

The Patristic Origin of “Mutual Subordination”

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FOR THE LAST FIFTY YEARS or more, it has been the predominant view among scholars that Ephesians 5:21 teaches “mutual subordination” or “mutual submission” or “mutual subjection.”¹ This expression is understood to be a reference to that verse (Ἰπποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις ἐν φόβῳ Χριστοῦ; NRSV: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ”), as well as a summary of its content, and is often linked with the claim that the verse applies to and interprets the following passage on the husband-wife relationship. More recently, however, divergent voices have arisen, and their challenge to the predominant view that Ephesians 5:21 teaches mutual subordination seems to be gaining a hearing.²

¹ This is the view upheld by the standard commentaries across the theological spectrum. E. Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 523, and A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 365–67, provide good examples from different theological perspectives. Throughout this essay other examples of the predominant view are cited—see especially note 5.

² See P. T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 398–405; W. A. Grudem, “The Myth of Mutual Submission as an Interpretation of Ephesians 5:21,” in *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. W. A. Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 228–29; T. G. Gombis, “A Radically New Humanity: The Function of the Haustafel in Ephesians,” *Journal of Evangelical Theological Studies* 48 (2005): 317–30, especially 323–24; Wayne Walden, “Ephesians in Translation,” *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 12 (2007): 10–13; and J. Cottrell, *Headship, Submission and the Bible* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2008), 57–65. More than 30 years ago, Stephen B. Clark made the point inchoately in *Man and Woman in Christ* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1980), 73–87.

The challenge, if accepted, leaves unanswered the question of where the idea of mutual subordination comes from. This essay proposes an origin: Ultimately, it came from Origen's interpretation of Ephesians 5:21. In this, as in other matters of scriptural interpretation, the third-century Alexandrian scholar seems to have been the innovator.³ This understanding carries with it significant implications for how the passage has been interpreted and adapted throughout history.

The Problem with “Mutual Subordination” in Ephesians 5:21

The challenge that the predominant view of Ephesians 5:21 faces can be summarized by two objections. First, the verb “subject yourselves” (*ὑποτασσόμενοι*), the key semantic indicator in the text, probably does not mean something “mutual” in a symmetrical sense, something the same for both sides of the relationship. Some of the important observations are as follows:

- The Greek verb in the verse does not mean something symmetrical. Rather, it expresses an ordered, and therefore asymmetrical, relationship. It means to arrange under or to place under, and if one thing is ordered under another, it cannot be ordered over it at the same time (mutually ordered). If a crag is over a boulder, the boulder cannot also be over the crag.
- Attempts to find instances of a symmetrical meaning for “subordination” (*ὑποταγή*) or “subordinate” (*ὑποτασσόμενοι*) in Greek literature contemporary to or earlier than the passage have failed. There are no unambiguous examples.⁴
- In many contexts (army, government, employment, etc.), the verb “subordinate” indicates being under authority. The example of *1 Clement 37* (cited below), close in time to the letter to the Ephesians, is strikingly clear.
- There is no other verse in the Bible where mutual subordination, either in the marriage relationship or in any other relationship, is

³ It is likely that he was the first to write a full commentary on Ephesians and the first patristic writer who made a practice of writing commentaries on the books of Scripture; see R. E. Heine, *The Commentaries of Origen and Jerome on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3 and 7.

⁴ This is said on the basis of the surveys given in *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed. G. W. Lampe (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 1461–62, and by G. Delling, “ὑποτάσσω, κτλ.,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 39–47.

unequivocally taught. Ephesians 5:21 would be the unique example if it did indeed teach mutual subordination.

Beyond these observations, the contention of the present article is that there is no documented instance of a mutual subordination understanding of the text for about 175 years afterwards. The silence of the subsequent record also calls into question the predominant view that the author intended a mutual subordination understanding.

The second major objection to the predominant reading is that the context of the passage, most notably the following *Haustafel* (household code) in Ephesians 5:22–6:9, indicates that 5:21 has to be understood as asymmetrical, as in fact the summary of a set of ordered relationships. Some of the important observations are as follows:

- 5:21 is probably a hinge or transitional verse and therefore serves as a heading for what follows. In other words, it completes the sentence (a series of exhortations) that begins with 5:15 and introduces the *Haustafel*, which further specifies the subordination (order) in the community. Since 5:22 is an ellipse that draws its verb from verse 21, the following *Haustafel* must be illustrative of the statement in 5:21.
- The exhortation to the husband and wife, which follows 5:21 and is introduced by it, is asymmetrical. They are not exhorted to relate to one another the same way. The same is even truer of the Christ-Church relationship, the model presented for the husband-wife relationship.
- The parallel exhortations to parents and children and masters and slaves, which also are introduced by Ephesians 5:21, are likewise asymmetrical. Each side of the relationship is encouraged to something different.
- All three pairs of the exhortations that follow 5:21 most naturally read as exhortations to someone under authority (the wife, the children, the servants) to respond in a submissive or obedient way, and exhortations to someone in authority (the husband, father or master) are to exercise authority in a good way.
- Many of the best contemporary scholars who advocate the mutual subordination interpretation are reduced to holding that the verse is in contradiction to its context in the list that follows.⁵

⁵ There are many examples of exegetes who interpret Eph 5:21 as referring to mutual subordination and then find it inconsistent with the following exhortation. J. P. Sampley accepts “a lack of complete harmony” between 5:21 and

- The phrase “out of reverence (fear) for Christ” does not support the view of mutual subordination. It does not militate against the position, but neither does it provide support for it.

Given such a long list of reasons, why would the mutual subordination interpretation be so common? The answer seems clearly to be the phrase (in Greek, one word) “to one another” (*ἀλλήλοισις*). That could indicate something symmetrical. If two people are exhorted to love one another, for instance, both are exhorted to do the same thing in relation to the other.

