

Ordered Community: Order and Subordination in the New Testament

Lutheran Theological Journal 39:2/3 (2005): 196-209.

John W Kleinig

Years ago when I was working as a chaplain at Saint Peters Lutheran College, I had a conversation with three Aboriginal girls about their difficulties in fitting into the boarding school and feeling at home in it. In the course of the conversation one of them remarked that as soon as they set foot on the campus, they had to switch from “we” to “I”, from thinking of themselves as part of a community to regarding themselves as individuals apart from their community.

We, I hold, must do the reverse, if we are to make sense of the New Testament teaching on subordination. Subordination presupposes the primacy of community over individuality, the need for communal solidarity for the wellbeing of each person. Unlike many modern western thinkers, the writers of the New Testament assume that we can only truly be ourselves as persons, and find lasting personal fulfilment, in community. None of us is ever independent and autonomous; we are all interdependent, like the leaves and branches in a tree, in our family, our workplace, our society, our nation, and our church. We are, as the New Testament reminds us, members of a body. This applies for our life in the human family as well as for life in God’s family. Our prosperity comes from receiving and giving in community. We suffer if we separate ourselves from our given social matrix. We damage our community if we go our own way and refuse to cooperate with each other under the supervision of our leaders. We threaten the health of the church if we, like a cancerous organ, disorder its ecology by taking what we want from it for ourselves, without giving what is required of us for its wellbeing. Community depends on subordination. Without subordination there is no true community.

The term subordination, like the Christian teaching about it¹, has, I concede, fallen into disrepute. Most people equate subordination with destructive subservience to authoritarian leaders, enforced servitude to power-mongers, and a disabling sense of inferiority in a hierarchy of domination. It bespeaks all that we abhor most. Yet, if I may put my case most provocatively, the proper practice of subordination, as taught in the New Testament, contributes much more to our experience of love, joy, contentment and peace than we realise. It has to do with a good conscience that comes from living a God-pleasing life in our station and vocation (Rom 13:5; Col 3:19; 1 Pet 3:18-21; 1 Clem 41:1). Subordination supplies the context for self-giving love to flourish in our families and our church, without the abuse of power. In fact, I maintain that the practice of subordination is a bulwark against authoritarianism, with its abuse of power and authority in the church.

The apostolic teaching on subordination should not be identified, as is commonly done, with inferiority, or subservience. It is possible to be subordinate and yet equal.

¹ Richard Foster asserts: “Of all the Spiritual Disciplines none has been more abused than the Discipline of submission. Somehow the human species has an extraordinary knack for taking the best teaching and turning it to the worst ends. Nothing can put people into bondage like religion, and nothing in religion has done more to manipulate and destroy people than a deficient teaching on submission” (96).

So, for example, I am subordinate as a lecturer to the principal of the Australian Lutheran College, just as I am subordinate to my national president as a pastor and to my pastor as congregational member. But that does not make me inferior to any of them, a lesser person, or lesser Christian, or lesser pastor than they. Even though I respect and obey them, I am not subservient to them, nor do they run roughshod over me as if I were their underling. None of them has ever dominated or exploited me, just because I am subordinate to them.

Subordination involves our willing acceptance of our given communal leaders and our whole-hearted cooperation with them because they are our leaders. We are subordinate to those who are our heads², because they occupy an office³ over us, a divinely instituted position of leadership in our community. We are subordinate to them in their office.

Since headship exists in community and works for its common good, it depends on that community for its existence and its legitimacy. Like the head of a body, leaders who exercise headship must be responsive and responsible, accessible and accountable, to the people that make up their community, for they cannot lead effectively unless they gain and retain their acquiescence and cooperation, their willing subordination.

My basic premise is that God has instituted certain basic orders for community, such as the family, government, and the church, with offices for leadership within them, for the delivery and distribution of his blessings to the people who live and work in them. By their subordination to these offices people receive and share God's blessings. That is the purpose of subordination.

In this paper which is a tribute to my teacher and dear colleague Vic Pfitzner, I would like to explore the startling teaching on subordination in the New Testament.⁴ It is offered to him as a token of appreciation for showing me that it is possible to engage in theological controversy in a peaceful godly way. Even though we have stood on opposite sides in the debate on the ordination of women, his generosity of spirit, his brotherly love, has kept us from falling out with each other but has, in fact, drawn us closer to each other in Christ. And so I thank him most warmly for reflecting God's loving kindness and patience in his interaction with me.

