
Mutual Submission
A Radical Approach to Christian
Team Leadership

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Introduction

Definition: Hypotage = arrange in order under (a recognised authority).

“No one is going to tell me what to do”. “Submission” is not an attractive word in the West. Some people do not like the idea of submission because they are not “on top”. The world’s standards sometimes creep into the church, where they are unintentionally imitated. Take Deuteronomy 28:13: “The LORD will make you the head, not the tail”; adapted out of context, it is used in a triumphalist way on behalf of man. God will not give his glory to anyone (Isaiah 42:8). Other people feel threatened by leaders and prefer to remain outside of accountability structures.

But without submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and then to one another, individuals and ministry teams stand alone and remain limited, gifted leadership becomes dysfunctional, pursuing society’s objectives, and not according to Christ.

Jesus modelled servant leadership. He was completely confident of His mission and authority, but submitted to the Father; during his earthly ministry He was prepared to wash the feet of his disciples, a duty normally left to slaves (and commanded us to have the same attitude, John 13:15).

I have seen some high potential Christian leadership teams break up. Not over doctrinal schisms, but because of relationship failures. Success went to their heads, they (tragically) jostled for relative position and ascendancy, and ultimately forfeited great blessing because their ways were inimical to the cause, character and testimony of Jesus Christ. They simply would not submit to one another.

The challenge for modern Christian leadership is to work through second order differences and keep our eyes on the prize, in a spirit of humility, collaboration and dependence on God.

“Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.” (Ephesians 5:21)

1. Importance of Integrated Teams

Christian teams that “work” practice mutual recognition and submission.

Christian leadership is not intended to be a “one man band”, with a solitary figure declaiming from a pulpit, or executive office, with everyone else in spectator roles.

The most effective leadership comes from integrated, synergistic teams. Consider the following analogies from the Bible and life.

- The Trinity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three in One; with order, no overlapping, or competition. Jesus always did what pleased the Father; the Holy Spirit came to glorify Jesus - (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13, 14)
- The human body (1 Corinthians 12:14-26); God has placed us in the Body of Christ, according to His purpose; we need one another organically, as much as our body parts need one another.
 - without one another we are incomplete; what if one part said “I don’t need the rest”?
- The family – God sets the solitary in families (Psalm 68:6), in His order (Ephesians 5).
- Orchestra = harmony; in tune with one another, playing from the same song sheet. Senior leadership is critical; the buck has to stop with someone, but the senior leader is not alone.
- Hospital teams – submission to one another’s strengths is essential, specialities exist (general medicine, midwifery, coronary care, mental health), but only as part of a whole service.
- Sporting teams; one leader; the most effective coach recognises everyone’s skills & assigns places and members play to their strengths for the sake of all.
- Teams that work recognise and allow for the expression of differing gifts: 1 Cor 12; Romans 12, with diversity but complementarity.
- If we focus on position, we are focussing on the wrong thing. Teams that are hierarchical miss out on outcomes intended by God because they do not “run on all cylinders” & become side-tracked.
- “Mutual” leadership functions by relationship with God, not hierarchical for the sake of an arbitrary “pecking order”.

Mutual submission does not undermine authority; it enhances it.

2. Results of Erroneous Paradigms

Many poor leadership models exist. Some are adopted by the church.

- Viewing people based on their “roles”.
 - “Laity” - leads to others (usually non-professionals) neglecting or stifling their spiritual gifts.
- The world’s views of leaders are predicated on dominance. Jesus’ view was:
 - “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” (Mark 9:35)
- “Untouchability of senior leadership (“Touch not the Lord’s anointed” – 1 Chronicles 16:22, taken out of context). Many Christians are involved in churches where submission is *not* mutual.
 - In such churches “submission” is enforced, leading to subjugation (often seen in cults)
 - It takes great humility to work effectively with such leadership
- Competition for position and defence for its own sake (“there arose a reasoning among them, which of them should be greatest” – Luke 9:46) is familiar, but not consistent with the Kingdom of God (Luke 22:26).
- Unwillingness to be corrected. Only a short step to assumptions about infallibility.
- Lack of accountability; leads to extremist teaching or relationships; “Who are you to correct me?”
- Singularity of leadership (cf it is not God’s will that solo leaders do all the work, fill all the roles, carry all of the responsibility).
 - leads to burn-out, diminished effectiveness of the local church
 - loss of “richness” in the Christian community, as people settle for less than God’s best
- “Autonomy” often leads to anarchy.
- Western narratives of “democracy”, “independence” and “rights” have permeated the Christian culture (in part as a reaction to excesses due to more hierarchical ecclesiastical structures, in both high and low church traditions, including Pentecostal denominations), leading to a culture of self-assertiveness, defence of individual freedoms, personal demands, trade-offs and expectations that are not in line with what the Bible teaches.

