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Paul Taught Mutual Submission¹

Craig Keener

Abstract

The longest passage that some use to support wives' submission is Ephesians 5:22-33, but it belongs to a wider passage addressing submission, 5:21–6:9. This passage uses the ancient literary form of household codes. Although Paul contextualises submission for his audience in the Roman Empire, he qualifies the code in a specifically Christian way, explicitly framing the code with the call to *mutual submission*, both regarding marriage (5:21) and slavery (6:9). His invitation to wifely submission is grammatically inseparable from his invitation for mutual submission. This fits Jesus's teaching that calls all Jesus's followers to serve one another. Similarly, when Peter urges submission to every human institution (1 Pet 2:13), he gives examples within his culture of kings, slaveholders, and husbands (2:13–3:6), without expecting all cultures to continue monarchy, slavery, or patriarchal marriage.

Key Words: biblical marriage, mutual submission, Paul and women, wives in the Bible

Paul framed the Ephesian codes with mutual submission – in a world where literal mutual submission was virtually unheard of. In most cultures today, Christians take into account the culture-specific biblical teachings about head coverings, which expressed sexual modesty, and holy kisses, which represented familial greetings. Just as the principles of sexual modesty and familial greetings need not be expressed in the same way in all cultures, neither does the principle of submission to authority require us to maintain in all cultures the same authority structures particular to first-century contexts.

Scholars often note that some New Testament letters, most extensively Ephesians 5:22–6:9, adapt the contemporary literary form of household codes,

¹ This essay condenses material from my “Mutual Submission Frames the Household Codes,” *Priscilla Papers* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2021): 10-14; and “Together in the New Humanity,” *Priscilla Papers* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 4-7, used with permission. I draw also on Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage & Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Baker Academic, 2004); *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Baker Academic, 2012), 1:597-638.

following even the overall structure in place since Aristotle.² What is striking is not Paul's use of familiar forms but his adaptations. Such adaptations include addressing not only the male householder but also the wife, children, and slaves; instructing the husband to love; and the grammatically clear linkage of submission with not only wives but all believers in Eph 5:21. Paul also relativises the slaveholder's authority in 6:5-9.

Most significantly, Paul *frames* the household codes with mutual submission in Eph 5:21 and 6:9. He adapts the form in light of Christian teaching (stemming from Jesus) on servanthood. Although some ancient writers were more interested in mutuality than were others, I know of no other ancient household codes that frame their discussion with mutual submission. Similar adaptations appear in Colossians and 1 Peter, suggesting a dynamic in early Christianity that differs from most of its contemporaries. So why did they use household-codes frameworks to begin with? They ministered in a world that generally mistrusted religious movements that undermined their cultures' family structures.

The Wider Ancient Mediterranean Setting

A few other ancient women-friendly thinkers taught *some* sort of mutuality. Four or five centuries before Paul, Xenophon argues in *Oeconomicus* for partnership (*koinōnia*) between spouses (7.18, 30).³ The husband has more courage (7.25), but both are equals in memory and self-control (7.26-27). The first-century Stoic thinker Musonius Rufus viewed women as equal to men in nature and virtues.⁴ Although he distinguished their roles,⁵ he also often disagreed with the restrictive roles to which his society had limited women.

While many philosophers affirmed women's equality in principle, though, apparently only Epicureans achieved this ideal in practice.⁶ Socrates claimed that a woman's nature was not inferior to a man's, except in strength – and intellect!⁷ One Cynic writer more generally denied that women are worse by nature than

² See Aristotle, *Pol.* 1.2.1, 1253b; David L. Balch, "Household Codes," in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (Scholars, 1988), 27. For Greek-speaking Jewish circles, see Josephus, *Apion* 2.201-17; see esp. Balch, "Household Codes," 28-29.

³ Still, Xenophon does not envision partnership in all respects; he contends that nature has suited wives' bodies better for indoor work and husbands' bodies for work outdoors (*Oec.* 7.22-23, 30).

⁴ On virtues being the same for both, see, e.g., the translation of Musonius Rufus, *frg.*: "Musonius Rufus: The Roman Socrates," trans. Cora E. Lutz, *Yale Classical Studies* 10 (1947): 3-147, 4, p. 44.10-35; 4, p. 46.31-37; p. 48.1-26; see also Antisthenes, quoted in Diogenes Laertius *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 6.1.12; Pseudo-Crates, *Ep.* 28; Seneca, *Dial.* 6.17.1.

⁵ For role distinctions in expressing virtue, see, e.g., Musonius Rufus, *frg.*, 3, p. 40.25-28; cf. Seneca, *Dial.* 6.7.3.

⁶ Wayne A. Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *HR* 13 (Feb 3, 1974): 170-73 (esp. 170).

⁷ Xenophon, *Symp.* 2.9, reporting Socrates's view (if, as is likely, *gnōmē* here involves intellect).

men.⁸ Yet neither they nor other writers thought to frame household codes with explicit mutual submission in practice.