This is, in many ways, an exercise in the rehabilitation of a teaching that has fallen out of favour among us. There are three reasons for this exercise. First, subordination is one of the key terms in the two texts that have been used to restrict the ordained ministry to men, which is presently under discussion among us. Second, the apostolic teaching on subordination provides some very helpful orientation in the rather contentious areas of debate about marriage, family, and ministry in our society and the church. Third, the concept of certain divinely instituted communal orders that is

² See 1 Cor 11:3; Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18; 2:10. The sense of the Greek word *kephalē* in the New Testament has been the subject of some debate. While some have followed the lead of Kroeger in arguing for the use of this term in the sense of a 'source' rather than 'a person in authority', this has been challenged lexically by the work of Grudem (1994).

³ This is Luther's favoured term. It is still by far the best term for this reality, because it puts the accent on the position of leadership rather than on the person of the leader.

⁴ This essay is a revision of a paper that was given in June 9, 2004, to the Pastors' Conference of the Queensland District of the Lutheran Church of Australia.

implied by this term, could, in the future, prove to be useful in evangelising some of the young people in our society, who are so fed up with disordered freedom that they long for a given social ecology, a cosmic order that provides a measure of harmony and stability for them.

1. Clarification of Terminology

The New Testament uses a whole body of words in its teaching on subordination. As they all interact with each other semantically, they help to define what is meant by this term.

The idea of order is basic to all talk about subordination⁵. The Greek word for this is *taxis*. This is basically a military term (1 Clem 37:1-4; Thiselton, 1168). It was used, most commonly, in the Hellenistic world for the order of a military unit, a century, under its officer, a centurion. It does not usually refer to the ranking of soldiers in a military hierarchy, but to the organisation of a unit in battle order, around its commander and under its standard. He usually led from the centre of front line for battle, with his soldiers around him. This is how that word is used in a few places in the LXX (Num 1:52; 2 Macc 8:22; 13:21).⁶ At the time of Christ Jewish writers had also begun to use *taxis* for the liturgical order of the synagogue. It described the set pattern of leadership in prayer with communal responses, and in reading from the Scriptures and the exposition of them with communal silence, as well as the custom of sitting to teach and standing to pray.⁷ Similarly, the noun *taxis* is used as a liturgical term in the New Testament. Thus, while Luke 1:8 tells us that Zechariah was officiating as a priest on duty in the ‘order’ of his division, Hebrews contrasts the priestly ‘order’ of Melchizedek (5:6,10; 6:20; 7:11,17,21) with the priestly ‘order’ of Aaron (7:11). Paul instructs the Corinthian congregation that in their worship everything must be done according to the right pattern and in ‘order’ (1 Cor 14:40⁸; see also 1 Clem 40:1). This instruction does not just insist that their worship should be orderly, which would mean that any order was acceptable. It implies that the service

⁵ See Delling, 42, Yoder, 172, and Elliott, 486f.

⁶ It was also used in the LXX for God’s heavenly army (Judg 5:20; Job 38:12; Hab 3:11).

⁷ The best compilation and analysis of the data on this comes from Dautzenberg, 278-84.

⁸ 1 Clement 40-42 shows how this concept of a liturgical order was understood in the Early Church by reference to the service at the temple: “Now that we have looked into the depths of divine knowledge, we ought to do all those things in **order** (*taxis*) that the Master of the House has commanded to be performed at **ordered** (*tetagmenous*) times. He did not command that the liturgical offerings should be performed arbitrarily or **disorderly** (*ataktōs*), but at appointed times and hours. By his supreme will he himself has appointed where and through whom he wished them to be performed, so that they may all be done devoutly with his approval and be most acceptable to his will. Therefore those who make their offerings at the **ordered** (*prostetagmenois*) times are most acceptable and blessed, for, since they follow the regulations of the Master of the House, they do not go wrong. For to the high priest has been given his own liturgical tasks, and their own place has been **ordered** (*prostetaktaī*) for the priests, and their own ministries have been assigned to the Levites, while the layperson has been bound by lay **orders** (*prostagmasin*). Let each of us, brothers, be well-pleasing to God in our own **order** (*tagma*), with a good conscience, without transgressing the appointed rule (*kanōn*) of our liturgical service, and with reverence.....The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent from the Father. So Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ. Both came to be in a **well-ordered** way (*eutaktōs*) by the will of God. After they had received their instructions and been fully assured through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and convinced by the word of God, they went out with the full assurance of the Holy Spirit and preached the good news that the kingdom of God was about to come. So, as they preached from region to region and from town to town, they appointed their first fruits, after testing them by the Spirit, as bishops and deacons.”

