

Introduction – Ephesians 5:22–33

This is one of the most well-known passages in the Bible about marriage. But it is also one of the most misunderstood. Often when people read this text, they start in verse 22—and if we start there without seeing the whole picture, we can easily miss what Paul is doing.

Now before we step into the text, I recognize that we have a wide range of experiences represented in this room. Some of you have never been married. Some of you are now widows or widowers. Some of you are happily married. Some of you are in difficult marriages. Some of you have experienced deep pain through abuse, divorce, or ongoing brokenness.

So, my prayer this morning is simple: Wherever you find yourself today, that you would hear God's design for marriage, and find hope in His grace.

We are going to move through the passage in three movements over the next three weeks: Marriage, Husbands, Wives. Today, we will the purpose of marriage, the persons involved in marriage, and the problems we all bring into marriage.

1. **The Purpose of marriage** – Scripture reveals several purposes for marriage. In Genesis, we see that God gives marriage for **the multiplication of His image bearers**, and for **our good and joy**. But in today's text, Paul is focused on one purpose in particular: Marriage **represents the gospel**.
 - **Tell the greatest story ever!** The passage in Ephesians reaches its climax (5:31-32) when Paul quotes Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Paul then says - "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."
 - What Paul reveals here is that **marriage was always meant to point beyond itself. The husband's love reflects Christ's love for the church. The wife's response reflects the church's devotion to Christ.**
 - God's intention for every Christian marriage is that it serves as a **living picture of the gospel**. Marriage was designed by God to **reflect the relationship between Christ and His redeemed people (church)**. Paul spends 9 verses (25-33) explaining Christ's love.
 - Do you realize that God wants your marriage to tell His story?
 - **Christ's love** – Paul focuses on 4 aspects of Christ love for the church. He gives these as examples for us so that we would love in the same way.
 - **Christ's love is Sacrificial** (25) – He gave himself up for us. Jesus laid down His life for the good of His bride. Christians should not define love by sentiment or feelings alone. Christ's love is sacrificial and substitutionary. This is the example for love within Christian marriage.
 - **Christ's love is Sanctifying** (26-27) – Jesus did not only die to sacrifice and save, he died to sanctify. Sanctification in the Bible means to wash away the sin and transform into holiness. Paul tells us that Jesus cleanses and transforms us by the washing of the word. That means the way in which husbands and wives join Christ in the work of sanctification in their spouse is through the adhering to, speaking, teaching, the word of God. A Christian marriage is one where the husband and wife represent Christ and the church as they wash one another in and with the word of God. Praying with and for each other. Reading together or encouraging reading. Speaking truth. Allowing the word to set the way in which you live, decisions you make. We wash one another when we actually live in

obedience to God's word. Spouses don't set one another up for failure through the decisions they make, the things they allow into their homes, shows they watch, the way they spend. Everything is under submission to Jesus and they encourage one another toward Christ-likeness (Not with a heavy hand.) Example speaks louder than words until the example creates ears to hear.

- **Christ's love is nourishing** (28-30) – Contrast the non-personal love of Jewish, Greek, roman marriages at this time. Jesus does not love us from afar. He nourishes and cherishes us. He protects, defends, supports, and supplies. Christian marriages seek to nourish and cherish, protect, support, and supply for each other.
- **Christ's love is covenantal** (31-33) – Christ has united Himself to His church. Legally binding, cannot be broken. Entered into, purchased with His very life and kept and maintained by Him. Always faithful, never wavering. Will not be broken. The best thing Christians can do is remove divorce from their vocabulary and mind. It's not an option. The next best thing is to then love one another in such a way that neither would ever fathom such a violation of unity. He never grows tired of us, hates us, or walks away.

From the beginning, God intended that when people look at a Christian marriage, they would see a reflection—however imperfect—of the relationship between Christ and His church. Therefore, Marriage exists to tell the story of the gospel. So the question becomes: How well is your marriage telling that story? And before you turn that question toward your spouse, ask it of yourself. This passage is not a checklist by which we grade our spouse. It is a calling for how **we ourselves** are to love and live.

2. **The Persons involved in marriage** – Marriage is a covenant relationship between **one man and one woman for life under the lordship of Christ.**

- **One Man and One Woman** - God created, instituted, and defined marriage.
 - Genesis 2:24 says: "A man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."
 - According to Scripture, marriage is the lifelong covenant union between one man and one woman. That means culture does not have the authority to redefine marriage. Marriage is not a cultural invention. It is not a social contract created by governments. Marriage is a divine institution created by God. And because God created it, God defines it.
 - Throughout history the world has repeatedly tried to distort or redefine what God established. We have seen attacks on marriage through polygamy, sexual immorality, and same-sex relationships. What is coming next to challenge marriage is/will be people's attempt to "marry" artificial intelligence/non-humans.
 - The church stands on God's word. It does not take its cues from culture. Sadly, many churches today have abandoned what the Bible clearly teaches. This church affirms what God has said: marriage is the covenant between one man and one woman for life.
- **Under The Lordship of Christ** – **There is another person involved in every Christian Marriage, Christ Himself. Every Christian belongs to Christ** - The church is described throughout Scripture as **the bride of Christ**. That means every believer lives in submission to Jesus above every other authority. And that reality shapes the way we live in our marriages and the type of people Christian's should marry.
 - **Every Person in the marriage (Husband and Wife) live in submission to Jesus.**

- o When we get into roles and responsibilities the next two weeks, we will see that both the husband and wife must first live in submission to Christ before being able to fulfill the roles God has given to them for His glory and their good. A person who does not live in submission to Jesus will not live in submission to anyone else.
- **Christians only marry Christians** - Paul warns in 2 Corinthians 6:14: “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.” A yoke joins two animals together to pull in the same direction. If one animal pulls one way and the other pulls another way, the work becomes impossible. The same is true in marriage. If one spouse is living under the authority of Christ and the other is not, it creates an immediate unity problem. A Christian marriage, one that reflects Christ and the church requires that both husband and wife live in submission to Jesus, pull in the same direction.
- **Instructions: Paul’s Instructions to the Corinthian Church (1 Cor 7).**
 - o For the Unmarried – Paul says that singleness can be a good and faithful calling. But if a believer does marry, they should marry **in the Lord**—that is, marry another believer.
 - o For the Married – Stay Married and honor the covenant. Live according to God's intended roles.
 - o For the Married but unequally yoked –This is not supposed to happen if you are in Christ before getting married. This does happen when someone becomes a believer after being married. The scripture says if the unbelieving spouse is willing to remain in the marriage, the believer should remain as well. But if the unbelieving spouse chooses to leave, the believer is not bound in that situation. And if a believer remarries, they should marry **in the Lord**.

3. **The Problems we all bring into marriage** – Every marriage begins with two sinners standing at the altar making promises neither one of them has the power to keep perfectly. Marriage is beautiful. Marriage is God’s design. But marriage is also the union of **two not-yet-perfected people**. And because of that, every marriage will face some of the same problems. I will mention two today.

- **Idolatry - Looking to our spouse as our functional savior** - One of the greatest struggles in marriage is idolatry.
 - Many people enter marriage expecting their spouse to satisfy the deepest desires of their hearts. Many people enter marriage believing their spouse will: complete them, fulfill them, fix their loneliness, give them lasting happiness. But no human being can carry that weight.
 - o Your spouse cannot ultimately fulfill you. Your spouse cannot ultimately satisfy you. Only Christ can do that. When you expect your spouse to meet needs that only Christ can meet, you set your spouse—and your marriage—up for failure.
 - **Solution** – The solution is not finding the perfect spouse (Doesn’t exist). The solution is finding your satisfaction in Christ. Jesus did not seek the church because He needed us to satisfy Him. The triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—has always existed in perfect love, satisfaction, and joy within Himself. Christ did not love us because He needed something from us. He loved us because He is overflowing with grace.
 - o Because Christ is perfectly satisfied in Himself, He was able to give Himself sacrificially for others.

- o The same principle applies in marriage. When our identity and satisfaction are rooted in Christ, we are free to love our spouses without demanding that they fulfill/complete us. We can honor our spouse and love them faithfully—even when they are imperfect—because our ultimate satisfaction is not found in them. It is found in Christ. Jesus alone fulfills us and completes us. Because He has, we can love our spouses the way Christ has loved us.
- **Pride - Seeking to rule our spouse instead of serving them.**
 - The second common problem in marriage is our desire to be first. Sin constantly whispers: “My needs matter most.” “My preferences should win.” Marriage quickly becomes a struggle over **who gets their way**. This happens with both small and large issues.
 - Solution - The gospel teaches a completely different posture.
 - o Philippians 2 says: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” That is exactly what Jesus did for us. Christ did not cling to His rights. He humbled Himself. He took on flesh. And He went all the way to the cross, placing our needs above His own life.
 - o The gospel moves us to put ourselves second. Christian marriage begins to reflect the gospel when husbands and wives stop competing to be first and begin learning to **serve one another**. Because Jesus put us first, we don’t have to put ourselves first. We can put others before us.

Every marriage faces these same struggles. We are tempted to look to our spouse for what only Christ can give. And we are tempted to put ourselves first instead of serving. But the gospel frees us from both. Because when Christ satisfies our hearts and Christ becomes our example, we are free to love our spouse the way Christ loves us.

Close: As we come to the end of our time this morning, let’s remember what we have seen in God’s Word. We have seen that **marriage has a purpose**. From the very beginning, God designed marriage to display the gospel. When a husband and wife love one another faithfully, they are telling the story of Christ and His church. We have seen **the persons involved in marriage**. Marriage is the covenant union of one man and one woman for life under the lordship of Christ. And we have also seen **the problems every marriage faces**. Two sinners entering a covenant together. We are tempted to look to our spouse to give us what only Christ can give. We are tempted to put ourselves first instead of serving.

And if we are honest, many of us feel the weight of that right now. Some of you are thinking about the ways you have failed your spouse. Some of you are carrying wounds from the ways your spouse has failed you. Some of you are grieving broken marriages. Some of you are discouraged and wondering if things can ever change. And some of you may be realizing for the first time that your marriage has not been centered on Christ at all. Maybe some of you are rejoicing that your marriage is great and you know that it is all of grace. Wherever you find yourself this morning, hear this clearly: **The hope of this passage and for our marriages is Christ alone.**

The Christ who **sacrificially loved His church** forgives. The Christ who **sanctifies His church** changes hearts. The Christ who **nourishes and cherishes His church** heals wounded people and broken marriages. And the Christ who **keeps His covenant with His bride** never abandons those who come to Him.

The right response this morning is not defensiveness, putting your head down, quitting, or attacking your spouse. The first right response is **repentance**.

Some of us need to repent of our selfishness. Some of us need to repent of our pride. Some of us need to repent for placing expectations on our spouse that only Christ could carry. Some of us need to ask our spouse for forgiveness. Some of us need to extend forgiveness we have been withholding. And some of you may need to come to Christ today for the very first time.

Jesus gave Himself for His bride. He died for sinners. And anyone who turns to Him in repentance and faith will be forgiven and made new.

Even when our marriages fall short of what they should be, **Christ never falls short of what He promised to be. Spend a few moments in silence before our prayer, asking God what you need to do today? Confess, Repent, Believe, Trust. Maybe some of you married couples need to pray together. If you need help, turn to God first, then reach out to your elder.**

Research

The research I put together this week is over 24,000 words, so I have put together a summary of the research here at the beginning.

As I worked through this passage and the research surrounding it, I was reminded that this section of Ephesians is not merely about marriage techniques or relationship advice. Paul is doing something much bigger. He is showing us that **marriage was designed by God to reflect the gospel itself.**

The instructions Paul gives husbands and wives are rooted in creation, shaped by the gospel, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. What we see here is not simply a model for a healthy home—it is a picture of Christ and His church.

1. The Wife's Calling: Respectful Submission (vv. 22–24)

One of the first things that became clear in my study is that Paul's command to wives does not stand alone. It flows out of what he has just said in verse 21: "Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ."

In other words, submission is not uniquely female. It is a **Christian posture of humility before Christ.** Every believer is called to live with a willingness to serve and yield for the good of others. Within marriage, that posture takes a particular form for the wife.

When Paul says, "Wives, submit to your own husbands," he is not suggesting inferiority or lesser value. Scripture consistently teaches that men and women are equal in dignity and worth because both are made in the image of God. What Paul is describing is **a difference of role within the covenant of marriage.**

God designed marriage with a structure. The husband is called to lead, and the wife is called to support and follow that leadership. This design is not rooted in culture or social convention but in **creation itself.** Paul's reasoning echoes Genesis, where marriage was first established by God.

Submission, then, does not mean silence, weakness, or blind obedience. It means **a willing posture of respect and support toward a husband's loving leadership.**

Paul actually highlights this at the end of the passage when he summarizes the wife's role with one word: **respect.** Just as husbands deeply need respect, wives deeply need love. God's commands here align with how He has designed men and women to function together in marriage. Ultimately, a wife's submission is not first about her husband. Paul says she does this "as to the Lord." Her response is an act of devotion to Christ.

2. The Husband's Calling: Sacrificial Love (vv. 25–30)

One of the striking things about this passage is that Paul spends far more time addressing husbands than wives. The weight of responsibility placed on husbands is enormous.

Paul does not tell husbands to rule their wives.
He does not say to command or control them.

Instead he says: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”
That sets the standard incredibly high.

The model for a husband’s love is not cultural masculinity. It is **the cross of Jesus Christ**.

Christ loved the church sacrificially. He gave His life for her. That means the leadership a husband exercises is not domination but self-giving love.

A husband’s calling is to die to selfishness, pride, comfort, and passivity so that his wife can flourish.

Paul also explains that Christ’s love is **sanctifying love**. Jesus gave Himself for the church so that He might make her holy. In the same way, a husband should care deeply about his wife’s spiritual good. While he cannot save her or change her heart, he should want her to grow in Christ.

Paul then moves to a very practical picture. Husbands are to love their wives **as their own bodies**. Just as we naturally care for our own well-being, a husband should nourish and cherish his wife.

Because in marriage the two have become **one flesh**. So loving your wife is not merely loving someone else—it is loving someone who has become part of your own life.

What became clearer to me in studying this text is that biblical leadership in marriage is not primarily about authority. It is about **sacrifice**.

3. The Marriage Mystery: Christ and the Church (vv. 31–33)

The passage reaches its climax when Paul quotes Genesis 2:24: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

Paul then says - “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” In Scripture, a “mystery” is something that was once hidden but is now revealed.

What Paul reveals here is that **marriage was always meant to point beyond itself**. From the very beginning, marriage was designed by God to illustrate something greater: the relationship between Christ and His people. **The husband’s love reflects Christ’s love for the church. The wife’s response reflects the church’s devotion to Christ.**

In that sense, every Christian marriage becomes a **living picture of the gospel**. Marriage is not ultimate. Christ is. Marriage exists to display the covenant love, faithfulness, sacrifice, and unity that we see in the relationship between Jesus and His church.

That means our marriages are testimonies to the gospel.

Final Takeaway - What stood out most clearly in my study is this:

Christian marriage works when husbands love like Christ and wives respond like the church. Husbands lead through sacrificial love. Wives respond with respectful support. And together they display the beauty of the gospel to the world.

Marriage was never meant to be merely about personal happiness. It was designed to **reflect the relationship between Christ and His redeemed people**. If you want a great book to read on the topic of Christian Marriage, I highly recommend Tim Keller's book, "The Meaning of Marriage."

When we understand that marriage was designed by God to display the gospel, the commands in this passage stop feeling restrictive and set us free to demonstrate God's love and the Church's response.

Deeper Research:

Here is the Precept Austin Link – https://www.preceptaustin.org/ephesians_521-22#5:22

Below are a few key take-aways from Precept Austin –

The spiritual dynamic that operates in a Spirit filled wife is that when she submits to her Lord, she will have no difficulty submitting to her husband. This verse does not say that the wife is inferior in any way to her husband, not does it say that she is to be his slave, for as stated in verse 21, the husband is also to submit to the Lord. It follows that if both Spirit filled spouses are voluntarily submitting to the Lord, their will be a oneness, a unity and a harmony in the marital relationship. As an aside, one can clearly see why a believer is clearly prohibited from marrying a non-believing spouse ([2Cor 6:14, 15, 16, 17, 18](#)).

Sometimes when you see what it does not mean, it helps see what it does mean. For instance, hupotasso does not mean that the wife is commanded to obey her husband as a child would obey his parents or a slave would obey his master. Many men treat their wives like door mats and they "walk all over them" as if they have no sense or ability and as if they are inferior. That is not what the hupotasso means. As a matter of fact, there is another Greek word that is used in that kind of relationship. It is the word [hupakouo](#) (see related noun [hupakoe](#)) which is entirely different.

Hupotasso describes two people who are absolutely equal in God's eyes. There is no inferiority of one to the other. The wife makes a choice to place herself as an equal underneath another equal, her husband, in order that there can be order and function in the family. The whole purpose of it is so that it meets the design that God has ordered... It takes nothing from the dignity of a woman for her to submit, but rather it enhances it. It takes great integrity for a person to do what God says should be done.

It is important to understand the cultural context in which Paul (and Peter see below) was calling for wives to submit to their own husbands. In the first century, there were 3 converging cultures, Jewish, Greek and Roman, and in each culture, women had no rights or at most minimal rights.

In the **Jewish culture** a woman was treated not as a person but as a thing; and was owned by her husband in exactly the same way as he owned his sheep and his goats. She was absolutely her husband's possession to do with as he willed. On no account could the wife leave the husband, although he could dismiss her at any moment. The more liberal Rabbis, headed by the Hillel interpreted [Deuteronomy 24:1](#) to say that a man might divorce his wife if she spoiled his dinner by putting too much salt in his food, if she walked in public with her head uncovered, if she talked with men in the streets, if she spoke disrespectfully of her husband's parents in her husband's hearing, if she was a brawling woman, if she was troublesome or quarrelsome! For a wife to change her religion while her husband did not was unthinkable. The Jews had a low view of women as evidenced by their

morning prayer in which a Jewish man gave thanks that God had not made him "a Gentile, a slave or a woman." The Jewish woman had no legal rights whatsoever.

