

The Theology of Gender - 5. Woman in the New Creation. The “submission” (Sofia Matzarioti-Kostara)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



St. Gregory of Nyssa, in an extensive homily on 1 Co 15:28^[1], written to challenge the heresy of Eunomius, explains the various meanings of the word *ὑποταγή* (submission) in Scripture. He clarifies that the word is used in the case of war to indicate subjugation to the victor, as well as the power of humans over nature and other living creatures. With regard to subjugation, he also mentions slavery where there is unavoidable necessity, and finally, the faithful who submit themselves to God for the purpose of salvation. His point is to differentiate these meanings from that of submission (*ὑποταγή*) of the Son to the Father. Interestingly enough, in the entire homily St. Gregory does not mention the case of the subjugation of women to men. Possibly he considers the use of the word submission in the case of women, as having the same meaning as the case of the Son's submission to the Father, something that is also argued by St. John Chrysostom.



Ὑποταγή (submission) of women to men according to St. John Chrysostom^[2] is similar to the submission of the Son to the Father and presupposes freedom and ὁμοτιμία (equivalent honor). Chrysostom introduces a revolutionary sociology in the 4th century against the exploitation and degradation of women in the environment of their families. However, with this interpretation he does not attempt to support the destruction of the given order that pertains to the different functions of the persons. He explains this order according to its higher level, which is parallel to the relationship between the persons of the Trinity.

The same commandment to women is also given by St. Peter in his first Epistle^[3]. The meaning of the word ὑποταγή is in accordance with that of St. Paul. All Christians are called to respect the given order of society, but in harmony with Christ's spiritual discipline. This elevates the ethical commandments to a higher level. Women are asked to be submissive to their husbands in order to give them a living example of genuine Christian life, so that those men who are not faithful might be transformed. Men also are called to respect and honor their wives since they are co-heirs (συγκληρονόμοι) of God's grace and so that the harmonious spiritual life of the two is not disrupted.

In St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (5: 22-33) one finds the theological grounds for the essence of marriage, which the Church proclaims in the marital service. The prototype of Christ's love to His Church is the model that Orthodox theology uses to describe the matrimonial union and the relationship between the spouses. The end of verse 33^[4] (*nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband*)^[5] has been misunderstood by women and led to the popular folk custom according to which the bride, at that point of the rite, would step on the foot of the bridegroom as a

sign of protest against his power. Contrary to the meaning that society has given to that statement, the pure patristic understanding is expressed by St. John Chrysostom in his tenth homily on Ephesians. He expresses a modern opinion for his age, by saying that fear is appropriate for slaves and sometimes not even for them, but that the woman does not have a true matrimonial bond if she trembles because of her husband.

The epistle reading in the wedding service is Eph. 5: 22-33^[6]. This paragraph is preceded by the phrase “*submitting to one another in the fear of God*”^[7] (v. 21). According to the critical editions, this phrase is the beginning of the paragraph v. 22-33, and not the end of the previous one^[8]. In this setting, the submission of woman to man is in the spirit of the mutual subjugation that is also asked of all Christians also in other Scriptural references.^[9] In 1 Corinthians Paul is repeating the same schema of parallel obedience between man and woman, as between Christ and God the Father.^[10] Moreover, according to St. Chrysostom, the image of the man as the head and woman as the body is used to represent the unity of the two in one flesh, not the subordination of the woman.^[11]

The interpretation of St. Paul’s writings should not be attempted without consideration of the times and society in and for which it was written. It is true that he balances between the Rome-Judaic sociological establishment of his time and the new “creation” that Jesus’ Gospel brought to this world. In no case did St. Paul try to contradict this establishment; his vision was to teach his brothers and sisters how to transform their lives through the example of Christ. Thus, he asks women to submit to their husbands as is the social ethos; but more than this he asks men to love their wives with a sacrificial love that is nowhere found in the world, but in Christ. It is a misunderstanding to maintain that the central point of this quote is the submission of women to men, since the message of Ephesians is the mutuality in the relationship between man and woman according to the prototype of the relationship between Christ and His bride, the Church. In this relationship between Christ and the Church one should note that Christ was crucified and died for the Church. The hierarchical placement of man and woman in their marriage has according to St. Paul, this type of theological background. According to the model of Christ and His Church, man is the head of the body of the family as Christ is the head of the body of the Church, the man therefore loves his wife to the point of sacrifice and death for her.