should be done according to an established order, God's order, the right pattern for speaking and hearing God's word and for giving and receiving Christ's body and blood. Paul also tells the Colossians that he rejoices in their 'order' as a congregation (Col 2:5).⁹

The opposite of *taxis* is '*akatasṭasia*, disorder, whether it be political (Luke 21:9; 2 Cor 6:5), social (2 Cor 12:20; see James 3:8), liturgical (1 Cor 14:33), or spiritual (James 3:16; see 1:8) in character. Those who refuse to work for a living act *disorderly* ('*ataktōs*) in their community (2 Thess 3:6,11), while those who disrupt its worship are *disorderly* ('*ataktous*) people (1 Thess 5:14; see 1 Clem 40:2).

The noun *taxis* is connected with verb *tassō*, which means to put or arrange a person or thing in a set place (BAGD, 1). It can also mean to establish an office (eg. Rom 13:11) or to appoint a person to a position, like the centurion in Luke 7:8, or for a particular task (Acts 15:2; 22:10).

From *tassō* comes the compound verb *hypotassō*, which means to put someone or something in a position *under* someone or something.¹⁰ In its active voice it is used only of God in the New Testament (1 Cor 15:27,28; Phil 3:21; Heb 2:5,8; see Herm Man 12:42; Diog 10:2).¹¹ Likewise its passive voice is used only for God's placement of angels (1 Pet 3:22) and the whole universe (1 Cor 15:27,28; Heb 2:8) under himself and Christ. The verb *hypotassō*, however, is most commonly used in the middle voice for self-subordination, the voluntary placement (Delling, 42) of oneself under God or his appointed agents (Rom 8:7; 10:3; 13:1; 1 Cor 14:34; 15:28; 16:16; Eph 5:21,24; Col 3:18; Tit 2:5,9; 3:1; Heb 12:9; James 4:7; 1 Pet 2:13,18; 3:1,5; 5:3). The noun from this verb is *hypotagē, subordination* (2 Cor 9:13; Gal 2:5; 1 Tim 2:11; 3:4; see 1 Clem 37:5; Ign Eph 2:2). With respect to Christ, no human being is *anhypotaktos*, exempted from his headship and *independent* from him (Heb 2:8). So those who refuse to accept God and the positions of leadership established by him are also regarded as *anhypotaktos, insubordinate* (1 Tim 1:9; Tit 1:6,10).

From this overview of the terminology we may conclude that subordination has to do with order. God subordinates people to himself and his agents in the orders that he has ordained for human life on earth. Subordination is a voluntary act by which people cooperate with God by fitting into his arrangement for them in the world and in the church.¹²

⁹ The connection in Col 2:5 of 'order' with 'firmness of faith in Christ' does not make sense unless we take the order as the firm foundation for the stability of their faith in him.

¹⁰ While Thiselton quite rightly recognises that the notion of divine 'order' is implied by the use of this verb, he ignores the force of the prefix *hypo* and so argues that in 1 Cor 14:34 *hypotassesthōsan* should be translated: 'let them keep their ordered place' (1153-55). He therefore disconnects Paul's term from any implied link with the reality of headship as authority. Yet the regular use of this verb with the dative for the person as its indirect object shows that it always describes the acceptance of two things: the order of a community and the leadership of those who are responsible for its maintenance.

Subordination is therefore always associated with an ordered community and its legitimate leadership.

¹¹ All these passages allude to the Messianic Psalm 8:6, an indication of the importance of this text in the development of the teaching on subordination in the Early Church and its connection with christology.

¹² The question remains whether the words 'subordinate' and 'subordination' are the best English translations for *hypotassō* and its cognates. Translators have used terms such as 'be subject/subjection', or 'submit/be submissive/submission', or 'be obedient/obedience'. Yet as Yoder has shown (172), none of these translations is entirely satisfactory. Subjection conveys the notion of

2. The Pattern of Subordination in the New Testament

The references to subordination in the New Testament show that there are three basic temporal orders which have been ordained by God, two that belong to the realm of creation, the world, and one that belongs to the realm of redemption, the church.¹³ St Peter maintains that each of these is *anthrōpinē ktisei*;¹⁴ they are not human inventions but divinely established positions of leadership, offices created by God for humanity (1 Pet 2:13).¹⁵ This means that there is no single general order of creation.¹⁶ Each order differs from the other. What applies to one does not necessarily apply to the other. Likewise there is no general concept of subordination. It means something different in each different context.