In the **Greek culture** the duty of the woman was "to remain indoors and to be obedient to her husband." It was the sign of a good woman that she must see as little, hear as little and ask as little as possible. She had no kind of independent existence and no kind of mind of her own, and her husband could divorce her almost at caprice, so long as he returned her dowry. It is fascinating to read some of the lofty ideals regarding marriage in the classic Greek literature (stress on monogamous marriage, Plato's promotion of equality in various offices, etc) and yet observe the obvious disconnect of these ideals from the frank reality of a culture that had a popular pun that if a woman runs a house it dies!

William Barclay, whose commentaries often provide a wonderful source for cultural and historical context, adds these notes concerning women in the Greek culture...

Prostitution was an essential part of Greek life. Demosthenes had laid it down as the accepted rule of life:

"We have courtesans for the sake of pleasure; we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation; we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately and of having a faithful guardian for all our household affairs."

The woman of the respectable classes in Greece led a completely secluded life. She took no part in public life; she never appeared on the streets alone; she never even appeared at meals or at social occasions; she had her own apartments and none but her husband might enter into them. It was the aim that, as Xenophon had it,

"she might see as little as possible, hear as little as possible and ask as little as possible."

The Greek respectable woman was brought up in such a way that companionship and fellowship in marriage was impossible. Socrates said:

"Is there anyone to whom you entrust more serious matters than to your wife—and is there anyone to whom you talk less?"

Versus was the imperial colleague of the great Marcus Aurelius. He was blamed by his wife for associating with other women, and his answer was that she must remember that the name of *wife* was a title of dignity but not of pleasure. The Greek expected his wife to run his home, to care for his legitimate children, but he found his pleasure and his companionship elsewhere.

To make matters worse, there was no legal procedure of divorce in Greece. As someone has put it, divorce was by nothing else than caprice. The one security that the wife had was that her dowry must be returned. Home and family life were near to being extinct and fidelity was completely non-existent.

([Barclay, W: The Daily Study Bible](#))

In the **Roman culture**, the law provided no rights for a woman. In law she remained forever a child. When she was under her father she was under the Roman law of **patria potestas**, the father's power, which gave the father the right even of life and death over her; and when she married she passed equally into the power of her husband. She was entirely subject to her husband and completely at his mercy. Cato the Censor, the typical ancient Roman, wrote

"If you were to catch your wife in an act of infidelity, you can kill her with impunity without a trial."

Roman matrons were prohibited from drinking wine, and Egnatius beat his wife to death when he found her doing so. Sulpicius Gallus dismissed his wife because she had once appeared in the streets without a veil. Antistius Vetus divorced his wife because he saw her secretly speaking to a freed woman in public. Publius Sempronius Sophus divorced his wife because once she went to the public

games. The whole attitude of ancient civilization was that no woman could dare take any decision for herself.

Barclay adds his insights on the role of women in the Roman culture noting that...

In Rome the matter was still worse; its degeneracy was tragic. For the first five hundred years of the Roman Republic there had been not one single case of divorce. The first recorded divorce was that of Spurius Carvilius Ruga in 234 B. C. But at the time of Paul, Roman family life was wrecked. Seneca writes that women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married. In Rome the Romans did not commonly date their years by numbers; they called them by the names of the consuls; Seneca says that women dated the years by the names of their husbands. Martial tells of a woman who had had ten husbands; Juvenal tells of one who had had eight husbands in five years; Jerome declares it to be true that in Rome there was a woman who was married to her twenty-third husband and she herself was his twenty-first wife. We find a Roman Emperor Augustus demanding that her husband should divorce the lady Livia when she was with child that he might himself marry her. We find even Cicero, in his old age, putting away his wife Terentia that he might marry a young heiress, whose trustee he was, that he might enter into her estate in order to pay his debts.

That is not to say that there was no such thing as fidelity. Suetonius tells of a Roman lady called Mallonia who committed suicide rather than submit to the favours of Tiberius the Emperor. But it is not too much to say that the whole atmosphere was adulterous. The marriage bond was on the way to complete breakdown. ([Ibid](#))

In the context of family relationships, it is notable that the wife is not called to **submit** not to **obey** (see word study [hupakouo](#)) her husband, as children are to obey their parents and slaves their masters. In other words, a husband is to treat his wife as an equal and not as his servant or as if she were a child. The husband is not to order the wife about, calling on her to respond to his every wish and command. A wife is not a slave, awaiting commands such as: "Do this! Get that! Fix me that!, etc, etc. That is not what submission means.

Wives... to your own husbands - Believer's Study Bible notes that...

In Greek "**wives**" is in the vocative case, yet with the definite article. Used in a general sense, it binds all wives into one class for this assignment. ([Criswell, W A. Believer's Study Bible: New King James Version. 1991. Thomas Nelson](#))

Peter also emphasizes the role of the **wife in submission** writing that...

In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, 2 as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. 3 And let not your adornment be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; 4 but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. (Comment: Peter is not calling for a spineless submission but, as someone has put it, a "voluntary selflessness." It is the submission which is based on the death of pride and the desire to serve. It is the submission not of fear but of perfect love.)

**SUBMISSION
BUT NOT
INFERIORITY
NOR INEQUALITY**

That **submission** does not imply **inferiority** is made clear by Paul in First Corinthians...

But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. ([1Cor 11:3](#))

So even in the Godhead, wherein there is equality, we see that Christ is subordinate to His Father and in the same way wives are subordinate to their husbands. The man is not superior to the woman, as the Father is not superior to Christ, for they are of the same essence. However, as there is divine order in the relative functions of the three persons of the Trinity, so it is fitting for God to ordain a divine order in the functions of the family (husband, wife, children). God established this pattern in the very beginning when Adam was first formed, then Eve, Paul recording that it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. ([1 Timothy 2:13](#))

Genesis also emphasizes the spiritual equality of man and woman Moses recording that... God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ([Genesis 1:27](#)) (**Comment:** Men and women equally share in the spiritual attributes not shared by animals. The text is very specific in defining this equality, which resides in their spiritual being, for that is what it means to be "in the image of God.")

This spiritual equality is emphasized in the New Testament by Paul who writes... For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is **neither male nor female**; for **you are all one in Christ Jesus**. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. ([Gal 3:26-29](#)) (**Comment:** Paul is clearly addressing the family of believers and setting forth in this context the spiritual equality of all who are one "in" Christ Jesus.)

Believer's Study Bible writes that "This equality in personhood and difference in function is beautifully illustrated by the Godhead. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all equal ([John 10:30; 14:9](#)), and yet in function the Son submits to the Father ([John 5:19, 20; 6:38; 8:28, 29, 54; 1Cor. 15:28; Phil. 2:5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11](#)), and the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father to testify of and glorify the Son ([John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13, 14](#)). Thus, the divinely defined relationship between husband and wife is analogous to the relationship within the Godhead, and the relationship within the Godhead is a pattern of instruction for the family unit. ([Criswell, W A. Believer's Study Bible: New King James Version. 1991. Thomas Nelson](#))

Morris adds that equality in personhood and distinction in function "is not an invention of the supposedly anti-feminist apostle, as some have alleged but the stipulation of God Himself, even before the entrance of sin and the curse into the world. This in no way means that man is superior to woman in God's sight, for both were created "in the image of God" ([Genesis 1:27](#)), and both are "one in Christ Jesus" ([Galatians 3:28](#)). Each, however, was created for a distinctive role and purpose, and neither is truly fulfilled apart from that. ([Defenders Study Bible](#))

Warren Wiersbe has a pithy statement regarding Christian homes writing that "The poet William Cowper called the home "the only bliss of Paradise that hast surviv'd the Fall," but too many homes are an outpost of hell instead of a parcel of paradise. ([Bible Exposition Commentary. 1989. Victor](#))

Wives ([1135](#)) (**gune/gyne** - gives us our word "**gynecology**" - branch of medicine dealing with health care for women) in context of Spirit filled, this designation refers to all believing wives. As one ponders the word **gyne** and **gynecology**, in a sense all husbands should be "*spiritual gynecologists*" (where **-ology** means the study of). In other words all husbands would do well to study their wives that they might practice good "preventive" medicine in their marriage!

Own ([2398](#)) (**idios**) means belong to one in a private sense, in contrast to public property. Husbands, you belong to your wife! Too many husbands live their lives, especially their work lives, as if they belonged to the public! And then they wonder why their wife feels a bit estranged!!! Note also that the

Greek word "idios" does not mean "idiot", which is how some wives treat their husbands (and is how some husbands deserve to be treated!)

Husbands ([435](#))(aner) refers first to the male sex and in the marital context to the husband.

When the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, he asked husbands and wives to turn their thoughts to their relationship with the Son of God ([Eph 5:22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 30, 31, 32, 33](#)). In Him we find undying love and forgiveness for our failures. In Him we find Someone who loves to forget the worst and bring out the best. He reminds us not of what we've lost but of what we have yet to find.

Forgive us, Father, for focusing on our flaws and failures rather than on the love of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to rediscover our spouse in the light of our Lord's great love for us. —Mart De Haan ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

REFLECTING ON MARRIAGE As a couple, recall the hopes and dreams you had when you were first married. Name some that have come true. Share with each other your hopes for the future.

**Marriages may be made in heaven,
but they have to be worked out on earth.**

Could it be that we expect another person to meet the deepest needs of our hearts? If so, we have placed an impossible burden on that person. Or is it our own reluctance to face the truth about ourselves, preferring to believe that it is our spouse who has a problem?

The divine commands for husbands and wives in [Ephesians 5:22-33](#) are the framework for success in marriage, not a checklist to use in evaluating the performance of our spouse. It's a place to find our own job description. The instructions are given to weak, sinful people who need a Savior and His transforming power.

Most of us would prefer a successful and fulfilling marriage that just happens by itself. But a growing marriage requires effort and perseverance. God calls us to work at our relationship with Him—and with the person we promised to love. —D C McCasland ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

"For better or for worse," we pledge,
Through sickness and through strife;
And by God's grace and with His help
We'll keep these vows for life. —D J De Haan

**Success in marriage is more than finding the right person;
it is being the right person.**

Below are from my commentaries: (Every portion is marked by a footnote.)

Tony Merida –

We could write an entire book on this passage of Scripture. I highly recommend Tim Keller's book *The Meaning of Marriage*, which treats this passage in great detail. I have chosen to hit the highlights of the text and magnify the need for the Spirit's work in marriage. Paul exhorts the wives (vv. 22–24) and then the

husbands (vv. 25–30). He concludes with a few important summary statements and reflections on the glorious mystery of marriage (vv. 31–33).¹

This passage is especially important in light of our present culture. The foundation for marriage is crumbling. People are confused about gender, marriage, and family. Some are outright hostile to the historic Christian view on marriage. Köstenberger and Jones put it well:

For the first time in its history, Western civilization is confronted with the need to define the meaning of the terms “marriage” and “family.” What until now has been considered a “normal” family, made up of a father, mother, and a number of children, has in recent years begun to be viewed as one among several options. (*God, Marriage, and Family*, 25)

This is not simply a cultural war; it is a spiritual war. The enemy would love to confuse people and tear down the foundations of God’s plan for marriage.

What is the biblical idea of marriage? Stott summarizes it well:

Marriage is an exclusive heterosexual covenant between one man and one woman, ordained and sealed by God, preceded by the leaving of parents, consummated in sexual union, issuing in a permanent mutually supportive partnership, and normally crowned with the gift of children. (*Involvement*, 163)

In addition to affirming the goodness of marriage (and singleness, see 1 Cor 7), we need to affirm the covenant nature of marriage: it is permanent, sacred, intimate, mutual, and exclusive. We should realize that Christ, not marriage, is ultimate. Our primary loyalty must be to Jesus. While we must, by the Spirit’s help, nurture our marriages, we must also remember the fleeting nature of marriage. Marriage in this life is a shadow of the ultimate marriage of Christ and His bride, as Paul illustrates in this text.

Paul does not provide an exhaustive theology of marriage here, but he does touch on the key responsibilities of husbands and wives and gives us an amazing analogy of Christ and the church. Single people do well to consider these exhortations as they prepare for marriage, and married people do well to listen prayerfully to God’s Word in order that they may have a marathon marriage².

Spirit-Filled Wives (5:22–24)

Paul begins with wives. While many struggle with the idea of wives “submitting,” we have already noted that the whole of Christian life is about submission. Remember that the wife is called to submit to a husband who is willing to die for her! The husband should be the first to apologize, forgive, and serve. He is to exemplify the lifestyle of Jesus to his bride. Köstenberger says,

While some may view submitting to one’s husband’s authority as something negative, a more accurate way of looking at marital roles is to understand that wives are called to *follow their husband’s loving leadership*. (*God, Marriage, and Family*, 73, emphasis in original)

We see a picture of the husband and wife having equal value, yet having different roles within marriage. You might compare it to a slow dance. One person leads, and one follows. One initiates, and the other responds. Both are necessary for the dance to happen. And when both fulfill their roles well, it is a beautiful thing to behold.

¹ Tony Merida, [*Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 136.

² Tony Merida, [*Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 136–137.

Further, whenever we have trouble with God's Word, we need to remember that God is infinitely wise and good. Anything He says is for our good and is the best possible plan. Many things in God's Word may cause us to react negatively, but always consider the nature of the God giving these commands.

When you think about marriage, and particularly headship, you have to remember that this is rooted in creation (Gen 1–2; Matt 19:4–6; 1 Cor 11:3–12; 1 Tim 2:11–13). Stott says, "This is not chauvinism, but creationism" (*Ephesians*, 221). Paul does not have an agenda against women. In fact, he elevated women, as Jesus did.

The instruction (5:22–24, 33). What does Paul say? He says the wife must revere Christ through proper submission to and respect for her husband (vv. 22–24, 33; cf. Col 3:18). The role of the wife is clear: submission and respect.

Let us take "respect" first (v. 33). The better word for this is "fear" (cf. v. 21). However, it does not mean terror but awe. Why did Paul use this term? I am not sure, but one reason surely is that the husband will give an account to God for his leading of the family. Both should stand in awe of that assignment. On a practical level the husband needs the wife's respect. Typically, women crave love; men desire respect. The wife should see the responsibility her husband has and respect him, love him, pray for him, and respect his needs.

The word *submit* creates more discussion (v. 22). This is not the only place "submission" is noted in the context of marriage. This is consistent with the New Testament's teaching (Col 3:18; 1 Pet 3:1; 1 Tim 2:11–13; Titus 2:4–5; cf. 1 Cor 11:3).

Notice Paul does not say wives submit to every man. The husband is the head of the wife (v. 23), not of all women. Also, notice that this submission is voluntary submission (see O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 411–12). This is a happy relationship. Christian wives freely and responsibly follow the loving leadership of a faithful husband, not a tyrant.

We must reject all improper caricatures of this teaching. Scripture is not talking about something akin to slavery, subservience, or of a top-down chain of command, where the subjects have to obey without question. The picture is not that of a man lying on the couch saying, "Bring me the pretzels."

One might wonder, Why are women called to "submit" and husbands called to "love"? Why not call the wives to love? I think Stott is right:

The wife's submission is but another aspect of love.... What does it mean to "submit"? It is to give oneself up to somebody. What does it mean to "love"? It is to give oneself up for somebody. (*Ephesians*, 235)

To submit is to put the will of the other ahead of your will. To love is to put the needs of the other ahead of your needs. Paul elsewhere actually mentions both actions to wives: "So they may encourage the young women to *love their husbands* and to love their children, to be self-controlled, pure, homemakers, kind, and *submissive to their husbands*" (Titus 2:4–5, emphasis added).

Paul says the motive of godly, loving submission is this: "as to the Lord" (v. 22). Wives submit to their husbands because they want to glorify Christ (cf. 5:21; 6:8–9). The godly wife sees this duty as part of her Christian discipleship. The motive is not to fulfill some societal role or cultural expectation. The motive is love for Christ and a desire to be conformed to His image.

What does submit "in everything" mean? It means submit in every area of life. It does not mean she follows him in matters that are sinful.

We should also point out that there is a difference in a "traditional marriage" and a biblical marriage (Köstenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 74). In a traditional marriage, a certain type of division exists. Women are often responsible for cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, etc., while men are working and earning an income. While Scripture does speak of a man working outside the home as his primary responsibility and the home as the center of a woman's activity (though not limited to the home; Prov 31:10–31), "the Bible is

not a law book that exacts the division of labor” (ibid.). There is freedom in Christ—freedom to work out the best way to live out the biblical guidelines. As long as Christlike headship and loving submission are practiced, it would be OK for the wife to make more money than the husband or for the wife to “bring home the bacon” while the husband is in school or injured. Further, the husband may be a better cook! A biblical marriage does not always mean a traditional marriage. The couple should simply yield to the pattern of the husband serving as the head and the wife as the helper, submitting to the loving leadership of her husband. And the two should strive to prayerfully apply this pattern faithfully in their own situation.

The illustration (5:23–24). Paul speaks of marriages as a picture of Christ’s love for the church in verses 23–24, and carries it into verses 25–32. Paul shows us that marriage displays the gospel. The Old Testament also illustrated God’s love for His people with a marriage. In this text it is Christ and the church specifically. In verse 32 Paul says this picture is “profound.” It is awesome. In creation God had Christ and the church in mind. Consider three applications of this picture.

This illustration gives us the ultimate picture of marriage. Wives give a picture of the church to the world (v. 24). Husbands give a picture of Christ to the world (v. 23). Christ is the head, as noted in 1:22. But look what kind of head He is. Peek into the next paragraph and consider the five actions of His leadership: He loved the church (5:25); He gave Himself up for her (v. 25); He sanctified her (v. 26); He cleansed her (v. 26); He presented her (v. 27); and He “provides and cares for” the church (v. 29).

