

Wives and Husbands

Ephesians 5:21 ... submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit 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 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,

30 because we are members of his body.

31 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

32 This mystery is profound, 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.

(Eph 5:21-33)

Darlin' I Don't Know Why I Go to Extremes

It is difficult to think of a single passage **more abused** in all the Bible than **Ephesians 5:22-33**. In it is contained instructions that most **women** today find offensive in the extreme (**vs. 22-24**), that a good many **men** seem to completely ignore, indeed doing the opposite (**25-29**), all rooted in a story of the Bible that is incessantly **mocked** as make-believe fantasy (**31**).¹ Unfortunately, this means we have to say some preliminary things about it that Christians in many other times would not have to say. Billy Joel has a lyric, “*Darlin' I don't know why I go to extremes.*” The context is his marriage, and it was an apology to his wife-at-the-time, Christy Brinkley. Marriage is the context of our passage too.

¹ On this last point, there is perhaps no more powerful or *insidious* way of mocking than through humor. I recently heard a bit from a comedian doing just this on the quotation from Genesis. “How do people justify homophobia in this country? ‘Y’know, it’s not Adam and Steve, it’s Adam and Eve,’ Look, technically that is true. Right, it was Adam and Eve. But if you remember the story, it was Adam and Eve *and a talking serpent*. I feel like the talking serpent throws the whole account into question. I don’t know how true this is. There’s a talking snake involved. Maybe you shouldn’t base your values on a *Jungle Book*-type scenario. What would Baloo do? What about Shere Khan? What about Winnie the Pooh? Oh, is that a different world? Does it matter at this point? That’s a *Jungle Book*-type scenario. Look, I’m an Indian-Hindu alright. I know all about *Jungle Book*-type scenarios. That is a *Jungle Book*-type scenario.” **Hari Kondabolu** in **Elizabeth Blair**, “Comedian Hari Kondabolu On Diversity, Race and Burger King,” **NPR** (July 18, 2013), <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/07/18/203034882/comedian-hari-kondabolu-on-diversity-race-and-burger-king>.

Perhaps nothing describes modern views of marriage better than going to extremes.

Webster's 1828 dictionary defines "marriage" this way, "The act of uniting a man and woman for life; wedlock; the legal union of a man and woman for life." 1913 Webster's says, "The act of marrying, or the state of being married; legal union of a man and a woman for life, as husband and wife." Notice anything missing? "For life." This is a subtle, yet deadly shift in meaning that occurred sometime during the intervening 85 years and most likely represents a softening of the institution within the church, for that is where these things always begin. It is perhaps no coincidence that once this definition was wed to pop-culture, divorce rates exploded.

Around 2015 Webster had this, "The state of being united to a person of the opposite sex as husband or wife in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law; the state of being united to a person of the same sex in a relationship like that of a traditional marriage." This reflects the 21st centuries first step in an imperialistic takeover of the language and institution of marriage, known universally for thousands of years as the union of a man and a woman. The second step has happened quickly. Only four years later and

Webster's had changed its definition yet again. In 2019 it reads, “**The state of being united as spouses in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law.**” Male and female have been utterly erased from the definition. They are simply no longer there at all. That’s all part of it, though, because the end-game here is to eliminate “male” and “female” as categories altogether.

What has caused such radical redefinition? While the answer to that could fill a dissertation, I lay the blame at **the feet of at least two things**. The first is the hypocritical self-righteous legalism that has and still does exemplify some holding the traditional view. Here’s an example. A fallen Christian homeschool guru and leader of a popular conservative movement dealing with family and marriage, supposedly a godly expert in the subject, was caught in a years-long affair with a woman (among other dark things) that destroyed his ministry. This man’s spiritual mentor describes how a certain meeting was set up to “**indoctrinate me in Patriarchy**,” even though this man had himself taught over 100 different messages on marriage and family.

We sat around the table while everyone listened to this [another man] lecture me. After he got done [the man I had disciplined] had us all move into the living room where the men all sat down on the couches. My wife sat next to me; but I noticed all the other women stood behind their husbands ... It was very strange. They just stood there the whole time behind their husbands. I thought we were going to have a nice conversation. But it wasn't a conversation, and it was very uncomfortable. [One guy] took over and started asking me questions. The last thing he asked me was, "If you were in a grocery store and your children started to act rebellious, how would you respond?" So I said, "I don't go shopping. My wife shops. Honey, what would you do?" So my wife starts to answer and this ... guy cuts her off and says, "Excuse me! I'm speaking to the men!" At this point I really had to hold myself back. [The disciple] just sat there the whole time and said nothing. It was obvious that [he] set this whole thing up. At this point we got up and left.²

Like something out of the *Stepford Wives*, this creepy horror show of cult-like mind-control is derived from words in our passage such as "submission" and "head[ship]."

