

Husbands + Wives

I recently studied the book of Ephesians with a small Christian connect group I'm fortunate to be a part of and it was an amazing few weeks, taking a deeper dive into this ancient letter. As we worked our way through the letter, week by week, we heard words of wisdom, counsel, and encouragement from one of the greats of the Christian faith, Paul the Apostle.

Paul starts his letter by commending the church at Ephesus for their strong faith in Jesus and their love of God's people everywhere. He comments that *he hasn't stopped thanking God and praying for them constantly.*

In Chapter 2, Paul reminds the believers that Christ himself had brought *peace* between two opposing sides – Jew and Gentile – uniting them into one people. These two groups had become one, members of God's family, a holy temple for the Lord *in which His Spirit dwelt.*

In Chapter 3, Paul shares his insights into God's mysterious plan, which had long been hidden; that both Jews and Gentiles share equally in the riches found in Christ. And, in fact, this mysterious plan was that *at the right time*, God would bring everything together – all things in heaven and earth – under the authority of Christ. The church's purpose in all this is to display God's wisdom and its rich variety to all, a cameo of what God intends for all things.

Chapter 4 is an inspiring sermon about *living in the light*; as Paul encourages the church at Ephesus to constantly renew their thoughts and attitudes through *the work of the Spirit in their lives.* The purpose, Paul comments in Chapter 5, is to imitate God, living a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He encourages the believers to be careful how they live, *letting the Spirit guide every aspect of their*

lives and he prays that God would empower them with inner strength from His glorious, unlimited resources.

As we drew closer to the end of Chapter 5, however, we all grew a little (comically) hesitant and uncomfortable. Those *awkward verses about submission* were approaching and, in particular, *wives submitting to their husbands*. Nobody wants to discuss those, even at the best of times!

In the light of this, I want to take a closer look at *those verses* (Ephesians 5:21-22), and their surrounding context, and I hope to demonstrate just how inspiring these verses really are and just how glad we can be that they form part of the Word of God!

Ephesians 5:21-22: Wives, Submit To Your Husbands

These verses have sometimes been bundled into the conversation about women's role in ministry, a topic I recently covered in more detail in my article '[Women + The Church](#)'. However, the context of Ephesians 5 shows that these verses aren't intended for women specifically, or speaking particularly to aspects of women in ministry, but rather form part of Paul's discourse on how all believers are to live spirit-filled lives, 'carefully determining what pleases the Lord' (Ephesians 5:18).

Paul begins by commenting (v21): "*submit to one another, out of reverence for Christ.*" This verse is often treated as a singular comment or instruction in its own right, followed by a secondary instructive: "*wives, submit to your husbands*", but, in the original Greek, these two verses are connected and are intended to be part of an entire thought. Verse 22 isn't a complete sentence as there is no verb. It literally translates as '*wives to their own husbands as to the Lord*', with the idea of submission (as we have it in our English translations) therefore coming from the previous verse (21).

The separation of 5:21 and 5:22 into separate sections demonstrates the sometimes misleading consequences of dividing biblical books into sections, chapters, or verses, which simply did not exist in the original manuscripts. The punctuation and various textual divisions that we see in our modern Bibles (sentences, verses, chapters etc) came much later and sometimes, unfortunately, as is the case in Ephesians 5, separate what is clearly intended to be a whole unit of thought.

The most important thing to notice is that the relationship between husbands and wives is not the main theme that Paul is addressing.

Ephesians 5:21-22 must be read as one unit of thought, contained within an even greater scope of thought: *living by the Spirit's power* (Ephesians 5:15-6:19). Paul is instructing all the church *about how to outwork their spirit-filled lives in conjunction with their relationships of interdependence*, giving examples of what this looks like for spouses, parents and children, and (specifically in Paul's time) slaves and masters.

Living By The Spirit's Power: Respect + Love

Believers are not isolated individuals but one body – Christ's, empowered by his Spirit – also connected within the context of Christ's body through the differing dynamics of human relationships. All are encouraged to *live a life filled with love* (Ephesians 5:1) and *empowered by the Spirit* (Ephesians 5:18), *deploying a servant heart in all these interdependent relationships*, which is modeled on the pattern of Jesus. Paul writes elsewhere about this theme of servant-heartedness in his letter to the church at Philippi, where he says:

Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble,

thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. | Philippians 2:3-8, NLT

As author and theologian C S Lewis puts it, "humility is not thinking *less of yourself* but *thinking of yourself less*."

The structure and context of Ephesians 5 make it clear that Paul's words about *submission in marriage* are given as an application of his primary theme, which is *life in the Spirit*. Further, this submission is mutual and is motivated by an individual's love and respect for Jesus.

