

# The Glory of Submission

In our study today, we are examining one verse—Ephesians 5:21—but notice the context: Paul is commending the Spirit-filled life. This life, he shows in Ephesians 5:18-21, includes our thankful praise and words of encouragement and our submission to one another.

## Ephesians 5:21

**18** And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, **19** addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, **20** giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **21** submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

**22** Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. **23** 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. **24** Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit fin everything to their husbands.

We usually don't think of our submission to another person as being something "glorious," but rather something humiliating. When we think of our glory, we usually think of how we bear authority over other people, not vice versa; but Paul teaches us here that Christians are to see this quite differently.

Verse 21 answers three significant questions for us: 1) What is Christian submission? 2) To whom should we submit? and 3) Why should we submit? Let's examine the answers.

### I. What is Christian submission?

The word "submitting" and its related forms are used 40 times in the New Testament, 23 times by the Apostle Paul. In all of these cases, submitting entails subordinating one's self to the authority of another. Christian submission, however, consists of some important elements:

- a. It is voluntary (see I Peter 2:16). We submit, not because we have to, but because we want to.
- b. It is wholehearted (see Eph. 6:5,6). We do not submit while grumbling, but with thanksgiving.
- c. It is conditional (see Ex. 1:17; Daniel 6:10; Mt. 2:7-12; Acts 4:19,20). Our submission to any human authority is contingent upon our obedience to Christ. The only one who can rightly disobey divinely ordained human authority is the one who carefully submits to all such authority when possible; and the only one who can rightly obey divinely ordained human authority is the one who is willing to disobey authority when necessary. Both the Protestant Reformation and the American Revolution might serve as examples of appropriate disobedience to divinely ordained authorities.

### II. To whom do we submit?

In other texts, both Paul and Peter speak of our need to submit to God-ordained authorities in the civil realm (see Romans 13:1-7; I Peter 2:13-17), but here the Apostle says we must submit "to one another." Some scholars (who seem to feel uncomfortable with the idea of authority in the church) would suggest that by this wording the Apostle means that everyone in the church submits to everyone else in the church equally (usually called "mutual submission"), but this is obviously not what is intended by Paul, for he shows in 5:22-6:9 examples of what he means: wives to husbands, children to parents, and slaves to masters. Paul surely does not mean, for example, that parents would submit to the authority of children just as children do to their parents. Paul speaks of the universal mutual love and sacrificial service in the church in other texts, using other language (see Eph. 4:2; Phil. 2:3,4; etc.), but here he speaks specifically of submitting to

the God-ordained authority given to several particular people in the believer's life.

### III. Why do we submit?

Paul gives the answer to this question by saying "out of reverence for Christ." This explains the glory in Christian submission: it is all for the glory of Jesus Christ.

The word translated here as "reverence" is literally the word "fear." In the Scriptures, the phrase "the fear of God" is found 150 times. Only here do we find the phrase "the fear of Christ." Solomon says "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Moses said we are to teach our children the fear of the Lord. Dr. John Murray, well-known 20th century Presbyterian scholar, said that the fear of the Lord is the soul of all godliness and that the essence of wickedness is the absence of the fear of the Lord (cited in Jerry Bridges, *The Joy of the Fear of God*). Paul teaches us that our submission to divinely ordained (sinful) human authorities is not primarily to keep the peace, or to maintain traditional order, or to show appreciation for our leaders, or to stay out of trouble, but rather to show awe, reverence, and admiration for the ultimate authority in the universe, Jesus Christ. In his sermon on this text, Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "If that does not enable you to submit yourselves, nothing can do it."

When we come to Christ, therefore, it is our privilege to identify those divinely ordained authorities in our lives and to render to them voluntary, wholehearted, biblically conditional submission as a distinctive way to demonstrate the glory of Jesus Christ, and we do this only by the power of the Holy Spirit.

### Discussion Questions

1. How is Christian submission to human authority distinctive from the submission of non-Christians?
2. Why is our godly submission to divinely ordained human authority important? Why is it difficult?
3. When is it necessary for the believer to be ready to disobey human authority? Why is this important?
4. How does our reverence for Christ motivate our submission to human authorities?

### Going Deeper

1. Identify all the divinely ordained human authorities in your life within the Church and family, and develop a simple plan to improve the way you submit to each of them in the Lord.