

# Yes, Paul Really Taught Mutual Submission

Why Wayne Grudem's interpretation of Ephesians 5:21 is untenable.

Murray Vasser May 7, 2024



In Ephesians 5:21, Paul instructs Christians to “submit to one another.” These words have traditionally been understood to require mutual submission, even among family members. The reformer John Calvin, for example, [acknowledged that](#) the notion of a father submitting to his child or a husband submitting to his wife might seem “strange at first glance,” but he never questioned that such submission is indeed what Paul prescribes.

In more recent years, however, this reading of Ephesians 5:21 has been called into question—ironically, in the name of theological conservatism. Many evangelical scholars now assert that the submission in this verse is not mutual submission (everyone submits to everyone) but one-directional submission to those in authority (some submit to others). The most outspoken proponent of this view is Wayne Grudem, a prominent theologian who helped establish the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.

Grudem, [who recently announced](#) his retirement from teaching, has [argued](#) for more than three decades that Ephesians 5:21 could be paraphrased as follows: “Those who are under authority should be subject to others among you who have authority over them.” On Grudem’s reading, this verse requires a wife to submit to her husband, but it does not in any sense require a husband to submit to his wife.

In defense of this interpretation, Grudem appeals to the meaning of *hypotassō*, the Greek verb translated “to submit” or “to be subject.” Grudem claims that this verb “always means to *be subject to someone else’s authority*, in all Greek literature, Christian and non-Christian.”

“In every example we can find,” [Grudem contends](#), “when person A is said to ‘be subject to’ person B, person B has a unique authority which person A does not have. In other words, *hypotassō* always implies a one-directional submission to someone in authority.”

The problem with this argument is that the claims about *hypotassō* are simply not true. Consider the following eight ancient passages containing the verb *hypotassō*. Each decisively refutes Grudem’s claim that *hypotassō* “always implies one-direction submission to someone in authority.” In several, *hypotassō* is used to describe submission that is explicitly mutual, not one-directional. And in all eight passages, *hypotassō* is used to describe submission to people who are not in positions of authority. (All translations are my own. An extended discussion of these and other relevant texts will appear in my forthcoming article in the [Lexington Theological Quarterly](#).)

- The seventh-century monk Antiochus of Palestine gives the following advice to the one seeking humility: “Let him submit to his neighbor, and let him be a slave to him, remembering the Lord, who did not disdain to wash the feet of his disciples” (*Pandectes* 70.75–77).
- The fourth-century bishop Gregory of Nyssa explains that every member of a monastic community should consider himself “a slave of Christ who has been purchased for the common need of the brothers” and should thus “submit to all” (*De instituto Christiano* 8.1:67.13–68.12).

- In a personal letter, the fourth-century bishop Basil of Caesarea speaks of one “who in accordance with love submits to his neighbor” (*Letters* 65.1.10–11).
- In a treatise regulating life in a monastic community, Basil cites Paul’s exhortation in 1 Corinthians 10:24: “Let no one seek his own good, but the good of the other.” Basil thus concludes that it is necessary “to submit either to God according to his commandment or to others because of his commandment” (*Patrologia Graeca* 31:1081.30–38).
- In a treatise attributed to Basil, the author describes members of a monastic community as both “slaves of one another” and “masters of one another.” This “slavery to one another” is not brought about by coercion, but is rather done willingly, with “love submitting the free to one another” (*Patrologia Graeca* 31:1384.7–14).
- In a sermon addressing sexual promiscuity, the fourth-century archbishop John Chrysostom states that “the bridegroom and the bride” who have not had prior experience with other sexual partners “will submit to one another” in marriage (*Patrologia Graeca* 62:426.33–35).
- In an exhortation to mutual submission, Chrysostom considers how one should treat a fellow Christian who has no intention of reciprocating: “But he does not intend to submit to you? Nevertheless, you submit; not merely obey, but submit. Entertain this feeling towards all, as if all were your masters” (*Patrologia Graeca* 62:134.56–59).
- In a treatise attributed to the fourth-century monk Macarius of Egypt, the author exhorts members of a monastic community to remain “in this good and edifying slavery” and to render “all submission to each one.” The author envisions “all the brothers submitting to one another with all joy,” and exhorts them “as imitators of Christ” to embrace “submission and pleasant slavery for the refreshment of one another” (*Great Letter* 257.22–261.1).

