

II. Ephesians 5:21-33



Ephesians 5:21 - 6:9 - Relationships in the Christian family

Ephesians 5:21

Be subject to one another out of reverence for the Messiah.

This is another fruit of being 'filled with the Spirit' (5:18).

The basic virtue for social life is for the members to be '**subject** [ὑποτάσσω] **to one another**'. Paul is not reinforcing social rank. He is writing to Christian communities in which 'there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but the Messiah is all and in all' (Colossians 3:11). He is asking us to respond to the inspiration of the Spirit of Jesus and to model ourselves on Jesus, as Paul himself does: 'Though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all' (1 Corinthians 9:19). This is what he asked of the Galatians: 'Through love become slaves to one another' (Galatians 5:13).

That this is what Paul has in mind is reinforced by his reference to Jesus, for this is the command given us by him, and we are to carry it out in complete submission to his will, for he is our Lord. We are to have a sense of wonder and awe at the presence of Jesus in all who are part of his body. This in turn is to lead us to a sharing in his humility, whereby we look up to others, subjecting our lives to serving them in love: 'Owe no one anything, except to love one another' (Romans 13:8).

That there is a lot more to this verse becomes apparent when we realise that it introduces a section in which Paul speaks of the Christian values that are to be lived in the home. We are socialised into 'traditional family values' from the first moments of our consciousness. These 'values' are basic to society. They are often unconscious and are most resistant to change. Yet the gospel must have something to say here. This brings up the perennial tension between 'inculturation' (the Christian life relating to the realities of the culture) and 'acculturation' (the Christian life being compromised by the habits, customs and 'values' of a society).

Paul himself lived in a society in which, in the public arena, husbands exercised authority over their wives, and in which domestic slavery was as taken for granted as the relationship of employer and employee today. Though there is no indication that Paul had a blueprint in his mind of a different way of organising the home, we are left in no doubt of the central values that were to rule all relationships. In this context, what Paul is saying in this verse is, indeed, revolutionary, and if followed faithfully it could not but have a dramatic effect on marriage, family and domestic slavery.

Ephesians 5:21-22

Be subject to one another out of reverence for the Messiah.

I. Wives, be subject to your husbands **as** you are to the Lord.

Paul's exhortation to wives here can be found, almost word for word, in Colossians: 'wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord' (Colossians 1:18).

It could appear, at first glance, to be simply an application of the general principle which he has stated in the previous verse. Since all Christians are to be '**subject to one another**', wives, for example, should look up to and reverence their husbands in everything, and give themselves in love in serving them.

Ephesians 5:22-24

Wives, be subject to your husbands **as** you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just **as** the Messiah is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just **as** the church is subject to the Messiah, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

It is when we come to examine the reasons which Paul gives for his exhortation (not found in the parallel passage in Colossians), that we become aware that he is addressing a relationship, traditional in the communities to whom he is writing, in which authority is vested in the husband: ‘**the husband is the head of the wife**’. By contrast with the previous verse, the verb ‘be subject’ is understood in such a way as to include its literal meaning whereby it refers to rank and social order as accepted in the society of his day.

Ephesians 5:22-24

Wives, be subject to your husbands **as** you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just **as** the Messiah is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just **as** the church is subject to the Messiah, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Is Paul, then, simply reinforcing the already given structure of authority? Is his purpose here to insist that wives recognise their lower position in the social order and behave accordingly?

Though Paul assumes the traditional structure, he is not insisting on it. His focus is elsewhere, as can be seen by his reference to the Messiah, and by his insertion of the key word '**as**'.

Assuming the authority of the husband, he is exhorting wives, when they live the reality of their position in the home, to do it in a certain way; namely, in the way in which they are subject to the Lord. In choosing to speak of Jesus as ‘**Lord**’, Paul is already making a point. **Jesus and Jesus alone is their Lord**. The values that are to permeate their relationship with their husband are not the values of the world, but those of Jesus.

The whole letter prepares us to hear Paul say: ‘The Messiah is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour.’

What does Paul intend when he says: ‘the husband is the head of the wife just as the Messiah is the head of the church’. We are pointing in the right direction if, once again, we focus on the word ‘as’. The Messiah is ‘head’ and he is faithful in love even to giving his life for the church (see 5:2). Since the husband is head, he should express his love in the same way.

Similarly, the ‘as’ is important when Paul tells wives to be subject ‘as the church is subject to the Messiah’. We will have to await further clarification of Paul’s meaning, but this much is already clear: while Paul is not suggesting a change in the authority structure of the family, he is introducing a revolutionary principle that must radically alter it.