The submission of women to men was established from classic times and was a norm in Judaic culture and its surrounding civilizations. It is obvious in this writing that it does not attempt to call the social order of that time into question, as this is

not the message of the “Good News.” The emphasis is that all Christians are asked to put into practice the Christian ethos in order to transform the imperfect reality of this world into the kingdom of God on earth. Admittedly, the main efforts are asked of men, because they are called to go beyond the standards of their time and to respect and honor their wives contrary to the ordinary model of man that was acceptable.

Despite the fact that St. Paul accepts the given social order, that acceptance exists only when the social ethos does not contradict the Christian ethos. Thus, he does not accept the typical model of man who possesses his wife, while he can have extramarital relationships.[\[12\]](#) Origen, who was one of the first interpreters of St. Paul’s letters, considers man and woman as equal with respect to their relationship as a couple.[\[13\]](#) He believes that there is no hierarchy because one belongs to the other, and vice versa. St. John Chrysostom clarifies the apparent contradiction that appears in St. Paul’s letters on the issue of gender in Eph 5:22-33 and 1 Co 7: 1-7. According to him, when St. Paul refers to spiritual topics concerning salvation, virtue, and ethics, there is absolute equality between man and woman. Nevertheless, when St. Paul reflects on social issues, he differentiates the functions and roles, and gives priority to men.[\[14\]](#) The same interpretation is given by Oikoumenios[\[15\]](#), who also believes that in issues of social order and hierarchy man has the priority, but between the couple there is absolute equality.

Theodoretus of Cyrus (5th century) gives a key evaluation on the significance of St. Paul’s writings on the issue of gender. He considers St. Paul as being ahead of his time because he legislates for men contrary to the social establishment and actually supports the equality of man and woman.[\[16\]](#)

Finally, no one can question the equality of men and women on issues of virtue and spirituality, as expressed throughout patristic theology. The Fathers admit that women are athletes of Christ with the same and often greater successes than men.[\[17\]](#)

In the early Christian era, the role and participation of women in the Christian faith is reflected in the writings of contemporary Roman writers. In the second century, the enemy of Christianity, Celsus, calls Christianity “the religion of women”, and Emperor Licinius tries to restrict the new faith by forbidding women from visiting Christian Churches.[\[18\]](#) These testimonies from the non-Christians prove the important place of women in the newly formed Christianity.

[\[1\]](#)Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Η Υποταγή του Υιού στον Πατέρα: Ομιλία Εἰς τό ρητόν «Ὅταν ὑποταγῇ αὐτῷ τά πάντα, τότε καί αὐτός ὁ Υἱός ὑποταγήσεται τῷ ὑποτάξαντι αὐτῷ τά πάντα»*

, (Κατερίνη, 1996).

[2] «Ὡςπερ ὁ ἀνὴρ ἄρχει τῆς γυναικός, φησὶν, οὕτω καὶ ὁ Πατὴρ τοῦ Χριστοῦ...καὶ γὰρ εἶπερ ἀρχὴν ἐζήτει εἰπεῖν καὶ ὑποταγὴν ὁ Παῦλος, ὡς σύ φής, οὐκ ἂν γυναῖκα παρήγαγεν εἰς μέσον, ἀλλὰ δοῦλον μᾶλλον καὶ δεσπότην. Εἰ γὰρ καὶ ὑποτέτακται ἡμῖν ἡ γυνή, ἀλλ' ὡς γυνή, ἀλλ' ὡς ἐλευθέρα καὶ ὁμότιμος. Καὶ ὁ Υἱὸς δέ, εἰ καὶ ὑπήκοος γέγονε τῷ Πατρί, ἀλλ' ὡς Υἱὸς Θεοῦ, ἀλλ' ὡς Θεός. Ὡςπερ γὰρ πλείων ἡ πειθὼ τῷ Υἱῷ πρὸς τὸν Πατέρα ἢ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πρὸς τοὺς γεγεννηκότας, οὕτω καὶ ἡ ἐλευθερία μείζων» Χρυσόστομος, "Εἰς Α΄ Κορ." Ὁμ. ΚΣΤ, 2. PG 51,214-216