Before I take a look at the specific passage in more depth, however, I'd like to ask a question that I think is super helpful in trying to understand any text: is there additional context?

"When in doubt, zoom out."

Concerning Ephesians 5, is there a further context that speaks into Paul's words? And yes, I think there is.

The Wider Context Of Ephesians 5

A significant issue that Paul had tackled in his letter to Timothy concerned the church at Ephesus. We learn in 1 Timothy that false teaching was a problem for the Ephesian church and Paul writes to Timothy to instruct the believers *to be filled with love, have a clear conscience, and genuine faith*. He then specifically addresses the requirement for an appropriate framework around learning and teaching, particularly for

women, to combat this false teaching.

Part of his discourse involved discussing the interdependent dynamics between men and women and, importantly for our consideration here, how these dynamics were to be outworked in the church in contrast to the false narratives of the culture. Women weren't to take over, Paul instructs, act in domineering ways, or tell everyone else what to do (just because they were now 'free in Christ'). Neither were they to use their gender as a weapon, either sexually or authoritatively, claiming superiority over men or absorbing the cultural myth (that Eve was formed first and was therefore more important).

Men and women 'in the Lord' are interdependent, Paul states, regardless of how the surrounding culture may view this relationship. Neither one is without the other – and all things come from God. ([1 Corinthians 11:8-12](#)). (To read more about the situation in Ephesus and Paul's thoughts in his letter to Timothy, head over [here](#)).

The flow of his argument is firmly rooted in the Genesis narrative and the interdependence between husbands and wives established from the beginning, a framework that he specifically addresses in his letter to Timothy (Ephesians 5:31-33 cp 1 Timothy 2:13-15). Their status as equals is shown in not just their relationship *to* one another as fellow humans, but also their relationship *with* each other as spouses.

Beautiful theological overtones are hidden within the creation story concerning marriage, which point to the redeeming work of Jesus and the [creation of the church](#), styled 'his bride' ([John 19:34](#), [Ephesians 5:25-27](#), [1 Corinthians 12:27](#)). We are given to understand from Ephesians 5:31-33 that the relationship between Jesus and the church wasn't modeled on the first marriage but, in fact, it was the other way around. God had the church in mind from the very beginning. Marriage is our human way of experiencing and understanding how we,

together as one body, relate to Jesus as his church.

I believe these same ideas form part of the context of his flow of thoughts and better informs our understanding of the kind of interdependence (mutual submission) that Paul has in mind, concerning marriage.

Within this framework and with this perspective in mind we're guided in our interpretation of Paul's instructions to husbands and wives.

Mutual Submission

Ephesians 5:21-22 (and onwards) is speaking of *mutual submission*. The 'what' (*submission*) is the same for both spouses, the 'why' is the same (*out of reverence for Christ*); it's the 'how' that differs. Before looking at this in more depth, it would be helpful to unpack *submission* a little more.

Submission for most modern English readers is taken to mean 'subjection', 'subjugation', 'lesser in authority', 'under the rule or authority of'. Certainly, the dictionary supports this as one interpretation, defining *submit* in the following way:

“submit (verb): a. to yield oneself to the authority or will of another : surrender. b. : to permit oneself to be subjected to something, to defer to or consent to abide by the opinion or authority of another.”

However, submit can also mean: “to present or propose to another for review, consideration, or decision, to deliver formally”, and: “to put forward as an opinion or contention.”

The original Greek word from which we get our English translation is ὑποτασόμενοι (*Hypotassomenoi*) which is a passive form of the verb ὑποτάσσω (*hypotasso*). It was a military term (which is fascinating in light of Paul's later thoughts in Ephesians 6), and, when used in a military context, there is a strong sense of *submitting to someone of*

higher rank. For example, a soldier must arrange himself in order under his sergeant. A sergeant arranges himself in order under the master-sergeants, and so on and so forth.

In a non-military sense, it's used to mean a voluntary attitude of giving in, cooperating, assuming responsibility, and carrying a burden.

Side Note: it's interesting to understand how we arrived at our English word '*submit*'. The New Testament texts, written in Koine Greek, developed over time, keeping pace with the growth of the early church. It wasn't until around 380-400AD that a Latin translation was made by St Jerome, which later became known as 'the Vulgate'. Jerome's translation became the standard Latin version of the Bible for the Western Latin-speaking Church for many centuries.

It wasn't until 1535 that the first *complete English Bible* was published (the Coverdale Bible), which used, as its source, much of Tyndale's work in translating the Hebrew and Greek texts, but which also relied heavily on the *Latin Vulgate* (which had been in use in the church for over 1000 years) as well as Luther's German New Testament.