This illustration gives us the ultimate purpose of marriage, namely, the glory of Christ. Everything in this passage points us to Christ: “as to the Lord” (v. 22); “as Christ loved the church” (v. 25); “as Christ does for the church” (v. 29). Everything comes back to Christ.

While it is important for couples to work through communication problems, financial problems, personality issues, the past, and other issues, let us remember that the ultimate issue in marriage is this: Are you surrendered to the lordship of Christ? Will you submit to Him in all areas of life? If the starting point for marriage is me, then I am starting at the wrong place. Marriage exists for Christ’s glory. Let your marriage be an offering of worship as you love each other, forgive each other, serve each other. Let your relationship serve as an aroma of Christ before a watching world.

This illustration provides amazing hope for marriage. Christ died for the church, which displayed her sinfulness and His saving grace. The biggest problem in marriage is sin. The ultimate solution is the grace of Jesus. Because marriage is not merely a social convention but is rooted in the lordship of Christ, who is gracious, you have great hope in marriage! Where do you turn when marriage is difficult? Alcohol, deer hunting, work, pornography? No! Those are the wrong places! Look to Christ. Marriage is intended to point us to our Redeemer.

Spirit-Filled Husbands (5:25–33)

Paul commands husbands to reflect Christ by loving their brides. We have already touched on this. We are called to love our wives as Jesus loved the church.

Sacrificial love (5:25). Christlike love is a Golgotha love. Christ’s back was scourged. His hands and feet were nailed to the wood. A spear was thrust into His side. A crown of thorns was placed on His head—all because He loved the church.

Christ’s sacrificial love is a foot-washing love. His headship is our model. He came to serve, though He was the head. We see in Christ authority coupled with unparalleled humility and love.

Men, marriage is a call to die. Dying to self may involve sacrificing your schedule and even good ambitions. It means giving yourself away for the good of your bride. It involves crucifying your flesh and resolving to be faithful to your bride, not yielding to the temptations of lust, anger, and pride.

Marriage is a call to serve. Christlike love takes initiative. Avoid being a passive husband. Actively love your wife (see 1 Cor 13). Christlike love involves not just service but also an appropriate Christlike attitude in serving (see Phil 2:5–11).

Sanctifying love (5:26–27). Paul says, “Cleansing her with the washing of water by the word” (v. 26). Some take this as ongoing sanctification, but I agree with O’Brien who says, “It is *positional* sanctification that is in view here, not progressive sanctification” (*Ephesians*, 422, emphasis added). That seems clear as Paul goes on to say, “He did this to present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless” (v. 27).

Christ’s cleansing happens by two agents: water and word. Some think “water” refers to baptism, but I do not think so. When Paul speaks of washing, he emphasizes the spiritual cleansing that takes place (cf. 1 Cor 6:11). The marriage imagery in Ezekiel 16:8–14 and the prenuptial bath in the Jewish customs may have influenced Paul. So there may be a secondary reference here to the bridal bath (O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 422). I take “the word” as the word of the gospel (see Eph 6:17). The word of the gospel is the means by which we receive spiritual cleansing. Christ cleanses His bride spiritually, and He does this through the word of the gospel (John 15:3; 17:17).

Does this have application for husbands? While a husband cannot atone for sins or cleanse anyone, there is a sense in which Christ’s sanctifying work is a pattern for husbands. Practically, I think this means you should love your bride in a way to help her grow in likeness to Christ. Here is the question: “Is our wife more like Christ because she’s married to us? Or, is she like Christ in spite of us?” (Hughes, *Ephesians*, 192).

Men, be concerned for her spiritual well-being. Be in the Word personally. Talk about the Word with her. Know how your wife is doing in theological knowledge, in the practice of spiritual disciplines, in her service in the local church, and in her relationships. Care for her soul. Do you know her fears, hopes, dreams, temptations, and disappointments? Shepherd her faithfully.

Satisfying love (5:28–31). After speaking of redemption as the pattern of love, Paul now refers to creation. He says husbands should love their wives “as their own bodies” (v. 28). The husband should provide, nourish, and care for his bride, just as he cares for himself (v. 29). Paul puts Genesis 2:24 underneath this directive, reminding the husband that the two have become “one flesh” (v. 30).

This directive for satisfying love may sound self-serving for the husbands or demeaning to the wives, but that is not the case. This directive makes perfect sense in light of the fact that the two have become one flesh. Just as you long to satisfy your own needs, husbands, satisfy your wife’s needs. Just as you long for intimacy, joy, security, health, peace, companionship, and community, provide them for your bride also.

Husband, how are you doing at nourishing your wife (v. 29)? Are you physically nourishing her? Are you cherishing your wife (v. 30)? Are you admiring her and complimenting her?

I’ll never forget one particular example of this type of love. Wayne Grudem, world-renowned theologian, was on faculty at Trinity University for 20 years. He served with scholars like D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo. They were the “Seal Team Six of Professors.” But his wife suffered from fibromyalgia, a disease that causes pain to many muscle groups and for which there is no known cure. She had a difficult time walking up stairs and doing household work. They had prayed and tried everything, but there was no relief. Her pain was aggravated by cold weather and humidity. Chicago was not the most ideal place for her to live.

Some friends invited the Grudems to Mesa, Arizona, for vacation, and they learned that the warm dry climate was wonderfully helpful. They made a few trips and even rode bikes together there for first time in 12 years. Dr. Grudem told his bride, “I would like to move here, but there are no seminaries.” A few days later they were flipping through the Yellow Pages and found Phoenix Seminary. Dr. Grudem called and asked if the school had any openings. The school was interested.

After much prayer and thought, Dr. Grudem began pondering the implications of Ephesians 5:28, that you should love your wife as you do your own body. He said, “If I were suffering like Margret, would I not want to move for the sake of my health?” The obvious answer was yes. But his bride did not want to move because she knew her husband had an influential role at a large, respected institution. So there they were. He wanted to move for her sake; she wanted to stay for his sake.

Finally, when Phoenix told him that they would give him a reduced teaching load with more time to write, Mrs. Grudem thought this was a wonderful incentive; the two began processing a possible move. Eventually she told her husband, “I’m going to trust you to make the decision.” In the end she followed the loving leadership of her husband, who made a great sacrifice in order to nourish and care for his bride (Grudem, “Upon Leaving”).

Husband, love your wife as your own body, even if it means sacrificing your career dreams. Nourish her. Cherish her.

God ordained marriage. Christ set the pattern for marriage. The Spirit empowers marriage.

The good news of the gospel is that Christ died for those who could not keep demands perfectly. And the good news is that the Spirit daily renews us and empowers us as we look to Christ for grace and mercy. This whole passage should cause us to rest and rejoice in our great groom, Jesus Christ. Spurgeon said of His love:

This love of Christ is the most amazing thing under Heaven, if not in Heaven itself. How often have I said to you that if I had heard that Christ pitied us, I could understand it. If I had heard that Christ had mercy upon us, I could comprehend it. But when it is written that he actually *loves* us, that is quite another and a much more extraordinary thing! Love between mortal and mortal is quite natural and comprehensible, but love between the Infinite God and us poor sinful finite creatures, though conceivable in one sense, is utterly inconceivable in another. Who can grasp such an idea? Who can fully understand it? Especially when it comes in this form—“HE” (read it in large capitals) “loved *me*, and gave Himself for *me*”—this is the miracle of miracles! (“Christ’s Love to His Spouse,” emphasis in original)³

James Montgomery Boice –

Of the three ancient cultures into which the Christian Scriptures were written—Hebrew, Greek, and Roman—Hebrew culture had the highest ideal of marriage. This was what we might expect because of the continuity between the two covenants, between God’s revelation in the Old Testament and God’s revelation in the New. Nevertheless, at the time of the writing of the New Testament the Bible’s proper ideal of marriage had been undermined and virtually destroyed. At the time of Christ a Jewish woman was not a person but a thing, much as black people were regarded as things (property) in America before emancipation. A woman had no legal rights whatever, and a wife could be dismissed at will.

It is true that the schools of Shammai and Hillel disagreed on the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1, the chief divorce law in Israel. It said that a man could divorce his wife if he found “something indecent about her” (N⁴V). Shammai said this meant adultery, and adultery alone. Hillel interpreted it as anything that might displease the husband, even spoiling his dinner. This was a major difference, of course. But since either was a recognized possibility, it is easy to see which view prevailed.

Moreover, a woman had no right of divorce, and a man could divorce simply by giving his wife a “bill of divorcement,” that is, a simple written statement that he had divorced her. The result was that marriage was in peril in Judaism. As Barclay notes, Jewish girls were refusing to marry at all because of their uncertain position.

If the state of marriage was on perilous ground in Judaism, it was on even worse ground in Greek and Roman cultures. Demosthenes had said, “We have courtesans for our pleasure, concubines for daily

³ Tony Merida, [*Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 137–143.

⁴NIV New International Version

cohabitation, and wives for the purpose of having children legitimately and of having a faithful guardian for our household affairs.” In Greece a married woman had no part in a man’s life. She was not even a true companion to her husband. She was to run his home and care for his children. A Greek husband was expected to find companionship elsewhere.

And what of Rome? Rome was the sewer of the ancient world. For the first five hundred years of the Republic divorce was unheard of. But at the time of Paul, as Seneca said, women were married to be divorced and divorced to be married. Martial tells of a woman who had ten husbands. Juvenal tells of one who had eight husbands in five years. Jerome tells of one Roman matron who was married to her twenty-third husband, and she was his twenty-first wife. Sexual perversions were rampant, and profligacy was widespread.

Barclay says, “It was against that background that Paul writes. When Paul wrote this most lovely passage he was not simply restating the view that every man held. He was calling men and women to a new fidelity and a new purity and a new fellowship in the married life. It is the simple fact of history that no one in this world with the single exception of children ... owes more to Christ than women. It is impossible to exaggerate the cleansing effect that Christianity had on ordinary everyday home life in the ancient world.”⁵

Yet the interesting thing about the discussion of marriage in Ephesians 5:22–33 is that, if you had asked Paul if he thought he was unfolding a newer, higher, and purer view of marriage than had been known before, he would have denied it at once. Barclay says that Paul was “*calling* men and women to a new fidelity and a new purity and a new fellowship in the married life.” But Paul, if he could be pressed to acknowledge even this, would have said at best that he was “*re-calling*” them to this standard.

The reason is that Paul was conscious of having gotten his ideas of marriage not from some special, new revelation of God but from the Old Testament, indeed, from the very early chapters of Genesis. In Ephesians 5:31 he quotes an Old Testament text specifically, saying, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” The quotation is from Genesis 2:24. So Paul is saying that his teaching is based on this and other parts of the Old Testament revelation, not on some new revelation or, worse yet, on some insight peculiar to himself or his Christian contemporaries. The true historical order is not a progression from animalistic or merely inadequate views of marriage to higher views. It is rather: first, the high standard; second, a falling away from that standard; third, a recall to that standard through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul’s view is grounded in the original orders of creation.

In fact, it goes back even further than that. One of my predecessors as pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia was Donald Grey Barnhouse, a man who had a remarkable Bible-teaching ministry. Among other things Barnhouse was noted for his gift of sermon illustration. His own explanation of his insight was this. Early in his ministry he read Revelation 13:8 which speaks of Christ having been “slain from [before] the creation of the world.” He immediately recognized that if this is so, then in God’s mind spiritual things came before all material ones and, as a result, everything was created to illustrate some spiritual truth. It did not make any difference what it was—whether the sun and moon, a blade of grass, a snowflake, a lamb, a horse—whatever—God created it to illustrate some spiritual truth that existed in God’s mind prior to that creation.

This applies to marriage. When God created marriage it was not simply that God considered marriage to be a good idea, though it certainly is that, or even because God thought it would be a good way to have and rear children. God created marriage to illustrate the relationship between Christ and the church.

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, [*Ephesians: An Expository Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 203–204.

The relationship of a husband to a wife in marriage was going to illustrate the relationship of the Lord Jesus Christ to those he would one day redeem from sin's slavery. The relationship of a wife to her husband was going to illustrate the relationship the people of God, the church, would have to Jesus Christ.

This is why the name of Christ occurs again and again throughout this great passage: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the *Lord*. For the husband is the head of the wife as *Christ* is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to *Christ*, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as *Christ* loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as *Christ* does the church—for we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about *Christ* and the church" (vv. 22–32).

Which comes first in the mind of God: the relationship of Christ to the church or marriage, which is the illustration of it? Obviously the relationship of Christ to the church! But if this is so, then several important conclusions follow.

1. *No one will ever be able to understand the truest, deepest meaning of marriage who is not a Christian.* If a husband is to love like Christ, he must know the love of Christ in order to fulfill that commandment. If a wife is to submit to her husband as she submits to Christ, she must first have submitted to Christ to understand it.

2. *No one who is a Christian should ever marry a person who is not a Christian.* Second Corinthians 6:14 says that explicitly: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers." But even without this text the principle should be evident from the nature of the relationships. If one partner is a Christian and the other is not, a husband and wife cannot possibly have the same ideals for their marriage and the marriage is flawed from the beginning.

3. *No marriage will ever attain its true potential unless those united in the marriage are pursuing it according to God's goal and standards.* In this as in all other areas of life we are to "trust in the LORD with all [our hearts] and lean not on [our] own understanding" (Prov. 3:5). Only when we pursue marriage according to God's standards will God make our paths straight and bring blessing.

True Union

When Paul writes about Christ and the church he is giving grounds to apply everything about that relationship to everything about the relationship of a man to a woman and a woman to a man in marriage—as the earlier verses in this chapter also suggest. But it is important to note that the point at which Paul actually brings this comparison in is when he is talking about the *union* of two persons in marriage as a result of which they become "one flesh" (v. 31). There are three great mystical unions in the Bible: (1) the union of the three persons of the Godhead, being one God; (2) the union of the two natures of Christ in one person; and (3) the union of the believer with Christ. Marriage illustrates the third of these unions which is why Paul calls it "a profound mystery." It is not incomprehensible, but it is something that taxes even our sanctified understanding.

One thing this means is that a man and woman are to be united to each other in marriage as they can never be united to anyone else, not even to their closest friends or family. Nor is any other closeness in life comparable.

When God made the first man and the first woman he made them in his own image which means, among other things, that he made them a trinity as he is a trinity. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In a similar way, man is a trinity of body, soul, and spirit. The union of one man with one woman in marriage is

to be a union on each of these three levels. It must be if the marriage is to attain to God's design for it and be lasting.

It must be a union of body with body, first of all, which is to say that there must be a valid sexual relationship. For this reason all branches of the Christian church have acknowledged that a marriage has not actually taken place until the sexual union is consummated. If sexual union does not take place or cannot take place, then the marriage can be annulled as invalid. I tell couples that this is a vital part of marriage. According to the Bible, neither the man nor the woman is to defraud the other of the sexual experience. The quickest way for the marriage to end up in trouble is for the wife to have a headache every night and go to sleep early to avoid sex or for the husband to lose interest in his wife romantically and spend his nights elsewhere. Sex must be a regular expression of the relationship.

On the other hand, if the relationship is based upon nothing but sex—in other words, if it is a marriage of body with body alone and not of soul with soul and spirit with spirit—then the marriage is weak and is headed for the divorce courts. When the glamor wears off, as it always does if there is nothing more to sustain it, the relationship is finished. Such a marriage is based purely on physical attraction and ends in either indifference, divorce, or adultery.

A good marriage is more than a union of body with body. It is also a union of soul with soul. The word "soul" had almost passed out of use in the English language until the blacks of our day revived it; but it is a good word, and we would have been poorer for its loss. It refers to the intellectual and emotional side of a person's nature, involving the characteristics that we associate with the mind. Hence, a marriage that involves a union of souls is a marriage in which a couple share an interest in the same things—the same books, the same shows, the same friends—and seek to establish a meeting of the minds (as it were) both intellectually and emotionally. Such marriages will last longer.

I believe that at this point a special word must be said to Christians who are married. For whenever a minister speaks like this to Christians, many are already racing ahead of him to point three and are concluding that because their marriages are one of spirit with spirit, they do not need to worry very much about a union of their minds or souls. This is not right. Not only do we need to worry about it at times, we also need to work toward it. For an emotional and intellectual union does not in itself come naturally.

What does a young woman have in her mind when she marries a young man? What is her vision of this new husband? It may have something to do with her father and whether she liked him or rebelled against him. It has a little bit of Clark Gable mixed up in it, and perhaps a little of James Bond or Johnny Carson or her minister. What is the vision of the husband? Keith Miller, who wrote the best-selling book *The Taste of New Wine*, said that his vision was probably a combination of Saint Teresa, Elizabeth Taylor, and ... Betty Crocker.

What happens when a girl with a vision of Clark Gable and a man with a vision of Betty Crocker get married and begin to find out that the other person is not much like their vision? One of two things! Either they center their minds on the difference between the ideal and what they are increasingly finding the other person to be like and they try, either openly or subversively, to push the spouse into the image. Or by the grace of God they increasingly come to accept the other person as he or she is, including his or her standards of how they themselves should be, and then, under God, seek to conform to the best and most uplifting of those standards.

It must be one or the other of those ways. Keith Miller has written, "The soul of a marriage can be a trysting place where two people can come together quietly from the struggles of the world and feel safe, accepted and loved ... or it can be a battle ground where two egos are locked in a lifelong struggle for supremacy, a battle which is for the most part invisible to the rest of the world."⁶³

⁶³ Keith Miller, *The Taste of New Wine* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1968), 46.

If we are to have the former in our marriages, then we must work toward it. We must do it by cultivating the interests and the aspirations of the other party.

A true marriage, then, must be a marriage of body with body and of soul with soul. But it must also be a marriage of spirit with spirit. For this reason the only marriages that can approximate the kind of marriage that God intended to exist in this world are Christian marriages.