Here, however, is the critical reason why the mutual subordination interpretation of Ephesians 5:21 faces mounting doubts. It is increasingly observed that although “to one another” can refer to a symmetrical relationship (e.g., a husband and wife marry one another or two ships are next to one another), it very often refers to an asymmetrical relationship, and at times to an ordered relationship. In fact, it has often been translated not as “to one another” (perhaps indicating a symmetrical relationship that every individual in the group is in), but “one to another” or occasionally “one to some other,” referring to (or at least being open to referring to) an ordered relationship.

There are many examples of “to one another” not referring to a symmetrical relationship. For instance, Luke 12:1 says, “Meanwhile, when the crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled *on one another*, he began to speak first to his disciples.” This does not mean, even in English, that all of them took turns trampling each other; it means that some trampled upon some others.

the *Haustafel* injunctions to husbands and fathers and ends up with the solution that, because of 5:21, the author of Ephesians “does not entirely agree” with “the posture of” the *Haustafel* form that he himself has reproduced and would seem, from his words, to be advocating; see “*And the Two Shall Become One Flesh*”: A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5:21–33 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 117. M. Barth says, “The mutual subordination proclaimed by Paul seems to contradict the subsequent and detailed exhortation,” and then goes on to describe this as a contradiction “not only of the context, but also of sound logic and moral order”; see *Ephesians 4–6*, Anchor Bible 34A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 609–10. G. Dawes holds that “what is truly puzzling is the relationship of v 21 with the verses which follow. . . . There is a certain *Widerspruch* between the language of mutual subordination in v 21 and that of female subordination in vv. 22–24”; see *The Body in Question: Metaphor and Meaning in the Interpretation of Ephesians 5:21–33* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 214–15. Best says, “None of the other NT parallels have such a verse and its content and form are at variance with the content and form of the HT [*Haustafel*]” (*Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, 523).

Similarly, speaking of someone who needs healing and so first confesses their sins to the church elders, James 5:16 says, “Therefore confess your sins *to one another* and pray *for one another* that you may be healed.” It is unlikely that he means that the sick should confess their sins to the elders and then have the elders confess their sins to the sick in turn and then have the elders pray over the sick for healing and then have the sick pray over the healthy elders for healing. The prayer and the confession are not mutual, and just previously 5:14 specifies that the prayer is to be done by the elders because they are the elders of the church. The interaction between the elders and the sick in James exemplifies an ordered relationship.

If there is no other passage in Scripture that teaches a mutual subordination in marriage or family life, and if the verb does not usually (or probably ever) in linguistic usage contemporary to the passage refer to something that can be mutual (symmetrical), and if the most immediate context of the Ephesians 5:21 is about the dynamics of asymmetrical relationships, then interpreting the verse as referring to something mutual (symmetrical) should be seen as unlikely unless the word *ἀλλήλοις* provides no other option. That, however, is clearly not the case. It is often used for asymmetrical relationships and sometimes for ordered relationships of the kind described in the aforementioned *Haustafel*. Thus, the case against understanding Ephesians 5:21 as enjoining mutual subordination is strong.

1 Clement and the Early Christian Approach

Here it is helpful to look at the fullest example we have before Origen of a presentation of the order of the Christian community, including the order in the husband–wife relationship. It indicates that good social order was important to early Christians, including an order in domestic relationships, and that the ordering of the community is described in terms of “subordination.” The pattern described does not present the relationship of subordination in terms of something mutual (symmetrical), and it does indicate that the husband–wife relationship involved some exercise of authority.

The example is to be found in a letter close in time to the latest books in the canon of the New Testament, Clement of Rome’s *Letter to the Corinthians* (1 Clem.), whose subject is subordination, the subordination of the community to its rightful elders. It provides us with a fuller and more varied example of the usage of the word–group than any New Testament writing. Because of its probable dating to the end of the first century and because it draws on Pauline writings, it is a helpful source

for understanding the usage of the word in Ephesians 5:21 and how the earliest generations of Christians would have read it.

The exhortation at the end reveals the purpose for the letter (words from the Greek word-group containing “be subordinate” are italicized):

You, therefore, who laid the foundation of the revolt, *must submit to* (ὑποτάγητε) the presbyters and accept discipline leading to repentance, bending the knees of your heart. Learn how to *subordinate yourselves* (ὑποτάσσεσθαι) laying aside the arrogant and proud stubbornness of your tongue. For it is better for you to be found small but included in the flock of Christ than to have a pre-eminent reputation and yet be excluded from his hope. (1 Clem. 57)⁶

The issue, then, is the subordination of the community to its duly appointed presbyters, and the occasion is a “revolt” because of which the lawful presbyters were rejected or replaced.

While Clement profiles subordination to the presbyters or elders, he is more fundamentally attentive to the good order of the whole church that was threatened by disorder at the highest level. At risk, among other things, were domestic relationships. His opening comments illustrate this concern when, after deploring the revolt, he praises the former condition of the Corinthian church:

For you did everything without partiality, and you lived in accordance with the laws of God, *submitting yourselves* (ὑποτασσόμενοι) to your leaders and giving to the older men [or perhaps “elders” in the sense of “the governing authorities”] among you the honor due them. You instructed the young to think temperate and proper thoughts; you charged the women to perform all their duties with a blameless, reverent, and pure conscience, cherishing their own husbands, as is right; and you taught them to abide by the rule of *obedience* (ὑποταγῆς), and to manage the affairs of their household with dignity and all discretion. (1 Clem. 1)

⁶ English translation from *Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, ed. M. W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007).