Our English word *submit* (English) is borrowed from the Latin words "*sub*" (under) plus the verb "*mittere*" (to send forth), which was originally translated from the original Greek *hypotasso*). Incidentally, we also get the word "*mission*" from the same word (*mittere*).

It's sometimes difficult to fully convey an original meaning in a target language. Nuance is often important in using a particular word but differences between languages mean that an exact translation is often not possible. The target language finds a word that is close, but missing some of the nuance that gave the original word its depth and range of meaning.

I think this is very much the case here. Paul is using a military term in what seems, initially, to be a non-military

context but, as he progresses, it becomes obvious that warfare is very much at the front and centre of his thoughts (Chapter 6), as well as the example given by Jesus regarding humility/servanthood, and it's likely the use of this word is intentional

The Latin translation contains some of the original meaning but has lost much of its military connotations and, by the time it makes its way into our English translation, '*to set forth under*' has become '*under the authority of*', losing almost entirely the true sense of the original word.

However, considering the context of Paul's usage (retrospectively guided by his commentary in Ephesians 6), the idea of *submission* here, I think, is very much: '*deploy yourself in support of*', '*think of your spouse as better than yourself*', '*be prepared to go into battle for your spouse's interests, not just your own*', '*arrange yourself in formation, in devotion to*', '*be on mission in support of your spouse*'.

Life in the Spirit, Paul says, is a life completely different from what a believer had previously known, a life that had been corrupted by lust and deception (Ephesians 4:22). This new life is one in which they are created to be like God – truly righteous and holy. And yet, they also needed to be on their guard. They hadn't just entered into a new life, but an old battle, one which had been raging since the dawn of time, in which good fought against evil, light against darkness, the God of truth against the enemy of lies.

"*Stay alert*", he exhorts, "*and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere.*" (Ephesians 6:18). In their spirit-guided relationships, husbands and wives needed to be aware of the reality of the battle they were in, that they were *on mission* together, and to *deploy themselves in support of one another, following the model patterned by Jesus – servant-hearted submission.*

For Wives

Wives are “*to submit to their husbands as to the Lord. For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the saviour of his body, the church.*”

In the same way that Christ is the *head of the church*, Paul says, so the husband is the *head* of his wife.

This passage is often interpreted to mean that Jesus is the *head* of the church in that he is the *supreme authority* of the church. Certainly, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to Jesus (Matthew 28:18), he is far above any ruler or leader, not only in this world but the world to come (Ephesians 1:22-23), and is described by Paul as Lord over creation (Colossians 1:15), over all spiritual power (Colossians. 1:16), and the eternal God and Sustainer of the universe (Colossians. 1:17). There is no doubt of Jesus' supremacy over all things.

But is this what Paul means by *head*? What does he have in mind when he says that Jesus is *the head of the church*?

Interestingly, Ephesians 1:22 states that God has done all these things – ie put all things under the authority of Christ *for the benefit of the church. The church is not a separate entity to also be put under Christ's authority but part of **his own body**, a beneficiary of the work that God has done in Jesus. We – the church – have been made *more than conquerors* because we are part of Jesus' own body. His victory becomes our victory, and his authority becomes our authority.*

Paul expands on these thoughts in Ephesians 5:21-33 and gives us exactly what (I think) he means by *head*. He qualifies that Jesus is head of the church *because he is the saviour of his body*, which **is** the church. There is nothing authoritative or hierarchical in these sentiments, conversely, Paul's language is sacrificial, life-giving, nourishing, and empowering, a theme that he often picks up elsewhere (Colossians 1:18, 2:19;

Ephesians 4:15–16).

The church *only exists* because of the sacrificial death of Jesus, prefigured by the deep sleep that came upon Adam in the Genesis story. Her entire identity is shaped by her *source (head)*; in Eve's case, Adam, and the church's case, Jesus. She, the church, *is made of the same stuff as him*. Through Jesus' death and sacrifice, she was created and at his resurrection, she becomes a living creature.

Paul doesn't only touch on this topic here, in Ephesians, but these same thoughts also form part of his discourse in 1 Corinthians 11:3-4. In that particular passage, there are fourteen primary reasons to interpret *head* as referring to "*source*" rather than "*authority*" (<https://bit.ly/2QVZa8I>) and I think the same reasons apply here in Ephesians 5.

Paul wants wives to understand that in this *spirit-led life*, they are not independent of their husbands but *one flesh and one body*, in the same way that Christ and the church are one. Wives are to view their husbands through the lens of Christ's sacrificial love and devotion and, *because of this*, show *respect, honour, and devotion* in the same way the church respects and loves Christ. The way in which Paul frames the perspective of wives is compelling evidence that he wishes them to think of their marital relationship as one of unity and mutual support. Rather than painting a picture of husbands as distant and authoritative, he describes them as close and intimate, the selfless nourishers of the body, *head* in the *same way that Christ is head of the Church*.