What does this mean, a marriage of spirit with spirit? Primarily it means that both the husband and the wife must be Christians, for the unsaved person possesses a spirit only in the sense that he supports a vacuum at the center of his life that can only be filled by God. He has a spirit, but the spirit has died—just as Adam’s spirit died when he disobeyed God and ran from him. The only persons who possess a live spirit are those who have been touched by the Holy Spirit and have entered into God’s family by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Only these can be married in the full sense of the word, which means body with body, soul with soul, and spirit with spirit. In this type of union a man and a woman experience the fullest measure of earthly blessing and most fully illustrate the mystical union of Christ and his church.⁷⁴

True and Perfect Love

Yet when we think of Christ and his relationship to the church, we think not primarily of his mystical union with us (important as that is) but of the simpler and even more wonderful fact that he loved us and gave himself for us. We recognize that this is to be our pattern.

In the Old Testament we are told of the marriage of Hosea and Gomer which from the beginning was set forth as an illustration of the way God loves and gives himself for his people in spite of their unfaithful behavior. Gomer was like us. She was married to Hosea, but she was flirtatious and soon left him for another man. Hosea made sure that she had food to eat and clothes to wear—even when she was living with another man. But at last Gomer sank so low that she was sold as a slave in the city of Samaria, and Hosea was told to go and buy her. He bought her for “fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley” (Hosea 3:2). At this point Gomer became Hosea’s property; he could have killed her if he wished. But he did not kill her. *He loved her!* And now, since she was his again, he promised love for her and claimed her love for himself.

This is a picture of the way the Lord Jesus Christ loves us and of how our marriages are to illustrate that great and prior relationship. We are the adulterous slave, sold on the auction block of sin. He loved us when we did *not* love him. He died for us when we were scorning his love and running from him. Still, he bought us by that greatest of all sacrifices, and we became his. Peter says, “You were redeemed ... with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:18–19). Having become his, we now owe him the fullest measure of love.

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Never make the mistake of dragging your understanding of the love of God in Christ down to the level of your own weak love. Rather let God draw your love up by the love and power of Christ to his standard. Then Christ shall have his way, and you will be able to testify to the world of his great love.⁸

⁷⁴ Portions of the discussion of the union of body, soul, and spirit are borrowed from James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 121–24.

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, [*Ephesians: An Expositional Commentary*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 204–209.

Submissive (Eph. 5:21–33)

Paul applied the principle of harmony to husbands and wives (Eph. 5:21–33), parents and children (Eph. 6:1–4), and masters and servants (Eph. 6:5–9); and he began with the admonition that each submit to the other (Eph. 5:21). Does this suggest that the children tell the parents what to do, or that the masters obey the servants? Of course not! *Submission* has nothing to do with the *order* of authority, but rather governs the *operation* of authority, how it is given and how it is received. Often Jesus tried to teach His disciples not to throw their weight around, or seek to become great at somebody else's expense. Unfortunately, they failed to learn the lesson, and even at the Last Supper they were arguing over who was the greatest (Luke 22:24–27). When Jesus washed their feet, He taught them that the greatest is the person who uses his authority to build up people and not, like the Pharisees, to build up his authority and make himself important. We are to esteem others “more important than ourselves” (Rom 12:10; Phil. 2:1–4). By nature, we want to promote ourselves, but the Holy Spirit enables us to submit ourselves.

As you study Paul's words to husbands and wives, remember that he was writing to believers. He was nowhere suggesting that women are inferior to men, or that all women must be in subjection to all men in every situation. The fact that he uses Christ and the church as his illustration is evidence that he has the Christian home in mind.

Wives, submit yourselves (vv. 22–24). He gives two reasons for this command: the lordship of Christ (Eph. 5:22) and the headship of the man in Christ (Eph. 5:23). When the Christian wife submits herself to Christ and lets Him be the Lord of her life, she will have no difficulty submitting to her husband. This does not mean that she becomes a slave, for the husband is also to submit to Christ. And if both are living under the lordship of Christ, there can be only harmony. Headship is not dictatorship. “Each for the other, both for the Lord.” The Christian husband and wife should pray together and spend time in the Word, so that they might know God's will for their individual lives and for their home. Most of the marital conflicts I have dealt with as a pastor have stemmed from failure of the husband and or wife to submit to Christ, spend time in His Word, and seek to do His will each day.

This explains why a Christian should marry a Christian and not become “unequally yoked together” with an unbeliever (2 Cor. 6:14–18). If the Christian is submitted to Christ, he will not try to establish a home that disobeys the Word of God. Such a home invites civil war from the beginning. But something else is important. The Christian couple must be careful to submit to Christ's lordship even before they are married. Unless the couple prays together and sincerely seeks God's will in His Word, their marriage begins on a weak foundation. Sins committed before marriage (“We're Christians—we can get away with this!”) have a way of causing problems after marriage. Certainly God is able to forgive, but something very precious is lost just the same. Dr. William Culbertson, former president of Moody Bible Institute, used to warn about “the sad consequences of forgiven sins,” and engaged Christian couples need to take that warning to heart.

Husbands, love your wives (vv. 25–33). Paul had much more to say to the Christian husbands than to the wives. He set for them a very high standard: Love your wives “even as Christ also loved the church.” Paul was lifting married love to the highest level possible, for he saw in the Christian home an illustration of the relationship between Christ and the church. God established marriage for many reasons. For one thing, it meets man's *emotional* needs. “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Marriage also has a *social* purpose in the bearing of children to continue the race (Gen. 1:28). Paul indicated a *physical* purpose for marriage—to help man and woman fulfill the normal desires given them by God (1 Cor. 7:1–3). But in Ephesians 5, Paul indicated also a *spiritual* purpose in marriage, as the husband and wife experience with each other the submission and the love of Christ (Eph. 5:22–33).

If the husband makes Christ's love for the church the pattern for loving his wife, then he will love her *sacrificially* (Eph. 5:25). Christ gave Himself for the church; so the husband, in love, gives himself for his

wife. Jacob so loved Rachel that he sacrificially worked fourteen years to win her. True Christian love “seeketh not her own” (1 Cor. 13:5)—it is not selfish. If a husband is submitted to Christ and filled with the Spirit, his sacrificial love will willingly pay a price that she might be able to serve Christ in the home and glorify Him.

The husband’s love will also be a *sanctifying* love (Eph. 5:26–27). The word *sanctify* means “to set apart.” In the marriage ceremony, the husband is set apart to belong to the wife, and the wife is set apart to belong to the husband. Any interference with this God-given arrangement is sin. Today, Christ is cleansing His church through the ministry of His Word (John 15:3; 17:17). The love of the husband for his wife ought to be cleansing her (and him) so that both are becoming more like Christ. Even their physical relationship should be so controlled by God that it becomes a means of spiritual enrichment as well as personal enjoyment (1 Cor. 7:3–5). The husband is not to “use” his wife for his own pleasure, but rather is to show the kind of love that is mutually rewarding and sanctifying. The marriage experience is one of constant growth when Christ is the Lord of the home. Love always enlarges and enriches, while selfishness does just the opposite.

The church today is not perfect; it has spots and wrinkles. Spots are caused by defilement on the outside, while wrinkles are caused by decay on the inside. Because the church becomes defiled by the world, it needs constant cleansing, and the Word of God is the cleansing agent. “Keep yourselves unspotted from the world” (James 1:27). Strictly speaking, there should be no wrinkles in the church, because wrinkles are evidence of old age and internal decay. As the church is nourished by the Word, these wrinkles ought to disappear. Like a beautiful bride, the church ought to be clean and youthful, which is possible through the Spirit of God using the Word of God. One day the church will be presented in heaven “a glorious church” at the coming of Jesus Christ (Jude 24).

The husband’s love for his wife should be sacrificial and sanctifying, but it should also be *satisfying* (Eph. 5:28–30). In the marriage relationship, the husband and wife become “one flesh.” Therefore, whatever each does to the other, he does to himself or herself. It is a mutually satisfying experience. The man who loves his wife is actually loving his own body, since he and his wife are one flesh. As he loves her, he is nourishing her. Just as love is the circulatory system of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:16), so love is the nourishment of the home. How many people have confessed, “I am starved for love.” There should be no starvation for love in the Christian home, for the husband and wife should so love each other that their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs are met. If both are submitted to the Lord, and to each other, they will be so satisfied that they will not be tempted to look anywhere else for fulfillment.

Our Christian homes are to be pictures of Christ’s relationship to His church. Each believer is a member of Christ’s body, and each believer is to help nourish the body in love (Eph. 4:16). We are one with Christ. The church is His body and His bride, and the Christian home is a divinely ordained illustration of this relationship. This certainly makes marriage a serious matter.

Paul referred to the creation of Eve and the forming of the first home (Gen. 2:18–24). Adam had to give part of himself in order to get a bride, but Christ gave all of Himself to purchase His bride at the cross. God opened Adam’s side, but sinful men pierced Christ’s side. So united are a husband and wife that they are “one flesh.” Their union is even closer than that of parents and children. The believer’s union with Christ is even closer and, unlike human marriage, will last for all eternity. Paul closed with a final admonition that the husband love his wife and that the wife reverence (respect) her husband, all of which require the power of the Holy Spirit.

If Christian husbands and wives have the power of the Spirit to enable them, and the example of Christ to encourage them, why do too many Christian marriages fail? Somebody is out of the will of God. Just because two Christians know each other and get along together does not mean they are supposed to get married. In fact, not every believer is supposed to marry. It is sometimes God’s will for a Christian to remain single (Matt. 19:12; 1 Cor. 7:7–9). It is wrong for a believer to marry an unbeliever, but it is also wrong for two Christians to marry out of the will of God.

But even if two Christians marry in the will of God, they must stay in God's will if their home is to be the creative fellowship God wants it to be. "The fruit of the Spirit is love" (Gal. 5:22), and unless both husband and wife are walking in the Spirit they cannot share the love of Christ, the love that is so beautifully described in 1 Corinthians 13. The root of most marital problems is sin, and the root of all sin is selfishness. Submission to Christ and to one another is the only way to overcome selfishness, for when we submit, the Holy Spirit can fill us and enable us to love one another in a sacrificial, sanctifying, satisfying way—the way Christ loves the church.

To experience the fullness of the Spirit a person must first possess the Spirit—be a Christian. Then there must be a sincere desire to glorify Christ, since this is why the Holy Spirit was given (John 16:14). We do not use the Holy Spirit; He uses us. There must be a deep thirst for God's fullness, a confession that we cannot do His will apart from His power. We must claim the promise of John 7:37–39: "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink!" By faith yield yourself to Christ; by faith ask Him for the fullness of the Spirit. By faith receive. When you find yourself joyful, thankful, and submissive, you will know that God has answered.

One more important factor should be considered. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God to work in our lives. Read Colossians 3:16–4:1 and you will see a parallel to our Ephesians passage. And you will note that to be filled with the Word of God produces joy, thanksgiving, and submission. In other words, when you are controlled by the Word of God, you are filled with the Spirit of God. Not only husbands and wives, but all Christians need to spend time daily letting the Word of Christ dwell in them richly, for then the Spirit of God can work in our lives to make us joyful, thankful, and submissive. And this means heaven in the home—or wherever God may put us.⁹

Spence/Jones -

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave himself for her. The husband's duty to the wife is enforced by another parallel—it ought to correspond to Christ's love for the Church. This parallel restores the balance; if it should seem hard for the wife to be in subjection, the spirit of love, Christ-like love, on the part of the husband makes the duty easy. Christ did not merely pity the Church, or merely desire her good, but loved her; her image was stamped on his heart and her name graven on his hands; he desired to have her for his companion, longing for a return of her affection, for the establishment of sympathy between her and him. And he **gave himself for her** (comp. ver. 2), showing that her happiness and welfare were dearer to him than his own—the true test of deep, real love.

Ver. 26.—**That he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word.** The immediate object of Christ was to cleanse her, and for this end he used the Word as a purifying agent, washing her by means of it. The difference between selfish and unselfish love is seen here: a selfish lover cares for his wife in his own interest—like Samson, desires to have her simply because she pleases him, and, in his converse with her, thinks, not of her good, but of his own enjoyment; but the love of an unselfish lover constrains him to seek her good, to do nothing that will hurt her and damage her in any manner of way, but to do everything that he believes will advance her well-being, especially in the highest sense. He finds her polluted (comp. Ezek. 16), and his great instrument of cleansing is "the Word" (comp. John 15:3; 17:17)—the Word in all its searching, humbling, rebuking, correcting, informing, stimulating, refreshing, consoling power. There is no express allusion to baptism, τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος is explained by ἐν ῥήματι, "the Word" being the great sanctifying medium, and baptism a figure (1 Pet. 3:21).

Ver. 27.—**That he might present to himself the Church glorious.** The ultimate end, to which ver. 26 is introductory. Christ both gives and takes the bride; he presents her to himself—the day of his espousals

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, [*The Bible Exposition Commentary*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 50–52.

being in the state of glory (Rev. 21:2), and all the training of this life being designed to fit her for that condition. She becomes glorious at last through assimilation to himself (2 Cor. 3:18; John 17:22). **Not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.** The idea is that of a body perfectly free from blemish, typical of a soul perfectly delivered from sin—of a character perfected in all grace and goodness. **But that it should be holy and without blemish.** The same truth expressed in positive form, which in the preceding clause is expressed in the negative. Nothing could more clearly denote perfection of character—the full development of the character with whatever of variety may arise from differences in natural gifts and constitution, or convey a more glorious idea of the destiny of redeemed humanity. To be, as it were, the bride of Christ is a high destiny in point of *condition*; but it would be miserable if character did not tally with condition; this agreement, however, is secured, for the Church is to **be holy and without blemish.**

Ver. 28.—**Even so ought husbands also to love their own wives as their own bodies.** A new illustration is introduced here to throw light on the bearing of the husband to his wife, and the οὐτως seems to refer, not to what goes before, but to what follows (comp. in ver. 33). **He that loveth his own wife loveth himself.** His wife is part of himself, so that not to love her as himself is not only a sin against law, but a sin against nature.

Ver. 29.—**For no man ever hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as Christ also the Church.** To hate one's wife is as irrational as to hate one's **own flesh**, and as, on the other hand, men constantly nourish and cherish their flesh, protecting it from hurt, seeking to heal it when hurt, and generally to promote its welfare and comfort, so ought husbands to act towards their wives. In this aspect of the case, too the sharp eye of the apostle finds an analogy between the relation of the wife to the husband and that of the Church to Christ, expanded in the next verse.

Ver. 30.—**For we are members of his body [being], of his flesh, and of his bones** (the last seven words omitted in many manuscripts and in the R.V.). The reference is to the original formation of woman as narrated in Gen. 2. Her very name indicated that she was “taken from man.” She was taken from him and given to him. So the Church is taken from Christ and given to him. Taken from his body, sprung from his incarnation and his crucifixion and resurrection, the spiritual offspring of his humanity, and then given to him, to be his servant, nay, above a servant, his companion, friend, and confidant for evermore. If it had not been for the body of Christ (Heb. 10:5) the Church could have had no existence. No bride fit for the King of heaven could have sprung from the earth. As Eve came from the opened side of Adam, so figuratively the Church springs from the pierced side of Jesus.

Ver. 31.—**For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they two shall come to be one flesh.** Quoted in substance from Gen. 2:24. It seems to be introduced simply to show the closeness of the relation between man and wife; it is such as in a sense to supersede that between parent and child. The apostle (as appears from the next verse) has in view, at the same time, the parallel truth—the closeness of the relation between Christ and the Church; it too in a sense supersedes the relations of nature (comp. Luke 14:26; Matt. 12:50).

Ver. 32.—**This mystery is a great one; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the Church.** The matter referred to is the typical relation between the marriage of man and wife, and the union of Christ and the Church. It is called a mystery, and it is not said, as is said of another mystery, referred to before (ch. 3:5), that it has been completely explained. Some light has been thrown upon it, but that is all. It is implied that there is something of mystery in many of the relations between things natural and things spiritual, but that in the depth and grandeur of the subject, the mystery connected with the marriage relation is pre-eminent—it is “a great mystery.” The analogy of the wind to the Holy Spirit; the springing up of plants to the resurrection; the melancholy sounds of nature to the prevalence of sin; and many other analogies, present vague shadows of truth, the clear, full forms of which we cannot see. When the day breaks and “the shadows flee away,” such things will appear in a clearer light.

Ver. 33.—**Nevertheless let each of you severally so love his own wife even as himself.** The “nevertheless” refers to the unsolved part of the mystery: whatever may be mysterious, there is no mystery

as to this, as to the duty of each husband to **love his wife even as himself**: that, as already shown, is clear from many considerations. **And let the wife see that she fear her husband**. Not, of course, with the slavish fear of one terrified and trembling because of a stronger being, but with the holy respect due to one to whom, by the will of God, she stands in a subordinate relation. The relation of Sarah to Abraham may again be referred to as indicating the true ideal of the relation of the wife to the husband.¹⁰

Harold Hoehner-

Wives and husbands (5:22–33).

5:22–24. **Wives** are to **submit to** their **husbands**. (The verb “submit,” absent in Gr. in v. 22, is borrowed from v. 21.) **As to the Lord** does not mean that a wife is to submit to her husband in the same way she submits to the Lord, but rather that her submission to her husband *is* her service rendered “to the Lord” (cf. Col. 3:18). The reason for this submission is that **the husband is the head of the wife** (cf. 1 Cor. 11:3), and this is compared to Christ’s headship over the church (Eph. 5:23; cf. 4:15; Col. 1:18). **As Christ is the Savior of the church, His body**, so a husband should be the protector of his wife, who is “one flesh” with him (Gen. 2:24). **As the church** is in submission **to Christ**, **so also** a wife **should** be to her husband. It would be foolish to think of the church being head over Christ. But submission does not mean inferiority. It means that she recognizes that her husband is the head of the home and responds to him accordingly without usurping his authority to herself.

5:25. After speaking of a wife’s submission to her husband (vv. 22–24), Paul then stated the measure of the husband’s love for his wife (vv. 25–32). **Husbands** are commanded, **Love your wives** (cf. v. 33) **just as Christ loved the church**. The word “love” (*agapaō*) means seeking the highest good for another person (cf. 2:4). This is an unselfish love as seen in Christ’s sacrificial death in which He **gave Himself up for** the church (cf. 5:2; John 10:11, 15, 17–18; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 5:25; Heb. 9:14). A wife’s submission in no way hints that a husband may lord it over his spouse, as a despot commanding a slave. The “submit-love” relationship is a beautiful mixture of harmonious partnership in marriage.

