

## Paul's Main Point in Ephesians 5:22-33

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### The Chiastic Structure of Ephesians 5:22-33

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Ephesians 5:21-33 is a passage that is often considered crucial in understanding the obligations of husbands and wives in Christian marriages. When we study and speak about this passage, phrases are usually dissected and closely examined, and certain words and phrases are highlighted, especially those that relate to the wife's obligation. However, I have rarely heard a minister speak at length about Paul's main point at the centre of this passage.

When we step back and read the whole passage in English there seems to be an overall lack of cohesion in Paul's writing. Paul seems to be alternating between different subjects. He mentions wives, then husbands, then Jesus and the church, then husbands, and then wives again. This chopping and changing makes for confusing reading for most readers who are used to English literary styles. But it would not have been confusing for people in Bible times.

Paul uses a common literary device found in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. He used a chiasm to draw people's attention to an important point. A chiasm is a way of arranging thoughts in sentences to form an X-shaped pattern.[1] The thoughts are stated sequentially in one direction until a main point or climax is reached; then the thoughts are repeated in reverse order. In a chiasm, the main point, or a highlighted idea, is often at the centre of a passage. Ephesians 5:22-33 is, in fact, beautifully structured with a vital point at the centre.

By understanding the chiastic structure of Ephesians 5:22-33, we can see that Paul makes two (or more) corresponding statements about wives, husbands, and Jesus and the church; and he repeats key thoughts such as sanctification, love, and the head-body metaphor, etc. It is important to consider each statement along with its corresponding statement to gain a fuller understanding of Paul's teaching in this passage.

Here is Ephesians 5:22-33 arranged to show the chiastic structure. I've underlined keywords that are repeated in the corresponding statement.

*A Wives, [submit yourselves] to your own husbands as to the Lord*

*B For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church*

*C He himself is the Saviour of the body.*

*D But as the church submit herself to Christ, so also the wives to their husbands in everything*

*E Husbands, love your wives just as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for her*

*F That He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word*

*X That he might present to himself the church in all her glory*

*F1 Having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she would be holy and blameless*

*E1 So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself.*

*D1 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also the church.*

*C1 Because we are members of his body.*

*B1 For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*

*BX This mystery is great, but I am speaking with reference to Christ and with reference to the church.*

*B2 Nevertheless, let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself*

*A1 And the wife is to respect her husband.*

## **Christ and the Church**

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When we recognise the structure of this passage we can more clearly see the points of Paul's message. Paul uses the example of Jesus as the "saviour of the body" with the most important point being highlighted at the centre of the chiasm. Here is where he explains *how* Christ is the saviour of the body.

First, Christ lowered himself—he came down to our level—when he became human and “gave himself up” for the church, even dying a degrading and brutal death on the cross (Eph. 5:25). But more than that, he elevates the church—lifting her closer to his level—by cleansing, sanctifying, and glorifying her (5:26-27). It's this elevation that Paul highlights, especially in verse 27a.

When we persistently interpret this passage only through the lens of traditional gender roles, this glorious message is lost or overshadowed.

... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant (or glorious) church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. Ephesians 5:25b-27

This is a message we should be highlighting more.

Paul wanted first-century husbands, who had a higher status and more honour, simply because they were male, to follow Jesus's example by lowering themselves (giving themselves up for their wives), and also by elevating their wives (loving and nurturing their wives as their own male bodies). See the E and E1 statements above in the chiasm. Paul wanted a levelling of status and honour between husband and wife. By reducing a distinction in status, a greater degree of head-body, one-flesh unity would be achieved. Unity is Paul's aim.

Note that Paul never tells husbands to give up their lives for their wives. Death and dying are not mentioned in Ephesians 5 even though we know that Jesus died for us. Some people make noble, even grandiose, statements about husbands laying down their lives for their wives, but Paul's instructions are more pragmatic. All Christian husbands can, and should, follow Paul's instructions in Ephesians 5:25ff. Very few will actually die doing so. Furthermore, *all* Christians are to follow Jesus's example and love as he did, not just husbands: "walk in love as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God" (Eph. 5:2 cf. Eph. 5:25).[2]

Note also that husbands cannot cleanse or sanctify their Christian wives. That's the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Husbands are not Jesus. More on this in footnote 3.