"Every time Paul talks about the husband being the head, it seems to me the point is not hierarchy but unity. The point is that the head and the body are connected to each other and dependent on each other." | [Keith Gregoire](#)

In the first century, there was no need for anyone to tell wives to obey their husbands; obedience was already an

expectation in that culture, but to take an active involvement in their mutual spiritual battle, voluntarily deploying themselves with a servant heart for the good of their husband was probably a concept which was foreign to many women. Hence Paul's specific advice and instructions for wives on *how* to contribute to the flourishing of a spirit-led marriage through *their* posture of submission.

For Husbands

What did it look like for husbands to *submit to their wives*? What was the '*how*' for them?

Paul tells them that submission from a husband *looks like love, in the same way Jesus loved the church.*

Everything that Jesus did was for the welfare of the church, his body. He washed her, made her holy and clean, exalted her to the position of unblemished glory, cared for her, and fed her. She is his very own, *bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh*. He doesn't consider her as *lesser* or *under him*, a separate identity from himself, but a *worthy equal*, actually part of his own identity.

It's so interesting that Paul presents the same situation for each spouse, but from a slightly different perspective. For wives, they were to look to Jesus' connection to the church *through the lens of sacrifice*. Husbands are to look *through the lens of Jesus' love for the church*. This is the blueprint for understanding how they are to show submission in their relationship.

Paul instructs husbands to view their wives with the same regard they view themselves. Whatever privileges, opportunities, or benefits were afforded to them were also to be afforded to their wives. Husbands contribute to the flourishing of a spirit-led marriage by loving their wives fully and completely, as if they were loving themselves.

In a fundamentally patriarchal society, with men occupying most public roles and wielding significant authority in the private sphere, women were viewed as perpetually under the guardianship of a man, be it a father, husband, or other male relative. Paul addresses this inequality through the lens of Jesus, pointing husbands to the reality that their wives were akin to their very own bodies, worthy and deserving of the same standard of love and care that a husband would show to himself.

Mutual Submission In A Collaborative Partnership

Marriage is a collaborative partnership, Paul says, and, more than that, spouses are fellow soldiers in the same battle, one in which they are engaged not with flesh-and-blood enemies, but an enemy far more devious with stakes far higher. This was *spiritual warfare*, a fight against mighty powers in this dark world and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. Paul's warfare language – *deploy yourselves in support of* (your spouse) – is exactly the right kind of language to employ for these interdependent relationships guided by the Spirit of God.

Husbands and wives are presented with the model of Jesus who, having gone into the ultimate battle and given up his life for the church, became both conquering victor over death, and saviour of the church. Both husband and wife are reminded of the key aspects involved; love, devotion, and sacrifice.

For husbands, ***biblical submission looks like love***, with all its facets of personal sacrifice and loving devotion. When a husband looks at his wife, he is to picture the church as Jesus' own body, not separate from him but part of his very identity, the woman for whom he died. He is to love his wife in acknowledgment of that love and sacrifice.

For wives, ***biblical submission looks like reverence***, with all

its facets of profound honour and loving esteem. When a wife looks at her husband, she is to picture the incredible way in which Christ saved the church, even to the laying down of his own life. She is to reverence her husband in acknowledgment of that love and sacrifice.

This mutual submission – this *looking to the other, and not just one's own interests* – is a work of the Spirit, the blueprint given by God for a flourishing and life-giving relationship between husbands and wives. Rather than being a passage instructing wives only to submit to their husbands, or emphasising men as the authoritative leader in marriage, these verses offer a compelling picture of what marriage touched by the hand of God looks like; mutually submissive, collaboratively protective, and spiritually nourishing. These relationships are outworked in the glorious resurrection light of God's new creation, brought into the life of the Spirit, and guided by the preeminent example of Christ's love and sacrifice for the church.

Ephesians 5:21-22 through 33 are inspiring and empowering verses that encourage us to look beyond ourselves and toward Jesus, modeling the kind of love and sacrifice he demonstrated in a beautiful illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.

“As the Scriptures say, “A man leaves his father and mother to get married, and he becomes like one person with his wife.” This is a great mystery, but I understand it to mean Christ and his church. So each husband should love his wife as much as he loves himself, and each wife should respect her husband.” | Ephesians 5:31-33, CEV

“If, then, there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on

one purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others. Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death – even to death on a cross.” | Philippians 2:3-8, CEV