5:26–27. The purpose of Christ’s death was **to make** the church **holy** (*hagiasē*, “to set apart” for Himself as His own forever; cf. Heb. 2:11; 10:10, 14; 13:12) which He did by **cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word**. This is not baptismal regeneration for that would be contrary to Paul’s teaching in this book as well as all his other writings and the entire New Testament. Metaphorically, being regenerated is pictured as being cleansed by water (cf. “the washing of rebirth” in Titus 3:5). The “Word” (*rhēmati*) refers to the “preached Word” that unbelievers hear (cf. *rhēma* in Eph. 6:17; Rom. 10:8, 17; 1 Peter 1:25). The ultimate purpose of Christ’s death is **to present ... to Himself** the church as **radiant** or “in splendor” (*rs^{11v}*). This adjective, “glorious,” in NE^{12B}, is not attributive (as in NI^{13v}’s “a radiant church”). It is in the predicate position because there is an article before church (to “present the church ... glorious,” NEB).

This purpose is then described negatively (**without stain or wrinkle**—no taint of sin or spiritual decay—**or any other blemish**) and positively (**holy and blameless**). These last two adjectives (*hagia*, “set apart,” and *amōmos*, “without blemish,” like a spotless lamb) are stated in Ephesians 1:4 as the purpose of

¹⁰ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., [*Ephesians*](#), The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 212–213.

¹¹RSV Revised Standard Version

¹²NEB New English Bible

¹³NIIV New International Version

God's election: that Christ may present His church to Himself in all its perfection (cf. "make holy" in 5:26; also cf. *hagious* and *amōmous* in Col. 1:22). Whereas human brides prepare themselves for their husbands, Christ prepares His own bride for Himself.

5:28–30. In verses 28–32 Paul applied the truths given in verses 25–27. As the church is the extension of Christ, so is the wife an "extension" of her husband. No one hates **his own body** but takes care of it. **Feeds** (*ektrephei*; cf. "bring them up" in 6:4) **and cares for** (*thalpei*; cf. 1 Thes. 2:7) is literally, "nourishes and cherishes." Thus as Christ loves the church, **His body** (of which all believers are **members**; cf. Eph. 4:25), so should **husbands ... love their wives as their own bodies** (5:28; cf. v. 33). Men care for their bodies even though they are imperfect and so they should care for their wives though they are imperfect.

5:31–32. Verse 31 is a free rendering of Genesis 2:24, indicating that the bond between husband and **wife** is greater than that between parent and child. The greatness of the **mystery** refers to **the two** becoming **one flesh**. But then Paul returned to mention the wonderful bond between **Christ and the church**, which illustrates the love of a husband for his wife.

5:33. This is a restatement of the responsibilities of the husband and wife toward each other: **love** by the **husband** (cf. v. 25) and **respect by the wife**.¹⁴

R.C – Sproul –

Husbands and wives

In the latter portion of chapter 5 we encounter one of the most controversial passages for today in the whole epistle. It was not very controversial throughout the history of the Christian church, but with the advent of feminism in Western civilisation, it has become extremely controversial. This is because the text, on the surface at least, seems to suggest a hierarchical structure of authority within the home by which, under the law of God, the husband is said to be the head of the house, and the wife is called to be in submission to her husband.

The argument of the feminists is that Paul wrote these instructions not by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit or by the revelation of God but from a standpoint of male arrogance. Chauvinism, whether it be in Paul or other men, assumes that there is an innate or intrinsic superiority of the male gender and a corresponding intrinsic inferiority of the female gender. Therefore the rationale for calling wives to be submissive to their husbands assumes this feminine inferiority.

This objection is based upon two assumptions. The first is that Paul was not setting forth the revelation of God. This assumption is tied to one's view of Sacred Scripture. If one is persuaded that the Bible, including Ephesians, is the Word of God, then one would immediately dismiss this assumption and regard it as slander against the Holy Spirit himself.

The second assumption is that to teach the subordination of the wife to the husband automatically carries the implication of female inferiority. This assumption is manifestly invalid. Though there is no doubt that countless men have chauvinistically drawn this erroneous conclusion from the text, the text itself does not warrant it. Because a person is given a subordinate position in a given structure that involves a division of labour does not carry with it the necessary inference of inferiority. We do not believe that the vice-president of the United States is necessarily inferior, as a human being, to the president of the United States. Children are not inferior to their parents simply because they are under their parents' authority.

¹⁴ Harold W. Hoehner, "[Ephesians](#)," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 640–641.

The best model we have for this is to be found in the Trinity. In the economy of redemption, the Son is subordinate to the Father, and the Holy Spirit is subordinate to both the Father and the Son. Yet at the same time we insist that the Son and the Spirit are co-eternal, co-essential, and equal in power and dignity with the Father. The Son is not inferior to the Father and the Spirit is not inferior to the Son and the Father.

Another feminist objection is this: Paul was articulating a theology of women derived in part from rabbinic Judaism and in part from the general culture, both of which did regard women as inferior. This is basically a more sophisticated version of the same objection. It is a more subtle way of saying that Paul was a chauvinist who was not writing as an agent of revelation. It mollifies the slander against him slightly by making Paul a victim of the undue influence of rabbinic tradition and the prevailing ideas of his day. Of course, if we carried this assumption to its extreme we would find little or nothing in the New Testament that differs from or transcends the cultural thinking of its day. On the other hand, if we find anything in the writing of Paul it is a thinker who, following Jesus, was so radically innovative and critical of human traditions that it cost him, as it did Jesus before him, his very life.

A more serious objection is that Paul's teaching in Ephesians contradicts his teaching in Galatians. This suggests either that Paul was confused or that his apostolic teaching underwent revisions as he grew in his own understanding of the implications of the gospel. Another alternative is that we, in interpreting Paul, are the ones who are confused and must look to Galatians 3:28 as the controlling principle of interpretation. In Galatians 3:28 we read: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

Of all the objections raised against Ephesians 5:22, this is the one we hear most frequently. I must confess that the use of the Galatians passage as a rebuttal to Ephesians 5:22 never ceases to amaze me. I see it as the classic illogical conclusion. The reasoning goes something like this: If in Christ there is neither male nor female, this implies that conversion to Christ obliterates the distinction between male and female. Conversion must yield unisexuality or asexuality. Paul, therefore, is caught in a hopeless contradiction between Ephesians and Galatians. On the one hand he teaches that in Christ there is neither male nor female, while on the other hand he enjoins the female member of a marriage (the wife) to be submissive to the male member (the husband).

But the contradiction in poor Paul's thinking doesn't end there. Apparently the confused apostle repeatedly contradicts his teaching of Galatians. Paul frequently gives instructions regarding the relationship between slaves and masters and even wrote an entire letter (Philemon) on the subject. How blatantly inconsistent this would be if Paul believed that distinction to have been obliterated completely. It is true that Paul sowed seeds for the abolition of the institution of slavery. Yet he recognised the fact that there were believers who were still slaves and believers who were still masters. He addressed both on their respective roles.

If we examine the context of Paul's teaching in Galatians we see that he is discussing the cardinal question of salvation by faith in Christ. It should be clear to us that what Paul has in view is this: 'You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:26).

It is by faith in Christ that we are saved. Anyone who has faith in Christ is included in the family of God. Salvation is not restricted to Jews or to Gentiles, to males or to females, to slaves or to freemen. The great leveller regarding salvation is not race, sexuality or status, but faith. That is the obvious point he is making. To carry his statement that in Christ there is neither male nor female to the absolute degree of the obliteration of the sexes is to do violence to the apostle's own teaching.

I want to look carefully at this text, not with the narrow-minded bigotry of a first century Jew, but as the revelation of the law of God.

Paul says, in verse 21, **Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ**. I have seen modern treatments of this passage that have, in my judgment, entertained a kind of exegesis of Scripture that is utterly irresponsible. Some have linked the whole passage to this phrase, **Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ**, meaning that everything that is enjoined to the wife also applies to the husband. This

would mean that wives have to be subject to their husbands and husbands have to be subject to their wives.

No, I think that verse 21 is a general introduction. In order to live the Christian life, each one of us has to manifest subjection to other people at certain points. I have to be in submission to the Presbytery that ordains me, to the Police Department in my town, to the Government of the United States. Everybody at some point has to learn what it means to submit to any authority that is over us in any capacity.

Now how do we flesh that out? Paul says that there is a certain structure which God has ordained, by which wives have to be in submission to their husbands, children to their parents.

This passage should put to rest once and for all the myth that marriages are to be fifty-fifty. I can't think of a worse scenario for a marriage than to have the authority in that relationship divided equally. When two people are together like that, then nobody has any authority. You are in a perpetual power-struggle where one is trying to get control of 51% of the stock. And that can be exceedingly destructive to a family.

When the Bible says that the husband is to be the head of the home, and that the wife is to be in submission to her husband, it does not give the man a licence to tyranny. It does not mean that the man is never to consult with his wife or to lean upon her wisdom and take seriously her concerns and her judgment. When Adam was created, with dominion over the earth, Eve ruled over the earth with him as his helpmate, not as his servant. In a sense, God made Adam king over the creation and gave Eve to him as his queen, not as his slave-girl. There is all the difference in the world between a queen and a slave-girl.

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord (verse 22). This is a service and an act of worship that the woman gives to the Lord himself. It is the Lord's will that the wife be submissive to her husband, and if she wants to honour Christ, then one of the concrete ways she does this is by being in submission to her husband. If a woman is contentious and refuses to follow the leadership of her husband, she is in rebellion, not simply against him, but also against Christ.

Let me make a qualification here. Whenever we are called to obey anyone, be it a civil magistrate, a domestic leader or our church rulers, we are told in the whole context of Scripture that we must ultimately be submissive to God. So if there is ever a conflict between the law of God and the rule of a human being, not only may you disobey, you must disobey the human command.

There is a teaching which has gone widely through evangelical Christianity which says that for a woman to be obedient to this passage, she must obey her husband no matter what he tells her to do. This is not true. For example, if her husband tells her to live a life of prostitution, she is to show her obedience to Christ by disobeying her husband's wicked commands. That woman must disobey her husband, because her husband is commanding her to do something that God forbids. Similarly, if the husband forbids her to do something that God commands, she must disobey her husband.

Nevertheless, the general principle is that a woman is to bend over backwards to defer to the leadership and authority of her husband. She is not free to disobey simply because she disagrees or because she finds herself inconvenienced by what the husband requires.

Why? The reason Paul gives is this: **For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything** (verses 23, 24). There is an analogy between the headship of Christ over the church and the headship of the husband over the wife. All kinds of exegetical gymnastics have been attempted in order to try to vitiate this passage, but here it is: headship involves authority. This authority is not given to exercise tyranny, but leadership. The husband is responsible for the leadership of the home. He is accountable to God for how the home is managed, and how the affairs of the home are conducted.

Here's where the men want to stop reading: **Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her** (verse 25). No Christian woman would object for a single moment to be in submission to her husband, if her husband were Jesus Christ. Obviously the Bible calls wives to be in subjection to husbands who are not Jesus Christ, but the responsibility that is given to the man here is

terrifying: to love their wives like Christ loved the church and gave himself for the church. Would a woman be afraid to submit herself to a man who loved her as much as Jesus loved the church? Would a woman fight and kick and scream against the leadership of a man who was willing to give his lifeblood to do anything he could to save her life? The kind of rule that the husband is to have over his wife is to be modelled on the leadership of Jesus.

Some husbands respond, 'I'll love my wife as Christ loved the church, as soon as she starts to submit herself to me!' But that's not how Christ loved the church. Christ loved a church that was not submissive to him. Christ died for a church that was in rebellion against him. Some wives will say, 'I will subject myself to my husband, when he starts loving me.' No, they have a responsibility before God to conduct themselves according to the word of God in their marriage.

Why did Christ die? **To make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless** (verses 26, 27).

Ceremonial baths were a regular feature in Jewish customs. Probably Paul is alluding here to the particular bath a bride underwent prior to her marriage ceremony. Symbolically, defilement was washed away, and purity was reinstated.

For the Christian, Paul may be saying that a similar cleansing unto holiness is effected by two agencies: the 'washing of water' and 'through the word'. Baptism, the washing of water, is said by Calvin to be the outward symbol by which the inner and invisible work of sanctification is confirmed. This external rite must, however, be accompanied by the second means, the application of the word of the gospel. Scripture becomes the means by which the Spirit accomplishes his work of sanctification—the process of becoming holy and blameless. Diligent attention to the Scriptures is the ordained means by which God conforms us to the image of his Son, burning away the dross of sin that so thoroughly pollutes our lives. Jesus' intention for his bride is to present her to the Father in her full splendour, without spot or wrinkle. He only wants the best for her.

That is the pattern that husbands are to follow: **In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no-one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church** (verses 28, 29). One of the most wonderful parts of the marriage ceremony is the vow that we take to cherish one another. To cherish one another means to hold one another in the highest esteem and to place an infinite value on one another. This is the attitude that is to permeate the home. Not a power struggle or a see-saw battle for more authority than the other one. Rather, the man is to love his wife as he loves his own flesh. A man takes care of his own flesh. He feeds himself, eats, drinks, nourishes his body and protects it. He has a strong instinct of self-preservation. He is to love his wife even more than he loves himself.

'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' The mystical goal of marriage is the union of two people. That union does not annul or annihilate individual personalities. This stands in stark contrast to Eastern religions where the loss of personal identity takes place in the mystical union of marriage. In Christianity, the union is very profound. People become of one mind, one concern, and one passion. That goes deep in a healthy marriage; the two are like one person.

This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church (verse 32). Notice how Paul keeps weaving this theme through Ephesians. Earlier he had talked about the church as the body of Christ in the mystical union that is shared by all who participate in fellowship with Christ (see pages 88–91).

However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband (verse 33). Probably the most fragile mechanism in the whole creation is the male ego. One of the most difficult things to admit or to understand is that there is probably nothing that a man wants more from his wife than her admiration. There is probably nothing that a woman wants more from her husband than his attention, taking her seriously and treating her with the greatest dignity. Here what we are getting

at is the question of respect. If I exercise my headship over my wife in a tyrannical way, I am not respecting my wife. If my wife gives slavish obedience to me without any love, she is not respecting me. The whole basis of the relationship is built upon love, cherishing and respecting one another.

Parents and children

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honour your father and mother’—which is the first commandment with a promise—‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth’ (6:1–3). The rendering of obedience to one’s parents is not simply a social convention, but it is a duty that is to be rendered to God. So important did God deem this particular duty of mankind, that he included it in the ten commandments, the foundation of the law for his nation, Israel. The respect that children are to give to their parents is essential for a well-ordered society, for the stability of the home, and also for the development of discipline and character in children. Notice the way the apostle says this: ‘Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right’. It is proper, it is good, for children to render obedience to their parents. He cites the fifth commandment: ‘Honour your father and mother’—which is the first commandment with a promise—‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’

But Paul doesn’t stop with the responsibilities of children to their parents. He goes on: **Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord** (verse 4).

The father is held accountable by God as the one who is responsible for teaching the children and for being the disciplinarian of the children. Fathers are warned at this point that as they carry out these responsibilities of discipline and instruction, they are not to be tyrannical or harsh in their treatment of the children.

We read countless passages in the Old Testament that warn against a latitudinarian spirit by which parents are so permissive that they refuse to discipline unruly children. Remember the statement that the parent who will not discipline his child, hates the child (Proverbs 13:24). Parents, when they are disciplining their children, often say, ‘This hurts me more than it hurts you.’ That really is true. There are times when parents find it extremely difficult to discipline their children because they don’t want to alienate the children and they don’t want to put up with the tears that may follow from disciplinary action. But when they just allow children to do whatever they want, without any discipline and without any instruction, they are loving themselves rather than their children.

So we have a host of admonitions in Scripture that call parents to be very diligent in the administration of discipline to their children. But with this caveat, **do not exasperate your children**. This doesn’t mean that every time a child becomes angry with a parent, it is because the parents have been guilty of unjust provocation. But there is such a thing as a belligerent, insensitive, harsh, and stentorian type of discipline which so frustrates children that they are filled with hostility and resentment towards their parents which then spills over into the rest of their lives. Of course, the ultimate model of discipline and chastisement is God himself, who always tempers his wrath with mercy.

Masters and servants

Some people find verses 5–6 very, very difficult to deal with at all, because we have this admonition: **Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.** At the time this was written, slavery was a commonplace social phenomenon. This tends to rub against the grain for contemporary Christians who see the very institution of slavery as something utterly inconsistent with the gospel and the will of God. Yet it seems by implication here that Paul is endorsing some forms of the institution of slavery.

There were certain kinds of voluntary slavery in the ancient world, where a person would bind himself over to the service of another person, for example, to pay off his debts. But there was also the whole idea of selling people into slavery and the even worse practice of stealing people who were free and using them as slaves. Paul doesn't comment here on any of the variety of forms of slavery that did exist in the ancient world. He just speaks in general to anyone who happens to be in that situation of slavery.

John Murray deals with this subject in his book *Principles of Conduct*. Murray says that Paul doesn't speak for or against slavery here in this passage, he is simply addressing those who happen to be in that particular situation. If you are a slave, whether justly or unjustly, you are still under the authority of your designated master, and as such it is your duty to perform the services that are expected and required of you. That is the Christian way for slaves to behave. Murray goes on to say that, in spite of Paul's instructions here to slaves and in spite of his writing an entire letter (Philemon) concerning a runaway slave, the New Testament in general, and Paul's writings in particular, contained the seeds of the dissolution of the institution of slavery. Subsequent history demonstrates that the Christian church has been at the forefront of the movement for the abolition of this institution.