[3] «Ὅμοίως αἱ γυναῖκες ὑποτασσόμεναι τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν, ἵνα καὶ εἰ τινες ἀπειθοῦσι τῷ λόγῳ, διὰ τῆς τῶν γυναικῶν ἀναστροφῆς ἀνευ λόγου κερδηθήσονται, ἐποπτεύσαντες τὴν ἐν φόβῳ ἀγνὴν ἀναστροφήν ὑμῶν...Οἱ ἄνδρες ὁμοίως συνοικοῦντες κατὰ γνώσιν, ὡς ἀσθενεστέρῳ σκεύει τῷ γυναικείῳ ἀπονέμοντες τιμὴν, ὡς καὶ συγκληρονόμοι χάριτος ζωῆς, εἰς τό μή ἐγκόπτεσθαι τὰς προσευχὰς ὑμῶν.» 1 Pt 3:1-7.

[4] «πλὴν καὶ ὑμεῖς οἱ καθ' ἓνα ἕκαστος τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα οὕτως ἀγαπάτω ὡς ἑαυτόν, ἡ δέ γυνή ἵνα φοβῇται τὸν ἄνδρα»

[5] The translation is not correct because the Greek text refers to "fear" and not to "respect".

[6] «Αἱ γυναῖκες τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν ὑποτάσσεσθε ὡς τῷ Κυρίῳ, ὅτι ὁ ἀνὴρ ἐστὶ κεφαλὴ τῆς γυναικός, ὡς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς κεφαλὴ τῆς ἐκκλησίας...οἱ ἄνδρες ἀγαπάτε τὰς γυναῖκας ἑαυτῶν, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς ἠγάπησε τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ ἑαυτόν παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς. Οὕτως ὀφείλουσιν οἱ ἄνδρες ἀγαπᾶν τὰς ἑαυτῶν γυναῖκας ὡς τὰ ἑαυτῶν σώματα...ἕκαστος τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα οὕτως ἀγαπάτω ὡς ἑαυτόν, ἡ δέ γυνή ἵνα φοβῇται τὸν ἄνδρα. » Eph 5:20-33.

[7] «ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις ἐν φόβῳ Χριστοῦ».

[8] See J. Karavidopoulos, "Τὰ ἀγιογραφικὰ ἀναγνώσματα τῆς Ἀκολουθίας τοῦ Γάμου: Ἑρμηνευτικὴ προσέγγιση" in the book *Ὁ Γάμος στὴν Ὁρθόδοξη Ἐκκλησία*, 140.

[9] «πάντες δέ ἀλλήλοις ὑποτασσόμενοι τὴν ταπεινοφροσύνην ἐγκομβώσασθε» 1 Pt 5:5.

[10] «θέλω δέ ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι ὅτι παντὸς ἀνδρός ἡ κεφαλὴ ὁ Χριστὸς ἐστὶ, κεφαλὴ δέ γυναικὸς ὁ ἀνὴρ, κεφαλὴ δέ Χριστοῦ ὁ Θεός» 1Co 11:3.

[11] «Οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν εἷς οὐδέπω, ἀλλ' ἡμῖς τοῦ ἐνός...Γυνή γὰρ καὶ ἀνὴρ οὐκ εἰσὶν

ἄνθρωποι δύο, ἀλλ' ἄνθρωπος εἷς...εἰ ὁ μὲν κεφαλὴ, ἡ δὲ σῶμα, πῶς δύο;» “Εἰς Κολασσαεῖς IB’”, PG 62: 387-388.