First, we have **the order of the household**, the family. In keeping with the definition of the household by the tenth commandment in Exodus 20:17, it includes three different sets of relationships: wives and husbands (Eph 5:24; Col 3:18; Tit 2:5; 1 Pet 3:1,5); children and parents (Luke 2:51; Tit 2:9; 1 Pet 2:18); servants and masters (Tit 2:9; 1 Pet 2:18). The husband, whose head is Christ (1 Cor 11:3), is the head of the wife (1 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:23). Surprisingly, the call for subordination of a Christian wife to her husband does not focus on her obedience to him, but on her respect for

forceful debasement and domination by a person in power. Submission suggests passive subservience to the will of another person. Obedience touches only on one aspect of subordination in some contexts, for even if people carry out the commands of another, they can still be inwardly insubordinate and refuse to accept their situation. The advantage that the term subordination has over all these, despite its possible modern connotations of inequality and inferiority, is that, as Elliott notes (487), it carries with it the notion of adjustment to an order, rather than subservience to a person.

¹³ In contrast to the medieval teaching on the holy order of the monasticism, Luther maintains that there are three divinely instituted ‘holy orders’, the order of the ministry, the order of marriage, and the order of civil government. These holy orders are instituted by God’s most holy word, the same word that sanctifies them and the believers who faithfully do the work of God in them. They and their work are sanctified by God’s word and faith in it. Luther’s teaching on these three holy orders is summarised most succinctly in his ‘Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper’ of 1528 (LW 37, 364f). This teaching has confessional status by virtue of its inclusion in part nine of the Small Catechism in ‘The Table of Duties’. Kolb and Wengert translate Luther’s heading accurately by stating that these passages are God’s word for the ‘holy orders’ that God has established. See Bayer and Wannenwetsch for two perceptive analyses of Luther’s teaching on these three holy orders.

¹⁴ While Peter’s call for Christians to be subordinate ‘to every divinely instituted authority’ clearly refers to the Roman emperor and the governors under him, his use of ‘every’ shows that it also introduces his call for the subordination of slaves to their masters (2:18), wives to their husbands (3:11), and church members to their presbyters (5:5).

¹⁵ The German text of Article 16 of the Augsburg Confession echoes this by asserting that the government and the family are ‘true orders of God’ (*wahrhaftige Gottesordnung*) in which each person, according to his own calling, is required to ‘manifest Christian love and genuine good works in his station of life’ (Tappert, 38).

¹⁶ Elliott quite rightly observes that ‘(t)he societies of the Greco-Roman period were greatly concerned with the establishment and maintenance of “order” (*taxis*) in all areas of public and private life as a replication of an ordered universe (*kosmos*)’ (486). He therefore assumes that this world view was adopted uncritically by the Early Church. Yet that does not quite fit the evidence. The apostles Peter and Paul and the apostolic authors, such as Clement and Ignatius, did not urge Christians to harmonise themselves and their behaviour to the natural order of the world or even its created order, but called on them to align themselves with the risen Lord Jesus as the head of the church and the cosmos by subordinating themselves to those whom God had set over them as their heads in the family, government and the church. They therefore did not promote the principle of order but the word of God that ordered the foundational communities for human life in the world and conveyed his blessings to those who lived in them.

him as her head (Eph 5:22,33; 1 Pet 3:2). Its purpose is for her to receive his love (Eph 5:24-27), and, if she is married to an unbeliever, to gain his conversion (1 Pet 3:1-2). While the father is the head of the family, both parents are the heads of their children. Like Jesus with his parents (Luke 2:51), the subordination of children to their parents involves reverence (1 Tim 3:4) and obedience (Eph 6:1; Col 3:20). Its purpose is the reception of prosperity and enjoyment of longevity in the family (Eph 6:1-3). Since slaves are considered part of the family¹⁷, their status is similar to the children. Their subordination to their masters also involves obedience (Eph 6:1; Col 3:20) and reverence (1 Tim 3:4), as well as acceptable behaviour and utter reliability (Tit 2:9,10). Its purpose is the reception of Christ's approval and his reward (Eph 6:8; Col 3:24; 1 Pet 2:22). In all these cases the attitude of subordination results in the kind of behaviour that is appropriate to the relationship.