Paul is speaking consistently about rendering service to whom service is due. Now we can speak more broadly here. There is a sense in which anyone who is in the employ of another person, although not a slave, is in a situation where services are to be rendered. In the case of our twentieth century industrial contracts, those services are rendered for hire. Employees receive pay cheques from their employers who enter into an agreement with those whom they employ. Employees are committed to giving certain services in return for the benefits and the remuneration that they receive for those services. Some of the principles that Paul applies to slaves can well be carried over and applied to anyone who is an employee. What Paul says is this: Work with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Wherever Christians are rendering a service, they must understand that such service is ultimately presented, not to employers or owners, but to Christ. So that by serving our masters or employers well, we are thereby rendering a service to Christ.

In verse 6, Paul writes: **Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.** All of us tend to perform more diligently when the eyes of our supervisors are upon us. But when there is no-one there to give oversight, we may slack off and shirk our responsibilities. Often, the only thing that keeps employees diligent and responsible in their work is the fact that somebody is watching them. But Paul is saying, 'Look, a real servant is somebody who works to please God. If you are going to please God it doesn't matter whether a supervisor is present or not present, for God is always looking at the heart.' We are expected, as Christians, to be people of integrity, doing a full day's work, whether somebody is watching over our shoulders or not **because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free** (verse 8).

Paul also has a word for those who are masters of slaves, and if we want to apply it more broadly, that would be to employers: **And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him** (verse 9). Whether a master has 50 slaves, or an employer 5,000 employees, both are still under the authority of the supreme Master. The employer is commanded to treat those who are under his authority in the same manner that he hopes to be treated by his Master in heaven. When I was working closely with Wayne Alderson and the Value of the Person movement in labour and management in Western Pennsylvania, I used to think frequently about this question: How would a steel mill function in terms of lines of authority and treatment of subordinates if Christ were the superintendent of that particular factory?

Sometimes we think that if Jesus were the boss of a work project, he would be so kind, gentle, and gracious that he wouldn't expect any work. But just a cursory glance at the New Testament, where Jesus is constantly urging his people to be productive and diligent in their labour, would show Jesus to be a demanding superintendent. He would expect those who were under his authority to give honest effort and a full day's work. Yet at the same time, there would be no partiality, no injustice, no petty criticisms, and no demeaning attacks on people's dignity. He is the perfect Master who treats all those under his authority

with love, tenderness, gentleness, justice and righteousness. He is the model for anyone who is in a position of authority.¹⁵

John Stott –

Paul has been outlining the new standards which God expects of his new society, the church, especially in terms of its unity and purity. These two qualities are indispensable to a life which is both worthy of the calling and fitting to the status of the people of God. He moves on now to the new relationships in which God's new people inevitably find themselves, and in so doing he concentrates in the rest of his letter on two further dimensions of Christian living.

The first concerns the practical, down-to-earth relationships of the home. For the divine family ceases to be a credible concept if it is not itself subdivided into human families which display God's love. What is the point of peace in the church if there is no peace in the home? The second dimension concerns the enemy we face and therefore the equipment we need in our unrelenting spiritual warfare.

These two responsibilities (home and work on the one hand, and spiritual combat on the other) are quite different from each other. Husband and wife, parents and children, masters and servants are visible, tangible human beings, while the 'principalities and powers' arrayed against us are invisible, intangible demonic beings. Nevertheless, if our Christian faith is to be of any practical value, it must be able to cope with both situations. It must teach us how to behave Christianly at home and at work, and it must enable us to fight against evil in such a way that we stand and do not fall. Thus harmony in the home and stability in the fight are the two final topics which the apostle handles.

Husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants were to be found in the earliest Christian congregations. Moreover, these three pairs of relationship are basic to all human existence. Markus Barth expresses this well by suggesting that in the first we see the human person as 'a *sexual* being (before Dr Freud or Dr Kinsey had put their fingers on this fact)', in the second as 'a *temporal* being (tied to the generation to which he belongs)' and in the third as 'a *material* being and part of an economic structure', Paul thus anticipating Marx. 'So this is man: a sexual, temporal and material being who, without exception, is enmeshed and, as it seems, hopelessly trapped in the structures of these three dimensions.'¹⁶¹

Detailed, practical instruction on Christian family life and on Christian responsibility in what nowadays we call 'employment' seems to have been given by the apostles from the beginning. Examples occur in the letters of both Paul and Peter.¹⁷² There is an urgent need in our day for similar plain moral education. Too much so-called 'holiness teaching' emphasizes a personal relationship to Jesus Christ without any attempt to indicate its consequences in terms of relationships with the people we live and work with. In contrast to such holiness-in-a-vacuum, which magnifies experiences and minimizes ethics, the apostles spelled out Christian duty in the concrete situations of everyday life and work.

Luther in his *Catechism* seems to have been the first person to refer to these lists as *Haustafeln*, meaning literally 'house tables' but often translated 'tables of household duties'. In recent years scholars have compared them with similar precepts both in the Jewish *halakah* (their corpus of law and tradition) and in Gentile literature, especially of the Stoics. That Jews, Stoics and Christians should all have been concerned about moral behaviour in the home should not surprise us. But the similarity between their

¹⁵ R. C. Sproul, [*The Purpose of God: Ephesians*](#) (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1994), 131–144.

¹⁶¹ Barth, *Broken Wall*, pp. 205–207. Cf. also his *Ephesians*, II, p. 755.

¹⁷² E.g. Eph. 5:22–6:9; Col. 3:18–4:1; Tit. 2:1–10 and 1 Pet. 2:18–3:7.

Haustafeln has sometimes been exaggerated.¹⁸³ If the apostles of Jesus were conscious of taking over any material from Jewish or Gentile sources, they thoroughly Christianized what they borrowed. There is no better example of this than Paul's address to husbands and wives in Ephesians, which is based upon a developed doctrine of Christ and his church.

1. Authority and submission

The ^{RS}_V may be right to begin the new paragraph with verse 21: *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ*. We have seen that the Greek verb is a present participle ('submitting') like 'addressing one another', 'singing and making melody' (verse 19) and 'giving thanks' (verse 20), and that all four participles depend on the command 'be filled with the Spirit' (verse 18) and describe the consequences of the Holy Spirit's fullness. Nevertheless, a Greek participle was sometimes used as an imperative, and undoubtedly the demand for mutual submissiveness leads on to the submission asked from wives, children and slaves. Moreover, there is no verb at all in verse 22, because the call for submission in verse 21 is intended to be carried over into it. So verse 21 is in fact a transition verse, forming a bridge between two sections, which is why the ^{NE}_B puts it in a paragraph by itself.

What is beyond question is that the three paragraphs which follow are given as examples of Christian submission, and that the emphasis throughout is on submission. Thus, wives are addressed before their husbands and are told to *be subject* to them (verse 22); children are mentioned before their parents and are told to *obey* them (6:1); and slaves are addressed before their masters and are told to *be obedient* to them (6:5).

Now the very notion of submission to authority is out of fashion today. It is totally at variance with contemporary attitudes of permissiveness and freedom. Almost nothing is calculated to arouse more angry protest than talk of 'subjection'. Ours is an age of liberation (not least for women, children and workers), and anything savouring of oppression is deeply resented and strongly resisted. How are Christians to react to this modern mood?

Our initial reaction to these liberation movements, I do not hesitate to say (although I shall qualify it later), should be one of positive welcome. For we have to agree that women in many cultures have been exploited, being treated like servants in their own home; that children have often been suppressed and squashed, not least in Victorian England in which they were supposed to be 'seen and not heard'; and that workers have been unjustly treated, being given inadequate wages and working conditions, and an insufficient share in responsible decision-making, not to mention the appalling injustices and barbarities of slavery and the slave trade.

We who name Christ's name need to acknowledge with shame that we ourselves have often acquiesced in the *status quo* and so helped to perpetuate some forms of human oppression, instead of being in the vanguard of those seeking social change. Nothing in the paragraphs we are about to study is inconsistent with the true liberation of human beings from all humiliation, exploitation and oppression. On the contrary, to whom do women, children and workers chiefly owe their liberation? Is it not to Jesus Christ? It is Jesus Christ who treated women with courtesy and honour in an age in which they were despised. It is Jesus Christ who said 'Let the children come to me' in a period of history in which unwanted babies were consigned to the local rubbish dump (as they are today to the hospital incinerator), or abandoned in the

¹⁸³ John Howard Yoder gives a list of eight 'very significant differences' between the Stoic and Christian *Haustafeln* in *The Politics of Jesus*, pp. 170–183.

¹⁹_{RSV} The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT 1946, 2nd edition 1971; OT 1952)

²⁰_{NEB} The New English Bible (NT 1961, 2nd edition 1970; OT 1970)

forum for anybody to pick up and rear for slavery or prostitution. And it is Jesus Christ who taught the dignity of manual labour by working himself as a carpenter, washing his disciples' feet and saying, 'I am among you as one who serves.'

So then, we must not interpret what Paul writes to wives, children and servants in his *Haustafeln* about submission in a way which contradicts these fundamental attitudes of Jesus. Nor should we make Paul contradict himself, as some writers do, for to do this in biblical exegesis is a counsel of despair. No, we must set the *Haustafeln* squarely within the framework of the Ephesian letter, in which Paul has been describing the single new humanity which God is creating through Christ. He has been emphasizing the complete oneness in Christ of people of all cultures, especially Jew and Gentile, while in his parallel letter to the Colossians he has added slave and free man (3:11) and in an earlier letter male and female (Gal. 3:28). We may be quite sure that in his *Haustafeln* he does not now destroy his own thesis by erecting new barriers of sex, age and rank in God's new society in which they have been abolished. We must give the apostle credit for a little consistency of thought and allow him to explain himself.

In the light of the teaching of Jesus and his apostles, we may confidently and repeatedly affirm at least three relevant truths: first, the *dignity* of womanhood, childhood and servanthood; secondly, the *equality* before God of all human beings, irrespective of their race, rank, class, culture, sex or age, because all are made in his image; and the even deeper *unity* of all Christian believers, as fellow-members of God's family and of Christ's body. It is only when these truths are firmly kept in the forefront of our minds that we are ready to consider the teaching of the *Haustafeln*.

Negatively, the submission which Paul enjoins on wives, children and servants is not another word for inferiority. Positively it is important to grasp the difference which Luther and his followers rightly make between persons on the one hand and their roles on the other. Here is one of Luther's expositions of this theme: 'I have often said that we must sharply distinguish between these two, the office and the person. The man who is called Hans or Martin is a man quite different from the one who is called elector or doctor or preacher. Here we have two different persons in one man. The one is that in which we are created and born, according to which we are all alike—man or woman or child, young or old. But once we are born, God adorns and dresses you up as another person. He makes you a child and me a father, one a master and another a servant, one a prince and another a citizen.'²¹⁴

Once we see this distinction, then those who hold an office—whether rulers, magistrates, husbands, parents or employers—have a certain God-given authority which they expect others to acknowledge. Husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants have equal dignity as God-like beings, but different God-appointed roles. As J. H. Yoder succinctly puts it, 'Equality of *worth* is not identity of *role*'.²²⁵ The husband, the parent and the master have been invested with an authority to which others should submit.

Two questions immediately arise about this authority: Where does it come from? And how is it to be used?

In answer to the first question we reply that it comes from God. The God of the Bible is a God of order, and in his ordering of human life (e.g. in the state and the family) he has established certain authority or leadership roles. And since such authority, though exercised by human beings, is delegated to them by God, others are required conscientiously to submit to it. The Greek words imply this, for at the heart of *hypotassomai* ('submit') is *taxis* ('order'). Submission is a humble recognition of the divine ordering of society. This is plainly taught in Paul's *Haustafeln*. He tells wives to be submissive to their husbands *as to the*

²¹⁴ From his exposition of 'Blessed are the meek' (Mt. 5:5) in *The Sermon on the Mount, Luther's Works*, Vol. 21 (Concordia, 1956), p. 23.

²²⁵ Yoder, p. 177 note 23.

Lord (verse 22), children to obey their parents *in the Lord* (6:1), and slaves to be obedient to their earthly masters *as to Christ* (6:5). That is, behind the husband, the parent and the master they must discern the Lord himself who has given them their authority. Then, if they wish to submit to him, they will submit to them, since it is his authority which they exercise. The same is true of the mutual submission expected of all Christian people. It is *out of reverence for Christ* that we are to submit to one another, the Christ who both wields authority as Lord and humbled himself as servant.

We have to be very careful not to overstate this biblical teaching on authority. It does not mean that the authority of husbands, parents and masters is unlimited, or that wives, children and workers are required to give unconditional obedience. No, the submission required is to God's authority delegated to human beings. If, therefore, they misuse their God-given authority (e.g. by commanding what God forbids or forbidding what God commands), then our duty is no longer conscientiously to submit, but conscientiously to refuse to do so. For to submit in such circumstances would be to disobey God. The principle is clear: we must submit right up to the point where obedience to human authority would involve disobedience to God. At that point 'civil disobedience' becomes our Christian duty. In order to submit to God, we have to refuse to submit to human beings. As Peter put it to the Sanhedrin: 'We must obey God rather than men.'²³⁶ This is the exception, however. The general rule on which the New Testament insists is humble submission to God-given authority.

To the second question about the use of divinely delegated authority, we reply that it must never be used selfishly, but always for those others for whose benefit it has been given. Perhaps the most striking feature of the *Haustafeln* is that in each pair of relationships reciprocal duties are laid down. It is true that wives are to submit to their husbands, children to their parents and slaves to their masters, and that this requirement of submission (*hypotagē*) presupposes an authority (*exousia*) in the husbands, parents and masters. Indeed, these two Greek words complement each other. Yet the word *exousia* is not used once in the passage. When Paul is describing the duties of husbands, parents and masters, in no case is it authority which he tells them to exercise. On the contrary, explicitly or implicitly, he warns them against the improper use of their authority, forbids them to exploit their position, and urges them instead to remember their responsibilities and the other party's rights. Thus, husbands are to love their wives and care for them, parents are not to provoke their children but bring them up sensitively, and masters are not to threaten their slaves, but treat them with justice.

It has seemed necessary, before coming to the actual text of the *Haustafeln*, to open up in a general way this topic of submission to authority. To sum up, 'authority' in biblical usage is not a synonym for 'tyranny'. All those who occupy positions of authority in society are responsible both to the God who has entrusted it to them and to the person or persons for whose benefit they have been given it. In a word, the biblical concept of authority spells not tyranny but responsibility.

The first responsibilities which Paul elaborates are those of husbands and wives. The essence of his teaching is clear. Wives are to 'submit', and husbands are to 'love'.

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ *For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour.* ²⁴ *As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands.* ²⁵ *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,* ²⁶ *that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,* ²⁷ *that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.* ²⁸ *Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.* ²⁹ *For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church,* ³⁰ *because we are members of his body.* ³¹ *'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.'* ³² *This mystery is a profound one,*

²³⁶ Acts 5:29.

and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church;³³ however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

2. The duty of wives (verses 22–24)

Two reasons are given, or at least implied, for the wife's submission to her husband. The first is drawn from creation and concerns the husband's 'headship' of his wife, while the second is drawn from redemption and concerns Christ's 'headship' of the church.

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife ... (verses 22–23a). The husband's headship is both stated as a fact and made the ground of his wife's submission. But its origin is not elaborated here. For a fuller understanding of Paul's argument we need to turn elsewhere, especially to 1 Corinthians 11:3–12 and 1 Timothy 2:11–13. In both these passages he goes back to the narrative of Genesis 2 and points out that woman was made after man, out of man and for man. He adds that man is also born from woman, so that man and woman are dependent on one another. Nevertheless, his emphasis is on the order, mode and purpose of the creation of Eve. And since it is mainly on these facts of creation that Paul bases his case for the husband's headship, his argument has permanent and universal validity, and is not to be dismissed as culturally limited. The cultural elements of his teaching are to be found in the applications of the principle, in the requirement of 'veiling' certainly, and I think also in the requirement of 'silence'. But the man's (and especially the husband's) 'headship' is not a cultural application of a principle; it is the foundation principle itself. This is not chauvinism, but creationism. The new creation in Christ frees us from the distortion of relations between the sexes caused by the fall (*e.g.* Gn. 3:16), but it establishes the original intention of the creation. It was to this 'beginning' that Jesus himself went back (*e.g.* Mt. 19:4–6). He confirmed the teaching of Genesis 1 and 2. So must we. What creation has established, no culture is able to destroy.

This is also why we should reject the facile argument that since slavery has been abolished, the wife's submission should by analogy be abolished too. If this were the case, then why not complete the trio and abolish a child's obedience as well? No, the parallels are inexact. Slavery is a dehumanizing institution, with no justification in any biblical doctrine. A husband's headship, however, is rooted in creation.

Turning from biblical revelation to contemporary experience, Christians will agree that our human sexuality is part and parcel of our humanness. Masculinity and femininity represent a profound distinction which is psychological as well as physiological. Of course the sexes are equal before God, but this does not mean that they are identical. God himself created man male and female in his likeness. So both equally bear his image,²⁴⁷ but each also complements the other.²⁵⁸ The biblical perspective is to hold simultaneously the equality and the complementarity of the sexes. 'Partnership' is a good word too, so long as it is remembered that the contribution which each brings to it is not identical but distinctive. Hence a man finds himself by being a man, and a woman finds herself by being a woman. Genuine self-discovery and self-fulfilment do not come from striving to be somebody else or from imitating the opposite sex.

What then are the complementary distinctives of the two sexes? The biblical teaching is that God has given to man (and specially to the husband in the marriage relationship) a certain headship, and that his wife will find herself and her true God-given role not in rebellion against him or his headship, but in a voluntary and joyful submission.

The modern understanding of sexual differentiation tends to confirm this biblical teaching. This at least is the thesis of the American sociologist Professor Steven Goldberg in his book *The Inevitability of*

²⁴⁷ Gn. 1:26–27.

²⁵⁸ Gn. 2:18–24.