[\[12\]](#) «τῇ γυναικί ὁ ἀνὴρ τὴν ὀφειλομένην εὖνοιαν ἀποδιδότω, ὁμοίως δέ καί ἡ γυνή τῷ ἀνδρί. ἡ γυνή τοῦ ἰδίου σώματος οὐκ ἐξουσιάζει, ἀλλ' ὁ ἀνὴρ ὁμοίως δέ καί ὁ ἀνὴρ τοῦ ἰδίου σώματος οὐκ ἐξουσιάζει, ἀλλ' ἡ γυνή» 1 Co 7:3-4.

[13] «...μή νομιζέτω ὁ ἀνὴρ ἐν τοῖς κατὰ τὸν γάμον πράγμασιν ὑπερέχειν τῆς γυναικὸς ὁμοιότης ἐστὶ καὶ ἰσότης τοῖς γεγαμηκόσι πρὸς ἀλλήλους» in the article Γεωργίου Πατρώνου, "Γάμος καὶ Αγαμία κατὰ τὸν Απόστολο Παύλο," *Θεολογία*, τόμος ΝΖ, τεύχος 1, 185.

[14] «Ἡ γυνή τοῦ ἰδίου σώματος οὐκ ἐξουσιάζει, ἀλλὰ καὶ δούλη καὶ δέσποινα ἐστὶ τοῦ ἀνδρός...μηδένα κύριον ὄντα ἑαυτοῦ, ἀλλ' ἀλλήλων δούλους...Εἰ δέ σώματος οὐκ ἐξουσιάζει ὁ ἀνὴρ ἢ ἡ γυνή, πολλῶ μᾶλλον χρημάτων. Ἀκούσατε ὅσαι ἄνδρας ἔχετε, καὶ ὅσοι γυναῖκας. Εἰ γάρ σῶμα ἔχειν ἴδιον οὐ χρή, πολλῶ μᾶλλον χρήματα. Ἀλλαχοῦ μέν οὖν πολλήν δίδωσι τῷ ἀνδρὶ τὴν προεδρίαν καὶ ἐν τῇ Καινῇ καὶ ἐν τῇ Παλαιᾷ λέγων Ἐν τῷ ἀνδρὶ σου ἡ ἀποστροφή σου, καὶ αὐτός σου κυριεύσει· ὁ δέ Παῦλος διαιρῶν οὕτω καὶ γράφων Ὅι ἀνδρες ἀγαπᾶτε τὰς γυναῖκας, ἡ δέ γυνή ἵνα φοβῇται τόν ἀνδρα ἕνταῦθα δέ οὐκέτι τό μεῖζον καὶ τό ἕλλατον, ἀλλὰ μία ἡ ἐξουσία. Τί δήποτε; Ἐπειδὴ περὶ σωφροσύνης ὁ λόγος ἦν αὐτῷ. Ἐν μέν γάρ τοις ἄλλοις πλεονεκτεῖτω, φησὶν, ὁ ἀνὴρ ἕνταῦθα δέ σωφροσύνης λόγος, οὐκέτι. Ὁ ἀνὴρ τοῦ ἰδίου σώματος οὐκ ἐξουσιάζει, οὐδέ ἡ γυνή. Πολλή ἡ ἰσοτιμία, καὶ οὐδεμία πλεονεξία» Ἰωάννου Χρυσοστόμου, “Ὁμιλία ιθ’,” PG 61, 152.

[15] «Τί δὴ ποτε δέ ἐν μέν τοῖς ἄλλοις τό πλέον δίδωσι τῷ ἀνδρί ἔνθα περί ὑποταγῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας ὁ λόγος αὐτῷ, νῦν δέ τὴν ἰσότητα ἔδωκε; Καὶ φαμεν, ὅτι ἐκεῖ μέν, περί τοῦ ἀρχικοῦ ὁ λόγος αὐτῷ, νῦν δέ, περί σωφροσύνης, ἐν ᾗ οὐδεὶς τό πλέον ἢ τό ἔλαττον ἔχειν ὀφείλει» Οἰκουμένιος Τρίκκης, *PG* 118, 724C.

