

**Psalm 45**

*Harriet Auber (1773–1862)*

With hearts in love abounding,  
Prepare we now to sing  
A lofty theme, resounding  
Thy praise, almighty King;  
Whose love, rich gifts bestowing,  
Redeemed the human race;  
Whose lips, with zeal o'erflowing,  
Breathe words of truth and grace.

In majesty transcendent,  
Gird on Thy conquering sword;  
In righteousness resplendent,  
Ride on, incarnate Word!  
Ride on, O King Messiah,  
To glory and renown;  
Pierced by Thy darts of fire,  
Be every foe o'erthrown!

So reign, O God in Heaven,  
Eternally the same!  
And endless praise be given  
To Thine almighty name.  
Clothed in Thy dazzling brightness,  
Thy church on earth behold  
In robes of purest whiteness,  
In raiment wrought with gold.

And let each Gentile nation  
Come gladly in her train,  
To share Thy great salvation,  
And join her grateful strain:  
Then ne'er shall note of sadness  
Awake the trembling string;  
One song of joy and gladness  
The ransomed world shall sing.

**ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ**

*In the Nick of Time*

**Submitting to Each Other: A Response to Denny Burk**

*Kevin T. Bauder*

Denny Burk is one of the leading voices for biblical complementarianism, a perspective that claims that, according to Scripture, men and women can be genuinely equal while nevertheless existing in certain structured relationships (such as the home and the church) that require male leadership. Needless to say, biblical complementarianism runs counter to the spirit of the age. Because Burk is one of the defenders of biblical complementarianism, I celebrate his insights and influence. The following response, then, should be understood as a disagreement among friends who share the same overall perspective.

On Wednesday, August 21, Burk published an essay addressing Paul's command to "submit to one another in the fear of the Lord" (Eph 5:21). This text has been used by some opponents of complementarianism who argue that husbands and wives must share authority equally within the marriage relationship. Burk rightly objects to this egalitarian interpretation, but in my judgment he ends up denying what the text actually does teach.

Burk claims that the term *submit* (Greek *hupotasso*) "always indicates authority and submission" within ordered relationships where one party submits to another. Citing the standard New Testament lexicon (BDAG) as his authority, Burk insists that the term cannot be softened to include relationships in which parties mutually serve each other or put each other's needs first. Of course, Burk must then explain the reciprocal pronoun (*one another*). He adduces examples (Mt 24:10; Luke 12:1; Acts 19:38; 1 Cor 7:5, 11:33; Rev 6:4) that are supposed to show this pronoun functioning in contexts where "it is clear that reciprocal action is not in view. One party is performing some action and another party is receiving the action." The result is that Burk reads Eph 5:21 as if it said, "Some of you submitting to some others of you."

For his pièce de résistance, Burk points out that in Eph 5:22 wives are explicitly told to submit to their own husbands. This command is not repeated for husbands, who are told instead to love their wives. Furthermore, Burk states that Christ and the church do not mutually submit to one another (Eph 5:23-25). Consequently, he feels justified in denying that husbands and wives are under any obligation of mutual submission.



*In the Nick of Time* is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.  
Permission is granted to duplicate for personal and church use.

www.centalseminary.edu | info@centalseminary.edu  
900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

For each of his arguments, however, Burk places more weight on his evidence than it will bear. First, though he appeals to the standard New Testament lexicon (BDAG), he neglects to mention that it includes as one definition of *submit* (Greek *hupotasso*) “submission in the sense of voluntary yielding in love.” This definition is fully compatible with “mutually serving each other” and “putting each other’s needs first.” One of the biblical references that the lexicon lists for this usage is Eph 5:21. Furthermore, Gerhard Delling’s discussion of this word devotes an entire paragraph to occurrences in which it connotes “readiness to renounce one’s own will for the sake of others . . . and to give precedence to others,” including, “mutual submission among Christians” (TDNT 8:45).

Second, Burk’s observations about the reciprocal pronoun are mostly flawed. People actually can mutually betray and hate each other (Matt 24:10), step on each other (Luke 21:1), accuse each other (Acts 19:38), deprive each other of marital rights (1 Cor 7:5), and wait for each other to eat (1 Cor 11:33). The one text that appears to support Burk’s argument is Rev 6:4, where people are caused to kill each other. Even here, it is not impossible for individuals to be committing mutually simultaneous murder. In any event, when the reciprocal pronoun is used *for groups* it uniformly indicates action that occurs indiscriminately among the members of the group, not action in which one specified party is acting upon a different specified party.

Third, Burk completely ignores evidence about how the apostolic fathers understood Paul’s command. For example, 1 Clement contains an exhortation that paraphrases Eph 5:21: “let each man be subject to his neighbor” (1 Cle 38:1-2). Like Paul, 1 Clement illustrates this principle by using pairs of examples in which each member of the pair exhibits a kind of submission suitable to that party’s station. For example, the strong must not neglect the weak, and the weak must respect the strong. The rich must support the poor, and the poor must give thanks to God for the rich. In each of these pairs, both members are exhibiting mutual submission, though in different ways.

Fourth, if submission does mean serving the other and putting the other’s needs first, then Christ and the Church really do have a mutually submissive relationship. Christ served the interests of the Church when He “loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:25-27). For Burk to state that “[t]here is no reciprocal submission between Christ and his bride” is not evidence, but begging the question.

What, then, is Paul saying in Eph 5:21ff? The leading verb is found in Eph 5:18, where believers are commanded to stop being drunk with wine

but to be filled with the Spirit. In a series of modal participles, Paul describes what Spirit filling looks like: speaking, singing, and making melody (Eph 5:19), giving thanks (Eph 5:20), and submitting to each other in the fear of the Lord (Eph 5:21). The passage expects an attitude of mutual submission from every Spirit-filled believer toward all other believers.

The problem is that such mutual submission is difficult to conceptualize—in Paul’s day no less than in ours. Rather than attempting to explain the concept, however, Paul chooses to illustrate it. He pictures submission in three pairs of relationships. Each pair involves an order of authority. Paul shows what submission looks like for each member in each pair.

For wives, mutual submission looks like submitting to their own husbands *as to the Lord* (Eph 5:22-24)—and the change in wording is significant. For husbands, mutual submission looks like loving their wives as their own bodies and as Christ loved the church (Eph 5:25-33). For children, mutual submission looks like obeying parents and honoring father and mother (Eph 6:1-3). For fathers, mutual submission looks like not provoking their children to wrath but rearing them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph 6:4). For slaves, mutual submission looks like obeying their masters sincerely (Eph 6:5-8). For masters, mutual submission looks like treating slaves humanely and kindly (Eph 6:9).

I think that Burk is wrong to say that Eph 5:21 does not teach mutual submission. I also believe that egalitarians are wrong when they assume that mutual submission obviates authority structures. The most straightforward reading of Eph 5:21-6:10 is that God does require mutual submission, but that mutual submission is fully compatible with the exercise of authority. As Paul illustrates, rightly mutual submission will manifest itself differently on each side of a relationship that involves ordered authority.



---

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

---