Patriarchy.²⁶⁹ Although it is a conscious response to the feminist movement, he claims that his approach is scientific and not ideological, in that he rests his case on empirical evidence. Nor is his viewpoint to be dismissed as masculine, for the distinguished American anthropologist Dr Margaret Mead is quoted on the book's dust cover as supporting its thesis: 'All the claims so glibly made about societies ruled by women are nonsense. We have no reason to believe that they ever existed.'

The first part of his book is an anthropological study whose conclusion he expresses as follows: 'In every society that has ever existed one finds patriarchy (males fill the overwhelming percentage of upper hierarchical positions in political and all other hierarchies), male attainment (males attain the high-status roles, whatever these may be in any given society) and male dominance (both males and females feel that dominance in male-female encounters and relationships resides in the male, and social expectations and authority systems reflect this).'²⁷¹ He is at pains to point out that he is neither making any value judgments, nor measuring performance, nor pronouncing either sex 'superior' or 'inferior' to the other; his purpose is simply to show that 'patriarchy', 'male dominance' and 'male attainment'—in the technical sense in which he employs these terms—are 'three universal realities',²⁸² since 'in no society, anywhere or at any time, have these realities been absent'.²⁹³

For the development of his second thesis Dr Goldberg moves from anthropology to physiology. He argues that the anthropological evidence for male dominance which he has marshalled has a physiological cause. The 'three universal realities' are the manifestation in society of a basic male drive (often called 'aggression', though Dr Goldberg prefers 'dominance tendency'), which is itself 'neuro-endocrinological' in origin. 'At its most basic, the hypothesis at the core of the theory presented here simply states that there are neuro-endocrinological differences between men and women that engender different male and female responses to the environment and, therefore, different male and female behaviour'.³⁰⁴ He is not denying that our genetic code interacts with our environment and upbringing, nor that there are individual exceptions to his generalization, nor that many women are frustrated because they lack opportunities to use their gifts. Instead, he is asserting that there are basic differences between masculinity and femininity, that masculinity means drive for dominance, and that 'dominance tendency is primarily a result of hormonal development and not primarily of anatomy, gender identity or the socialization that reflects anatomy and gender identity'.³¹⁵

A Christian who reads Professor Goldberg's thesis wants to state it theologically in terms of creation. God has made and makes men and women different, and one of their basic differences lies in the 'headship' which he has given to man. This may well have a genetic basis. If so, man's natural 'drive' needs to be controlled if his 'headship' is to be constructive. For 'patriarchy' sounds paternalistic and 'male dominance' oppressive. Even the biblical word 'submission' is often expounded as if it were a synonym for 'subjection', 'subordination' and even 'subjugation'. All these words have emotive associations. 'Submission' is no exception. We have to try to disinfect it of these and to penetrate into its essential biblical meaning. This we shall discover neither from its modern associations nor even from its etymology but primarily from the way it is used in its context in Ephesians 5.

²⁶⁹ Published in the United States in 1973 and in Britain by Maurice Temple Smith in 1977.

²⁷¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 63.

²⁸² *Op. cit.*, p. 60.

²⁹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

³⁰⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 121.

³¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 81.

There is little doubt what ‘submission’ meant in the ancient world in which disdain for women was almost universal. William Barclay sums it up: ‘The Jews had a low view of women. In the Jewish form of morning prayer there was a sentence in which a Jewish man every morning gave thanks that God had not made him “a Gentile, a slave or a woman” ... In Jewish law a woman was not a person, but a thing. She had no legal rights whatsoever; she was absolutely in her husband’s possession to do with as he willed ... The position was worse in the Greek world ... The whole Greek way of life made companionship between man and wife next to impossible. The Greek expected his wife to run his home, to care for his legitimate children, but he found his pleasure and his companionship elsewhere ... In Greece, home and family life were near to being extinct, and fidelity was completely non-existent ... In Rome in Paul’s day the matter was still worse ... The degeneracy of Rome was tragic ... It is not too much to say that the whole atmosphere of the ancient world was adulterous ... The marriage bond was on the way to complete breakdown.’³²⁶ Charles Seltman confirms this. In the Roman Empire, he writes, ‘A girl was completely under her father’s, a wife completely under her husband’s, power. She was his chattel ... Her life was one of legal incapacity which amounted to enslavement, while her status was described as ‘imbecilitas’, whence our word.’³³⁷ True, this was not the whole picture. Markus Barth tries to redeem the balance: ‘There was also a counter-movement which promoted equal rights for females’, while ‘different periods and different geographical areas produced differing views’. As for Ephesus and its environment, ‘The cult of the Great Mother and the Artemis Temple stamped this city more than others as a bastion and bulwark of women’s rights.’³⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the oppression of women prevailed in the ancient world, and their emancipation had scarcely begun. It is against this dark background that Paul’s teaching shines with such a bright light. Yet we still have to ask precisely what is meant by ‘headship’ and ‘submission’.

To begin with, these words do not by themselves establish stereotypes of masculine and feminine behaviour. Different cultures assign different tasks to men and women, husbands and wives. In the West, for example, it has long been conventional for the wife to do the shopping, cooking and cleaning, together with the feeding, bathing, nappy-changing and minding of babies. In many parts of Africa and Asia the women also work in the fields and carry heavy loads on their heads. Nowadays, however, and rightly, these conventions are recognized as cultural and are therefore being challenged and in some cases changed. Many couples are learning to share the household chores.

In order to understand the nature of the husband’s headship in the new society which God has inaugurated, we need to look at Jesus Christ. For Jesus Christ is the context in which Paul uses and develops the words ‘headship’ and ‘submission’. Although he grounds the fact of the husband’s headship in creation, he defines it in relation to the headship of Christ the redeemer: *for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour* (verse 23). Now Christ’s headship of his church has already been described in 4:15–16. It is from Christ as head that the body derives its health and grows into maturity. His headship expresses care rather than control, responsibility rather than rule. This truth is endorsed by the surprising addition of the words *and is himself its Saviour*. The head of the body is the saviour of the body; the characteristic of his headship is not so much lordship as saviourhood.

If the husband’s headship of the wife resembles Christ’s of his church, then the wife’s submission will resemble the church’s: *As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands* (verse 24). There is nothing demeaning about this, for her submission is not to be an unthinking obedience to his rule but rather a grateful acceptance of his care. To quote Markus Barth again: ‘The submission to, and respect for the husband, to which the wife is specifically admonished ... is by no means

³²⁶ Barclay, pp. 199–203.

³³⁷ *Women in Antiquity* (Pan, 1956), pp. 136, 138.

³⁴⁸ Barth, *Ephesians*, II, pp. 655–662.

the submissiveness of a pussycat or a crouching dog ... Paul ... is thinking of a, voluntary, free, joyful and thankful partnership, as the analogy of the relationship of the church to Christ shows.³⁵⁹ Whenever the husband's headship mirrors the headship of Christ, then the wife's submission to the protection and provision of his love, far from detracting from her womanhood, will positively enrich it.

3. The duty of husbands (verses 25–33)

If the word which characterizes the wife's duty is 'submit', the word characterizing the husband's is 'love'. We might think that nature itself would teach husbands this priority obligation, but many cultures both ancient and modern prove the contrary. Of course a certain tie of affection and desire binds every married couple together, and Paul's Stoic contemporaries taught husbands to 'love'. But the verb they used was the weak word *phileō*; it was Christian teaching which introduced strong, sacrificial '*agapē*-love' into marriage. Paul uses two analogies to illustrate the tender care which a husband's love for his wife should involve.

The first is that the husband must love his wife as Christ has loved his church. Already in the Old Testament the gracious covenant which God made with his people Israel was many times referred to as a marriage covenant.³⁶¹ Jesus took over this teaching and boldly referred to himself as the Bridegroom.³⁷² Paul enlarges on the image here and in 2 Corinthians 11:1–3, while in the Revelation we are permitted glimpses of the glorified church 'prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' and of the coming 'marriage supper of the Lamb'.³⁸³

What stands out in Paul's development of the theme is the sacrificial steadfastness of the heavenly Bridegroom's covenant-love for his bride. It is this which husbands are to imitate: *Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her.*

It will be observed that Paul uses five verbs to indicate the unfolding stages of Christ's commitment to his bride, the church. He *loved* her, *gave himself up* for her, to *sanctify* her, having *cleansed* her, that he might *present* her to himself. The statement is so complete and comprehensive that some scholars think it may be a quotation from an early Christian confession, liturgy or hymn. It seems to trace Christ's care for his church from a past to a future eternity. Certainly the words *Christ loved the church*, preceding as they do his self-sacrifice on her behalf, seem to look back to his eternal pre-existence in which he set his love on his people and determined to come to save them. So, having loved the church, he *gave himself up for her*. The reference is, of course, primarily to the cross.

But why did Jesus Christ do it? What was the purpose of his sacrifice? It was *that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her*. Perhaps there is a deliberate allusion to the bridal bath which took place before both Jewish and Greek weddings. The tenses of the verbs suggest that the cleansing of the church precedes her consecration or sanctification. Indeed, the cleansing seems to refer to the initial purification or cleansing from sin and guilt which we receive when we first repent and believe in Jesus. It is accomplished *by the washing of water with the word*, or more simply 'by water and word' (NE³⁹B). The 'washing of water' is an unambiguous reference to baptism,⁴⁰⁴ while the additional reference to 'the word' indicates that baptism is

³⁵⁹ Barth, *Broken Wall*, p. 223.

³⁶¹ E.g. Is. 54:5–8; Je. 2:1–3; 31:31–32; Ezk. 23; Hos. 1–3.

³⁷² Mk. 2:18–20; cf. Jn. 3:29.

³⁸³ Rev. 19:6–9; 21:2, 9.

³⁹NEB The New English Bible (NT 1961, 2nd edition 1970; OT 1970)

⁴⁰⁴ Cf. Acts 22:16.

no magical or mechanical ceremony, but needs an explanatory word to define its significance, express the promises of cleansing and new life in the Spirit which it symbolizes, and arouse our faith. True, some think 'the word' alludes to the candidate's confession of faith⁴¹⁵ or appeal for a clear conscience,⁴²⁶ rather than to the minister's preaching of the gospel or formula of administration. But it seems more natural to take 'water' and 'word' together as being both administered to the candidate. So when Calvin reached this verse in his expository series, he urged care 'that we do not separate the sacraments from the Word at any time', for 'to have the sign without the promise added to it is but a frustratory and unprofitable thing'.⁴³⁷ Markus Barth rather delightfully argues that in the context the word of promise can be no other than 'I love you'. He goes on: 'The Messiah as the Bridegroom ... says this decisive "word" to his Bride and thereby privately and publicly, decently and legally binds himself to her and her to him.'⁴⁴⁸ It is a solemn word of covenant love.

Having cleansed his bride by water and word, the heavenly Bridegroom's plan is to *sanctify* her and finally to *present* her to himself. The 'sanctification' appears to refer to the present process of making her holy in character and conduct by the power of the indwelling Spirit, while the 'presentation' is eschatological, and will take place when Christ returns to take her to himself. He will present her to himself *in splendour (endoxon)*. The word may hint at the bride's beautiful wedding dress, since it is used of clothing.⁴⁵⁹ But it means more than this. 'Glory' (*doxa*) is the radiance of God, the shining forth and manifestation of his otherwise hidden being. So too the church's true nature will become apparent. On earth she is often in rags and tatters, stained and ugly, despised and persecuted. But one day she will be seen for what she is, nothing less than the bride of Christ, 'free from spots, wrinkles or any other disfigurement' (JB^{46p}), *holy and without blemish*, beautiful and glorious. It is to this constructive end that Christ has been working and is continuing to work. The bride does not make herself presentable; it is the bridegroom who labours to beautify her in order to present her to himself. His love and self-sacrifice for her, his cleansing and sanctifying of her, are all designed for her liberation and her perfection, when at last he presents her to himself in her full glory. Dr Lloyd-Jones writes: 'Dare I put it like this? The Beauty-Specialist will have put his final touch to the church, the massaging will have been so perfect that there will not be a single wrinkle left. She will look young, and in the bloom of youth, with colour in her cheeks, with her skin perfect, without any spots or wrinkles. And she will remain like that for ever and ever.'⁴⁷¹

This, then, is Paul's exposition of the implications of Christ's headship. The church's head is the church's bridegroom. He does not crush the church. Rather he sacrificed himself to serve her, in order that she might become everything he longs for her to be, namely herself in the fullness of her glory. Just so a husband should never use his headship to crush or stifle his wife, or frustrate her from being herself. His love for her will lead him to an exactly opposite path. He will give himself for her, in order that she may develop her full potential under God and so become more completely herself.

After climbing with Paul to these sublime heights of romantic love, many readers sense an anti-climax in verse 28: *Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies*. For in his instruction to husbands to

⁴¹⁵ Rom. 10:8–10, 13.

⁴²⁶ 1 Pet. 3:21.

⁴³⁷ Calvin, pp. 583–584.

⁴⁴⁸ Barth, *Ephesians*, II, p. 691.

⁴⁵⁹ Lk. 7:25.

⁴⁶ JBP *The New Testament in Modern English* by J. B. Phillips (Collins, 1958)

⁴⁷¹ Lloyd-Jones, *Life in the Spirit*, pp. 175–176.

love their wives he seems to descend from the lofty standard of Christ's love to the rather low standard of self-love. This sense of anomaly has led some commentators to try to translate the sentence differently, but their attempts do not succeed because the next sentence stubbornly refuses to convey any meaning but the obvious one: *He who loves his wife loves himself*. The probable explanation for Paul's descent to the more mundane level of self-love is that he is always a realist. We cannot fully grasp the greatness of Christ's love; it 'surpasses knowledge', as he wrote earlier.⁴⁸² Nor do husbands find it easy to apply this standard to the realities of family life. But we all know from everyday experience how we love ourselves. Hence the practical usefulness of the 'golden rule' Jesus enunciated that we should treat others as we would ourselves like to be treated.⁴⁹³ For we all know this instinctively. It is after all the way we treat ourselves. *For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it* (verse 29a). That is, he feeds it and (it may mean) clothes it, or at any rate looks after it.

This exhortation to a husband to 'nourish and cherish' his wife as he does his own body is more than a useful guide to daily behaviour, however. It also contains an inner appropriateness, since he and his wife have in fact become 'one flesh'. Yet God intends sexual intercourse not only to be a union of bodies, but to symbolize and express a union of personalities. It is when husband and wife become thus deeply one with each other that truly *he who loves his wife loves himself*.

This leads the apostle to return in his thought to Christ and so to reach the climax of his argument. So far he has used two analogies for a husband's love of his wife, namely Christ's loving sacrifice for his bride the church, and the husband's loving care of his own body. Now he fuses the two. Christ's bride and Christ's body are the same (see verse 23), *because we are members of his body* (verse 30).⁵⁰⁴ He has incorporated us into himself, made us part of himself in a profound, indissoluble union. This leads Paul to quote Genesis 2:24: *For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh* (verse 31) and to declare that *this mystery is a profound one* (verse 32).⁵¹⁵ There seems no reason to doubt that in the first instance he is referring to the mysterious and sacred depths of sexual union itself. But then he immediately goes on to its yet deeper symbolism: *I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church*. In doing so, he not only uses the *egō* of his apostolic authority but actually employs the very expression *egō de legō* ('but I say') which Jesus himself used in the six antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount.⁵²⁶ It is appropriate for him to do so because a 'mystery' is a revealed truth, and the profound 'mystery' here, namely the church's union with Christ, is closely akin to that of Jewish-Gentile unity in the body of Christ, which had been revealed to him and of which he has written in 3:1–6. He thus sees the marriage relationship as a beautiful model of the church's union in and with Christ. When applied to Christ and his church, the 'one flesh' is identical with the 'one new man' of 2:15. Indeed, the three pictures of the

⁴⁸² 3:19.

⁴⁹³ Mt. 7:12.

⁵⁰⁴ The AV 'of his flesh and of his bones' does not belong to the original text. It was doubtless added as an echo of Gn. 2:23.

⁵¹⁵ Jerome's Latin translation in the Vulgate is *sacramentum hoc magnum est*. He used *sacramentum* in its older meaning of a 'mystery' containing some hidden truth or sacred symbolism, as in 1 Tim. 3:16. He did not imply, nor does the Greek teach, that marriage is a 'sacrament' in the sense which later Roman Catholic theology gave it. It is 'sacramental' only in Paul's sense here, namely that the union of husband and wife symbolizes the union of Christ and his church.

⁵²⁶ See Mt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44.

church which Paul develops in Ephesians—the body, the building and the bride—all emphasize the reality of its unity on account of its union with Christ.

Verse 33 is a succinct summary of the fuller teaching which Paul has been giving to husbands and wives: *Let each one of you love his wife as himself*, for she and he have become one, *and let the wife see that she respects her husband*. It is true that ‘respects’ translates *phobētai*, meaning literally ‘fears’, but this verb ‘may express the emotion of fear in all its modifications and in all its degrees from simple respect through reverence up to adoration, according to its object’.⁵³⁷ The apostle began with one couplet ‘love’ and ‘submission’. He ends with another ‘love’ and ‘respect’. We have seen that the love he has in mind for the husband sacrifices and serves with a view to enabling his wife to become what God intends her to be. So the ‘submission’ and ‘respect’ he asks of the wife express her response to his love and her desire that he too will become what God intends him to be in his ‘leadership’.