² David Cloud, "A Warning About Doug Phillips, Vision Forum, and the Integrated Church," *Way of Life* (Jan 14, 2014), https://www.wayoflife.org/reports/a_warning_about_doug_phillips_vision_forum.html.

There are real reasons someone has called it “a text of terror,” as it has sometimes been used “to legitimize violence” against women (and slaves).³

This man’s actions are also a classic example of saying one thing and doing another. Douglas Wilson speaks to this very event and passage when he says, “Hypocrisy would be when the right doctrine is taught, more or less, but the practice behind closed doors contradicts what is publicly taught.” But he adds this is not the only possible problem. “Abuse would be when a radical distortion of the Bible’s teaching is put forward, as though it were the Bible’s teaching, as you might find on a polygamist compound. And other times, there is a dangerous mixture of the two.”⁴ Certainly, all of this has been done with this passage from so-called “conservatives.”

I must point out here however, “A forged Rembrandt does not mean that the real Rembrandt never painted, and it certainly does not mean that a genuine painting of his has

³ Holger Szesnat, “Gender-Based Violence and Ephesians 5: Reflections on the Ethics, Hermeneutics and Didactics of a Community Bible Study in Suva, Fiji,” in *Oceanic Voyages in Theology and Theological Education: Reflections and Reminiscences in Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Pacific Theological College*, ed. Feleterika Nokise and Holger Szesnat (Suva, Fiji: Pacific Theological College, 2015), 135, 36.

⁴ Douglas Wilson, “Seven Theses on Submission,” *Blog and Mablog* (April 29, 2014), <https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/seven-theses-on-submission.html>.

no value ... Hypocrisy and abuse do not remove the need for the reality. If God has commanded us to live in a particular way, it must be important for us to do so. The enemy of our souls is going to attempt to chase us away from obedience by two means — one is a frontal assault from outside (feminism) and the other is a corruption from within. But the counterfeit is no disproof of the reality.”⁵

Why is all this worth talking about here? It is because when terrible things are done to others in the name of Scripture, many take it personally and sometimes turn quite violently against God and true religion, sometimes even seeking to destroy them (if they could). I think to some degree this is what has happened in our day. We are seeing [an opposite reaction](#) to this in our culture. That leads to the second thing.

Return to that idea of the elimination of male and female categories. This is that “outside” threat. I wondered how the more [radical feminists looked at this passage](#), and I came across a very old interpretation, probably 2nd or 3rd century, from the Gnostics. It is summarized by the infamous Gnostic feminist scholar [Elaine Pagels](#),

⁵ Wilson, *ibid.*

What is Paul saying [in Ephesians 5:22-32]? Is he concerned here with the actual relationships between men and women? Ptolemy notes that Paul himself says he is speaking allegorically; he is using sexual terminology to allude to the “mystery of Christ and the church” ... Although often described as the marriage of Sophia with the savior, the “marriage” is conceived in universal terms ... The females, becoming male, and united with the angels ... Thus the women is said to be changed into a man, and the church on earth into angels.⁶

As bizarre as that interpretation is, all I’m interested in here is simply showing you that the blending together, indeed, the elimination of binaries like male and female, even from this text, is an ancient and pagan idea.⁷ There’s nothing

⁶ Elaine Hiesey Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 126-27. Because Gnostic language is not well understood, I’ve had to leave out some of the key points of the main quote that help you see, from a Gnostic perspective, how such a bizarre interpretation could possibly come from this text. If you are interested in pursuing it, you will have to read the full context of the quote and then do a little homework on the meaning of all the Gnostic terminology found therein. One of the key terms used here is “syzygy.” A good dictionary entry on the Gnostic meaning of this is found here: David Brons, “The Pair (Syzygy) in Valentinian Thought,” *The Gnostic Society Library*, http://gnosis.org/library/valentinus/Syzygy_Valentinian.htm. A word of caution though. Prepare to enter the darkness...

