



feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dear Church Family,

“Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Eph 5:21). The idea of submitting is generally perceived negatively in our secular culture. It clashes with the American ideals of freedom and the pursuit of happiness. Freedom as defined by John Stuart Mill, “the only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good our own way.” Submitting to anything means not pursuing our own way, and we see that as a hindrance on our lives. We prize the autonomy to decide for ourselves what is right and require the freedom to pursue it.

There are numerous passages in the NT where Christians are called on to submit and they are within contexts that we find objectionable (to governments, wives to husbands, slaves to masters). We may be tempted to conclude that the principle of submission is not relevant to our modern age. But the call to submission, as much as any other command in Scripture, is linked to the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. Before we seek to free ourselves from submission, we should be careful that we are not ignoring a core principle of the gospel.

The Greek word is a combination of two words, one that means to place in proper order and the other is the preposition under. So the literal meaning of the word is to consider that your proper place is under whoever or whatever you are submitting to. Every Christian believer is going to pay homage to the virtue of submitting to God. The challenge we face in scripture is that this submission to God is presented as being lived out in submission to others, including earthly authority. If we are not submitting to earthly authorities in our lives then it is likely that we are not submitting to authority at all, including God.

Submission is not just obedience. It will involve obedience, but it is obedience with an attitude of respect for authority. It is an obedience that flows from a view that authority is good and necessary and to honor it is in itself valuable and pleasing to the Lord. The predominant view of authority in our surrounding culture is a negative one. Rather than respecting authority, we are more likely to view authority with suspicion and seek to protect ourselves from authority rather than put ourselves under it.

Also, to obey out of agreement with authority does not require submission. It is only when I disagree with authority, when I would choose a different path, that I am called on to practice submission. True submission is voluntary, it is not coerced. If I obey out of coercion, meaning there are negative consequences if I do not obey, then my obedience is out of self-interest not submission. To obey out of submission is to obey out of respect for authority, not merely out of fear of consequences. With this understanding, do you have examples where you are submissive to authority in your own life?

An obvious question is what about submitting to authority that is unjust? Are we always called to submit? Similar to our discussion of church unity, I apply the image of a scale. Church unity is very important, but there can be weighty reasons why church unity would have to be sacrificed for truth and right practice. We saw that there were times when Paul divided from those who claimed the name of Christ. Likewise, we see examples of the apostles not being submissive. Peter is not submissive to the Jewish authorities in Acts 4:18-20, Paul is not submissive to Peter in Gal 2:11 (*But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.*) If the call to submission were an absolute, then it could be indiscriminately applied to any situation. But in the scale application analogy, we can determine when God’s authority may need to be outweigh man’s authority. Ultimately, in order to do this with wisdom, we need to have renewed minds when it comes to the principle of submitting.

Philippians 2:1-11 does not have the word submit, but it is a crucial passage for understanding submitting. Paul's concern in this passage is the unity of the fellowship in Philippi. He wants them to *"be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."* A key to having this unity is in verse 3, *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves."* This is a call to submit to one another. Counting others as more significant is considering yourself, your interests, to be lower in importance to others. Although you are equals, submitting means to see the other as superior, deserving your attention. So it is to take the view of being a servant of the other, just as servants must consider the interests of their master as a higher priority than their own interests.

Let's acknowledge how counter this perspective is to the way we naturally operate. We do not put the interest of others before our own, in fact we do the opposite. We consider our own interests to be our primary concern and might consider the interests of others if they do not interfere with our own interests. But if they do, we will choose our own interests. We highly value the ability to pursue our own interests and will resist anything that might interfere with that. To consider the interests of the other as a higher priority than my own... Why in the world would I ever want to do that? In the world, there is no good answer to this question. The answer only comes through the gospel.

Paul presents Jesus as the model of submission and calls upon the Philippians (and us) to have a mind of submission like Jesus. Jesus is a model of submission because his actions are the antithesis of the actions of Adam and Eve that inaugurated the reign of sin. Adam and Eve did grasp for equality for God and this fueled their rebellion against God's authority in their lives. And thus Christ's submission to the Father depicted here, is the reverse action of the Fall. Christ puts the interests of God the Father, who wants to reconcile men back to Himself, above his own interests. And he does this to such an extent that he gives his life in the most humiliating and degrading way possible on the cross. Never has there been such a giving up of status as what Jesus did. From one scholar, "submission as demonstrated by Christ is precisely antithetical to what constitutes a sinful mindset. Thus, the dilemma of sin which consistently seeks to promote the self over and against God is abolished by the very opposite mindset demonstrated in Christ's submission. The character of selflessness which is the center of Christ's submission becomes the status quo for those who claim salvation in Christ's name."

So we understand the command to submit to one another to be a part of working out our salvation. As we practice this command, we are putting to death our flesh which is always clamoring to be put first. When our perspective is shaped by the gospel, practicing submission is not a restrictive, necessary evil to be avoided when possible. It is a practice of saying no to our flesh, putting to death our sinful nature. It is a humbling act and we know that God gives grace to the humble and opposes the proud. Just as it was the way that Jesus walked according to the Spirit, it is also the way that we will walk according to the Spirit in our lives. All this should change our scale and give submission much more weight and value than our secular culture gives it.

Also, it does not take too much imagination to realize that the practice of submitting to one another would make for an extraordinary community. What would be the effect if we considered the interests of one another as more important than our own interests? What type of community bonds would be formed?

Imagine also how submitting to one another would affect issues that are divisive or threatening to community. That is the context of Phil 2:1-11 - the call to unity. In community we will have different perspectives and interests. Practicing submitting to one another would help us to navigate those differences. I urged you to consider how submitting to one another would affect efforts to talk about the divisive issue of race within our country and the church.

The call to submit to one another is a high calling. We can only do it with our eyes fixed upon the author and perfecter of our faith, Jesus the ultimate example of godly submission.

In Him and for Him,
Bo