

December 1997

Frank W. Nelte

WHAT DO YOU MEAN ... 'SUBMITTING YOURSELVES ONE TO ANOTHER'?

It seems to me that some people have a bit of a hard time clearly understanding Ephesians 5:21. On two or three occasions during our recent trip to the USA I heard people mis-explain and misapply this verse. Here is this verse in the KJV.

Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God. (Ephesians 5:21)

COMMONLY HEARD EXPLANATION FOR THIS VERSE

Some people have used this verse to claim that God teaches us ALL to submit "to one another", everyone submitting to everyone else. After all, that is what this verse appears to tell us to do, right? Was the Apostle Paul perhaps being "politically correct" in making this statement ... or are those who today view it that way perhaps the ones who desire to appear to be politically correct?

The problem is that in the very next verse Paul also plainly says:

WIVES, SUBMIT yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. (Ephesians 5:22)

And there is really no comparable statement applying to husbands anywhere in the Bible (i.e. "husbands submit yourselves unto your own wives" is simply not there).

But, based on Ephesians 5:21, some have "REASONED" that God in effect also requires husbands to submit to their wives. When pressed further to explain precisely what this is supposed to look like in practical terms, such people will often say things like:

"Well, husbands should be willing to listen to their wives. And sometimes a wife may even have to correct her own husband, and he should be willing to listen to her."

And yes, most certainly husbands should be willing to listen to their wives. And yes, certainly husbands should also be receptive to correction from their wives.

BUT THESE THINGS (listening and being receptive to correction) ARE NOT REALLY WHAT PAUL MEANT BY "SUBMIT"!

Let's examine this verse more closely. We are going to see that the translation in the KJV creates some unnecessary confusion, something a number of other translations have simply copied.

THE GREEK TEXT FOR EPHESIANS 5:21

Here is the Greek text for this verse, as found in the Antiochian Majority Text (used by the KJV and others):

"hupotassomenoi allelois en phobo theou" (Ephesians 5:21 Received Text)

And here is the Greek Text for this verse, as found in the Alexandrian Minority Text (used by the NIV, RSV, etc.):

"hupotassomenoi allelois en phobo Christou" (Ephesians 5:21 N26)

As you can see, the preserved Greek texts for this verse are identical except for one thing: where the Antiochian Text has the word "God" (i.e. "theou"), the Alexandrian Minority Text has replaced this with the word "Christ" (i.e. "Christou"). But the first four Greek words are identical in all texts. If we for the present ignore whether it should read "God" or "Christ", it means that ALL of the English translations of this verse base their renditions of this verse on exactly the same Greek text.

So we now simply have to examine those five Greek words.

The verb "hupotassomenoi" is the present passive (or middle) participle of the verb "hupotasso". The verb "hupotasso" is formed from the preposition "hupo" (which means "under") + "tasso" (which means "to appoint" or "to determine" or "to set"). So this whole verb "hupotasso" literally means "to appoint to be under" or "to set under". This is fully in line with our English word "submit", which is derived from the Latin "sub + mittere", meaning "to send under". Webster's Dictionary gives the following meanings for the verb "submit":

1 a: to yield to governance or authority

b: to subject to a regime, condition or practice

2 a: to commit to the discretion or judgment of another

b: to make available, offer

c: to put forward as an opinion, affirm

When we look at these definitions as they are presented in Webster's Dictionary, we see the historic development of this verb in the English language. TODAY it may be fairly common to use this verb with the meaning of "to put forward an opinion" or "to make available". But that is NOT what the word "submit" meant in 1611 A.D. when the King James translators translated the Greek word "hupotasso". In the 1600's the word "submit" still meant primarily "to yield to governance or authority". And that is what the Greek word used in Ephesians 5:21 also means.

So when Paul wrote "hupotassomenoi" he really meant "to yield to governance or authority, to subject to a regime, condition or practice". Paul did NOT mean the modern English meaning of "submit" as "to offer an opinion".

Next, the Greek word "allelois" is the dative plural of a pronoun derived from the adjective "allos", which means "other" or "another". "Allelois" (or genitive plural "allelon") is generally viewed as a reciprocal pronoun, meaning:

genitive plural "allelon" = of one another, of each other;

dative plural "allelois" = to one another, for one another.