The subordination or submission to the presbyters was, in other words, part of a broader pattern of order in the community, which included the subordination in the family.

In section 37, Clement applies *ὑποτάσσω* outside the context of personal relationships among the Christian people:

Let us, therefore, serve as soldiers, brothers, with all earnestness under his faultless orders. Let us consider the soldiers who serve under our commanders, how precisely, how readily, how *obediently* (*ὑποτεταγμένως*) they execute orders. Not all are prefects or tribunes or centurions or captains of fifty and so forth, but each in his own rank executes the orders given by the emperor and the commanders. The great cannot exist without the small, nor the small without the great. There is a certain blending in everything, and therein lies the advantage. Let us take our body as an example. The head without the feet is nothing; likewise, the feet without the head are nothing. Even the smallest parts of our body are necessary and useful to the whole body, yet all the members work together and unite *in subjection* (*ὑποταγῆ*)⁷ that the whole body may be saved.

Clement employs two illustrations. The first is the Roman army, in which the soldiers execute orders in a subordinate or submissive way. Further, it is not just the soldiers that obey in a submissive way, but also the officers who obey those over them, because all of them are in the one ordered relationship that constitutes the disciplined army. The second illustration is the parts of the body. Here Clement stresses the contribution each part makes, but his more fundamental point is that an overall order allows each part to make a contribution to a united effort. Included in the example is the idea that the head, part of the ordered relationships, directs the various parts of the body, since the head is being implicitly compared to the king (emperor) and the governor.

⁷ Holmes translates this as “mutual subjection,” probably intending a reference to Eph 5:21. The actual phrase is more literally “needs agreement in one subjection” (*ὑποταγῆ μιᾷ χρῆται*). The passage goes on in the beginning of section 38 to encourage “each one to be subject to his neighbor.” In the context of what precedes in section 37 and what follows in section 38, the semantics of this text suggest a possibility that it is an exhortation to “subordinate yourselves to one another” and would then be an interpretation of Eph 5:21 as encouraging ordered relationships throughout the body.

In Clement's thinking, the root consideration behind his exhortation to subordination is the value of good order, rather than the value of personal obedience. He does not seem to base his exhortation on, say, the importance of honoring parents and others over us, as later catechisms in various Christian traditions do, or on the value of obedience for spiritual growth, as the fathers of the ascetic movement often do. Rather, he is using the idea of an order that allows different individuals to function in a unified way.

Clement is not, however, speaking about an impersonal order, like that of modern drivers who submit to traffic laws and traffic lights even in the absence of police officers directing traffic. He is thinking of an ordered set of personal relationships in which individuals are subordinate to other individuals who are responsible to exercise authority and so make use of the relational order to promote a united effort to reach the corporate good.

In this conception, Clement's thinking is close to what one finds elsewhere in the New Testament and in later Greco-Roman writings. In many of the passages in which the word-group is used, the focus seems to be on the order of the relationships, either in the Christian community or out of it. In fact, a commonly upheld ideal for the Christian communities or churches is to be well ordered, as one can see in the commendation given to the Colossian community: "For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ" (Col 2:5). The juxtaposition of faith and good order seems foreign to most modern sensibilities, but is not foreign to the concerns of early Christian teachers.⁸

Clement, then, is clearly not thinking in terms of mutual subordination. If he were, he would not be concerned that there were two sets of presbyters, only that they were not subordinating themselves to each other in a good way. He is presupposing that there is an order to

⁸ The Letter to the Colossians abounds with exhortations to adopt what a Hellenistic audience would have understood as civic virtues that promoted social harmony. Verbs such as *βραβεύω* ("serve as umpire") and *συμβιβάζω* ("knit together") and the noun *σύνδεσμος* ("[social] bond") are sown throughout the midsection of the composition (Col 2:2 and 19 and 3:3–7, especially 3:14–15). Other like-minded contemporaries voicing their support for ordered society (*συμφωνία/harmonia*) are Josephus (*Contra Apion* 2.145–72, especially 171–72) and Ignatius of Antioch (Ign. *Eph.* 4.1–2 and 5.1). The same can be found in writers that are neither Christian nor Jewish, such as Cicero (*De republica* 2.67–70).

the set of relationships, with each knowing his or her role or function and with authorities able to sort out disagreements about direction and to lead in certain activities. Just as it is impossible to be spatially under something and over it at the same time, it is inconceivable for the soldier to be under the captain and over the captain at the same time. In other words, 1 Clement is using the Greek word in its natural (asymmetrical) sense, the sense that prevailed in the Greek of Clement’s time. And it assumes, like many Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian writings, that order and subordination are the keys to unity or effective corporate existence.⁹

The value of 1 Clement is that it provides a developed picture of what subordination might mean to an early patristic writer, a contemporary of the New Testament writers. This excerpt indicates that subordination or subjection or submission was not seen as mutual (symmetrical). Rather, subordinating oneself means entering into an ordered relationship involving authority. Later in the patristic period, however, the view of a mutual subordination appears.

Influential Mutual Subordination Presentations in the Patristic Era

We have two authoritative independent presentations of mutual subordination in patristic commentaries on the letter of Ephesians that show how the mutual subordination interpretation was applied. One is found in Jerome, probably the most influential exegete in the Latin Church, and the other in John Chrysostom, probably the most influential exegete in the Greek Church. They present the same understanding of the subordination encouraged in “be subject [subordinate, submissive] to one another in the fear of Christ”—namely, mutual service. Two people are subordinate to one another if they serve one another and the relationship is symmetrical.