Ephesians 5:25

2. Husbands, love your wives, just as the Messiah loved the church and gave himself up for her

As noted in the commentary on the previous verses, Paul is not simply applying the general principle enunciated in verse twenty-one to various groups within the church. If he were he would tell husbands to be subject to their wives as they are to the Lord. He is assuming an order within marriage whereby authority lies with the husband, and he goes straight to the heart of the Christian life by telling husbands: ‘love your wives, just as the Messiah loved the church and gave himself up for her’. He prepared us for this when, speaking of husbands in their role as ‘head’, he spoke of Jesus the ‘head’ as being our ‘Saviour’ (5:23). His exhortation echoes his words addressed to all Christians: ‘Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as the Messiah loved us and gave himself up for us’ (5:1-2).

Ephesians 5:25-27

Husbands, love your wives, just as the Messiah loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind — yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

When Paul goes on to describe how Jesus loved the church, he uses imagery from the ritual preparation of a bride for the nuptials. In his love Jesus prepares the church to be presented to him as a bride is prepared to be presented to the king (see Psalm 45:10-15).

Paul highlights the ‘washing of water’ and the ‘word’. The allusion is to baptism, and the word is the gospel itself, with special reference to the words that accompany baptism ‘in the name of the Lord’.

God has chosen all of us ‘in the Messiah ... to be holy and blameless before him in love’ (1:14). We have all been presented to him when ‘he raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in the Messiah Jesus’ (2:6). What Paul wrote earlier about Jesus being our ‘Saviour’ (5:23), and what he says here about the church, applies equally to both bridegroom and bride.

In applying it to the bride is Paul simply reflecting the tradition which spoke of Israel as a bride (see Hosea 2:7; Isaiah 54:5), and in which it is the bridegroom who says: ‘You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you’ (Song of Solomon 4:7)?

Ephesians 5:28-31

In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own flesh, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as the Messiah does for the church, because we are members of his body. *‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’* (Genesis 2:24).

Two aspects of this text are clear from a first reading.

The first is that Paul is calling upon husbands, once again (see 5:22) to **‘love their wives’**.

The second is that he keeps the risen Jesus before our eyes throughout as the one who **‘nourishes and tenderly cares for the church because we are members of his body’**. Other aspects of the text are not as easily comprehended.

Paul speaks of the wife as the '**body**' of the husband. His reason for doing so becomes apparent only towards the end of the passage.

We must first recognise that he is drawing upon the narrative of Adam and Eve in the story of Genesis. Adam is alone in the garden of Eden. God declares: 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner' (Genesis 2:18). God goes on to make all the different living creatures and to present them to Adam 'but there was not found a helper as his partner' (Genesis 2:20). So God makes Eve, not by a separate act, but by taking already created flesh from Adam and forming it into Eve. When she is presented to Adam, he exclaims with joy: 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' (Genesis 2:23). There follows the remark quoted by Paul: '**For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh**' (Genesis 2:24).

Our first conclusion is that Paul speaks of the wife as the ‘body’ (and ‘flesh’) of the husband in order to recall the intimate communion intended by God the creator.

There is already an implied critique of the dominion exercised by husbands over their wives, when we recall that this dominion is a result, not of God’s intention as creator, but of sin.

To the woman God said,

“I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and **he shall rule over you.**” (Genesis 3:16).

Ephesians 5:32

This is a great **mystery**, and I am applying it to the Messiah and the church.

It is here that the thrust of Paul's exhortation finally becomes clear. Throughout the letter, Paul has been speaking of '**the mystery**': namely, God's design to bring the whole of humanity into one body in a communion of love by uniting everyone to the Risen Jesus. He is presenting the communion in love between husband and wife 'in the Messiah' as a special witness to this mystery of communion that exists between the Risen Jesus and his body the church.

The traditional Latin version of the Bible (the 'Vulgate') translates the Greek *μυστήριον* here as '*sacramentum*'; hence our referring to marriage as a sacrament: an especially graced union that expresses the intimate love which Christ has for his church.

Ephesians 5:33

Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself,
and a wife should respect her husband.

Paul sums up his teaching by using traditional Jewish and Christian language to call on a husband to love his wife ‘as himself’ (see Galatians 5:14; Mark 12:31). His exhortation to a wife takes us back to his opening sentence: ‘Be subject to one another out of reverence for the Messiah’ (5:21).

Paul's logic

1. Eve from Adam's side - so the Church from Jesus' side
2. Christ's love for the Church (Baptism & Eucharist)
3. What does this show concerning husband-wife relationship?

Paul is working with cultural assumptions

The word 'as' introduces a revolutionary principle

Looking back over Paul's exhortation to wives and husbands, we see that his thought is moving in two directions. As is fitting in the context, and in line with the biblical tradition which speaks of God as a bridegroom and the people as a bride, Paul uses the imagery of marriage to describe the loving care which Jesus has towards his body, the church. He is the new Adam (see 1Corinthians 15:21-22; 15:45-49; Romans 5:12-21), the first-born from the dead, who, as the new 'Man', is the source of a new humanity (see 4:24).