Much more common was the model originally promulgated by Aristotle himself, which simply instructed the male householder how to rule his household. Aristotle affirmed that the male was by nature superior to and should rule over the female.⁹

Despite women's considerable progress in Roman society, older Greek ideologies continued to influence some elite thinking and writing. In one view, women exist only to make men miserable;¹⁰ a misogynist might wish that women did not exist, apart from bearing children.¹¹ One example of tactlessness is a guest denouncing women when invited to speak at a wedding.¹² Juvenal longs for the old days of cave women, before adultery had been invented.¹³

Because of their supposed immaturity, women were often linked with minors, slaves, and the like.¹⁴ This appears particularly conspicuous in a saying that celebrated fortune not making the speaker a woman, beast, or barbarian,¹⁵ a saying eventually adapted into a Jewish benediction as well.¹⁶ I will not even repeat some of the harsher views about women's character here.

While the Stoic Musonius held friendlier views towards women, not all Stoics agreed. His predecessor, Seneca, a Roman contemporary of Paul, often portrayed women as unstable and irrational,¹⁷ and a later Stoic emperor could regard a man's soul as different from a woman's.¹⁸ Although Stoics were more egalitarian than Aristotle, they accepted the hierarchical roles already existing in society.¹⁹ Thus "Roman Stoics were egalitarian in theory but Aristotelian in practice."²⁰

⁸ Pseudo-Crates, *Ep.* 28. Diogenes, though, treats women's nature as inferior, in some sense in the tradition in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 6.2.65.

⁹ Aristotle, *Pol.* 1.2.12, 1254b; cf. 2.2.15, 1264b. Virtues differed by gender (Aristotle, *Pol.* 3.2.10, 1277b).

¹⁰ Euripides, *Or.* 605-6.

¹¹ Ps-Luc., *Am.* 38.

¹² Theophr., *Char.* 12.6.

¹³ Juv., *Sat.* 6.7-8.

¹⁴ E.g., Cicero, *Off.* 2.16.55-57; Aelius Aristides, *Def. Orat.* 130, §41D; with barbarians and uneducated persons in Seneca, *Dial.* 6.7.3; cf. Jewish laws in *m. Suk.* 2:8; *Hag.* 1:1; cf. especially *Sipre Num.* 39.6.1 (where women, proselytes and slaves do not belong to Israel proper).

¹⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 1.33. See Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Eerdmans, 1984), 70.

¹⁶ E.g., *t. Ber.* 6:18; *b. Men.* 43b-44a, bar. "Gentile" naturally replaced "barbarian."

¹⁷ See Gerard B. Lavery, "Never Seen in Public: Seneca and the Limits of Cosmopolitanism," *Latomus* 56, no. 1 (1997): 3-13; Sen., *Dial.* 6.7.3.

¹⁸ Marcus Aurelius, *Med.* 5.11. In the mid-second century BCE, Stoics had begun moving away from their earlier political egalitarianism (Andrew Erskine, *The Hellenistic Stoa: Political Thought and Action* [Cornell University Press, 1990], 181).

¹⁹ Wayne A. Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (LEC 6; Westminster, 1986), 60-61.

²⁰ Balch, "Household Codes," 31; see further David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (SBLMS 26; SBL, 1981), 143-49.

While later rabbis were more diverse and nuanced in their views, some first-century Jewish writers in Greek mirrored classical Athenian prejudices more directly: Philo always portrays male as superior to female;²¹ he contends that masculinity is closer to divinity than femininity is.²² When he praises the empress Livia, he claims that her training made her virtually male in her intellect.²³ Josephus claims that courts should not accept the testimony of women because of women's instability.²⁴ Josephus believes that men who heed the folly of women merit judgement,²⁵ and he cites approvingly the Essene suspicion of women's infidelity.²⁶

Aside from such ideology, some men were simply brutal: for example, to obey the priests and not be defiled, Sulla divorced his sick and dying wife and had her carried away while she lived.²⁷ Plutarch reports that when Alcibiades's good wife asked for a divorce, in response to his behaviour with courtesans, he dragged her home forcibly; she died soon after, while he was away.²⁸ This was not cruel, Plutarch explains, because the law requires the wife to go to court precisely so that if the husband wants her he may take her.²⁹ Abuse was sometimes sanctioned,³⁰ especially in earlier times.³¹ Another man ordered his freedman to beat his eight-months-pregnant wife; she died in childbirth, but he was not

²¹ Sharon Lea Mattila, "Wisdom, Sense Perception, Nature, and Philo's Gender Gradient," *HTR* 89, no. 2 (1996): 103-29. Male is more complete than and superior to female (Richard A. Baer Jr., *Paul's Use of the Categories Male and Female* [ALGHJ 3; Brill, 1970], 41, citing *Spec. Laws* 1.200-1); female is "an imperfect male" (Baer, *Categories*, 41, citing *QE* 1:7; *QG* 1:25); and nature places men before women (Philo, *Spec. Laws* 2.124).

²² Cf. Colleen Conway, "Gender and Divine Relativity in Philo of Alexandria," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 34, no. 4 (2003): 471-91; Baer, *Categories*, 55-64.