Being subject to one another as mutual service is clearly stated in Jerome’s commentary on Ephesians:

Eph. 5:21 “*Subjected to one another in the fear of Christ.*” Let the bishops hear these words, let the presbyters hear them, let every order of teachers hear them, that they be subjected to those who

⁹ The emphasis on good order continued throughout the patristic period. For a presentation of it in John Chrysostom, see D. C. Ford, *Women and Men in the Early Church: The Full Views of St. John Chrysostom* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 1996), 115–37.

are subjected to themselves and imitate the apostle who says, “*For although I was free from all I made myself a servant to all that I might gain all*” (1 Cor. 9:19), and in another passage, “*Serve one another through love*” (Gal. 5:13). This is why he himself also served all the churches of the Gentiles with the same love. Our Savior also *took the form of a servant* that he might serve his disciples and *wash their feet* (Phil. 2:7; John 13:5). This is the difference between the rulers of the Gentiles and of Christians. The former dominate their subjects but we serve, and “*we are greater in this service if we shall be least of all*” (Matt. 20:25–7). But the words “*in the fear of Christ*” are also to be understood so that the subjection itself does not occur for the sake of human glory but because of the fear of Christ, since we fear to offend him.¹⁰

In John Chrysostom’s *Homily XIX on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians*, we find a somewhat different presentation of mutual subordination as mutual service. Unlike Jerome’s presentation, it does not contain exegetical reflections, but rather simply reads as a homiletic application:¹¹

“Subjecting yourselves one to another,” he says, “in the fear of Christ.” For if you submit yourself for a ruler’s sake, or for money’s sake, or from respectfulness, much more from the fear of Christ. Let there be an interchange of service and submission. For then will there be no such thing as slavish service. Let not one sit down in the rank of a freeman, and the other in the rank of a slave; rather it were better that both masters and slaves be servants to one another;—far better to be a slave in this way than free in any other; as will be evident from hence. . . .

No, more, if you have a mind to examine the matter nicely, there is indeed on the part of masters a return of service. For what if pride suffer not that return of service to appear? Yet if the slave on the one hand render his bodily service, and you maintain that body, and supply it with food and clothing and shoes, this is an exchange of service: because unless you render your

¹⁰ Jerome, *Commentary on the Epistle of the Ephesians* 3.5.21 (PL, 26:654); English translation found in Heine, *Commentaries of Origen and Jerome*, 231–32.

¹¹ See J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 91–94, for a discussion of the writing of the homilies on Ephesians, which he describes as “generally careless in composition,” probably unrevised stenographer’s notes.

service as well, neither will he render his, but will be free, and no law will compel him to do it if he is not supported. If this then is the case with servants, where is the absurdity, if it should also become the case with free men? . . . But he does not choose to submit himself to you? However, submit yourself; do not simply yield, but submit yourself. Entertain this feeling towards all, as if all were your masters. . . .

This is “subjecting yourselves one to another in the fear of Christ,” in order that we may subdue all the passions, be servants of God, and preserve the love we owe to one another.¹²

The master in such an understanding does not receive commands from his slave, but rather the master should let the good of the slave determine his own behavior. He should be subordinate to the slave’s interests. Actually, he should, in the example given by Chrysostom, be subordinate to the slave’s just claim, something modern people might miss because the idea of obligations due to slaves is foreign to popular modern understandings of slavery, a historically variegated institution. The slave cannot demand these things of him as the wife can claim her conjugal rights (1 Cor 7:4)—although he can run away and not be forced to return—but the master should provide for the slave and, fulfilling this duty, expresses mutual subordination.

Jerome adds another interpretation of the phrase “be subject to one another” in discussing the exegesis of “another teacher”¹³ who accepts mutual subordination but does not explain it in terms of mutual service:

But another will interpret “*subjected to one another in the fear of Christ*” in such a way that he says this general notion is divided

¹² John Chrysostom, *Homily XIII on Ephesians* (PG, 62:4–176); English translation adapted from *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 [reprint]; hereafter, *NPNF1*), 13:142.

¹³ Jerome informs us that in his Ephesians commentary he drew primarily from Origen’s commentary and secondarily from Apollinaris and Didymus (Heine, *Commentaries of Origen and Jerome*, 78). The leading conjecture for the unnamed source here seems to be the younger Apollinaris of Laodicea. See A. Souter, *Earliest Latin Commentaries of the Epistles of St. Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927), 109–10. This would be confirmed by the observation that Jerome is free to speak about Didymus by name but not Apollinaris, probably because Apollinaris was controversial at the time Jerome wrote the commentary. Also see J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 59–60 and 145–49.

and distributed in the words which follow: “*Let wives be subject to their husbands*” and “*Children, obey your parents*” and “*Servants, obey your masters in the flesh with fear and trembling*” (Eph. 5:22; 6:1, 5), so that not only a wife subject to her husband, and children to their masters, but also husbands are to be subject to their wives according to the duty which is commanded, and fathers to children so that they not provoke them to wrath, and masters to servants that they may abstain from threats and offer them the necessary things of life which they possess (Eph. 5:25; 6:4, 9). They should be subject to one another and do this from “*the fear of Christ*” so that as he was subject to his servants, so also these who appear to be greater may be subject to those lesser than themselves by rendering the duties which are commanded.¹⁴

Both Chrysostom and Jerome, as well as the other teacher Jerome cites, therefore, understand that mutual subordination is the orientation of Ephesians 5:21. For those in authority, it is acting for the good of the subordinates —and the subordinates likewise acting for the good of those in authority over them. However, fulfilling one’s duties to the other side of the relationship is the most important way of acting for their good, and so what each does is in fact different because their duties are clearly understood to be different. What masters do for servants or slaves is not the same as what the servants do for masters, although both are subordinating themselves to the other by fulfilling their duty to that other.