Second, we have **the order of government** (Rom 13:1,5; Tit 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13). The subordination of Christian citizens to their rulers involves obedience with four kinds of good works (Tit 3:2): the payment of taxes, the payment of custom's duties, respect for them, and honouring them (Rom 13:7). In this they do exactly what all good pagan citizens do. They, however, differ from them by their acceptance of their rulers as God's agents, his ministers (Rom 13:4) and assistants (Rom 13:6). The purpose of their subordination is the reception of benefits from God through their rulers and the possession of a good conscience before God (Rom 13:3-5; 1 Pet 2:14).

Third, we have **the order of the church** (1 Cor 14:40). Here the risen Christ is the head (Eph 5:24; cf. Eph 4:15; Col 1:18; 2:19) with God the Father as his head (1 Cor 11:3). Within that order everybody is subordinate to some others (Eph 5:21).¹⁸ The congregation is subordinate to God the Father for the reception of life from him (Heb 12:9; James 4:7) and to Christ for the reception of its salvation (Eph 5:24; see 4:15-16). Its subordination involves adherence to God's word (Rom 8:7) and the gospel as it is confessed in the creedal statements of the church (2 Cor 9:13).¹⁹ The members of the congregation are subordinate to its leaders who teach God's word (1 Cor 16:15,16²⁰; 1 Pet 5:5²¹; see Ign Eph 2:2; Ign Mag 2; 13:2; Ign Tr 2: 1,2; 13:2; Ign Pol

¹⁷ See Exod 20:17.

¹⁸ The participial clause in Eph 5:21 can be construed in two ways grammatically, either as the fifth consequential participial after the imperative, 'be filled with the Spirit' in 5:18, or as a new participial imperative that serves as a summary introduction to the instructions in 5:22-6:11 (Barth, 608f, and Clark, 365). I take it to function both ways. Over the last fifty years this verse has been understood as a call for mutual, reciprocal subordination either for husbands and wives to each other in marriage, or else for all members to each other in a family. This interpretation, however, is questionable, as has been shown by Doriani and Grudem (2002b). It is contradicted by the specific call for the subordination of wives to husbands in 5:22,24, without any corresponding call for reciprocity from their husbands. It has, traditionally, been taken to mean that all Christians are to be subordinate to those others who are their leaders. This remains a viable interpretation, since the pronoun '*allèlois*' is not only used reciprocally to refer to 'each other' and 'all others'. It can, in some cases, also be used distributively to refer 'each to another/each to some others' (see Matt 24:10; Luke 2:15; 12:1; 24:32; 1 Cor 11:33; Gal 6:2; Rev 6:4). 1 Clem 2:1 seems to paraphrase Paul's admonition: 'You were all humble-minded and not at all arrogant, subordinating yourselves rather than subordinating others, giving more gladly than taking.' See also its elaboration in 1 Clem 38:1-2.

¹⁹ See Pfitzner, 135.

²⁰ 1 Clem 42:4 tells us that the elders in the church at Corinth came from the 'first converts' there, who, according to Paul in 1 Cor 16:15, were from the household of Stephanas. So, when Paul urges the Corinthians to be subject to the household of Stephanas, he, most likely, refers to the elders in Corinth (Grudem, 2002b, 226, footnote 10).

6:1; 1 Clem. 1:3; 57:1,2; Pol. Phil. 5:3).²² This includes the silent subordination of women (and men!) to the men who teach God's word in their congregation (1 Cor 14:34; 1 Tim 2:11). The purpose of subordination is the reception of all that Christ gives to the church through his word.

Three things are worth noting from this data. First, the New Testament does not teach that there is a general universal order of creation. Second, it does not speak of the general subordination of all women to all men but only their subordination in particular relationships, according to their station, such as wives to husbands. There is therefore no theological reason why women cannot be leaders in government. Third, subordination means different things in different contexts and different relationships. While a woman may not speak as teacher in the liturgical assembly, she may question her husband at home (1 Cor 14:33-35) and teach younger women to be good wives and mothers (Tit 2:3-5).