But that is not the only way this word is used in the New Testament. Of the 100 times it is used in the New Testament, it is used quite a number of times with the meaning of "themselves" and "yourselves". To illustrate that this is also very much a valid translation for this word "allelon", here are some of the

verses where it is so used. In each case I have rendered the translation of "allelon" in capital letters for easier recognition.

[Let] nothing [be done] through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than THEMSELVES. (Philippians 2:3)

And when they agreed not among THEMSELVES, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers, (Acts 28:25)

And when the barbarians saw the [venomous] beast hang on his hand, they said among THEMSELVES, No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live. (Acts 28:4)

But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among THEMSELVES, (Acts 4:15)

They said therefore among THEMSELVES, Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be: that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots. These things therefore the soldiers did. (John 19:24)

Then said [some] of his disciples among THEMSELVES, What is this that he saith unto us, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me: and, Because I go to the Father? (John 16:17)

The Jews therefore strove among THEMSELVES, saying, How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat? (John 6:52)

And they were all amazed, and spake among THEMSELVES, saying, What a word [is] this! for with authority and power he commandeth the unclean spirits, and they come out. (Luke 4:36)

Likewise also the chief priests mocking said among THEMSELVES with the scribes, He saved others; himself he cannot save. (Mark 15:31)

And they reasoned among THEMSELVES, saying, [It is] because we have no bread. (Mark 8:16)

Jesus therefore answered and said unto them, Murmur not among YOURSELVES. (John 6:43)

Now Jesus knew that they were desirous to ask him, and said unto them, Do ye enquire among YOURSELVES of that I said, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me? (John 16:19)

See that none render evil for evil unto any [man]; but ever follow that which is good, both among YOURSELVES, and to all [men]. (1 Thessalonians 5:15)

As can be readily seen from these examples, there is in fact very little difference between the reflexive pronouns "themselves" and "yourselves" on the one hand, and "one another" or "each other" on the other hand.

Next, the Greek words "en phobo theou" mean "in the fear of God".

That gives us the TWO POSSIBLE meanings for this verse, as it appears in the Greek text. When we put

it all together, it means that this verse should be translated EITHER AS:

"Submitting YOURSELVES in the fear of God"

OR AS:

"Submitting ONE TO ANOTHER in the fear of God".

But here is the point:

It cannot mean both expressions at the same time! It has to be either the one or the other. But not both!

It simply CANNOT mean: Submitting YOURSELVES (allelon) ONE TO ANOTHER (allelon) in the fear of God.

Such a translation would imply that Paul used this Greek word TWICE in this one verse. And that is simply not the case. Thus the KJV is clearly a mistranslation of the Greek text, because it implies that the word "allelon" is used twice in this verse.

We really have to settle for one of these two possible options. So which one did Paul intend when he wrote this?

This fact, that this verse CANNOT have both, the reflexive pronoun "yourselves" and also the expression "one to another" in it is commonly recognized by translators today. And many translations have made a choice between these two options.

So, for example, in the Interlinear Bible edited by Jay P. Green Sr., the interlinear text for this verse is literally translated as: "being subject to one another in the fear of God". While Jay P. Green has chosen to translate "allelon" as "to one another", it should be noted that he clearly left out the pronoun "YOURSELVES", illustrating that translators really need to choose either "yourselves" or "one another" for this verse.

This is also recognized by the following translations, which all omit the reflexive pronoun "yourselves".

Eph 5:21 and submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Weymouth NT, 1912)

Eph 5:21 Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. (RSV)

Eph 5:21 Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. (NRSV)

Eph 5:21 and submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (NIV)

Eph 5:21 and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. (NAS)

As can be seen, all of these translations are based on the Alexandrian Minority manuscripts (as shown by the word "Christ" instead of the word "God"). That is not necessarily a big problem here, though it should be quite clear that the Bible repeatedly teaches us to have "the fear of GOD".

All these translations have opted to translate "allelon" as "to one another". That is certainly a valid translation; but then the word "yourselves" would also be an equally valid translation.