The reciprocity involved in mutual service, then, does not automatically take away the authority involved in a relationship of subordination. Rather it is reciprocity of service within the framework or structure of that relationship. All are seeking to serve the others or act for the good of the others when fulfilling their differing roles. The reciprocity concerns the aim or orientation with which the service or function is carried out, not the authoritative order observed when so doing or the actual duties themselves, which are complementary and not symmetrically reciprocal.

Jerome and Chrysostom therefore give us two influential patristic presentations of Ephesians 5:21 that teach mutual subordination as mutual service. This does not, however, mean that mutual subordination or mutual service was the universal or even reigning patristic interpretation of the passage. While we have these examples of patristic

¹⁴ Jerome, *Ephesians* (on Eph 5:21–22; see Heine, *Origen and Jerome*, 232).

teachers who held to the view that Ephesians 5:21 was speaking of mutual subordination, we also have examples of those who do not take that approach. For instance, Ambrosiaster rephrased *subiecti invicem* (“be subject to one another”) as *alter alteri se subiciens* (“each one submitting himself to some other”).¹⁵ Theodoret of Cyrrihus saw Ephesians 5:21 as advocating “a general requirement of subordination,” which then is followed by a specification of “what is appropriate in each case.”¹⁶ He interpreted it as a heading for what followed and asymmetrical (ordering) in meaning. The mutual subordination as mutual service view was only one acceptable understanding of the passage.

The Source of the Innovative Interpretation

This discussion raises the question of where the interpretation of “subject yourselves to one another” as mutual service came from. The fact that Origen influenced Jerome gives us a lead. The earliest presentation of this understanding in patristic literature can be found in the fragment of Origen’s commentary on Ephesians that treats Ephesians 5:21. The two compositions (Origen’s and Jerome’s) are now available for comparison in Ronald E. Heine’s work *The Commentaries of Origen and Jerome on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians*. Heine judges that Jerome’s commentary “closely follows Origen’s in all of its major lines of thought.”¹⁷ The full extant section of Origen’s interpretation or application of Ephesians 5:21 is as follows in the Heine translation:

Eph. 5:21 Being subject, he says, to one another in the fear of Christ. This completely destroys all desire to rule and be first. The following command has been given to all, “For although I am free from all I have made myself a servant to all that I might gain all” (1 Cor. 9:19). The command which says, “Be servants to one another” (Gal. 5:13), also prescribes this. Wherefore, the apostles “were servants to the churches . . . because of love” (Gal. 5:13), ministering and being servants for the salvation of humanity. Even the Savior assumed “the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:7) for no other reason than to be a servant to the disciples. Conse-

¹⁵ Ambrosiaster, *Ad Efesios* on Eph 5:21 (CSEL 81, pt. 3:117).

¹⁶ Theodoret of Cyrrihus on Eph 5:21, in *Commentary on the Letters of St. Paul*, vol. 2, trans. R. C. Hill, New Testament 8 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001), 52.

¹⁷ Heine, *Origen and Jerome*, 6 (comparison of these two particular compositions on 231–32). This compilation is not Origen’s full commentary, no longer extant, but only selections found in patristic *catenae*.

quently, he once “put water in a basin” to wash “the feet of the disciples” (John 13:5). Furthermore, one who has understood the statement, “He who wishes to be great among you shall be the servant of all” (Matt. 20:26–27), “will be subject” to serve those whom it is necessary to serve.

It is possible, however, that although one who serves performs the appropriate services for those he serves he may seem not to be subject, when those being served, in addition to being ignorant of what is fitting, command those who wish to serve them to do things for them which are inappropriate. But even then he who acts for his advantage and serves is also subject to the need of the person whom he serves because of the serene “fear” which produces happiness in accordance with the word of God. For I think this is revealed by the phrase, “in the fear of Christ.”¹⁸

Origen thus teaches that servanthood is the highest ideal for leaders. The needs of others guide their service, although their leadership may not always be well received.

There is no example of the mutual service or mutual subordination understanding of Ephesians 5:21 in the patristic corpus earlier than Origen. We have several examples of references to Ephesians 5:21 in early patristic literature, according to *Biblia Patristica* and the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*.¹⁹ The first in time is in Ignatius of Antioch’s *Letter to the Magnesians* 13.2:

Be subject to the bishop and to one another (ὑποτάγητε τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ καὶ ἀλλήλοις), as Jesus Christ in the flesh was to the Father, and as the apostles were to Christ and to the Father, that there might be unity, both physical and spiritual.²⁰

¹⁸ There is one other citation of Eph 5:21 in Origen’s extant works, in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 2.7, in *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1946–), 26. But it is simply quoted as the opening verse of Eph 5:21–27, and he continues on to establish that the Church is the bride of Christ and Christians are members of his body without indicating how he understands “being subject to one another.”

¹⁹ *Biblia Patristica: Index des citations et allusions bibliques dans la littérature patristique*, 7 vols. (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1986), 1:497 and 2:521. The *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* search apparatus is available at <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/index.prev.php>; the abridged text collection is available for search for free, but access to the unabridged is available only by subscription.

²⁰ English translation found in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*. Whether we can say, with the *Biblia Patristica*, that this is a reference to Eph 5:21 because of the use

Ignatius is not thinking in terms of mutual service, but rather of harmony in the body, and is clearly not encouraging reciprocal obedience: Christ was not expected to obey his apostles in addition to their obeying him. Rather, there was an order of subordination, from the Father to Christ to the bishop, and then to the presbyters and to the deacons (cf. *Ign. Magn.* 13.1).