Besides the earthly orders of family, government, and the church, there are three heavenly orders, **the order of the church triumphant, the angelic order and the order of the Holy Trinity**. In the order of the church triumphant God the Father has made Jesus the royal head of the universe for the benefit of the church and its mission to the world (1 Cor 15:25-27; Phil 3:21; Heb 2:5-8; 1 Pet 3:22). In the angelic order all the angels and the all things in the cosmos are now subordinate to Christ (1 Pet 3:22; 1 Cor 15:27; Eph 1:22; see Phil 2:9-11). In the order of the Trinity God the Father is the head of his Son, his royal deputy (1 Cor 11:3). In his vice-regal office Christ himself is, in some sense, operationally subordinate to the Father, until he finally hands back that office to the Father after the destruction of the last enemy, which is death (1 Cor 15:24-28).²³ This will occur only after the whole created order, together with the church in Christ, has been included in the order of the Holy Trinity, without disrupting and changing that order.

The Semantic Field of Subordination in the New Testament

Relationship of Subordination	Order	Nature of Subordination	Benefits of Subordination
Wives to husbands	Family	Respect	Husband's love Husband's conversion
Children to parents	Family	Reverence Obedience	Prosperity Longevity
Slaves to masters	Family	Reverence Obedience Winsomeness Fidelity	Christ's approval Christ's reward

²¹ The contrast between 'elders' as pastor-teachers in 1 Pet 5:1-4 and 'younger men' in 5:5 is rather puzzling. As Elliott has shown (838-41), the comparative adjective *neōteros* could refer to those who were later converts. It is used in Luke 22:26 for those who are led, in contrast to the 'great', those who lead. This pair of terms reflects the common Hebrew idiom, 'small and great' (Gen 19:11; 1 Sam 30:2,19; 1 Kgs 22:31; 2 Kgs 23:2; 25:26; 1 Chr 25:8; 26:13 2 Chr 15:13; Job 3:19). As in Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians 5:3, Peter most likely uses it to refer to the lay members of the congregation.

²² For an analysis of the teaching of Ignatius on subordination to the leaders of the church, see Hensley.

Christian citizens to rulers	State	Tax payment Duties payment Respect Honour	God's gifts Good conscience
Christians to God and his word	Church	Obedience (?)	Life from God
Christians to Christ	Church	Love (?)	Salvation
All Christians to the men who teach them	Church	Silent listening	Learning as disciples
Universe to Christ	Church triumphant		
Angels to Christ	Angelic order		
Jesus the Son to God the Father	Trinity		

3. Subordination and the Great Reversal

In the New Testament most of the teaching on subordination is found in the so-called *Haustafeln*, the house tables, the tables of domestic duty (Eph 5:21-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1; Tit 2:1-3:7; 1 Pet 2:11-3:22; 5:1-5)²⁴. They seem to reflect the tradition of catechesis in the Early Church. While they do reflect some common aspects of ethical teaching in the Ancient World, they themselves are quite unique in their form and content.²⁵

First, they are not primarily addressed to those free individuals who enjoy the independence and power that come from an assured income and a high position in society, and allow them to exercise benevolent patronage with their dependants and clients. Instead, they first address those who are dependent on others for their livelihood, wives, children, and slaves. They treat these 'subordinate' people as moral agents, people who are responsible for social cohesion and communal solidarity. Only then do they speak to the people who are the leaders, their husbands, parents, and masters. Thus we have matching sets of instructions that presuppose reciprocity and focus on the importance of the rank and file members of the family for its prosperity.

- Wives \sqsubseteq Husbands (Eph 5:22-33; Col 3:18-19; 1 Pet 3:1-7)
- Children \sqsubseteq Parents (Eph 6:1-4; Col 3:20-21)
- Slaves \sqsubseteq Masters (Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-4:1²⁶)

²⁴ See Elliott, 503-11, for a recent summary of the debate about the origin, nature and function of the so-called house tables as well as a bibliography on them and subordination in them.

²⁵ Delling makes this claim about the teaching on subordination in the New Testament: 'This word which belonged originally to the sphere of worldly order is now filled with new content as a term of order' (45). In what follows I am much indebted to the work of Yoder on the revolutionary teaching on subordination in the New Testament.

²⁶ Note that in 1 Pet 2:18-25 and Tit 2:9-14 the mention of slaves is not followed by the mention of their masters.