Biblical mutual submission stops us adopting/imitating the world’s patterns.

- Cultural mindsets impact how we view Christian leadership, some societies (especially in Asia) revere senior leadership but permit the growth of totalitarianism, this has touched Christian thinking; in the West, on the other hand, the “tall poppy syndrome” means senior leaders are taken less seriously, often derided, this has had the effect of undermining the status of leaders; neither mindset reflects the teaching of Jesus Christ.
- “Me first” culture starts with “I make all my own decisions”
- Just because an idea is dominant in the “Christian” West does not mean it “fits” the Gospel.
- Leaders who direct churches within the confines of their exclusive thinking and permission end up narrowing creativity, stifling emerging leaders and diminishing results:
 - “I want to be able to look around and see my team following me at conferences.”
 - “Your role is to make me look good.”
 - “I am the one with the vision.”
 - “God speaks to me first.”
 - “I am not prepared to give up my role/authority”
 - Mutual submission actually *strengthens* spiritual authority.
- Leadership that has to assert itself has, in fact, an inherently weak foundation; it is unstable, defensive, carnal, wrong thinking.
- Personal goal seeking that stresses independence produces a lot of lonely people.
- Not about merit, personal worth, point scoring, or individual “goodness”.
 - “Each of us should please our neighbours for their good, to build them up.” (Roman 15:2)
- Not a question of hierarchy or authoritarianism, but influence, heart.

By being submitted to one another we actually create a protective shield.

3. Jesus Christ & Submission

- Jesus' life and teaching flew in the face of cultural mores that the way to lasting happiness is to look after ourselves first
 - He came to the world to occupy a *body* prepared for him and become a sacrifice for our sins (Hebrews 10:6). For the creator of the world (Hebrews 1:2, 3) this represented absolute submission to the Father's will.
 - When he was born all the angels worshipped Him (Hebrews 1:6), but as He grew up He submitted to his earthly parents in everything (Luke 2:51).
- Jesus was always pursuing His "Father's business" (Luke 2:49)
 - He taught us that mutual submission is radical but safe.
- He only did what Father wanted (John 8:29)
 - "These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me." (John 14:24)
- Our example:
 - Jesus took a position of servant coach to his disciples "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him." (John 13:2-18)
 - "Learn of me" (Matthew 11:29). Jesus is our mentor. Background: in NT times, oxen usually ploughed in pairs, with an experienced beast hitched to an inexperienced one.
 - "In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:3-8)
 - Jesus taught that, If we pursue our own agendas, we will gain nothing (fulfilment comes from surrendering, Matthew 16:25).
- "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." (John 20:21)

"... not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42)

4. Leadership in the NT Church

- Jesus is the Head of the church (Colossians 1:15-20). He “gives” ministries (Ephesians 4:11-13).
- The pattern in the New Testament church was a plurality of leaders, depending upon one another, accountable to one another, submitting to one another, and living out a mutuality in ministry.
- “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28)
 - The New Testament does not distinguish between elder, pastor, overseer (Acts 20:17, 28-30; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Peter 5:1-3)
 - Paul told the Ephesian church leadership: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which He bought with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). There was more than one leader.
 - "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers." (1 Peter 5:2)
 - "... elders who direct the affairs of the church well." (1 Timothy 5:17)
 - "respect those "who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you." (1 Thessalonians 5:12)
 - "Remember your leaders.;" "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account." (Hebrews 13:7, 17)
 - Elders worked together (Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 4:14 & Titus 1:5; see also Acts 19:22)
 - "I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5)
 - "Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord." (James 5:14)
- The church today likewise needs plurality of gifts and input to leadership.
- The task and challenges are too great for just a few to tackle. We need a variety of teams, led by people who can work together collaboratively, in a spirit of openness, gratitude, adaptability, learning and recognition of where God has placed skill sets in individuals' lives.