Clement of Alexandria, who preceded Origen as a Christian teacher at Alexandria,²¹ refers to Ephesians 5:21 in his *Stromata*:

. . . [B]ecause he who directs is the head. And if “the Lord is the head of the man” and if “the man is the head of the woman,” the man has authority over the woman in so far as “he is the image and glory of God.” That is why in the letter to the Ephesians it is written, “Submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of God, wives should be submitted to their husbands as to the Lord, because the man is the head of the wife.”²²

Clement is straightforwardly using Ephesians 5:21, along with the following *Haustafel*, to support the subordination of wives to their husbands and shows no trace of a mutual subordination understanding.

There is one other quotation of the verse given by *Biblia Patristica*, that of Polycarp of Smyrna in his *Letter to the Philippians* 10.2.²³ The

of “to one another” is not perfectly obvious, although this passage is at least a good example of how “to one another” was used in an ordered sense.

²¹ For views on the relationship between Clement and Origen, see H. Crouzel, *Origen* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 7–8; J. A. McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 6 and 81; and M. J. Edwards, *Origen against Plato* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 18–19. For the earlier consensus, based on Eusebius (*Historia ecclesiastica* 5.11 and 6.13), see J. Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 2, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers after Irenaeus* (Utrecht/Antwerp: Spectrum, 1953), 4–5 and 37–38.

²² Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 4.8, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004 [repr.]; hereafter, *ANF*), 2:420.

²³ The quotation (Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 10.1–3, in *ANF*, 1:35) is not from the incomplete Greek text of the letter, but is in the Latin version:

¹ Stand fast, therefore, in these things and follow the example of the Lord, firm and immovable in faith, loving the brotherhood, cherishing one another, united in the truth, giving way to one another in the gentleness of the Lord, despising no one. ² When you are able to do good, do not put it off, because “charity delivers from death.” All of you be subject to one another [omnes vobis invicem subiecti estote], and maintain an irreproachable standard of conduct among the Gentiles, so

passage does not provide much indication of how Polycarp understood Ephesians 5:21, but there is no reference to mutual subordination as mutual service.

The sample (even with the possible addition of 1 Clem. 37 as discussed above in note 7) is small, but, if the list is exhaustive, or at the very least representative, it establishes that there is no extant instance of the mutual service interpretation before Origen. Moreover, 1 Clement, along with similar texts in other apostolic fathers, provides us with an example of Christian teaching on order in the community. Mutual subordination is absent in such texts, and so we have further corroboration that the first example of the mutual service interpretation of Ephesians 5:21 is probably that of Origen.

The Reason for the Mutual Service Interpretation

Origen, Jerome, and Chrysostom agree that Ephesians 5:21 speaks about mutual service, and their writings are early indications of the mutual service interpretation of the passage. None of them, however, reveals any trace of innovation or controversy in their interpretation. Rather they simply seem to be making an exegetical clarification of the verse based on other scriptural teaching, the teaching that mutual service should characterize Christian relationships, especially in Church leadership.

Origen, the one with the best claim to inaugurating this interpretation, does not seem to be asserting that he has found the correct interpretation of the passage, that the interpretation of the passage has been disputed and he is now about to resolve the disputation, or that he is deliberately introducing an innovation. Rather, his commentary indicates that he is mainly interested in giving a reasonable interpretation of Ephesians 5:21 and at the same time stressing that Christian authority is an authority of service.²⁴ He could be expected to say something

that you may be praised for your good deeds and the Lord may not be blasphemed because of you.³ But woe to him through whom the name of the Lord is blasphemed. Therefore, teach to all the self-control by which you yourselves live.

²⁴ We do not have many treatments of Origen's approach to concrete practical matters of Christian living by contemporary scholars of Origen, and none on Eph 5:21. This may be due, in this case, to the fact that the text we are examining is only found in *catenae* and not in Origen's extant works. It is likely also due to the fact that modern commentators show their highest interest in Origen's "allegorical" or "spiritual" approach to exegesis or his doctrine of scripture or doctrine in general, but not to his moral teaching. P. W. Martens's

about Ephesians 5:21 when he reached it, and since he probably wrote the first commentary on Ephesians,²⁵ he may have not known of any previous discussions of its meaning (nor do we).

The reason “mutual subordination” turns out to have the significance it does in many current discussions is that it is often (but not always) understood to be a teaching that eliminates the authority of the husband over the wife. If they are reciprocally subordinate, the wife does not have to be subordinate to her husband in any way that he is not also subordinate to her.²⁶ Neither Jerome nor Chrysostom nor Origen make that inference or even raise that as a concern.

Chrysostom, for instance, is perfectly clear that he in no way thinks that the mutual service expected of husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and servants means that either the order of the relationships or, consequently, the one-way subordination in them are cancelled because Ephesians 5:21 means a reciprocal subordination. In his commentary on 5:23–24, for example, he says:

He had already laid down beforehand for man and wife the ground and provision of their love, assigning to each their proper place, to the one that of authority and forethought, to the other that of submission. As then “the Church,” that is, both husbands and wives, “is subject unto Christ, so also you wives submit yourselves to your husbands, as unto God.”²⁷

In his comments on 5:22–32, Chrysostom shows a primary interest in exhorting the husband to love the wife, not in getting the wife to

survey in *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3–4, of the “four foci” of Origen scholarship and his review of current scholarship (pages 6–11) indicate that Origen’s approach to concrete practical matters of Christian living is not central to modern scholarship on his work.

²⁵ See note 3.

²⁶ There are many modern presentations that use such a line of argumentation. See, for example, C. Keener in *Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990). For an extreme example of the approach, one which applies Eph 5:21 to all Christian authority relationships, see G. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985). A more recent example can be found in A. G. Padgett, who gives the interpretation that Christ serves the Church, but omits a consideration of whether the Church ever obeys Christ because of his intrinsic authority; see *As Christ Submits to the Church: A Biblical Understanding of Leadership and Mutual Submission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011).