⁷ **Going Deeper.** The point of this sermon is not to delve into this particular topic, but merely to show the radically different interpretations of our passage that are out there. However, I am of the strong opinion that this whole arena of Gnosticism has taken a modern deified form under the guise of Postmodernism with all of her cultural Marxist hydra-heads (multiculturalism, egalitarianism, diversity, liberation theology, critical race theory, social justice, intersectionality, victimhood, oppression, racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. etc.). This is not well un-

new under the sun. Erasing biological gender and distinctions has been the heart of pagan religion for a long, long time. Francis Schaeffer saw this all 50 years ago in something that you might think could only have been written in the last couple of years:

Some forms of homosexuality today are ... a philosophic expression ... of the current denial of antithesis. It has led in this case to an obliteration of the distinction between man and woman. So the male and the female as complementary partners are finished. This is a form of homosexuality which is a part of the movement below the line of despair. In much of modern thinking, all antithesis and all the order of God's creation is to be fought against—including the male-female distinctions. The pressure toward unisex is largely rooted here. But this is not an isolated problem; it is a part of the world-spirit of the generation which surrounds us. It is imperative that Christians realize the conclusions which are being drawn as a result of the death of absolutes.⁸

derstood, even though it is perhaps the greatest enemy facing the church and Western Civilization which is built upon it, even as Gnosticism was the great threat of Christianity's first few centuries. To that end (and to the end of relating this back again to the potential perverted sexual worship of Artemis-Ishtar and other gods and goddess of Ephesus, I recommend [Peter Jones](#), "Androgyny: The Pagan Sexual Ideal," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43:3 (2000): 443-69; an updated version is found here: <https://truthxchange.com/2000/09/androgyny-the-pagan-sexual-ideal/>.

⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, "The God Who Is There," in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 1 (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982, 1968), 37.

So those are the **extremes** in terms of how people have understood & used our passage.

On the other hand, when we get this right—all of it right, when marriage is honored, husbands and wives do what they were created to do, and people honor the Scripture in both heart and deed, there is nothing greater in all the world than marriage. This passage helps us to that end. As the great Chrysostom said 1,600 years ago,

For [marriage—the love of man and wife] many will lay aside even their arms, for this they will give up life itself ... When they are in harmony, the children are well brought up, and the domestics are in good order, and neighbors, and friends, and relations enjoy the fragrance. But if it be otherwise, all is turned upside down, and thrown into confusion. And just as when the generals of an army are at peace one with another, all things are in due subordination, whereas on the other hand, if they are at variance, everything is turned upside down; so, I say, is it also here ... “*Wives, be in subjection unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.*”⁹

⁹ John Chrysostom, “Homilies on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians,” in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. William John Copeland and Gross Alexander, vol. 13, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 143.

This shows you the importance of what is before us. Therefore, let us not go to extremes, but let us try to understand God's word and to interpret it with the help of the church and, especially, the word of God itself, so that we might find that proper balance so that our marriages might once more be among the things that shine forth the light of truth, goodness, and beauty to a dying world.

Haustafel: Not a German Dessert

Ephesians 5:22 begins a lengthy section sometimes called the “Household Code” (*haustafel* or lit. “house-table”), coined by Martin Luther in his *Smaller Catechism*. It refers to a list of specific actions two parties in relationships to one another within a household are supposed to perform. That means, these rules pertain only to those particular relationships. Find yourself in a different relationship and you might find very different rules apply to you.

These were quite popular in the ancient Greco-Roman world,¹⁰ and in the Bible, including **Colossians 3:18-22**

¹⁰ For example Aristotle says this some 350 year earlier, “Now that it is clear what are the component parts of the state, we have first of all to discuss household management; for every state is composed of households.... The investigation of everything should begin with the smallest

which is a shorter version of this list. The two main ways ours differs from, say, Aristotle's is, (1) its emphasis on the man to whom it was extremely rare to address, especially with the kinds of commands that are given here and,¹¹ (2) in the dignity and value he ascribes to women, children, and slaves. As someone summarizes, “Suffice to say Paul, while sharing some cultural views with that of the surrounding Greco-Roman world, the Church’s walk in this word differs significantly.”¹²

Keep in mind our context. Rather than trying to appease pagans, Paul has been stressing the absolute incompatibility of the “new man” with the darkness we came out of.¹³ This doesn’t mean there is no overlap, of course, because God gives the light of common grace even to pagans. The point is that Paul “is laying out a manifesto for the New Humanity, painting in broad strokes a vision for how believers

parts, and the primary and smallest parts of the household are master and slave, husband and wife, father and children; we ought therefore to examine the proper constitution and character of each of these three relationships, I mean that of mastership, that of marriage ..., and thirdly the progenitive relationship” (*Politics* 1.1253b).¹⁰ For more see Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, vol. 42, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1990), 357.

¹¹ A helpful article on this is Mark Keown, “Paul’s Vision of a New Masculinity (Eph 5:21-6:9)” *Colloquium* 48/1 (2016), 47-60. https://www.academia.edu/36607328/Pauls_Vision_of_a_New_Masculinity_Eph_5_21-6_9.