²³ Philo, *Embassy* 319-20; on females becoming more male, see Baer, *Categories*, 45-49, 69 (esp. 45). Similarly, Seneca praises his mother for her manliness (Michael Grant, *A Social History of Greece and Rome* [Scribner's, 1992] 34, citing Seneca, *Consol.* 16), and Porphyry encourages his wife that she can be virtually male (Porphyry, *Marc.* 33.511-16). It is this line of thought, rather than a Galilean Jesus, that is echoed in *G. Thom.* 114.

²⁴ Josephus, *Ant.* 4.219; in later rabbis, see *Sipra VDDeho.* pq. 7.45.1.1; Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person?: The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 120-23 (esp. 122). Elsewhere in antiquity, see Justinian, *Inst.* 2.10.6.

²⁵ E.g., Josephus, *Ant.* 18.252-55.

²⁶ Josephus, *War* 2.121.

²⁷ Plutarch, *Sulla* 35.2; likewise, in 33.3, he ordered Pompey to divorce his wife and then gave him his daughter, already pregnant by another husband; she died in childbirth.

²⁸ Plutarch, *Alc.* 8.3-4.

²⁹ Plutarch, *Alc.* 8.5.

³⁰ In myth, Apollodorus, *Bib.* 2.7.1; envisioned in Alexander's day, Quintus Curtius Rufus, *History of Alexander* 8.8.3. Augustine's mother Monica told wives to endure such beatings with servility (Augustine, *Conf.* 9.9).

³¹ E.g., Valerius Maximus, *Facta et dicta*, 6.3.9 (where a man cudgelled his wife to death for drinking wine). A tyrant like Periander (who allegedly killed his pregnant wife in anger, then slew his concubines for goading him on; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 1.94) is exceptional, however. They also knew of the Indian custom of widow burning (Diodorus Siculus, *Diod. Sic.* 17.91.3; Cicero, *Tusc.* 5.27.78).

considered guilty because he grieved and was not seeking her death.³² Even antiquity, though, had its limits.³³

Paul Reworks the Household Codes (Eph 5:21–6:9)

Both regarding marriage and regarding slavery, Paul's treatment of roles differs from that of his culture. After urging slaves to obey their masters (Eph 6:5), Paul urges masters to "do the same things to them" (v. 9). Perhaps few first-century hearers would have taken Paul literally, but what he actually says expressed one of the most radically antislavery sentiments of his day. He was not talking about violently overthrowing the institution of slavery; even the failed slave revolts of his era had never attempted that. But he advocated ethics that went beyond mere theory. Some early Stoic philosophers had advocated human equality, but Stoics had backed away from this and Stoics who could afford it held slaves. Paul and Stoics concurred in principle: Paul affirmed that slaves and slaveholders share the same master in heaven (v. 9). But Paul's instruction, "Do the same things to them" (6:9), goes beyond theory to practice.

This is not an accident, a slip of Paul's tongue or his scribe's pen. Paul frames his entire section of household codes with mutual submission. In his work on governance, the earlier Greek thinker Aristotle had a large section on family roles, what scholars call household codes. In it, Aristotle instructed the male head of the household how to rule his wife, children, and slaves. Subsequent thinkers adopted the same schema, often in the same sequence. Because Rome was suspicious that minority religious groups undermined these traditional values, such groups often laboured to reaffirm their belief in such values.

Paul presents a series of household codes in the same sequence as Aristotle: the relation of the male head of the household (as it was envisioned in his day) to wives, children, and slaves. Paul thus writes like the member of a minority religious group seeking tolerance – after all, he writes from Roman custody, probably in Rome itself (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20).

Yet Paul changes the standard formula. Instead of addressing only slaveholding men, he also addresses the wives, children, and slaves, who probably comprised a majority of the church. (In Paul's urban congregations, the slaves would have been household slaves, who had more freedom and frequently opportunities for manumission than other slaves.) Moreover, he never instructs the male householder to rule; instead, the householder must *love* his wife, serving her by offering his life for her (Eph 5:25). He must also avoid provoking his children (6:4) and must treat slaves as fellow servants of God (v. 9).

Most importantly, Paul frames his entire set of instructions (Eph 5:21–6:9) by enjoining mutual submission: submitting to one another (5:21) and doing the same things to them (6:9). This sets submission in a new context: the example and teaching of our Lord, who invited us all to serve one another (Mark 10:42–45; cf. John 13:14–17, 34–35; Gal 5:13–14).

³² Philostratus, *Vit. soph.* 2.1.555–56.

³³ See Apollodorus, *Bib.* 3.15.1; esp. Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.22.

Some controlling husbands today quote Ephesians 5:22 (“Wives, submit to your husbands”) out of context, much the way earlier US slaveholders quoted Ephesians 6:5. But in Greek, there is no verb in 5:22; it simply says, “Wives, to your husbands ...” Of course, Paul is not saying, “Wives, do to your husbands just whatever you want.” Greek grammar presumes that we carry over the verb from the preceding verse, and that verb is “submit.” But because the verb is carried over from 5:21, it cannot mean something different in 5:22 than it meant in 5:21. The wife’s submission is, explicitly, merely an *example* of mutual submission; so is the husband sacrificing his life for his wife.

