relationship is an analogy or pattern, not a ground for the wife’s submission.” Marshall, 199.

“[T]he connection between the husband’s responsibility and the narrative cruciform pattern of Christ precludes any interpretation of the text that would grant the husband some

sort of power over his wife that contradicts that self-giving, altruistic love of Christ. The kindness and tenderheartedness expected of believers because of their experience of God's love in Christ applies to husbands as to all men in the community. In fact, the love to which husbands are called in marriage is a death experience, in which the self denies its own will, and gives itself to another for the other's good. The responsibility of the husband, then, is no less a form of subjection to his wife than is her subjection to him – despite the fact that different verbs are used for each one's obligation." Gorman, 265-266.

"[T]he parallelism of obligations within marriage suggests that the primary purpose of the 'head' and 'body' language in 5:22-23 is not to reinforce hierarchy and stress difference in marital roles. Rather, the language is intended to show the need for mutual care because of the unity of persons that marriage creates (cf. Especially vs. 31). The language of 'submitting to one's head' and 'caring for one's own body' does not, then, express patriarchal or patronizing values but challenges them." Gorman, 266.

"In any case, *kephalē* in Ephesians 5:21-33 certainly does not mean 'lordship' in any plain and simple sense. In this passage, Jesus is the head of the church by taking care of his bride, not by lording over her. Jesus takes the lead (*kephalē*) in being a servant, and his headship is not a role-hierarchy. The lord is also a servant, and this servant is also the Lord. Christians do indeed submit to Jesus, just as wives should submit to husbands; but Jesus has also submitted to us in love and taken up the role of a slave for us in the economy of salvation history. Free, loving, and mutual submission is the way of following after Jesus in true discipleship." Padgett, 66, 67.

"'Head' then means head servant, and refers to a sort of servant leadership (cf. Luke 22.25ff.). If Christ, the one who lovingly offers himself as a sacrifice, is the model of

headship, then general patriarchy and the assumptions of a patriarchal culture are not providing the model or the way it is to be enacted. . . .” Witherington, *Ephesians*, 328

[61](#) “Further, ‘authority over’ makes no sense in the context of the rest of the instructions to husbands. In verses 25-33, Paul draws a series of parallels between Christ’s expression of love for the church and a husband’s expression of love for his wife. . . . [N]one of these expressions have anything to do with authority or rule.” Miles, 95.

[62](#) Miles, 88, 111.

[63](#) Keener, 214.

[64](#) Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 214.

[65](#) In both this essay, and my previous essay “Concerning Women’s Ordination: Disciples of Jesus.”

[66](#) Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 340.

[67](#) “Paul addresses these issues [slavery and hierarchical marriage] not by recommending the immediate overthrow of existing structures, but by insisting that Christians act within those structures in a very different way than the world around them was acting. Although Paul did not call for the violent overthrow of these structures, the principles Paul lays down for acting within them – mutual submission and equality – ultimately challenge the moral right of structures such as slavery to exist.” Keener, 186

“The larger principles of mutual submission, of seeking to serve rather than to rule, of seeing others in the Spirit rather than according to the flesh are, like leaven in bread, slowly helping us to rise above the best level we could attain on our own (namely, the ethics of the pre-Christian, Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures.) God cannot accomplish his whole purpose at once, for his church and the society around it

cannot so quickly leave behind the 'futile ways inherited from [their] ancestors . . . The church has come to recognize and been bold enough to affirm that 'there is no slave or free,' and in this generation is coming to understand that 'there is no longer male and female' (Gal 3:28), but that all these distinctions based on the flesh and on this temporary ordering of this world are not ultimate." deSilva, 237.

[68](#) See my essay, "Concerning Women's Ordination: Beginning with Genesis," <http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-beginning-with-genesis>.

Keener had already addressed Grudem's objection in addressing a similar objection by George Knight III, but Grudem ignored this: "Knight is quite right that marriage and slavery differ in this regard [whether marriage is God-ordained], but his observation simply begs the actual question. The issue is not whether marriage itself is God-ordained, but whether a wife's submission to her husband is a permanently God-ordained part of marriage." Keener, 208.

[69](#) Padgett, 81-84. See also, Peter H. Davids, "A Silent Witness in Marriage: 1 Peter 3:1-7," *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 224-238.

[70](#) Padgett, 87.

[71](#) Grudem, 215.

[72](#) See particularly William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001); A shorter version of Webb's argument is found in "A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: The Slavery Analogy"; "Gender Equality and Homosexuality," *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 382-413.

[73](#) Grudem, 353, 356.

[74](#) For some contemporary examples, see Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation, A Contemporary Introduction to Christian Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996); Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Scripture: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Ben Witherington III, *The Living Word of God: Rethinking the Theology of the Bible* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007) .

[75](#) “Concerning Women’s Ordination: Hierarchy and Hermeneutics,”
<http://willgwitt.org/theology/concerning-womens-ordination-hierarchy-and-hermeneutics>.