5. Mutual Submission DNA in the Christian Life

- Submission and teachability are (by definition) central planks of genuine “discipleship”; involve surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and God’s will in our lives
- As Christians, we are part of a “new creation”, with renewed minds, standards and relationships. We are no longer “products” of our society.
- The NT emphasises submission to authority, eg husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees, slaves and masters = “right thing to do”.
- Submission is a common element of Pauline teaching for all Christians. Mentioned dozens of times in Paul’s letters.
- How can we willingly follow the Father’s will for our lives if we are not prepared to submit to human leaders, or our partners in marriage?
- Different “roles”, not identical, not superior or inferior, but the call and gifts of God.
- Submission does not imply dominance, abuse, oppression, suppression or violation of dignity.
- Mutual submission in a Biblical context involves being comfortable in the role God has purposed for us. Don’t try to be someone else – don’t aspire to do something to which you are not called or equipped (read Romans 15:3-8).
- Don’t take on responsibilities, accountabilities you are not called or anointed to carry.
- Walking in humility, trusting in God, involves the heart, not merely our actions (not like the boy who was told to sit down, but protested that he was “still standing up inside”).
- Mutual submission is a conscious choice, a decision to submit to wisdom, counsel of team.
- Christian leaders are called to lead by example in their personal walk. Their relationships must be consistent with the Message.

Our purpose is to live by God’s order in the church and home/personal lives.

6. What is Mutual Submission in Christian Leadership?

- Definitions
 - Sometimes rendered “sub-mission”, ie under the mission (of the leader) – sounds good (know what it feels like to be in a subordinate role), but often translated “my way or the highway”; misses the bigger picture and experiences/perspectives of others.
 - Literally: “be subject to one another”; individuality and personal entrepreneurship subject to others with whom we are in relationship of trust and reciprocal accountability.
- As though submitting to Jesus Christ.
- Some find the concept difficult, eg makes them vulnerable; requires trust (yet ends up building trust).
- A lot to ask; more than tokenism; involves sacrifice, yielding from the heart.
 - Most people are motivated by drive for personal satisfaction and gain: “What’s in it for me?”
- Supernaturally enabled; has to be, because goes against the grain.
- God is the author of order, not confusion.
- Lack of submission leads to dysfunctional relationships and conflict; submission liberates.
- Developing under the vision of experienced men and women of God inculcates good practice.
- It also develops faithfulness and trust, that the emerging leader will eventually look for in others (Proverbs 20:6, Luke 16:12).

Christian leadership that works is not threatened by accountability; but embraces it.

7. Common Challenges.

- The NT does not use roles to portray personal importance or superiority.
- Too many people want to be in charge:
 - “I wrote to the church, but Diotrefes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.” (3 John 9-10).
 - “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” (James 4:1)
- We focus too much on differences - we *are* different, but God can use that to sharpen each one of us (Proverbs 27:17)
- Pride: “don’t challenge me”. Untouchability.
- Divided loyalties – the world can end up being more important (2 Timothy 4:10).
- The reality of cultures, cultural models, mores and modalities sometimes used as pretexts.
- Lack of accountability leads to loss of objectivity, competition, superiority, one-upmanship, pride, division, emergence of cults, separation, deception; has led to extremism, adultery, fraud. These are all foreign to the Kingdom of God.
- Misunderstanding of the nature and authority of spiritual leadership can lead to excesses.
 - Leadership *can* be corrupted, abused, eg hyper-shepherding, covenant and covering excesses.
- Accepting that God puts down one and puts up another, according to His will (Psalm 75:7).
- Preventing resentment, disappointment, misunderstanding, hurt, frustration from taking over.
- Busy leaders need to find time to look out for one another – teamship that works requires additional investments of time, effort, coordination, communication (meaningful dialogue, ie both ways) and patience.

There are challenges in achieving mutual submission, but the investment is worth it.

8 Benefits of Moving to a Mutual Submission Leadership Model

- Greater accountability leads to greater safety (Proverbs 11:14). (We need one another because it is hard to be objective subjectively.)
- Burden is shared, load lifted, less defensiveness, stress, burn-out, extremism, alienation.
- The modern church in a complex and rapidly changing world needs a variety of ministries.
- Mutual submission does not undermine authority; it enriches it.
- Even the most gifted Christian leader can benefit from input, wisdom, vision, ideas and experiences of others, and be prepared to give honour where it is due. We can/should all learn from one another (even “the least”, cf 1 Corinthians 6:4).
- Leads to more integrated church community. Improves cohesiveness, clarity of purpose.
- Mutual submission liberates, because it reduces competitiveness, feelings of superiority/inferiority.
- Allows us to “rest” in God’s call, cf people struggling to what God has not called them to do.
- It reduces unnecessary waste of effort that occurs when leaders spend their time asserting themselves, proving their status and struggling to sooth bruised egos.
- Mutual submission among leaders models similar behaviour for the whole church, so that every one becomes fully engaged, working in tandem with others.
- Teams can accomplish a lot if individuals do not care who gets the glory except God.
- Team members who work on the basis of humility and trust, looking out for one another, learn how to support and anticipate one another.
- Teams that are subject to, and trust one another, and actively listen to one another, are better equipped to manage periods of uncertainty and transition.
- Someone to lift us when we stumble (and vice versa) (Ecclesiastes 4:9).
- Takes away the imperative to show ourselves better than others.
- Removes scope for disunity. Neutralises devices Satan uses to divide Christian leaders.