Some object, “But Paul makes submission explicit only for the wife!” Yes, but the command to love is explicit only for the husband (Eph 5:25), yet we understand that all Christians should love each another (v. 2), just as all Christians should submit to one another (v. 21). Although Paul is not trying to cover every circumstance, he offers a general principle for how we should live: looking out for one another’s interests, listening to one another, loving others more than ourselves. Such advice is in keeping with his explicit teaching elsewhere (e.g., Rom 12:10; 13:8-10; 15:2-3; 1 Cor 13:4-7; Gal 5:14; 6:2), including in the preceding context (Eph 4:32).

New Creation in Galatians 3:28

Galatians 3:28 declares that unity in Christ has obliterated ethnic and gender barriers. If Galatians 3:28 is the universal principle, how is that lived out in the tension between the already/not yet in a fallen world?

Investigating the passage’s allusion to Genesis may shed some light. In the first two examples in Galatians 3:28, Paul says, “neither ... nor”: “neither Jew nor Greek” and “neither slave nor free.” But for the third pair, *male and female*, Paul says, “neither ... and,” although some translations obscure this difference. Moreover, avoiding his usual Greek terms for “male” and “female,” Paul borrows the entire phrase from Genesis 1:27, where God created humanity in his image, “*male and female*.”³⁴ The exact phrase Paul uses appears in the Greek translation of the OT only in Genesis, and applies there to people only in Genesis 1:27 and 5:2, which declare that God created humans, male and female, *in his image* and likeness. The phrase appears elsewhere in the NT only when Jesus quotes Genesis 1:27 (Matt 19:4; Mark 10:6).

In keeping with Jewish expectations of a restoration that echoes the beginning,³⁵ Paul evokes a sort of return to God’s original purpose for humanity, where man and woman together reflect God’s image and rule over creation. It is only afterward, as a result of the Fall, that husbands rule their wives; Genesis 3:16 thus predicts and describes the historic prevalence of men subordinating women. But representatives of God’s Kingdom are not called to *promote* the effects of the Fall, such as pain in childbirth or men sweating (Gen 3:19).

³⁴ With e.g., J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33A (Doubleday, 1997) 376, 380; Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians* (Baker Academic, 2013) 254.

³⁵ See e.g., 4 Ezra 8:52-54; *Sipra Behuq.* 1.261.1.6.

Joel 2:28-29 reveals the promised restoration of God's original plan: God pours out his Spirit on male and female, young and old, slave and free, and ultimately *all* flesh, including Jew and Gentile. Galatians 3:28 may echo Joel 2 (cf. Acts 2:17-18; Rom 5:5), depicting the present, eschatological prophetic empowerment on both genders, all ages, and all flesh.

One in Christ's Body

Citing Genesis, Jesus argued that God originally created humans as male and female (Gen 1:27), and by *marriage* he joins male and female back *together* (Gen 2:24; Mark 10:6-8). Although the New Testament allows some exceptions (cf. Matt 5:32; 19:9; 1 Cor 7:15),³⁶ ideally, Jesus argues, people should not separate what God joined together.

In Ephesians 5:31, Paul likewise quotes Genesis 2:24, using Jesus's verse about God putting male and female back together in marriage. In Ephesians 5, Paul appeals to this principle for his underlying point about marriage: male and female can become one flesh, as in their original creation. Paul applies the principle not only to the one-flesh union of husband and wife, but to the one-body union of Christ and his church (Eph 5:32). This same picture of one body in Christ stands behind Paul's exhortation for *ethnic* unity earlier in Ephesians (2:14-16).

Paul speaks explicitly of Christ as the new Adam in Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, 45. He also addresses the new creation in the new Adam in Ephesians and Colossians. Just as Genesis speaks of humanity created in God's image, Colossians 3:10 speaks of believers as new persons created in God's image. Likewise, Ephesians 4:24 speaks of this newly created self. In Greek, Ephesians 4:24 speaks of a "new person," or "new humanity" (*ton kainon anthrōpon*).

Ephesians 2:14-16 explains that Jesus shattered the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile by nullifying in his own flesh the barrier of ethnic-exclusive rules. He reconciled both groups the same way by his one body on the Cross, so *making the two into one new person*, one *new humanity* (v. 15) in the body of Christ (v. 16).

In this one new humanity, in Christ's body, we remain individuals, distinct from one another and from Christ, the body's head (Eph 4:16). But we belong together just like the parts of an ideally whole body belong together (vv. 12, 16). Regarding both ethnicity and gender, Paul's emphasis is unity.