The Greek scholar Robertson in his work "Robertson's Word Pictures of the New Testament" in commenting on Ephesians 5:21 wrote the following about the expression "hupotassomenoi

allelois":

"Present middle participle of hupotasso, old military figure to line up under (#Col 3:18|). THE CONSTRUCTION HERE IS RATHER LOOSE, COORDINATE WITH THE PRECEDING PARTICIPLES OF PRAISE AND PRAYER. It is possible to start a new paragraph here and regard hupotassomenoi as an independent participle like an imperative." (my emphasis)

Robertson is telling us that this construction ties in with the previous verses. Robertson also makes clear that this is a MILITARY term, which has to do with "submitting to authority" and "to be subject to a regime" and NOT with "putting forward an opinion". Robertson's suggestion that we could regard hupotassomenoi "as an independent participle like an imperative" means that we could regard this statement by Paul like A COMMAND! Paul was not just making a suggestion ... his instruction is much more like a command.

So let's notice the whole context of this chapter.

THE CONTEXT OF EPHESIANS CHAPTER 5:

In Ephesians 5:1 Paul instructs us to be "followers of God". The focus Paul gives here is: find out how God wants us to live and then strive to conform to God's requirements.

In Ephesians 5:2 he tells us to "walk in love"; i.e. live our lives based on a motivation of outgoing concern for other people, and looking to Christ's life as the example.

In Ephesians 5:3-7 Paul spells out that this means we are to avoid the world's wrong ways of living ... fornication, covetousness, filthiness, foolish talking, etc..

In Ephesians 5:8 he reminds us that we had been, prior to our conversion, a part of those ways of the world.

In Ephesians 5:9 he tells us that God's Spirit in us will produce good fruits.

In Ephesians 5:10 he plainly tells us to PROVE what God expects from us.

In Ephesians 5:11-12 Paul again tells us to avoid the wrong ways of living, as he had already done in verses 3-7.

Ephesians 5:13-14 tell us that we need to wake up to seeing the world's wrong ways for what they really are.

In Ephesians 5:15-17 he tells us to walk wisely and to make good use of our time, as he had also told us in verse 10.

In Ephesians 5:18 he again tells us to avoid the world's wrong ways, in this case the matter of misusing alcoholic drinks. This is like verses 3-7.

In Ephesians 5:19 Paul tells us to have a spiritual focus, seeking contact with God.

In Ephesians 5:20 Paul clearly directs the focus onto God the Father! This verse reads:

Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
(Ephesians 5:20)

It is God the Father whom we are to follow (verse 1), whom we are to strive to please and whose will we are to seek (verses 10, 17). In rejecting the world's ways we are "submitting" ourselves to the will of God the Father. And for everything we are to give thanks to God the Father. He is the focus of everything we are to do.

Having in the first part of this chapter warned us to avoid the world's wrong ways of living, Paul in the next section now focuses on HOW we are to implement GOD's instructions in practical ways and circumstances, the right ways of living:

- Ephesians 5:22-24 = the conduct of wives within marriage;
- Ephesians 5:25-31 = the conduct of husbands within marriage;
- Ephesians 5:32-33 = these two areas are summarized;
- Ephesians 6:1-3 = the conduct of children within the family;
- Ephesians 6:4 = the conduct of fathers towards their children;
- Ephesians 6:5-8 = the conduct of servants/employees in their work;
- Ephesians 6:9 = the conduct of masters/employers in their work.

In these six different situations we see that:

- WIVES are to submit ...
- CHILDREN are to obey ...
- SERVANTS are to obey ...

and:

- HUSBANDS are to love ...
- FATHERS are to nurture and to admonish ...
- MASTERS are not to threaten

Thus Paul made clear that the first three categories listed above are to "yield to governance or authority" in some way; and the second three categories are to not misuse or take advantage of the authority for which they are responsible. But in no way did Paul suggest or hint that these second three categories are to ALSO "yield to the governance or authority" of the first three categories. Thus: Paul did NOT mean to say that masters are to "submit" to their servants; he certainly did not mean to imply that fathers are to "submit" to their children"; and he did not mean to imply that husbands are to "submit" to their wives.

Rather, IF all six of these categories abide by and implement these instructions Paul has spelled out, THEN they will in effect be "SUBMITTING THEMSELVES TO GOD"! Because it is GOD who requires us to abide by these instructions. To go against whichever of these instructions apply to us (depending on whether we are in the category of wives or husbands or children or fathers or servants or masters) would in fact be proof of a lack of the fear of God.