²⁷ John Chrysostom, *Homily XIII on Ephesians* (PG, 62:4–176); English translation adapted from *NPNF1*, 13:144.

submit to the husband. Moreover, he can speak of a mutual subordination in referring to the master-servant relationship. Nonetheless, he does not think that the mutual service or love in the husband-wife relationship actually abolishes the need for the wife to be submissive to her husband or the servant to be obedient to his master.²⁸ Nor does Jerome, although exhorting the bishops and clergy to serve those for whom they are responsible, propose to abolish all subordination to the clergy. Moreover, he does not think that wives should be exempt from submission to their husbands.²⁹ The same is true for Origen, who believes the husband should “regulate the matters of marriage in accordance with reason” and so imitate Christ, the bridegroom of the Church.³⁰

Strikingly, neither Jerome, nor Chrysostom, nor Origen actually applies the passage (Eph 5:21) specifically to the husband-wife relationship, but rather generally to ruler-subject relationships. If we are comparing the patristic and contemporary views of mutual subordination, this is very significant, since the only application given in most contemporary discussions of mutual subordination is to the husband-wife relationship. Jerome and Origen apply the passage to clergy-lay relationships, and Chrysostom applies it to master-servant relationships. Only the “other teacher” Jerome cites applies it to the husband-wife relationship, but merely as one item in the *Haustafel*. None of them, then, show signs of considering mutual subordination to be central for understanding the structure of the husband-wife relationship.

There is a further, broader contextual consideration that can be briefly mentioned: nowhere in the literature of the early Church, whether New Testament or later, is the husband ever instructed to be subordinate to his wife. Given how revolutionary such an exhortation would have sounded in the culture of the times—as many who uphold the view of mutual subordination acknowledge—that instruction should have been repeated often and with emphasis, if indeed it was intended. Yet nowhere is that done. Nor is it done for parents to chil-

²⁸ For further references to Chrysostom’s teaching that the husband is the head of the family and in authority over the wife, see Ford, *Women and Men*, especially 138–68, and W. A. Grudem, “The Meaning of *Kephalé* (‘Head’): An Evaluation of New Evidence, Real and Alleged,” in *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, 146–57.

²⁹ Jerome, *Ephesians* 3.5.22, 23 (*PL*, 26:530–31); English translation from Heine, *Commentaries of Origen and Jerome*, 233. See also G. Sfameni Gasparro, C. Maguzzu and C. Aloe Spada, *The Human Couple in the Fathers*, Pauline Patristic 1 (New York: Alba House and Pauline Books and Media, 1999), 243–44.

³⁰ Heine, *Commentaries of Origen and Jerome*, 233.

dren or masters to slaves. In fact, no prominent Christian writer before the nineteenth century suggested that there was any understanding of Ephesians 5:22–32 or any similar New Testament passage other than that wives should be subordinate to their husbands and husbands should exercise some form of authority over their wives in a good Christian way.³¹

Origen, then, seems to present us with an innovation, although probably unintentionally. That innovation can be described against the background of the teaching that preceded him as a new explanation of the phrase “to one another” in a symmetrical or mutual sense in Ephesians 5:21. It is not, however, the introduction of a deliberate innovation in the understanding of how Christians were to relate to one another, much less how husband-wife relationships or other Christian relationships were to be conducted.

To conclude this essay on the patristic origin of mutual subordination, we should return to the beginning and ask how Origen’s innovation responds to the two objections raised to this interpretation. How did Origen get around the fact that *ὑποτασσόμενοι* semantically does not allow mutuality? And how did he miss the arrangement of asymmetrical relationships in Ephesians 5:22–6:9 that seemingly illustrate the meaning of *ὑποτασσόμενοι*?

The latter question is certainly the hardest one to answer, and all we can do is make a guess. The reason that Origen saw no reason to deal with the relationship of Ephesians 5:21 to its context is possibly that he took it as an independent exhortation, not simply as the heading for the *Haustafel*,³² an approach some exegetes even today adopt. In addition, Origen possibly saw Ephesians 5:21 as an exhortation to all the members of the Christian community about subordination to the leaders (the bishop, presbyters, and deacons), since that is what he

³¹ For surveys, see Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ*, 281–99, and Daniel Doriani, “The Historical Novelty of Egalitarian Interpretations of Ephesians 5:21–22,” in Grudem, *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, 203–20.

³² In the earliest Greek manuscripts (including those witnessed in Origen and Jerome) there is no verb in the *Haustafel*, so *ὑποτασσόμενοι* must serve to complete the sense of the passage. Later readings often add the imperative form (Chrysostom) or participle form (Jerome) of *ὑποτάσσω*. Consequently, every English translation of Eph 5:22 supplies a verb to span the gap. For a critical assessment of readings, see B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Society, 1975), 608–09, and P. W. Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), 597. Of the critical editions of the Greek New Testament, only the *Textus Receptus* follows the later readings.

focused on and what the parallel texts that teach authority as service focused on. He possibly then thought the text moved on to a further set of exhortations for the members of each Christian household to be subordinate to the leader(s) of the household. The *Haustafel*, in other words, was not the specification of the exhortation to mutual subordination in Ephesians 5:21, but an additional example of subordination within the Christian community, or even a related but new topic. The teaching on mutual service was primarily directed to the leaders of the community in their exercise of authority.³³

Jerome, because of his familiarity with “another teacher,” was aware of an alternative, one favored by many scholars today. In this view, the mutual subordination of Ephesians 5:21 is a heading for the *Haustafel*, and each of the relationships in the subheadings of the *Haustafel* is an example of mutual subordination. Jerome seems to have thought that the other teacher’s approach was an equally acceptable opinion (not being bound to the conviction that there can be only one acceptable exegesis of a passage³⁴), but not his favored one. Nonetheless, none of the patristic authors who interpreted Ephesians 5:21 as enjoining mutual subordination in the sense of mutual service thought it reversed the normal asymmetrical sense of subordination (or obedience) in the following *Haustafel*. The common approach seems to have been to comment on Ephesians 5:21 and the *Haustafel* separately without asking how they related to one another. Such an approach was the usual one until the nineteenth century.³⁵