Paul's reasons for using household codes may be culture-specific – that is why different biblical passages depict gender roles quite differently (contrast e.g., Prov 31:16, 24 with 1 Tim 5:14). His wider principle, however, is our unity in the new humanity. Remember that Galatians 3:28 addresses not just ethnicity but also slavery and gender. Like Galatians 3:28, the promised restoration in Joel 2:28-29 crosses barriers, there including slavery, gender, and age, and (with "all

³⁶ Cf. the argument in Craig Keener, *...And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 1991).

flesh”) the ethnic barrier as well. The fundamental, transcultural message of Ephesians modifies household codes by putting them in context.

As Paul is addressing marriage in Ephesians 5, he elaborates at special length on how husbands should *love* their wives (5:25-31), well over twice as long as he addresses wives. He instructs husbands to love their wives as their own bodies, just as Christ loves his own body, the church (5:25, 29). *This* is when he specifically quotes Genesis 2:24, about a man becoming one flesh with his wife (v. 31), and remarks that he speaks especially about Christ and the church (v. 32; cf. 1 Cor 6:15-19). He invokes the husband’s headship when he invites the wife to submit but admonishes the husband instead with self-sacrifice.

By applying Genesis 2:24 to both marriage and to the body of Christ, Paul shows that he is still thinking of the one new humanity in Christ. He is still thinking of the restoration of the way God meant things to be in the beginning. His emphasis is not on what the culture emphasised: husbands, rule your wives. His emphasis, justified from Scripture, is on unity in Christ, in marriage as in the wider body of Christ.

Thus, in Ephesians, Paul’s essential principle in Galatians 3:28 holds. In the new creation, we are a new humanity, one body in Christ. Just as slaves are their slaveholders’ equals in the new creation, and just as Jewish and Gentile believers share the same Lord, so male and female are equal members in Christ’s body. Paul lacked the worldly status and power to transform all the social structures of his day, but the body of Christ is an alternative community, where slaves became elders, Gentiles became evangelists, and Junia became an apostle. As a foretaste of the coming world, we must model for the world around us what the restoration of Eden looks like.

Household Codes in Colossians

Although Paul elaborates only in Ephesians, other NT household codes also differ from the wider culture. Like Ephesians 5:22–6:9, Colossians 3:18–4:1 also follows the traditional Aristotelian outline, addressing wives, children, and slaves, yet again emphasises mutual responsibilities of both.³⁷

The more concise passage in Colossians begins more abruptly than its parallel unit in Ephesians. Whereas Ephesians 5:21’s functional imperative is really a subordinate participle dependent on the imperative, “Be filled with the Spirit” in 5:18, Colossians 3:18 has a genuine imperative, the connection of which to the invitations in 3:16-17 is less grammatically explicit: “Wives, submit to your husbands.” Each of the admonitions in 3:18-21 is stated concisely, like simple parenesis. They address in immediate succession wives, then husbands; and children, then fathers. The difference in admonitions to wives in 3:18 and to children and slaves in 3:20, 22 is nevertheless evident in the different choice of verbs: whereas wives submit (*hupotassō*), children and slaves obey (*hupokouō*).

Only the slave section is expanded beyond brief comment, which in turn allows fuller observation of Paul’s intention. As in Ephesians, slaves are called

³⁷ Indeed, 1 Corinthians 7:1-5 also emphasises mutual, and in that case the *same*, responsibilities of both husbands and wives.

to obey masters not with the masters themselves in mind, but for Christ's sake (Col 3:22-25). More stark is the command to masters in Colossians 4:1, which, as in Ephesians 6:9, suggests mutual submission. Most translations say something like, "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly" (NRSV). But that is because many scholars suppose that Paul's instructions here, if taken literally, sound too radical for a first-century setting. Literally, Paul says, grant them justice (*dikaion*) and equality (*isotēta*). *Isotēs* normally means "equality," especially in slavery contexts where it typically *contrasts* with slavery.³⁸ That is, Paul's admonition to slaveholders is among the most radical ideas of ancient thinkers on the subject.

Household Codes in 1 Peter

In the context, in 1 Peter 2:13, Peter explicitly addresses *human* institutions, such as kingship, slavery, and patriarchal marriage structures. Thus 1 Peter 2:13-14 states: "For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right" (NRSV).

Peter then addresses slaves in 2:18: "Household slaves, submit to masters with all respect." So also, wives of unbelieving husbands in 1 Peter 3:1, which he introduces with the Greek term *ὁμοίως* (*homoios*), "Likewise," "in the same way." And consider 5:5: "Likewise, you who are younger, submit to the elders." Indeed, 5:5 follows an admonition to the elders not to lord it over the flock but be examples to them (v. 3), treating their overseeing role as a role for service (v. 2).

While supporting submission to governing authorities, Peter does not fix for all cultures what such institutions must be or look like. This observation is implicitly recognised by all interpreters today who do not mandate monarchical government (1 Pet 2:13), slavery (v. 18), or calling one's husband, "lord" (3:6).