Mutual submission is a sign of a healthy relationship with God and church & family life.

9. Integration.

- The kind of thinking we need as we move forward is teamwork that encourages people to operate according to their gifts and calling, is respectfully subject to the rest of the team, mentors the whole church, develops and releases gifts and is Christ-centred in its ultimate focus.
 - Begins with a deliberate *choice* to look out for others, rather than defaulting to pleasing ourselves (Romans 15:1)
- One person still needs to be in overall charge, but submitted relationally to the wisdom, experience, responsibilities of others, in a spirit of mutual accountability.
 - Korah and his friends did not understand this, and died in rebellion (Numbers 16)
 - Likewise Miriam and Aaron: “ ‘Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?’” they asked. ‘Hasn’t he also spoken through us?’ And the LORD heard this.” (Numbers 12:2; they were judged by God).
- People who are opposites in temperament can still be effective team players, if their hearts are in the right place.
- Mutual submission is a matter of the will, a deliberate choice; often goes against our personal preferences or styles.
- Keeping the “unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3) is something we have to choose to pursue.
- Will often cross traditional lines (ethnic differences, education, gender).
- The Holy Spirit can bring people together into effective teams (Acts 13:1-3).
- Ephesians 2 shows us that God can tear down walls that divide people, and make them one.

Effective ministries never work alone.

10. Implementation

- Practise mutual submission to God's will and relationship to servant leadership.
- Humble yourself, don't be assertive, grasping or defensive. God will lift you up (James 4:10.)
- Heed your calling, but aim for Christ's glory.
- Seek to encourage, build up, bless those with whom you are in relationship (Heb 3:13).
- Be mutually submitted to one another (1 Peter 5:5).
- Identify each other person's calling, gifts, contribution, with gratitude, not resentment.
- Learn to celebrate different gifts.
- Accept a of variety of teams, without feeling inadequate, inferior.
- Not a matter of insisting, complying, forcing others to yield; a spiritual principle, a "truth".
- Submit to the vision, no matter how good you are.
- Be motivated by love and generosity – as Jesus was. Ask Him to help you do so.
- Learn to practice forgiveness for the times those you submit to hurt or offend you (even unintentionally, cf James 3:2).
- Practice forgiveness (don't let anything divide the team; remember, every relationship has its ups and downs). You *will* be let down from time to time, but
- Spend time together, have "down time" together, cultivate a sense of non-judgemental honesty.
- Learn through adversity.
- Don't play the "blame game".
- Give thanks for the relationships in which God has placed you.
- Give thanks for God's grace in *giving* you those you relate to, and for the impact they have in your life, circumstances, development.
- Take personal responsibility for your part in the relationships.
- Pray for one another.
- Speak positively into one another's lives. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you the needs of "others".

Mutual submission is gift from God, to bless the church (Psalm 133).

Finally...

If you are a Christian leader:

- Recognize that God has placed you in a team (His Body) and called you to work with him and others to carry out His will, and to develop leaders.
- Take the initiative; be ready to recognise the distinct and complementary gifts of individuals in your team.
- Don't despise, neglect or abuse those whose gifts are still developing.
 - Humbly acknowledge and honour the contribution of each one.
 - Look for ways to sow blessing into their lives.
 - Don't be afraid of consensus.
 - Celebrate their growth and open doors for them to exercise their calling.
 - Learn from one another.
- Remember: you are also accountable.

Leading this way will not demean or diminish you; it will build you up and give the Holy Spirit room to do much more than you can possibly achieve alone. (After all, it is not about your superiority, your security, or your position; it is about Jesus Christ.)

God will give you the pattern and the power to exercise servant leadership as you and your team work together to build the Body of Christ and carry out His purpose in your world.

“in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work” (1 Corinthians 12:6)