As Robertson told us, while the construction ties in with the preceding section, verse 21 could ALSO be viewed as starting a new section.

It seems to me that there are two ways of viewing what Paul was trying to express in verse 21.

EITHER it could be stated in English as follows:

"submitting YOURSELVES in the fear of God."

This I believe is the more likely intended meaning. In this case what is implied here is that we are all to "submit ourselves TO GOD"! It is God who is the focus of the entire previous section and not only the preceding verse. It is God whom we are to follow (verse 1); we are to prove what is acceptable to God (verse 10); it is God's will that we need to understand (verse 17); and it is God to whom we need to always give thanks (verse 20).

By using the expression "in the fear of God" it made the need to spell out TO WHOM we are to submit redundant ... there was no need to say: "submit yourselves TO GOD IN THE FEAR OF GOD". The expression "in the fear of God" takes care of that.

ALTERNATIVELY:

IF we are to understand verse 21 as starting "a new paragraph" (in Robertson's words), THEN verse 21 can be seen as the preamble to what follows. In that case the rendering:

Submitting ONE TO ANOTHER in the fear of God"

... is the other possibility.

In this case this verse would be a general introduction to the statements that follow. Thus it would not be that Paul meant that EVERYONE is to submit TO EVERYONE ELSE, because Paul's subsequent statements make that quite clear. It would simply mean that in the categories Paul proceeds to enumerate there are those who are expected to submit to those who are addressed in the contrasting categories. In fact, in all three of the relationships Paul then addresses, it is the party which is required "to submit" that is addressed first. This way of first addressing each group that is required to submit makes clear that the statement "submitting to one another" is not intended to be absolute and without qualifications. The statements that follow verse 21 ARE the qualifications that Paul intended to be applied.

There is no justification for lifting verse 21 out of its context and viewing it as a totally independent, unqualified and absolute statement, as I have at times heard some "politically correct" ministers do in their sermons. IF this verse introduces a section, then it must also be viewed in the context of that section.

To illustrate that those who have studied this text don't get the meaning of "everybody is supposed to

submit to everybody else", here is how John Gill commented on this expression in his work "John Gill's Expositor":

"Ver. 21. 'Submitting yourselves one to another', &c.] Which may be understood either in a political sense, of giving honour, obedience, and tribute, to civil magistrates, since they are set up by God for the good of men, and it is for the credit of religion for the saints to submit to them; or in an economical sense; thus the wife should be subject to the husband, children to their parents, and servants to their masters, which several things are afterwards insisted on, as explanative of this rule; or in an ecclesiastic sense, so the Ethiopic version renders it, "subject yourselves to your brethren": thus members of churches should be subject to their pastors ..."

While we need not agree with this (or any other) commentary, it should be readily apparent that the idea of "everybody submitting to everybody else" doesn't enter the discussion. It is always a matter of those in one particular situation "submitting" to those who are in some way in a (from an authority perspective) higher position. And that is also precisely the principle we find expounded throughout the whole Bible ... so it isn't really difficult for any commentator to see that.

When we really think it through, then it should become clear that "everyone being required to submit to everyone else" is an impossibility! It would only produce chaos! There would be no submission at all! Everyone could insist that: "Yes, but YOU are supposed to also submit TO ME! And if you don't submit to me, then I don't need to submit to you either."

The problem with this verse for some has arisen because they have viewed it from THEIR perspective. They have, in effect, said: "TO ME the expression 'submit yourselves to one another' means the following" And usually they don't bother thinking through THEIR particular view to its logical conclusion. They don't tell you what their view would look like if applied in real-life situations. They have also NOT asked: "What did PAUL mean when he used this expression? What meaning did this expression have AT THE TIME when Paul used it?"

So ...

Whether you choose to translate this verse as "submit YOURSELVES in the fear of God" or whether you choose to read it as "submit TO ONE ANOTHER in the fear of God"

... there is no way that it could possibly mean that everyone is supposed to submit to everyone else!

The biblical example is that those under authority submit to those who are in authority.

Frank W. Nelte