Given cultural expectations, it is not surprising that Peter does not summon believing husbands to submission by reusing the term used for those socially subordinate (1 Pet 2:13, 18; 3:1); but he does again use *ὁμοίως*, "in the same way" (v. 7). He urges showing the wife *honour*, just as believers must show to rulers – and to everyone else (2:17). The husband must thus respect his wife,³⁹ who shares with him the same standing before God as an heir of resurrection life. Otherwise, his prayers will be hindered (3:7) – implying that he would be unrighteous (v. 12).

I believe that by "weaker vessel" (1 Pet 3:7) he refers to showing considerateness for the person in the socially weaker position. (Keep in mind

³⁸ Donald Murray Vasser, "Grant Slaves Equality: Re-Examining the Translation of Colossians 4:1," *Tyndale Bulletin* 68, no. 1 (2017): 59-71; idem, "Slaves in the Christian Household: The Colossian and Ephesian Haustafeln in Context" (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2021).

³⁹ Here mutuality goes beyond even Ephesians 5:33. Kurt C. Schaefer, *Husband, Wife, Father, Child, Master, Slave: Peter through Roman Eyes* (Wipf and Stock, 2018), 125, views this instruction as reversing the expectations of Aristotelian codes. See also Craig S. Keener, *1 Peter: A Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2021), 208-51.

that Greek husbands were often more than a decade their wives' senior.) The socially weaker member was in greater need of mercy or attention (cf. 1 Cor 12:22). "Weakness" sometimes entailed vulnerability that might merit protection or invite sympathy.⁴⁰ The point seems to be that the husband should be sensitive to his wife and seek to protect her (cf. Eph 5:25).

Conclusion

That Colossians and 1 Peter also qualify typical household codes suggests that Christians, while working within the societal structures of their day, recognised that these structures fell short of the creation and Kingdom ideal.⁴¹

More explicitly, Paul *framed* the Ephesian codes with mutual submission – in a world where applying mutual submission literally was virtually unheard of. That it was rarely attempted, however, does not make it any less significant. Even today, husbands and wives and people in other kinds of relationships often seek our own interests more than those of others (cf. Phil 2:4, 21). What would happen if we took Paul at his word? What would happen if we actually began to put mutual submission into practice?⁴² Let's try it and find out.

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⁴⁰ E.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Rom. Ant.* 8.24.4–5; Livy, *Ab urbe cond.*, 34.7.14; Plutarch, *Rom. Q.* 108, *Mor.* 289E; Ps.-Quintilian, *Decl.* 272.3–5, 9; 338.8. In Greek mythology, cf. Cornutus, *Greek Theology* 32, §66.12-15.

⁴¹ Indeed, even as late as the letter of Clement of Rome to the Christians of Corinth (written towards the end of the first century), more than usual mutuality appears (see Craig Keener, "Woman and Man," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* [ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids; InterVarsity, 1997], 1205-15).

⁴² I am not referring to submitting voluntarily to spousal abuse. Also, Paul urges less mutual submission in the instruction to fathers (Eph 6:4): children do need guidance.

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Response to Craig Keener's “Paul Taught Mutual Submission”

Bobby Chaw

Thank you, Dr. Craig Keener, for the opportunity to engage with your excellent presentation. Your paper provides a clear and strong argument on Paul's vision of mutual submission, a vision that radically redefines the first-century household codes and reflects the transformative life of those made new in Christ. Your meticulous work on the biblical texts, shaped by insights from the ancient Mediterranean social and cultural world, helps us see more clearly Paul's countercultural vision. This contribution is especially valuable in Asia, where pervasive hierarchical social norms often challenge Christians to uphold their Spirit-shaped ethos of mutual submission. In engaging this paper, I offer three interrelated observations.

This Paper Resonates with Realities That Asian Christians Face

Despite modernisation and globalisation, hierarchical control and gender inequality remain deeply entrenched across Asia. In 2025, researchers conducted an extensive study of families across twenty-two Asian and North African countries and ranked them according to the “Patriarchal Index” (PI).¹ Indonesia, China, Myanmar, Cambodia, and India had high PI scores, which indicate that “patriarchal control remains organised around extended kinship and residential arrangements.”² The study reveals, “In these regions, the rudimentary patriarchal system continues to dominate ... [and is] perpetuated through familial arrangements, modes of production, state-regulated laws and policies, control of sexuality, and monopolies in religion and culture.”³ Eva Wong also notes that the patriarchal culture in Asia is “deeply entrenched and ingrained” and is prevalent even in Christian organisations, churches, and ministries – Pentecostal and charismatic alike.⁴

¹ Mikolaj Szoltysek, et al., “The Patriarchy Index for Asia: A Pragmatic Tool for Cross-Cultural Analysis of Gender Inequalities,” August 2025, https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/m8f7b_v1.

² Szoltysek, et al., “Patriarchy Index.”

³ Szoltysek, et al., “Patriarchy Index.”