³³ J. A. Mohler, S.J., presents a variety of texts showing Origen’s concern that the bishop and the presbyters should be servants of the Church, not misusing their powers; see *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1970), 64–65. The set of references indicates that his focus on the clergy as servants in his discussion of Eph 5:21 reflects a broader concern in his writings. Origen himself had struggles with his own bishop in Alexandria, and that may have affected his commentary on Ephesians. The same was true of Jerome concerning the clergy of Rome when he left there.

³⁴ Augustine presents the principle behind this in *De civitate Dei* 15.26: “Now anyone may object to this interpretation and give another which harmonizes with the Rule of Faith. . . . Although different interpretations are given, yet they must all agree with the one harmonious catholic faith”; see *The Basic Writings of St. Augustine*, ed. Whitney J. Oates, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1948), 2.313.

³⁵ Doriani gives the following explanation:

In the past, exegetes and theologians were content to make two statements and let them stand side by side without lengthy explanation. We may plausibly surmise that they had the liberty to do so because they hardly had to defend the notion that God created an ordered society

The former question, the first objection raised at the essay’s beginning (the semantic domain of ὑποτασσόμενοι), is more serious because, even if Ephesians 5:21 is not to be understood as a heading for what follows, the idea of mutual subordination or mutual subjection is incompatible with the normal meaning of the Greek word ὑποτασσόμενοι. The answer is that Origen seems to have interpreted “subject yourselves to one another” as having an extended sense. Jerome and Chrysostom did likewise.

An extended sense often comes into play when the exegete finds a literal contradiction in a text. Rather than reject the text as self-contradictory, it is good procedure to ask if the text might have an extended sense. If the exegete understands it in an extended sense, one feature or note of its normal semantic meaning is disregarded and the word or phrase is extended to a broader variety of instances than its original meaning would have allowed. In this case, the personal subordination normally understood in the Greek word would have been disregarded and the term would have been extended to apply to any situation where individuals are obliged to provide service to another human being, “subordination” here being understood in a broad sense. The extended meaning, then, would not restrict their subordination to those in authority over them but would qualify the manner in which it would be exercised.

For Origen, this was easy to do because he understood that the Greek word for service (*δουλεία*) was also asymmetrical and ordering. Many readers are used to the idea of mutual service, no doubt because of the influence of the scriptural passages Origen cited, and it does not occur to them that the phrase understood in its literal sense may be intrinsically self-contradictory.

where husbands had authority over their wives roughly as magistrates led the state, ministers of the Gospel led the Church, and parents led their children. (“Historical Novelty,” 210)

As he observes, the relationship of the content of Eph 5:21 and that of the *Haustafel* was not discussed in patristic commentaries, and not at all until the nineteenth century. Aquinas’s and Calvin’s commentaries on Ephesians provide easily accessible examples of the traditional approach in later periods. For a fuller presentation of “an ordered society” in Christian tradition until the nineteenth century, see Doriani’s “History of the Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2,” in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15*, ed. A. J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. S. Baldwin (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 213–67.

For the Greek-speakers of the ancient world, however, service (*δουλεία*) was what slaves gave to their masters. They served their masters; their masters did not serve them. Exercising authority as a service is no less difficult a concept than mutual subordination. Mutual service was an extended sense of this concept in line with a number of scriptural texts that Origen cited. One phrase was a close parallel to Ephesians 5:21: “through love be servants [slaves] of one another” (Gal 5:13).

If this is the case, then Origen probably used the text as the way of emphasizing a point he wanted to make—namely, that service is the guiding principle of the exercise of authority by Christian leaders. In addition, by making such an interpretation, he harmonized this text with a set of other (likewise paradoxical) New Testament texts about how authority was to be exercised as a service and not as domination. Since, “to one another” can have a symmetrical (reciprocal) meaning and does in some of the texts on service, the harmonization came easily.

In the patristic understanding as we find it in Origen and those who came after him, *ἀλλήλοις* taken in conjunction with *ὑποτασσόμενοι* qualifies the exercise of authority by teaching the overall manner in which it should be exercised. Christian authority is to be exercised as service, that is, with the good of the subordinate as the goal or at least included in the goal. The order of the relationship is not to be abolished such that the slaves get to command the master in his role as master (Chrysostom) or that the laity get to tell the clergy how to exercise their office (Jerome and Origen). Rather, masters and clergy in their distinctive roles are to follow the example of Jesus, the Lord of all, who served his subjects (the Church) by laying down his life for them on the cross rather than by laying down his lordship and letting them command him.

The mutual service interpretation of Ephesians 5:21 found a wide following in subsequent Christian teaching. It has the backing of authorities in Christian antiquity, especially Jerome and Chrysostom. Despite the neglect of Origen after the condemnation by Justinian (and possibly the Fifth Ecumenical Council) of some opinions attributed to him,³⁶ Origen’s exegesis in this and many other matters had already taken hold among eminent Church teachers and was influential through the subsequent centuries. Therefore, the mutual service

³⁶ For the question of Origen’s condemnation and its influence, see McGuckin, *Origen*, 25–26; Edwards, *Origen against Plato*, 2–5; and Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 20.

interpretation has a claim as a traditional interpretation or a reasonable extended sense, even though it most likely does not have a claim to be the understanding in the mind of the original scriptural author. **N&V**