¹² Luke Nagy, “Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians 5:22-33,” https://www.academia.edu/39080806/Exegetical_Commentary_on_Ephesians_5_22-33.

¹³ Timothy G. Gombis, “A Radically New Humanity: The Function of the Haustafel in Ephesians,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48:2 (2005): 318.

ought to conduct themselves in new creation communities, thus epitomizing the triumph of God in Christ.”¹⁴ In this way, it continues the whole idea of we are to live lives of light, filled with the Spirit and the love of Christ.

Now, when you think “household,” you probably think nuclear family: parents and children. In this way, the code begins with wives and husbands (Eph 5:22-33) and extends to parents (6:1-4), particularly fathers (vs. 4), and children. But he does not stop here. The ancient household extended farther than ours. And so, he wraps up the code with rules to slaves/bondservants and masters (5-9).

Since he has been talking about the church-temple, it might seem strange for him to move to households. And yet, do not forget that in the same place he brought up the church as a “temple” he also said that we are “members of the household of God” (2:19). In this way, I believe what these household rules do is function as an model of the church and how she is to behave at all times, not just in the formal worship of god.

Today, we will only look at the first of these: Wives and husbands. The first verses in the ESV is, “Wives, submit to

¹⁴ Ibid., 319.

your own husbands, as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22). This translation is helpful here even though the Greek literally uses the words “women” and “men.” It is literally “The women, to her own man, as to the Lord.” It is not just any man, but her “own” (*idiois*) man, meaning, her husband. This is made clear later when he talks about the marriage of the man and woman and uses Genesis as an example. Therefore, anyone who might try to use this passage as a proof-text for the submission of all women to all men is, much less total submission at all times is, as Wilson said, abusing the Scripture with a radical distortion of its teaching.

Teaching to the Wives (Eph 5:22-24)

We come first to the wives. This is by far the great controversy of our day, even though it would have been the husband part that would have been eyebrow raiser in earlier centuries. “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22). All translations have a form of submit/subject, even though there is technically no verb in this sentence (see above). This is necessary because of the previous verse where the last idea of “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (21). You can hear that in both, Christ is

the reason for the submission. It is done *because* of him, because of what he has done for us, and because of who he is as our Lord. The passage continues, “**For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands”** (23-24).

I’m going to state the issue up front as clearly as I can. There is some kind of authority in the husband/wife relationship, even as there is in the exact parallels of parents/children and masters/slaves. To deny this is to deny fundamental order not to mention the textual parallels. To abuse it, however, could turn authority into androgyny on one hand or tyranny and dictatorship on the other, even as we saw earlier. Both result in the absolute devastation of families and eventually entire societies.

I said last time that **vs. 21** is **transitionary**, but that there is debate over whether this should be considered the heading of our new section or the close of the previous section. **Grammatically**, it has to finish the sentence that began in **vs. 18** (there is no other way to make sense of the five participles). But **theologically**, it obviously has to connect to what women are commanded to do. The reason this matters is

only if someone wants to try to argue *from one or the other* some kind of theological point about what Paul is now saying. For example, **some very much want to minimize** the mutual submission of the previous section so that they can over-emphasize the wife's submission to them at the expense of their own mutual submission commanded there. On the other hand, **some want to connect vs. 21 so tightly** to **vs. 22** in order to de-emphasize the submission of wives, as they turn whatever Paul tells husbands into the exact same thing as the submission of women. In other words, there is no distinction between the command to "submit" and the command to "love" because there is no authority or hierarchy in marriage. Both are unacceptable. Words have meaning, and though there can be some conceptual "submissive" overlap between submitting and loving, they are not identical in function and practice.

There are two interpretive difficulties with the command. The first is the **meaning of "submission."** The second is **the meaning of "head."** What does "submission" mean? When you look at lexicons you will find that, across the board, they say it means *to be subject, to obey, to be obedient, to rank under*, and so on. Very clearly, this word does have that kind of meaning, and most of the time. It is also how many

have taken it in the past. Lancelot Ridley, “It is the duty of the wife to be obedient to her husband in all lawful and honest things” (*Commentary on Ephesians*). Wolfgang Musculus, “He takes his argument not from human laws but from the divine order and constitution, telling wives to consider that and in the light of it to obey their husbands as they would obey the Lord” (*Commentary on Ephesians*).