⁴ Eva Wong Suk Kyun, “Toward Biblical Equality in Pentecostal Leadership in the Twenty-first Century,” *Malaysian Pentecostal Journal* 2 (2024): 160,

Against this backdrop, evangelical complementarianism has increasingly gained prominence in Asia over the past few decades. Complementarianism holds that men and women are “equal in value and dignity” yet have “different roles” as part of the created order, and this essentially privileges male authority and restricts female leadership.⁵ From the 1940s, indigenous church leaders in China advocated the mutual submission model.⁶ Mary Ma notes that “before the 2000s, female leadership was the norm.”⁷ However, several scholars have noted how American complementarianism has shaped contemporary Chinese theology in the years that followed.⁸ Churches started “elevating male headship, teaching the complementarian relationship between two genders, and discouraging females from leading the church.”⁹ Mary Chung argues that “Conservative evangelical theology of the West that emphasises male-headship and female-subordination ... inevitably predominates in Chinese churches. This serves to reinforce the traditional Chinese view of male-superiority and female-inferiority.”¹⁰ In the book *Discovering Biblical Equality*, psychologist Kylie Pidgeon argues that complementarianism “creates not only systemic discrimination but implicit and explicit biases that disadvantage women.”¹¹ Similarly, Frank Macchia observes that it “arguably essentialises gender roles in ways that are inherently oppressive to women.”¹²

What this means is that the alignment of evangelical complementarian ideals with the entrenched patriarchal cultural norms has continued to marginalise women in Asia. As such, there is a pressing need for the Asian church, especially Pentecostals, to recover Paul’s radical vision of mutual submission that is pneumatic, Christocentric, embodying the life of the coming Kingdom in the here and now. This leads me to my second observation.

<https://bcm.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Malaysian-Pentecostal-Journal-Volume-2-2024WebVersion.pdf>.

⁵ William G. Witt, *Icons of Christ: A Biblical and Systematic Theology for Women’s Ordination* (Baylor University Press, 2020), 43, Kindle.

⁶ Anneke H. Stasson, “Mutual Submission, Not Complementarianism: Reviving the Chinese Marital Theology of Watchmen Nee and Wang Mingdao,” *Missiology: An International Review* 53, no. 2 (2025): 141, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00918296241260415>.

⁷ Stasson, “Mutual Submission,” 132.

⁸ Stasson, “Mutual Submission,” 132.

⁹ Mary Li Ma, “Power Structures in the Church,” *Do Justice*, April 19, 2019, accessed October 20, 2025, <https://www.crcna.org/DoJustice/article/power-structures-church>, as quoted in Stasson, “Mutual Submission,” 132.

¹⁰ Mary Keng Mun Chung, *Chinese Women in Christian Ministry: An Intercultural Study* (Peter Lang, 2015), 133, as quoted in Stasson, “Mutual Submission,” 132.

¹¹ Kylie Pidgeon, “Complementarianism and Domestic Abuse: A Social-Scientific Perspective on Whether ‘Equal but Different’ Is Really Equal at All,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, 1st ed., ed. Ronald W. Pierce et al. (InterVarsity Press, 2021), 487.

¹² Frank D. Macchia, “Pneumatological Feminist/Womanist Theologies: The Importance of Discernment,” *Pneuma* 35, no. 1 (2013): 65.

Paul’s Vision of Mutual Submission is Theologically Robust

Keener observes, “Some controlling husbands today quote Ephesians 5:22 (‘Wives, submit to your husbands’) out of context, much the way earlier US slaveholders quoted Ephesians 6:5 (‘Slaves, obey your masters’).”¹³ Proponents of complementarianism have also misapplied some of these texts. Macchia notes that “Complementarians ... take several culturally embedded texts from the Bible to universalise as timeless subordinate roles for women in the home and the church.”¹⁴ He adds that such misapplication “is simply poor hermeneutics, out of touch with the ‘general sense’ and direction of the biblical gospel and uninformed about the contextual nature of texts and of theological reflection.”¹⁵ In this regard, Keener’s critical work on ancient Mediterranean settings and the theological reflections in this paper prove invaluable.

Paul’s vision of mutual submission unfolds in three interrelated dimensions. It is pneumatic, Christocentric, and it embodies an eschatological vision.

Mutual Submission is Pneumatic

First, mutual submission is pneumatic. Keener argues that Paul’s household codes in Ephesians were adapted from the prevailing Aristotelian model, which held that “the male was by nature superior to and should rule over the female.”¹⁶ However, Paul redefined these relationships with mutual submission, with a command to all believers in 5:21—“submit to one another,” and this command flows from being “filled with the Spirit” in 5:18. In other words, mutual submission is the expected fruit of being filled with the Spirit. Rather than yielding to cultural pressures and conforming to the dominant norms of male headship or becoming like the Roman Stoics (egalitarian in theory but Aristotelian in practice), Paul is commanding all believers, both men and women, “Now that you are filled with the Spirit, walk in mutual submission.” Wives submit to husbands, and husbands do the same to wives. This may go against the grain of a patriarchal society; however, as Amos Yong writes, “The baptism of the Spirit is also a baptism of love that not only sanctifies and perfects individual hearts but also produces a counter-cultural way of life.”¹⁷ Mutual submission is a defining expression of Pentecostal ethos.