4. Summary

Taking the husband first, what Paul stresses is not his authority over his wife, but his love for her. Rather, his authority is defined in terms of loving responsibility. To our minds the word ‘authority’ suggests power, dominion and even oppression. We picture the ‘authoritative’ husband as a domineering figure who makes all the decisions himself, issues commands and expects obedience, inhibits and suppresses his wife, and so prevents her from growing into a mature or fulfilled person. But this is not at all the kind of ‘headship’ which the apostle is describing, whose model is Jesus Christ. Certainly, ‘headship’ implies a degree of leadership and initiative, as when Christ came to woo and to win his bride. But more specifically it implies sacrifice, self-giving for the sake of the beloved, as when Christ gave himself for his bride. If ‘headship’ means ‘power’ in any sense, then it is power to care not to crush, power to serve not to dominate, power to facilitate self-fulfilment, not to frustrate or destroy it. And in all this the standard of the husband’s love is to be the cross of Christ, on which he surrendered himself even to death in his selfless love for his bride. Dr Lloyd-Jones has a striking way of enforcing this truth. ‘How many of us’, he asks, ‘have realized that we are always to think of the married state in terms of the doctrine of the atonement? Is that our customary way of thinking of marriage?... Where do we find what the books have to say about marriage? Under which section? Under Ethics. But it does not belong there. We must consider marriage in terms of the doctrine of the atonement.’⁵⁴⁸

As for the wife’s duty in the marriage relationship, it surprises me how unpopular this passage is among many women. When it is read at a wedding and it provokes a feminine outcry, I find myself wondering how carefully it has been read and in particular whether it has been read in its total context. Let me spell out five points which will, I hope, demonstrate that it is not the blueprint for oppression which many think, but rather a charter of genuine liberty.

a. The requirement of submission is a particular example of a general Christian duty

That is, the injunction ‘wives submit’ (verse 22) is preceded by the requirement that we are to ‘submit to one another’ (verse 21). If, therefore, it is the wife’s duty as wife to submit to her husband, it is also the husband’s duty as a member of God’s new society to submit to his wife. Submissiveness is a universal Christian obligation. Throughout the Christian church, including every Christian home, submissiveness is to be mutual. For Jesus Christ himself is the paragon of humility. He emptied himself of his status and his rights, and humbled himself to serve. So in the new order which he had founded he calls all his followers to

⁵³⁷ Hodge, p. 353.

⁵⁴⁸ Lloyd-Jones, *Life in the Spirit*, p. 148.

follow in his footsteps. 'Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility towards one another.'⁵⁵⁹ Should not the wife even rejoice that she has the privilege of giving a particular demonstration in her attitude to her husband of the beauty of humility which is to characterize all members of God's new society?

This is specially so when it is seen that her self-humbling is not coerced but free. It must have been very obvious in the ancient world. The wife had no status and few rights, as we have seen. Yet the apostle addresses her as a free moral agent and calls upon her not to acquiesce in a fate she cannot escape, but to make a responsible decision before God. It is this which 'begins the revolutionary innovation in the early Christian style of ethical thinking.'⁵⁶¹ Voluntary Christian self-submission is still very significant today. 'Jesus Christ demonstrates rather than loses his dignity by his subordination to the Father. When a person is voluntarily amenable to another, gives way to him, and places himself at his service, he shows greater dignity and freedom than an individual who cannot bear to be a helper and partner to anyone but himself. Ephesians 5 supports anything but blind obedience or the breaking of the wife's will. Rather, this chapter shows that in the realm of the crucified Servant-Messiah, the subjects respect an order of freedom and equality in which one person assists another—seemingly by renouncing rights possessed, actually in exercising the right to imitate the Messiah himself ... A greater, wiser, and more positive description of marriage has not yet been found in Christian literature.'⁵⁷²

b. The wife's submission is to be given to a lover, not to an ogre

The apostle's instruction is not 'Wives submit, husbands boss'; it is 'Wives submit, husbands love'. Of course there have been examples in every age and culture of cruel and tyrannical husbands, and there have been painful occasions in which in order to maintain the integrity of her conscience, a wife has been obliged to resist her husband's authority. But Paul is describing the Christian ideal, not hideous deviations from it. This has always been obvious to commentators. Back in the sixteenth century Calvin preached. 'Husbands ... should not be cruel towards their wives, or think all things that they please to be permissible and lawful, for their authority should rather be a companionship than a kingship.' Three times the apostle repeats his fundamental charge: *husbands, love your wives* (verse 25); *husbands should love their wives* (verse 28); *let each one of you love his wife* (verse 33). If then the husband's headship is expressed in responsible love for his wife, why should she be reluctant to submit to him? And if a husband desires her to do so, he will know that it is only by loving her that he will succeed.

c. The husband is to love like Christ

Does the requirement of 'submission' sound hard to a wife? I think what is required of her husband is harder. This is not that he 'love' her with the romantic, sentimental and even aggressive passion which frequently passes for genuine love today; instead, he is to love her with the love of Christ. If the husband's obligation to love is repeated three times, so is the requirement to model his attitude and behaviour on Christ's. He is the head of his wife *as Christ is the head of the church* (verse 23); he is to love his wife *as Christ loved the church* (verse 25); and he is to nourish and cherish her *as Christ does the church* (verse 29). Thus his headship, his love and his care are all to resemble Christ's. The highest pinnacle of demand is reached in verse 25 where he is exhorted to love his wife *as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*. This is the totality of self-sacrifice. He is to love her with what is sometimes termed 'Calvary love'; no

⁵⁵⁹ 1 Pet. 5:5

⁵⁶¹ Yoder, p. 174.

⁵⁷² Barth, *Ephesians*, II, pp. 714–715.

higher standard is conceivable. A Christian husband who even partially fulfils this ideal preaches the gospel without ever opening his lips, for people can see in him that quality of love which took Jesus Christ to his cross.

d. The husband's love, like Christ's, sacrifices in order to serve

We considered earlier the five verbs of verses 25 and 26. Christ loved' the church and 'gave himself' for her, in order to 'cleanse' her, 'sanctify' her, and ultimately 'present' her to himself in full splendour and without any defect. In other words, his love and self-sacrifice were not an idle display, but purposive. And his purpose was not to impose an alien identity upon the church, but to free her from the spots and wrinkles which mar her beauty and to display her in her true glory. The Christian husband is to have a similar concern. His headship will never be used to suppress his wife. He longs to see her liberated from everything which spoils her true feminine identity and growing towards that 'glory', that perfection of fulfilled personhood which will be the final destiny of all those whom Christ redeems. To this end Christ gave himself. To this end too the husband gives himself in love.

e. The wife's submission is but another aspect of love

We have seen that the essence of Paul's instruction is 'Wives submit, husbands love', and that these words are different from one another since they recognize the headship which God has given to the husband. Yet when we try to define the two verbs, it is not easy to distinguish clearly between them. What does it mean to 'submit'? It is to give oneself up to somebody. What does it mean to 'love'? It is to give oneself up for somebody, as Christ 'gave himself up' for the church. Thus 'submission' and 'love' are two aspects of the very same thing, namely of that selfless self-giving which is the foundation of an enduring and growing marriage.

Not that such self-giving is ever easy. I fear I may have painted a picture of married life which is more romantic than realistic. The truth is that all self-sacrifice, although the way of service and the means to self-realisation, is also painful. Indeed, love and pain appear to be inseparable, especially in sinners like us, since our fallenness has not been obliterated by our re-creation through Christ. In marriage there is the pain of adjustment, as the old independent 'I' gives way to the new interdependent 'we'. There is also the pain of vulnerability as closeness to one another leads to self-exposure, self-exposure to mutual knowledge, and knowledge to the risk of rejection. So husbands and wives should not expect to discover harmony without conflict; they have to work at building a relationship of love, respect and truth.

The giving of oneself to anybody is a recognition of the worth of the other self. For if I give myself up, it can only be because I value the other person so highly that I want to sacrifice myself for his or her self, in order that he may develop his selfhood, or she hers, more fully. Now to lose oneself that the other may find his or her self—that is the essence of the gospel of Christ. It is also the essence of the marriage relationship, for as the husband loves his wife and the wife submits to her husband, each is seeking to enable the other to become more fully himself and herself, within the harmonious complementarity of the sexes.⁵⁸

John Calvin –

⁵⁸ John R. W. Stott, [*God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 213–236.

Wives, submit yourselves. He comes now to the various conditions of life; for, besides the universal bond of subjection, some are more closely bound to each other, according to their respective callings. The community at large is divided, as it were, into so many yokes, out of which arises mutual obligation. There is, first, the yoke of marriage between husband and wife;—secondly, the yoke which binds parents and children;—and, thirdly, the yoke which connects masters and servants. By this arrangement there are six different classes, for each of whom Paul lays down peculiar duties. He begins with wives, whom he enjoins to be subject to their husbands, in the same manner as to Christ,—*as to the Lord*. Not that the authority is equal, but wives cannot obey Christ without yielding obedience to their husbands.

23. *For the husband is the head of the wife.* This is the reason assigned why wives should be obedient. Christ has appointed the same relation to exist between a husband and a wife, as between himself and his church. This comparison ought to produce a stronger impression on their minds, than the mere declaration that such is the appointment of God. Two things are here stated. God has given to the husband authority over the wife; and a resemblance of this authority is found in Christ, who *is the head of the church*, as the husband is of the wife.

And he is the saviour of the body. The pronoun *He* (αὐτός) is supposed by some to refer to *Christ*; and, by others, to *the husband*. It applies more naturally, in my opinion, to Christ, but still with a view to the present subject. In this point, as well as in others, the resemblance ought to hold. As Christ rules over his church for her salvation, so nothing yields more advantage or comfort to the wife than to be subject to her husband. To refuse that subjection, by means of which they might be saved, is to choose destruction.

24. *But, as the church is subject to Christ.* The particle *but*, may lead some to believe that the words, *he is the saviour of the body*, are intended to anticipate an objection. Christ has, no doubt, this peculiar claim, that he is the Saviour of the Church: nevertheless, let wives know, that their husbands, though they cannot produce equal claims, have authority over them, after the example of Christ. I prefer the former interpretation; for the argument derived from the word *but*, (ἀλλά,) does not appear to me to have much weight.

25. *Husbands, love your wives.* From husbands, on the other hand, the apostle requires that they cherish toward their wives no ordinary love; for to them, also, he holds out the example of Christ,—*even as Christ also loved the church*. If they are honoured to bear his image, and to be, in some measure, his representatives, they ought to resemble him also in the discharge of duty.

And gave himself for it. This is intended to express the strong affection which husbands ought to have for their wives, though he takes occasion, immediately afterwards, to commend the grace of Christ. Let husbands imitate Christ in this respect, that he scrupled not to die for his church. One peculiar consequence, indeed, which resulted from his death,—that by it he redeemed his church,—is altogether beyond the power of men to imitate.

26. *That he might sanctify*,—or, that he might separate it to himself; for such I consider to be the meaning of the word *sanctify*. This is accomplished by the forgiveness of sins, and the regeneration of the Spirit.

Washing it with the washing of water. Having mentioned the inward and hidden sanctification, he now adds the outward symbol, by which it is visibly confirmed; as if he had said, that a pledge of that sanctification is held out to us by baptism. Here it is necessary to guard against unsound interpretation, lest the wicked superstition of men, as has frequently happened, change a sacrament into an idol. When Paul says that we are washed by baptism, his meaning is, that God employs it for declaring to us that we are washed, and at the same time performs what it represents. If the truth—or, which is the same thing, the exhibition of the truth—were not connected with baptism, it would be improper to say that baptism is the washing of the soul. At the same time, we must beware of ascribing to the sign, or to the minister, what belongs to God alone. We must not imagine that washing is performed by the minister, or that water cleanses the pollutions of the soul, which nothing but the blood of Christ can accomplish. In short, we must

beware of giving any portion of our confidence to the element or to man; for the true and proper use of the sacrament is to lead us directly to Christ, and to place all our dependence upon him:

28. *He that loveth his wife.* An argument is now drawn from nature itself, to prove that men ought to love their wives. Every man, by his very nature, loves himself. But no man can love himself without loving his wife. Therefore, the man who does not love his wife is a monster. The minor proposition is proved in this manner. Marriage was appointed by God on the condition that the two should be *one flesh*; and that this unity may be the more sacred, he again recommends it to our notice by the consideration of Christ and his church. Such is the amount of his argument, which to a certain extent applies universally to human society. To shew what man owes to man, Isaiah says, “hide not thyself from thine own flesh.” (Isa. 58:7.) But this refers to our common nature. Between a man and his wife there is a far closer relation; for they not only are united by a resemblance of nature, but by the bond of marriage have become one man. Whoever considers seriously the design of marriage cannot but love his wife.

29. *Even as Christ the church.* He proceeds to enforce the obligations of marriage by representing to us Christ and his Church; for a more powerful example could not have been adduced. The strong affection which a husband ought to cherish towards his wife is exemplified by Christ, and an instance of that unity which belongs to marriage is declared to exist between himself and the Church. This is a remarkable passage on the mysterious intercourse which we have with Christ.

30. *For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.* First, this is no exaggeration, but the simple truth. Secondly, he does not simply mean that Christ is a partaker of our nature, but expresses something higher (καὶ ἐμφαιτικώτερον) *and more emphatic.*

31. *For this cause.* This is an exact quotation from the writings of Moses. (Gen. 2:24.) And what does it mean? As Eve was formed out of the substance of her husband, and thus was a part of himself; so, if we are the true members of Christ, we share his substance, and by this intercourse unite into one body. In short, Paul describes our union to Christ, a symbol and pledge of which is given to us in the ordinance of the supper. Those who talk about the torture exercised on this passage to make it refer to the Lord’s supper, while no mention is made of the supper, but of marriage, are egregiously mistaken. When they admit that the death of Christ is commemorated in the supper, but not that such intercourse exists as we assert from the words of Christ, we quote this passage against them. Paul says that *we are members of his flesh and of his bones*. Do we wonder then, that in the Lord’s supper he holds out his body to be enjoyed by us, and to nourish us unto eternal life? Thus we prove that the only union which we maintain to be represented by the Lord’s supper is here declared in its truth and consequences by the apostle.

Two subjects are exhibited together; for the spiritual union between Christ and his church is so treated as to illustrate the common law of marriage, to which the quotation from Moses relates. He immediately adds, that the saying is fulfilled in *Christ and the church*. Every opportunity which presents itself for proclaiming our obligations to Christ is readily embraced, but he adapts his illustration of them to the present subject. It is uncertain whether Moses introduces Adam as using these words, or gives them as an inference drawn by himself from the creation of man. Nor is it of much consequence which of these views be taken; for, in either case, we must hold it to be an announcement of the will of God, enjoining the duties which men owe to their wives.

He shall leave his father and mother. As if he had said, “Let him rather leave his father and mother than not cleave to his wife.” The marriage bond does not set aside the other duties of mankind, nor are the commandments of God so inconsistent with each other, that a man cannot be a good and faithful husband without ceasing to be a dutiful son. It is altogether a question of degree. Moses draws the comparison, in order to express more strongly the close and sacred union which subsists between husband and wife. A son is bound by an inviolable law of nature to perform his duties towards his father; and when the obligations of a husband towards his wife are declared to be stronger, their force is the better understood. He who

resolves to be a good husband will not fail to perform his filial duties, but will regard marriage as more sacred than all other ties.

And they two shall be one flesh. They shall be one man, or, to use a common phrase, they shall constitute one person; which certainly would not hold true with regard to any other kind of relationship. All depends on this, that the wife was formed of the flesh and bones of her husband. Such is the union between us and Christ, who in some sort makes us partakers of his substance. “We are bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh,” (Gen. 2:23;) not because, like ourselves, he has a human nature, but because, by the power of his Spirit, he makes us a part of his body, so that from him we derive our life.

32. *This is a great mystery.* He concludes by expressing his astonishment at the spiritual union between Christ and the church. *This is a great mystery;* by which he means, that no language can explain fully what it implies. It is to no purpose that men fret themselves to comprehend, by the judgment of the flesh, the manner and character of this union; for here the infinite power of the Divine Spirit is exerted. Those who refuse to admit anything on this subject beyond what their own capacity can reach, act an exceedingly foolish part. We tell them that the flesh and blood of Christ are exhibited to us in the Lord’s supper. “Explain to us the manner,” they reply, “or you will not convince us.” For my own part, I am overwhelmed by the depth of this mystery, and am not ashamed to join Paul in acknowledging at once my ignorance and my admiration. How much more satisfactory would this be than to follow my carnal judgment, in undervaluing what Paul declares to be a deep mystery! Reason itself teaches how we ought to act in such matters; for whatever is supernatural is clearly beyond our own comprehension. Let us therefore labour more to feel Christ living in us, than to discover the nature of that intercourse.

We cannot avoid admiring the acuteness of the Papists, who conclude from the word *mystery* (μυστήριον) that marriage is one of seven sacraments, as if they had the power of changing water into wine. They enumerate seven sacraments, while Christ has instituted no more than two; and, to prove that matrimony is one of the seven, they produce this passage. On what ground? Because the Vulgate has adopted the word *Sacrament* (*sacramentum*) as a translation of the word *Mystery*, which the apostle uses. As if *Sacrament* (*sacramentum*) did not frequently, among Latin writers, denote *Mystery*, or as if *Mystery* had not been the word employed by Paul in the same Epistle, when speaking of the calling of the Gentiles. But the present question is, Has marriage been appointed as a sacred symbol of the grace of God, to declare and represent to us something spiritual, such as Baptism or the Lord’s Supper? They have no ground for such an assertion, unless it be that they have been deceived by the doubtful signification of a Latin word, or rather by their ignorance of the Greek language. If the simple fact had been observed, that the word used by Paul is *Mystery*, no mistake would ever have occurred.

We see then the hammer and anvil with which they fabricated this sacrament. But they have given another proof of their indolence in not attending to the correction which is immediately added, *But I speak concerning Christ and the church.* He intended to give express warning that no man should understand him as speaking of marriage; so that his meaning is more fully expressed than if he had uttered the former sentiment without any exception. The *great mystery* is, that Christ breathes into the church his own life and power. But who would discover here anything like a sacrament? This blunder arose from the grossest ignorance.

33. *Nevertheless, let every one.* Having digressed a little from this subject, though the very digression aided his design, he adopts the method usually followed in short precepts, by giving a brief summary of duties. Husbands are required to love their wives, and wives to *fear* (φοβῆται) their husbands, understanding by *fear* that *reverence* which will lead them to be submissive. Where reverence does not exist, there will be no willing subjection⁵⁹

⁵⁹ John Calvin and William Pringle, [*Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*](#) (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 322–326.