More recently, people have been arguing this way: “It is important to understand that submission (having a disposition of deference, humility, and respect toward another person) is not the same as obedience (acting under command from a higher authority). Obedience can follow from submission, but obedience is not necessarily entailed by submission. In biblical usage, “to ‘submit oneself’ could mean to ‘give in’ or ‘cooperate,’ and need not mean ‘obey.’” There is some truth here.¹⁵

So what does it mean here? Here are a few points to consider. First, “Elsewhere the notion of submission is only used for the attitude of specific groups—women (1 Cor 14:34; Col 3:18; 1 Tim 2:11; Titus 2:5), children (1 Tim 3:4), and

¹⁵ Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 164. To this point, Lincoln observes, “There is obviously a difference between willing submission and imposed obedience but hardly a major distinction between voluntary subordination and voluntary obedience.” Lincoln, 368.

slaves (Titus 2:9)—or for the attitude of believers to the state (Rom 13:1, 5; Titus 3:1).¹⁶ In all of these other relationships, there is some kind of hierarchy. But it is just at the point of hierarchy moderns get perturbed. *This is a democracy, not a hierarchy*, they seem to think! Marriage, according to them, has no inherent hierarchy whatsoever. But these comparisons strongly point, in my opinion, to some kind of hierarchy within marriage.

A second point has to do with the word “head” in the next verse. This is the second inflammatory word in the modern context. This word is found in vs. 23, “For the husband is the head of the wife...” Most have argued that this word implies hierarchy and authority of the husband over the wife.¹⁷ This is also how everyone took it until only just a few decades ago.

- Augustine said, “I am definitely speaking to Christians who heed faithfully the words: ‘A husband is head of the wife,’ whereby they realize they are to be the leaders; their wives, on the other hand, followers. Therefore, the husband must

¹⁶ Lincoln, 365.

¹⁷ See Wayne Grudem, “Does κεφαλὴ (“Head”) Mean “Source” Or “Authority Over” in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples,” *Trinity Journal* 6.1 (Spring 1985): 38-59. This is a very interesting study, but another scholar has shown some holes in it. See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 502-5.

avoid entering upon a path of conduct which he may fear his wife will follow in imitation.”¹⁸

- Basil said, “Let women be subject to their husbands, as to the Lord; because the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church; and he is the saviour of his body. Therefore as the church is subject to Christ, so also let the wives be to their husbands in all things.’ *Tit.* [2:4, 5]: ‘That they may teach the young women to be wise, to love their husbands, chaste, having a care of the house, gentle, obedient to their husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.’”¹⁹
- Tertullian said, “Hang on your ears the words of God, bind on your neck the yoke of Christ; bow your heads to your husbands—and that will be ornament enough for you.”²⁰

You can say that they are all wrong, but you can’t say that this is not the universal interpretation of the church until just very recently. As a point of fact, this is exactly what all

¹⁸ **Augustine of Hippo**, “Adulterous Marriages,” in *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. Charles T. Huegelmeyer, vol. 27, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1955), 109.

¹⁹ **Basil of Caesarea**, *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. M. Monica Wagner, vol. 9, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), 190.

²⁰ **Tertullian**, *Disciplinary, Moral, and Ascetical Works*, ed. Hermigild Dressler, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quain, vol. 40, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1959), 149.

other household lists (Jewish, Greek, Roman, it doesn't matter) say about women. It wasn't viewed as controversial. No one questioned it. It just is what it is.²¹ It is only once you get to the 20th and 21st centuries that suddenly, the entire history of the church is no longer "woke" to the truth that it doesn't mean this.

But, there's much more to say. There is quite possibly something else going on with the word "head." While "head" certainly can mean **authority** (probably in Eph 1:22), it can also mean "**source**," as in the head of a river. This is probably how it is used in Eph 4:15 where we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. Christ is our source of all life and he holds us together as a body.²² I believe there is something of both authority and source going on here, as Christ is both the authority over the church and its source of life. This softens the idea so that it cannot be taken as **authoritarianism**. You must never think of this word

²¹ Philo writes, "Wives must be in servitude to their husbands, a servitude not imposed by violent ill-treatment but promoting obedience in all things. Parents must have power over their children ... The same holds for any other persons over whom he [a man] has authority" (*Hypothetica* 7.3, 5).²¹ From David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (SBLMS 26; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981) 54, in Gombis, "Radical Humanity," 316. See also Aristotle and Josephus (below).

