Frank W. Nelte

EPHESIANS 5:21

THE SCRIPTURE CONCERNED

> Submitting YOURSELVES ONE TO ANOTHER in the fear of God. (Ephesians 5:21 AV)

THE MEANING PEOPLE DRAW FROM THIS TRANSLATION

As this leads into the instructions for husbands and wives, some people have felt that this verse also instructs husbands to submit to their wives.

But that is not at all what this verse is saying.

THE MISTRANSLATION

The Greek plural reciprocal pronoun "allelon" is typically translated into English as "yourselves" or as "themselves" or as "one to another", but NOT as a combination of any of these.

This Greek pronoun is used in this verse as follows:

> "Submitting ALLELON in the fear of God."

The KJV makes it appear as if the word "allelon" was used TWICE in this verse. In other words, if we translate the text of the KJV back into Greek, then this verse would look as follows:

"Submitting ALLELON (i.e. yourselves) ALLELON (i.e. one to another) in the fear of God."

So the point is this:

The correct translation of Ephesians 5:21 should read EITHER:

"Submitting YOURSELVES in the fear of God"; OR it should read:

"Submitting ONE TO ANOTHER in the fear of God."

But it should NOT include both these expressions! It is either the one or the other, but not both.

EITHER expression is theoretically a correct translation of the word "allelon".

This fact, that only one of these two expressions should be included in this verse, is acknowledged by many of the modern translations, which LEAVE OUT one of these two expressions. Unfortunately they have all retained THE WRONG EXPRESSION, and left out the correct expression.

The NAS, NIV, NKJV and NRSV have all left out the word "YOURSELVES", because they recognize that the KJV translation implies a duplication of the word "allelon", and that it is simply incorrect to retain both

expressions in this verse.

THE CORRECT TRANSLATION is to leave out the expression "one to another" and to RETAIN the word "yourselves".

One example of where it is appropriate to translate "allelon" as "yourselves" is John 6:43.

> Jesus therefore answered and said unto them, Murmur not among YOURSELVES (Greek "allelon"). (John 6:43 AV)

In the verses that follow (in Ephesians) Paul addresses wives and husbands, then children and fathers, then servants and masters. In each case Paul mentions the ones who are to be under authority first; i.e. "wives submit ... children obey ... servants be obedient ...".

It is ridiculous to infer that Paul meant that everybody in his categories here is supposed to "submit" to everybody else in all the other categories; that husbands are to submit to their wives and to their children and to their servants.

Ephesians 5:21, as well as providing a concluding statement for the preceding 20 verses, also sets the tone for all the instructions that follow. And what Paul was saying in this verse is that ALL OF US ARE TO SUBMIT "OURSELVES" (ALLELON) TO GOD!

An examination of the context of this verse shows that Ephesians 5 verses 1-20 deal with HOW we are to be "followers of God" (verse 1). And verse 21 is a perfect transition into the next topic, which is relationships between people. The joining bridge between these two subject matters is our collective submission to God.

The expression "one to another", while technically a correct translation of "allelon", is WRONG AND OUT OF PLACE in this verse, because Paul's focus is that we are all to submit to God. And with THAT FOUNDATION we should approach all the following instructions to wives and husbands and children and fathers and servants and masters. The correct translation of "allelon" in this verse is "YOURSELVES".

[Comment: The other point about this verse, whether it should read "the fear of God" or whether it should read "the fear of Christ" does not change the meaning, since we are to have the right respect for both, God the Father and also Jesus Christ.]

THE SOURCE OF THIS WRONG TRANSLATION

I suspect that the KJV translators also got this from the Latin Vulgate translation. The Vulgate text for this verse reads: "subiecti invicem in timore Christi", which literally translated means: "submit (subiecti) MUTUALLY or RECIPROCALLY (invicem) in timore (in the fear) Christi (of Christ)".

The Latin "invicem" means "mutually, reciprocally, by turns". And that is what prompted the KJV translators to opt for the translation "one to another".

THE CORRECT TRANSLATION

> Submitting yourselves in the fear of God. (Ephesians 5:21)

THE MEANING OF THIS CORRECT TRANSLATION

In Ephesians 5:1-20 Paul discusses how God wants us to live, how we are to be "followers of God". Verse 21 summarizes this section by stating that we all are to submit ourselves TO GOD in the fear of God. It should be OBVIOUS that the submission of true Christians must be to God, and NOT "to one another". And IF we are indeed in full submission to God, THEN we can approach all six of the relationships Paul then discusses from the proper perspective. Verse 21 summarizes verses 1-20, and it provides a foundation for Ephesians 5:22 - Ephesians 6:9. Verse 21 forms the bridge between these two sections.

IN SUMMARY

The idea that everybody is to "submit" to everybody else would only produce chaos. In addition, that idea would also contradict the very statements which follow Ephesians 5:21. It would also contradict God's very clear and unequivocal statement to Eve that "he (your husband) shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). The one who "rules" is not also expected "to submit" to those he rules over.

Frank W. Nelte