[\[16\]](#) «”Τῇ γυναικί ὁ ἀνὴρ τὴν ὀφειλομένην εὐνοίαν ἀποδιδότω, ὁμοίως δέ καί ἡ γυνή τῷ ἀνδρί”. Περὶ σωφροσύνης ταῦτα νομοθετεῖ, καὶ τὸν ἄνδρα καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα ἴσως ἔλκειν κελεύων τὸν τοῦ γάμου ζυγόν, καὶ μὴ ἐτέρωσε βλέπειν καὶ διαφθείρειν τὴν ζεύγλην, ἀλλὰ τὴν προσήκουσαν ἀλλήλοις εὐνοίαν ἀπονέμειν. Τῷ δέ ἀνδρί προτέρω τοῦτο νενομοθέτηκεν, ἐπειδὴ γυναικὸς κεφαλὴ ὁ ἀνὴρ. Οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἀνθρώπινοι νόμοι ταῖς μὲν γυναιξὶ διαγορεύουσι σωφρονεῖν, καὶ κολάζουσι παραβαινούσας τὸν νόμον·τούς δέ γε ἄνδρας τὴν ἴσην σωφροσύνην οὐκ ἀπαιτοῦσιν. Ἄνδρες γὰρ ὄντες οἱ τεθεικότες τούς νόμους, τῆς ἰσότητος οὐκ ἐφρόντισαν, ἀλλὰ σφίσι συγγνώμην ἀπένειμαν. Ὁ δέ γε θεῖος Ἀπόστολος, ὑπὸ τῆς θείας χάριτος ἐμπνεόμενος, τοῖς ἀνδράσι πρῶτοις νομοθετεῖ σωφροσύνην» Θεοδωρήτου Κύρου, “Ἑρμηνεία εἰς τὴν Α΄ πρὸς Κορινθίους Ἐπιστολήν” PG 82,

[17] «Ἀρετῆς δεκτικόν τό θῆλυ, ὁμοτίμως τῷ ἄρρενι, παρά τοῦ κτίσαντος γέγονε. Καί τί γάρ ἡ συγγενεῖς διά πάντων τοῖς ἀνδράσιν ἐσμέν; Οὐ γάρ σάρξ μόνον ἐλήφθη πρὸς γυναικός κατασκευήν, ἀλλά καί “ὅστοῦν ἐκ τῶν ὀστέων”. Ὡστε τό στερρόν καί εὐτονον καί ὑπομονητικόν, ἐξ ἴσου τοῖς ἀνδράσι, καί παρ’ ἡμῶν ὀφείλεται τῷ Δεσπότῃ» PG 31,241A,and «Στρατεύεται καί τό θῆλυ παρά Χριστῷ, τῇ ψυχικῇ ἀνδρεία καταλεγόμενον εἰς τήν στρατείαν καί οὐ διά τήν τοῦ σώματος ἀσθένειαν ἀποδοκιμαζόμενον καί πολλάι γυναῖκες ἠρίστευσαν ἀνδρῶν οὐκ ἔλλατον» PG 31, 624D,and «...Ὅμοιαι γάρ αἱ φύσεις ἀμφοτέρων ἐπλάσθησαν καί ἴσαι τούτων αἱ πράξεις...Μή γάρ προφασιζέσθω τό ἀσθενέστερον ἢ γυνή· ἐν γάρ τῇ σαρκί τοῦτο· ἡ μέντοι ψυχὴ ἐπίσης τῇ ἀνδρείᾳ τήν οἰκείαν ἔσχηκε δύναμιν...Ὑπεραίρει γάρ πολύ καί τήν ἀνδρείαν φύσιν ἢ τοῦ θήλεος περί τό ἐνστατικόν τοῦ καλοῦ καί καρτερικόν· καί οὐκ ἂν ποτε ἐξισωθείη ἀνὴρ γυναικί ἢ περί τήν τῆς νηστείας καί τήν τῆς ἄλλης ἀρετῆς ἀσκησιν ἢ τό ἐν δάκρυσιν δαψιλές ἢ τό ἐν προσευχαῖς φιλόπονον ἢ τό ἐν εὐποιίαις ἀφθονον...» PG 30,33C-36B.

[18] Barbara Kalogeropoulou-Metalenou, *Η γυναίκα στην καθ’ ἡμᾶς Ανατολή*, (Αθήνα, 1992).