²² Someone notes the word can mean "authority," "source," "prominence/place of honor," or "interdependent relationship – cannot be separated." Douglas Heidebrecht, "Because We are Members of His Body: Reading Ephesians 5:22-33), 7, https://www.academia.edu/35931007/Because_We_are_Members_of_His_Body_Reading_Ephesians_5_22-33.

like that! Rather, “[I]t is the function of the head to plan for the safety of the body, to secure it from danger and to provide for its welfare; so has Christ treated the church, and so should the husband treat his wife.”²³ So think of it the way Hendriksen does, “He is her head *as being vitally interested in her welfare. He is her protector.*”²⁴

Along the same lines, remember the word “submitting” in **vs. 21**, a word referring to everyone, can’t possibly mean anything like authoritarianism.²⁵ How could everyone possibly have authority over everyone else, let alone absolute authority? You should beware of anyone who even tries to come close to this in interpreting our passage.

Finally, and I think most importantly, in the only other usage of the exact same participial form of “submitting” in the entire Bible, Peter says something almost exactly the same as Paul will say, “**Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust**” (**1Pe 2:18**). The key word here is “**respect.**”

²³ J. A. Robinson, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 124, 205, from Bruce, *Ephesians*, 385.

²⁴ William Hendriksen, *Galatians and Ephesians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 248 [Emphasis original].

²⁵ This point is made in James R. Beck, “Is There a Head of the House in the Home? Reflections on Ephesians 5,” *Priscilla Papers* 2:4 (1988), 3 [1-4]. https://www.academia.edu/34851174/Is_There_a_Head_of_the_House_in_the_Home_Reflections_on_Ephesians_5.

Why? Because [this is the synonym](#) Paul uses of submit in our passage too. He finishes this list by saying, “[... and let the wife see that she respects her husband](#)” (33). While the man is given the same command, the wife is told first to submit and then to respect.

With all this in mind, we need to turn to [the justification and motivation](#) for this command. There is a parallel in the relationship between husband and wife as there is to Christ and his church. Again, he calls the husband the “head.” If you want to understand the true meaning of this word, [you must look to Christ](#), for Christ is the “head” of the church. The only thing he says about this here is that Christ is her “[Savior](#).” And how did he save his bride? By dying for her. This already anticipates the command to the husband, but it must never be divorced from the meaning of her submission.

What I mean is made clearer in the final verse. “[As the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands](#).” Again, the parallel is [the church’s submission to Christ](#) and the wives to the husband. Is the church to think itself the functional equal to Christ? Blasphemy. But the reason the church submits to Christ is because of who he is and what he has done for her. He always has her best interest at heart as only a loving husband could.

He is kind to her, and patient, he is never arrogant or rude. He does not insist on his own way (he lets you go your way, all in his divine sovereign will); he is never irritable or resentful, he does not rejoice at wrongdoing, he bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things for her.

All of this it must be remembered is something she does “as to the Lord” (22) in a parallel that everyone does “out of reverence for Christ” (21). In fact, the very same thing is told to children (6:1) and slaves (5, 7) later, making this one very significant motivation. As Lloyd-Jones says, “It is idle for us to go on to consider the duties of wives towards their husbands, or of children to parents, or of servants to masters, unless we are clear about this over-riding principle concerning the way in which we do these things, the reason why we must do them.”²⁶ We do it because we are Christians and because we are in Christ. Something important this means is that this is not forced submission, but voluntary submission. It is something entered into freely via a covenant that is made before the Lord.

²⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in the Spirit: In Marriage, Home & Work--An Exposition of Ephesians 5:18-6:9* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1973), 71.

One more word needs to be said, and that is about the “in everything” part. “Paul does not force wives into an unjust, dangerous, harmful and ungodly obedience but into one that is convenient and necessary for any lawful marriage. No woman is expected to obey a man who orders her to do things that are ungodly, harmful and unjust, because that sort of obedience is not of God but more like obedience to the will of Satan” (*Musculus, Commentary on Ephesians*). Again, this anticipates the command to the husbands. But before we come to that, let’s summarize this one.

The marriage relationship is a parallel of Christ and his church. As such, there is a head and body analogy going on. The wife plays the part of the body, which in the NT is the means by which God carries out his will in Christ on the earth. Yet, the head is higher and so the command is for the willful submission, just like it is in vs. 21 with all of us one to another, which more than anything means respect. With that, let’s turn to the husbands.

Teaching to the Husbands (Eph 5:25-29)

The command to the husbands begins in **vs. 25**. It is simple yet utterly earth-shattering for an ancient household list.