Grudem’s interpretation of Ephesians 5:21 is thus founded upon a misunderstanding of the Greek verb *hypotassō*. As illustrated by the passages cited above, this verb is not only used to describe submission to people in positions of authority; it is also used to describe submission to neighbors, to brothers, and to wives.

Moreover, using Thesaurus Linguae Graecae—a massive digital library containing essentially all of the extant Greek literature from the ancient world—I have examined every citation and allusion to Ephesians 5:21 prior to A.D. 500. I find no evidence that the Greek-speaking church was even aware of the some-to-others interpretation defended by Grudem. Paul’s words in Ephesians 5:21 are uniformly understood by the ancient Christians to require submission to everyone in the community, regardless of rank, and are thus routinely associated with passages such as Mark 10:44 (“be a slave of all”) and Galatians 5:13 (“be slaves to one another”).

For example, immediately after quoting Ephesians 5:21, Chrysostom gives the following exhortation to mutual submission: “Let there be an interchange of slavery and submission. For thus there will be no slavery. Let not one sit down in the rank of free, and the other in the rank of slave; rather it is better that both masters and slaves be slaves to one another” (*Patrologia Graeca* 62:134.28–32).

Notice that in expounding Ephesians 5:21, Chrysostom uses the language of Galatians 5:13: “be slaves to one another.” While these two verses are routinely associated in the Greek patristic literature, Paul’s English readers often miss the connection. English Bibles typically render Galatians 5:13 as “serve one another,” but Paul’s language is stronger than this translation suggests. The Greek noun for “slave” is *doulos*, and the verb used in Galatians 5:13 is the cognate *douleuō*, which means “to be a slave.”

The verbs *douleuō* and *hypotassō* are thus quite similar and are sometimes used together as near synonyms. Consider the following four passages in which the verb *hypotassō* is paired with the verb *douleuō*.

1. The second-century Roman author Plutarch cites Plato’s advice not “to submit and be a slave” to passion (*Moralia* 1002E).
2. The Roman philosopher Epictetus, a younger contemporary of Paul, excoriates the one who fails to attain the Stoic ideal: “You are a slave, you are a subject” (*Discourses* 4.4.33).
3. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a second-century Christian text, describes what will happen “if you are a slave to the good desire and submit to it” (45.5).

4. In the first of the eight passages cited above, Antiochus writes, “Let him submit to his neighbor, and let him be a slave to him.”

In his arguments against mutual submission, Grudem has overlooked the similarity between these two verbs. He correctly observes that *hypotassō* implies a hierarchy in which one person is ordered below another person. Since two people cannot simultaneously be beneath each other, Grudem and other critics of mutual submission dismiss the concept as self-contradictory.

However, these scholars fail to observe that the verb *douleuō* in Galatians 5:13 also implies a hierarchy in which one person is ordered below another person. Nevertheless, as all commentators acknowledge, Paul is obviously using the verb *douleuō* in Galatians 5:13 to describe action that is mutual, not one-directional. Thus, while Paul’s language of mutual submission in Ephesians 5:21 is indeed (deliberately) self-contradictory, it is no more self-contradictory than his language of mutual slavery in Galatians 5:13.

The ancient church uniformly understood Ephesians 5:21 to require mutual submission, and the modern rejection of this interpretation among some evangelicals is rooted in spurious claims about the Greek verb *hypotassō*. Jesus took “the form of a slave” (Phil. 2:7), and all who follow him, both male and female, are called to embrace submission too.

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