Second, the moral philosophers in antiquity did not call on wives, children, and slaves to be subordinate, because they had no choice but to submit to their superiors. In contrast, the call for subordination by Paul and Peter arises from their equality before God (Yoder, 175).²⁷ Through baptism and union with Christ each Christian has gained the same royal status and worth. All the saints share the same status as Christ the Son because they are all ‘sons’ of the heavenly king and coheirs with him Gal 3:26-4:7). They then have even greater freedom and dignity than the aristocracy in their society. This makes them people that matter, holy people who make a difference, God’s coworkers.

Third, while the teaching of moral philosophy in antiquity tried to prevent a social-political revolution upwards in which the ruled displaced their former rulers, the apostolic teaching on subordination presupposes a spiritual revolution downwards that was accomplished by the incarnation, death, and resurrection of God’s Son. Through him the original order of the human family has been redeemed and transformed so that it now provides the framework for the life of God’s heavenly family here on earth. In this new order the abuse of power is arrested and undone by self-sacrificial love.

In their epistles St Paul and St Peter promote a kind of revolutionary subordination that involves a complete reversal of social values.²⁸ In the ancient world the ideal person was an independent man, with economic resources and political clout, a self-sufficient autonomous person. Yet in the church this is reversed. There the ideal human being is a dependent person, someone who is subordinate and reliant on others, such as a wife or a child or a servant. Thus the church is the bride of Christ; all Christians are children of God and servants of Christ. The ideal state for the Christian is now no longer to be a master, with legally assured status, wealth and power, but to be a servant, free from enslavement to social status, wealth and power (1 Pet 2:16). Subordination has therefore become the normal condition in the church. All Christians are subordinate to Christ (Eph 5:21,23), to God the Father (Heb 12:9; James 4:7), and to the orders that God has established (1 Pet 2:13). So, every Christian is in subordination to someone else. All are under headship and authority. None are self-sufficient and autonomous

Fourth, the revolutionary character of the apostolic teaching on subordination is most evident in the content of the house tables. Even though the apostles accepted the given structure of the family and their societies, they called for a change in the attitude of those who lived in these communities. There are two surprises! On the one hand, by their subordination to their heads, wives, children, slaves and citizens are expected to do nothing more than what was normally required of them. In one very significant case the usual demands have been lightened. Thus, in a society where wives were often expected to serve their husbands sexually and to use their sexual assets to gain what they wanted, the apostles merely urge wives to ‘respect’ their husbands (Eph

²⁷ It is worth noting that there is very little explicit teaching about equality in the New Testament. Jesus never mentions it. The apostles teach about five aspects of it: the equality in divinity of the Son with the Father (Phil 2:16; see John 5:18), the equal bestowal of the Holy Spirit on Jews and Gentiles (Acts 11:7), the equal possession of faith by all Christians (2 Pet 1:1), the equal provision for the needs in the church through the offering for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:13), and the equal treatment of slaves by their Christian masters (Col 4:1).

²⁸ See Yoder, 185-87, and Foster, 101-05.

5:33) and to be fearless in doing what is good, without using their sexuality to manipulate their husbands (1 Pet 3:1-7).²⁹ On the other hand, the apostles required much more of husbands, fathers, and masters than what was demanded by custom and law. They were, in fact, to act as if they stood in the shoes of their subordinates. Instead of requiring their wives to demonstrate their love for them, husbands were to love their wives demonstrably and self-sacrificially, like Christ with the church (Eph 5:25-28; Col 3:19); instead of expecting their wives to meet their needs and honour them, they were to honour their wives and consider their needs (1 Pet 3:7). Paul does not demand that children should avoid provoking and angering their fathers; instead, fathers should not provoke and anger their children (Eph 6:4; Col 3:21). Most radically, masters were not just urged to treat their slaves fairly as if they were equals³⁰ (Col 4:1), but to do God's will by wholeheartedly 'serving' them (Eph 6:9)³¹.

Fifth, even though the apostles teach that God has created the order of the family and government (Rom 13:2; 1 Pet 2:13), they do not base their teaching on how and why Christians are to be subordinate to their leaders on God's creation of these orders or on a universal cosmic order. Instead, they find both the reason for subordination and the model of right subordination in Christ and his self-sacrificial service (Eph 5:21-27; Tit 2:9-10; 3:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13,21-25). Since they are in Christ and have him as their Lord (Eph 6:1; Col 3:18), they are to be subordinate to others out of reverence for him (Eph 5:22). Subordination is the apt thing to do for those who are in Christ (Col 3:18). Since willing subordination reflects Christ's attitude and character, it sends out the right message to the world and so promotes the mission of the church (Tit 2:4-5,9-14; 1 Pet 2:13-15; 3:1-2).