“Husbands, love your wives.” In the ancient world, such a command was unheard of. The word *agape* (love) is not found in any Greco-Roman household codes, in rabbinic literature, or even in the OT in such a direct way.²⁷ **Domosthenes** tells you the general attitude of men, “We keep mistresses for pleasure, concubines for our day-to-day bodily needs, but we have wives to produce legitimate children and serve as trustworthy guardians of our homes” (**Demosthenes**, oration *Against Neaera*). This is because, as **Aristotle** tells you, “The male is by nature superior and the female is inferior, the male ruler and the female subject” (Pol. 1254b [1.2.12]). Josephus, the Jew, says almost the same thing. “The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation but that she may be directed; for the authority has been given by God to the man” (*Against Apion* 2.201, Loeb).²⁸

Imagine, therefore, Paul telling the husbands of Ephesus to love their wives! This is revolutionary, not only in the **unheard-of command** to the husband, but in the **implicit dignity** it gives to the wife! **She is worthy of love.** She is not a plaything for your amusement, a punching bag for your

²⁷ Keown, 54, n. 28.

²⁸ Keown, 54, n. 27.

fits of anger, or a doormat for your authoritarian feet. Sadly, when you say it that way, the question becomes, imagine telling this to many church-going men in our country, some of whom should be in jail for the way they treat their wives.

The reasoning for this command comes into play beginning in the second half of this verse. “... as Christ love the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25b). This is now the third time in three verses that he has raised the doctrine of the church. I said earlier that up until these household commands, everything has been said to the church. But in putting the commands to the wife and husband this way, he is in a sense continuing this practice. For Christian husbands and wives are part of the church. Therefore, they know that love that Christ has for them personally. Because we know it personally, we can therefore obey out of gratitude.

The gratitude here comes as a parallel to the word “Savior” in vs. 23. How is Christ the wife’s “Savior?” The same way he is the husbands. He “gave himself up for her.” Suddenly, the husband actually becomes the wife—the bride of Christ. All husbands are brides to the Groom of Heaven. Therefore, they know what submission is supposed to be on an experiential level. This is to therefore help them with

how they lead as the “head.” In the analogy, they are to love their wife so passionately, that they would **give themselves up for her**, thereby paying the very highest price that can be paid for a person—a death ransom.

Christ is not asking husbands to die, of course. But he is saying that their love is to be so **sacrificial** towards her that he would. But much more pertinent, it is to be this sacrificial towards her not merely in death, *but in their lives together*. This is the kind of “headship” he is to have. And, in its own way, it is a form of submission, for to willingly do this for your wife is a form of respect and deference of your will to hers. As **Ambrose** says of Christ’s headship, “**After His Incarnation, then, is Christ the head of man, for His self-surrender issued from His Incarnation.**”²⁹ Of course, this submission is not identical in nature to hers. It is not submission because of the natural order of things. Nevertheless, it can be looked at through those lenses. It is submission because she is worthy of love.

²⁹ **Ambrose of Milan**, “Exposition of the Christian Faith,” in *St. Ambrose: Select Works and Letters*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin, and H. T. F. Duckworth, vol. 10, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1896), 266. Here’s another good quote along the same lines. “Yes, Paul teaches wives, children, and slaves to be submissive to those ‘over’ them. However, Paul also demands a level of ‘submission’ from husbands, fathers, and masters premised on the self-giving nature of the incarnation.” **Stanley N. Helton**, “Ephesians 5:21: A Longer Translation Note,” *Restoration Quarterly* (2006): 41. https://www.academia.edu/11556623/Ephesians_5_21_A_Longer_Translation_Note.

The sacrifice of Christ here is for the husband, in his election into the church as the bride. Yes, the husband is the bride of Christ. This is for three stated purposes, and these become the impetus for the husband to love his wife. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her first, “that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (26). This was done “so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.” This was done, “that she might be holy and without blemish.” The order is **sanctification** for **presentation** in perfect spotless **purity** on her wedding day. Christ is making an unclean bride to be a pure virgin, a thing impossible in the world of men, but all things are possible with God.

Sanctification is a word for ritual purity. Hence, the language of **washing of water**.³⁰ This is the OT language of ritual baptism for cleansing. It clearly harkens to NT baptism at least as a metaphor. But here he is not talking about actual

³⁰ Someone did a Thesis on this phrase, though I didn't read hardly any of it. Moses Y Yoseph, “THE MEANING OF “KATHARISAS TŌ LOUTRŌ TOU HYDATOS EN RĒMATI (CLEANSING WITH THE WASHING OF WATER IN THE WORD)” IN EPHESIANS 5:26: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY,” Masters Thesis at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (2016), https://www.academia.edu/28628374/THE_MEANING_OF_KATHARISAS_T%C5%8C_LOUTR%C5%8C_TOU_HYDATOS_EN_R%C4%92MATI_CLEANSING_WITH_THE_WASHING_OF_WATER_IN_THE_WORD_IN_EPHESIANS_5_26_AN_EXEGETICAL_STUDY.

water baptism. He is talking about the washing that occurs as the word is poured over the church through the means of grace. The only way this can have meaning is if the word itself is powerful to cleanse. That's the power of law and gospel in a Christian life. It sanctifies you as you are washed with it together.