The Messiah is Adam and the church is Eve, his own body, the chosen object of his love, living in intimate communion of love with him. ‘He loved the church and gave himself up for her’ (5:25). He gave himself up to his executioners, making of his death a self-offering to us in love. He gave himself up to God, making of his dying an act of self-offering in obedient trust to his Father. He did this ‘so that she may be holy’ (5:26).

Christ wanted to draw the community of believers into the realm of the sacred, filling it with the Holy Spirit of God, and setting it aside as his beloved spouse (compare 1Corinthians 6:11; 2Corinthians 11:2-3). He ‘cleansed her with the washing of water by the word’ (5:26). Just as a bride is bathed prior to her nuptials, so the Church in baptism is cleansed, in order to enter into a new life with Christ, to be ‘raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places’ (2:6) The church is presented as the glorious spouse of Christ. Christ ‘nourishes and tenderly cares for her’(5:29), filling the Church with his own divine fullness (see 1:22-23). He pours out his gifts upon the church (see 4:11-16).

Besides baptism, we think of the Eucharist (see 5:18-20), and the gift of the fullness of the Spirit (see 5:18).

Jesus is the ‘**saviour**’ (5:23) of the church, in all the ways we have just mentioned; he is also the ‘**head of the church, his body**’ (5:23). The church owes him obedience, for he is our ‘**Lord**’ (5:22). In brief, Paul takes the relationship between Adam and Eve, the archetype of the relationship between husband and wife, and uses it as an image to describe the relationship between the Risen Jesus and the community that lives in communion with him.

The complementary movement in Paul's thought, and his primary focus in this section, is to reflect on what this intimacy between the Risen Jesus and the church means for the relationship between wives and husbands, and also to see how this relationship in turn enriches the life of the Christian community.

We have seen that the key to Paul's reflections is found by focusing on the central theme of the letter: what Paul continues to call '**the mystery**'. Husbands and wives are to relate in such a way as to be a sacrament of God's design to call everyone into the '**one body**', the body of the Risen Jesus.

Wives are to remember that the Risen Jesus is the one and only Lord, and, in being subject to their husbands, they are to witness to the values that inform the church in its relationship to him.

The husband's authority is to be one of love, of self-sacrifice, of a life given that his wife might be seen in her full glory. When Paul exhorts husbands to love their wives 'as their own bodies' (5:28), it emerges that he is reminding them that both they and their wives are one body because they belong to the body of the Messiah.

Paul's reflections on the spousal love of the Risen Lord for the church challenge a Christian husband in a number of ways.

Firstly, he is included in the initial exhortation: 'Be subject to one another out of reverence for the Messiah' (5:21). He is, therefore, to be subject to his wife out of reverence for Jesus. At the deepest level of Christian identity, subordination is to be mutual.

Secondly, he must exercise his authority as ‘**head**’ in the way shown by Jesus.

Thirdly, he must see in his relationship to his wife a sacrament of Jesus’ relationship to her. Three times he is told to ‘**love**’ her (5:25,28,33), with the love with which Jesus loves her. Paul sees in the intimate communion of husband and wife an expression of the mystery that is revealed in the gospel. Their love is a sacrament of the kind of intimate love to which all are called, in which differences enrich but do not divide, nor are they exploited for power of one over another. While Paul does not directly criticise the institution of marriage as it existed in his time, his insistence on love and on the example of Jesus contain the power to revolutionise every social institution, including marriage.

In some cultures today, it is no longer assumed that the husband has authority over his wife. A man and a woman commit themselves together in love and as equals to a partnership in which they attempt to reach all decisions in mutual respect and love. When there is disagreement it is not at all assumed that the wife must submit to her husband's will. A way has to be found to live in unity, and compromises are found to be necessary. When consensus cannot be reached, sometimes one submits, sometimes the other. In such a situation it is no longer satisfactory to apply the principle in the way Paul does.

We have to go deeper to the fundamental principle of Christian baptism: 'There is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). It is no longer satisfactory to compare the husband to Jesus and the wife to the church. The husband is Jesus for the wife, and the wife is Jesus for the husband, and both belong to the community that is loved by Jesus and in which his Spirit dwells.

Paul's basic insight still applies: marriage has been transformed by the fact that the union it expresses has reached its fulfilment in the Risen Jesus. Marriage is now a sacrament of this communion between Jesus and the Church, and so all the relationships that exist between a husband and wife are to be transformed, enlightened and enlivened by the presence of Jesus binding wife and husband together in love.

When a husband loves his wife, Jesus is loving her. When a wife loves her husband, Jesus is loving him. When a husband obeys his wife, he is obeying Jesus; and when a wife obeys her husband, she is obeying Jesus.

When they thank each other, correct each other, or forgive each other, they are to do so 'in Jesus'. When they are 'subject to one another' (5:21) and discern in love the best way to act together in their married life, using all the spiritual means available to make their discernment, they are doing so, not because of an assumption that the husband commands and the wife obeys, but 'in Jesus', inspired by his love and guided by his Spirit.