If Christ is the basis and the model for subordination, then only those who are in Christ can be truly subordinate, for they alone have been transformed by him and conformed to him by the Holy Spirit (Tit 3:1-7). Thus in Ephesians 5:18-21 Paul associates subordination with the communal performance of thanksgiving to God the Father through Jesus, and regards both as products of the Holy Spirit³². As we are filled with the Holy Spirit we receive the ability and desire to practice full subordination.

4. Conclusion

When the apostles Peter and Paul teach subordination, they do not thereby sanction the social, political, economic status quo, but, in fact, acknowledge how riddled it is with sin and the abuse of power. They do not propose a social or political agenda for the reformation and transformation of a society by the behaviour of its lower classes. Nor do they reinforce cultural roles or stereotypical patterns of behaviour in marriage, family life, and society at large. Instead, they show how Christians can already now, by faith, live with God as citizens of heaven within the earthly orders of a fallen world, because Christ has transformed the whole human life cycle from the womb to the tomb by his incarnation and his exaltation. Christ does not abolish the old divinely instituted orders of family and government to free his disciples from life in

²⁹ In fact, in 1 Cor 7:3-4 Paul teaches that Christian husbands and wives should, by common consent, provide mutual sexual access to each other.

³⁰ While the term '*isotēs*' can mean 'fairness' and 'equity', it may also mean 'equality'.

³¹ The phrase *ta panta poieîte* refers back to *met' eunoias douleuontes* in 6:7.

³² See footnote 18

community, but he redeems these orders so that they can accomplish their proper purpose. In practical terms, the apostles do not assimilate the church to the patriarchal family, which is modelled on the state with its coercive structures of power. On the contrary, Christ rules as the head of all principalities and powers in all governments and all families for the sake of the church (Eph 1:20-23). The family and government are meant to serve Christ and his church. By fulfilling its vocation of serving others in self-giving love, the church provides the model for life in community as it reflects the order of self-giving in the Holy Trinity.

In sum: the apostolic teaching on subordination does not establish a chain of command for the exercise of power by those who sit at the top; it promotes a chain of transmission from the triune God for the delivery of blessings through his appointed agents in the church and in the world.

No one has summed this whole teaching up more vividly and aptly than Clement in his First Letter to the Corinthians. He writes these glowing words to that congregation which had been riddled with insubordination (37-38)³³:

Brothers, let us therefore campaign most strenuously under the Son's blameless **orders** (*prostagma*). Let us consider those who campaign with our leaders, with what **good order** (*eutaktōs*), with what willingness, and with what **subordination** (*hypotetagmenōs*) they fulfil their **orders** (*diatassomena*). They are not all generals or colonels or captains or lieutenants, or so forth; but each one in his own **order** (*tagma*) fulfils the **orders** (*epitassomena*) given by the emperor and the leaders. The great cannot exist without the small, nor the small without the great. There is a kind of mixture that is beneficial to all.

Take our body! The head without the feet is nothing; likewise, the feet without the head are nothing. Even the smallest parts of the body are necessary and useful to the whole body. But all breathe together and act in single **subordination** (*hypotagē*), so that the whole body may be saved.

So let our whole body be saved in Christ Jesus, and let each person be **subordinate** (*hypotassomai*) to his neighbour, as appointed with his gift (*charisma*). Do not let the strong neglect the weak, and let the weak respect the strong. Let the rich provide for the poor, and the poor give thanks to God, because he has given them someone to fill up what they lack. Let the wise show their wisdom in good deeds rather than in words. Do not let the humble-minded speak about themselves, but let others speak about them. Do not let those who are sexually chaste boast, knowing that it is someone else who grants them this self-control.

So brothers, let us consider how we were begotten, how we entered the world, how God has shaped and created us from a dark grave and brought us into his world, where he had prepared his benefits for us before we were even born. Since therefore we have received all these things from him, we ought to give thanks to him for everything, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

³³ This translation is a slightly modified version of the text in Goodspeed, 67f.

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