Amazingly, **this washing is done by Christ**—the Word and the presentation of the church-bride is “to himself.” You must be washed by Christ. Have you been? Has he washed you of your sin and cleansed you from within? He does this so that his bride might be fit to be in his perfect, holy presence. And what does she become through this washing and sanctification? Full of splendor, without spot or wrinkle. She shines. She is no longer old and haggard. She is young and her skin is perfect. Because through this process, she becomes perfect on that Last Day.

Perfection is the end goal. This can be described also as holiness. **Calvin** is good here,

Christ does not wash us in order to see us return to our former pollution but in order that we may retain for life the purity that we have received ... As a wife’s beautiful figure is a cause of love, so Christ adorns the church, his bride, with

holiness as a sign of his good will ... The true beauty of the church consists of its holiness and innocence ... Note that the church is to be holy, not for the sake of other people but for the sake of Christ ... Paul does not mean that the church has achieved perfection already but merely states the purpose for which Christ has cleansed it ... The church has started along the road to holiness and makes further progress every day.

It is with this in mind, because they are themselves the bride of Christ being washed by him as they submit to Christ, that husbands are, “In the same way ... [to] love their wives as their own bodies” (28). No one hates his own body (29), they take care of it, they eat, they drink, they exercise, they protect it from harm, and so on. As Paul says, “He nourishes and cherishes it” (29). In between these comments, he says something that “He who loves his wife loves himself” (28b). This refers to a great mystery that we will get into next time. This mystery actually becomes the great reason for anything the wives and husbands are to do for each other. They are one flesh, not two. To love your wife is to love yourself. To submit to your husband is to respect yourself. Oh, that we had time today to discuss this.

Alas, we must conclude. The sad fact is, far too many wives do not respect their husbands; far too many husbands do not earn the respect of their wives. And many single people have never thought about these things at all. If you are not married, you might be and you must consider the future now. Are you willing to do such a thing for another? But even if you will not be married, the fact is, you already are married if you are in Christ. Therefore, consider your own relationship to him, the order of the thing, and how you might spur your married friends onto love and good works in your own example as a Christian.

If you are married, you must ask yourself how well you are doing in your own respective commands under Christ. Wives, you need to ask yourself if you submit to your husband and whether you respect him. And, you need to ask yourself if you do this out of anger or out of love for Christ. Are you doing it willingly or resentfully?

Husbands, you need to ask yourselves if you force submission upon your wives, Lord your authority over them like a tyrant and so disobey the Lord Jesus. For this is not loving your wife as Christ loved you. You need to ask yourself how well you are doing at loving your wife. Are you

displaying that 1 Cor 13 definition of love towards her increasingly on a daily basis?

Both of you need to ask yourselves what your children see of these things in you. Beware, for when you are not obeying the Lord in these matters, you are begging for rebellion in them. For they know what it is supposed to be like in your marriage, at least to some degree, and they know hypocrisy when they see it. If this order is maintained, if husbands love their wives and wives submit to in respect of their husbands, children see it, friends see it, neighbors see it, the church see its, the world see its. And God has ordained it to be that when these things take place, the result is goodness, beauty, truth, and light.

But when they are disobeyed, when rebellion from either one of you sets into your hearts, the whole world goes awry. Our nation's children are what they are in large part because their parents did not heed even the basic lists of pagans in these matters, much less these of the Bible. The hypocrisy of saying one thing and doing another behind closed doors created a revolution of perversion in the 60s that has only grown exponentially in the 2010s. The very fabric of civilization is unraveling due in no small measure to the total

breakdown of the family. And that starts with the husband and wife.

There is much here for possible despair. But do not despair, for if Christ is in you, greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world. This relationship, as we will see next time, is a profound mystery that points you to the power and strength of the Great Groom of Heaven—the one who has done all things necessary for his bride on earth to be washed and forgiven and cleansed when she fails. Therefore, do not look to yourselves for power in these matters. Look to the one who is the very Power of Heaven, the one who has saved you by submitting to his Father in heaven to the point of death on a cross, for that is how great his love is for you.

Outline of the Passage

¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and

making melody to the Lord with your heart,

²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit 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 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it,

just as Christ does the church,³⁰ because we are members of his body.

³¹ "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

³² This mystery is profound, 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.³¹

³¹ This basic outline comes from Szesnat, 163. https://www.academia.edu/10920780/Gender-Based_Violence_and_Ephesians_5_Reflections..

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