Mutual Submission is Christocentric

Second, Keener notes that when Paul instructs, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (v. 25), he redefines the husband’s headship, subverting it from a position of dominance into a cruciform expression of self-sacrificial love that gives up all privilege for his wife. By doing so, the husband gives back to the wife the honour that she and the larger

¹³ Craig S. Keener, “Paul Taught Mutual Submission,” in *Asian Voices Amplified*, ed. Kong Hee et al. (Regnum, 2026), 89.

¹⁴ Macchia, “Pneumatological Feminist/Womanist Theologies,” 65.

¹⁵ Macchia, “Pneumatological Feminist/Womanist Theologies,” 66.

¹⁶ Keener, “Paul Taught Mutual Submission,” 87.

¹⁷ Amos Yong, *Spirit of Love: A Trinitarian Theology of Grace* (Baylor University Press, 2012), loc. 1623, Kindle.

society give to him.¹⁸ Christ's model of headship is not about defining household roles or authority, as complementarians propose; rather, it is about love – a love that gives up one's privilege and bestows that privilege on others in service and honour. The more we embody mutual submission, the more we are transformed into the image of Christ.

Mutual Submission Embodies an Eschatological Vision

Last, Keener notes that Paul's use of Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians, both in reference to marriage and to the church, reflects his broader vision of ethnic and gender unity in the "one new humanity" in Christ and his anticipation of God's restoration to the original design in the beginning. Yet Paul remains conscious of the eschatological tension between the "already" and the "not yet." Rather than advocating the violent overthrow of the social structures of his day, he calls the body of Christ to radically model to the world a foretaste of the coming Kingdom – "by treating one another as equals and serving one another (starting) in their homes."¹⁹ This brings me to my third and final observation.

Practising Mutual Submission in Asia amidst Pervasive Cultural Pressures Has Its Challenges

Practising mutual submission in Asia amidst pervasive cultural pressures demands courage and cross-bearing. Daniel Sandeep and his wife, Grace, are pastors in Punjab, India, where family and society are structured around a patriarchal hierarchy that reinforces male dominance.²⁰ Husbands typically control finances and social decisions, physical violence is often normalised, and wives are expected to endure it. When the husband exhibits moral failings, apologies are rarely expected. Women who confide in their community often receive reinforcement of these norms, with neighbours consoling them by saying, "He is your husband; you must submit and obey."²¹ Since their marriage, Daniel has intentionally practised the countercultural model of mutual submission. He consults Grace on all financial and social decisions, making choices collaboratively, and has developed the discipline to apologise when he is wrong. This approach has attracted criticism from their community, with some

¹⁸ Frank D. Macchia, *Tongues of Fire: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Cascade Books, 2023), 584, Kindle.

¹⁹ Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Baker Publishing Group, 1992), 279, Kindle.

²⁰ Manvinder Kaur and Ameer Sultana, "Patriarchy in Punjab: Documenting the Narratives of Women from Three Generations of Jat Sikh Families of Punjab," *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 6, no. 1 (January 31, 2006), <https://samyuktajournal.in/patriarchy-in-punjabdocumenting-the-narratives-of-women-from-three-generations-of-jat-sikh-families-of-punjab/>. This reports states that in Punjabi society, "A man is equated with the sun, while women are mere satellites who derive their luminescence from him," illustrating the deeply entrenched patriarchy in the region.

²¹ These societal norms in Punjab, India were given by Daniel Sandeep, during my personal conversation with him, October 24, 2025.

mocking, “He always listens to his wife.” In an honour–shame culture, where pride and ego are fiercely defended, Daniel had to “bear his cross” daily.

During a recent visit to their home, while Grace served the guests first, I noticed Daniel deliberately gave her a spoonful before he began eating. When I enquired further, he explained that this was a practice he learned from Grace’s parents, and it serves as a reminder – to themselves and others – that in a male-dominated society, where women are expected to serve and men to be served, they seek to uphold equality and mutual respect. Over the course of the past twenty years, Daniel has observed that this practice has influenced other family members and church congregants, who have begun to adopt similar patterns of mutual respect and love. While these gestures may seem small, they represent a significant step for Pastor Daniel and his family in practising mutual submission within a male-dominated Indian culture. Transforming the broader social and cultural norms may be challenging, but we can start with our family and our local community to have a foretaste of what Eden is like.

Conclusion

Paul’s vision of mutual submission aligns with the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit upon “all flesh” (Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:17-18), which transcends distinctions of race, gender, age, marital status, and social class. This vision is hermeneutically sound, theologically robust, and practically viable, offering the Asian church a way of life for faithful witness to the gospel of freedom and equality. Nevertheless, a common concern within pragmatic Asian societies is that the egalitarian model of mutual submission – gender equality – lacks clear and distinct structures or roles within household relationships. Could this potentially lead to a slide towards liberalism, the erosion of authority structures, or even a blurring of gender distinctions? These critiques merit further theological engagement with both biblical fidelity and cultural sensitivity.

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