## Husbands and Wives

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By reading Ephesians 22-23 as chiasm we gain a better understanding of Paul's instructions and what he meant by the wife being submissive and the husband being the "head." [4]

Paul links submission with respect in the 'A' sentences (Eph 5:22, 33b). So it seems that submission and respect are somehow connected. The word for "submit" does not appear in several ancient manuscripts containing Ephesians 5:22, but it is inferred from the preceding verse where Paul calls for mutual submission among all believers, that is, among Christian brothers and sisters.[5] In fact, the entire Ephesians 5-6 "household code," including Ephesians 5:22-33, is introduced by a call to mutual submission: "Submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21).

In the 'B' statements, Paul links "the husband is the head of the wife" with a verse that goes back to Genesis 2: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Eph. 5:23, 31, cf. 33a). Many people read the word "head" and interpret it metaphorically as "leader" or "person in authority." Yet "head"

rarely had the metaphorical meaning of authority in ancient Greek. Paul's real implication of using the head-body metaphor is of unity. Paul writes about the unity between Jesus Christ and the church, and uses this example to encourage husbands to love their wives. (More about the head-body metaphor in Eph. 5:22ff here.)

In the Greco-Roman world, husbands (and parents and male and female slave owners who are addressed in Ephesians 6) had more power than wives (and children and slaves) but Paul did not want the more powerful people to exploit, abuse, or harass those with less power. (More about power in the household codes here.)

Furthermore, even though husbands had more power than their wives, Paul never uses words that mean lead, leader, or leadership in his words to husbands in Ephesians 5:25ff or elsewhere (cf. Col. 3:19). Patriarchy or male-only leadership is not being reinforced in the Ephesians 5-6 household code. There is no implication of patriarchy in the following statements to husbands, but the concepts of yielding, affinity, unity, and love:

- ~ husbands ought even to love their own wives as their own bodies ...
- ~ the two shall become one flesh ...
- ~ each individual among you [should] also love his own wife even as himself.

A husband who truly loves his wife as his own body, treats her as his equal.

## A Summary of Ephesians 5:22-33

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~ Paul tells the Ephesian wives to submit themselves to their own husbands (not to men in general) and he uses the example of the church submitting herself to Christ (Eph. 5:22-24). [6]

~ He uses the words "head" and "body" in a head-body metaphor which primarily signifies unity.[7]

~ Paul says nothing to men about leadership or authority. Rather, he uses the word "love" 6 times when addressing husbands (Eph. 5:25ff).

~ I suggest Paul wanted the husbands to lower themselves as Christ did (Eph. 5:25), but also to elevate their wives as Christ does the church in order to present the church to himself in splendour (Eph. 5:26-27).

~ The Ephesian husbands were to elevate their wives by loving them as their own (male) bodies, which in the first century had a much higher status than women's bodies (Eph. 5:28-31).

~ Paul wanted a levelling of status and a profound level of unity in marriage (Eph. 5:31-33). He did not intend to reinforce patriarchy or unilateral subordination. He prefaced the Ephesians 5-6 household code with an instruction for mutual submission (Eph. 5:21).

## Conclusion

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The unity between Jesus Christ and his church, and how Jesus achieved this by being our saviour, is a profound model for the union of marriage. As followers of Jesus, both husbands and wives should be building unity, nurture, love, and respect in their marriages.

As well as understanding Paul's practical instructions, we must not lose sight of the fact that one day Jesus is going to present to himself a sanctified, spotless, and splendid church. This is the glorious hope of every redeemed man and woman. (See 2 Cor. 4:14; Col. 1:22.) In the meantime, let our relationships show that we are people who are being sanctified and loved by our Lord.

*To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Jude 1:24-25*

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### Footnotes

[1] *Chi* (from *chiasm*) is the Greek letter that looks like an X.

[2] It seems that for many Christian men, the takeaway from Eph. 5 is that one day they have to be willing to die for their wife. Accordingly, the concept of men giving themselves up for their wives is considered valiant and heroic. But the concept of women giving themselves up for their husbands is considered a duty, just part and parcel of being submissive.

[3] The person in this video shows what happens when we miss Paul's meaning in Ephesians 5. My critique is below.

Stephen Um says it is the husband's role to sanctify his bride and make her presentable before Christ. If this is correct (and it's not) that means that unmarried women are less sanctified than married women. There is a kind of sanctification that comes from being married to a Christian, but this sanctification has nothing to do with gender (1 Cor. 7:14). The Bible teaches that Jesus is the saviour and sanctifier of men and women, and he presents the church to himself. This is the crux of Ephesians 5:22-33. But Stephen Um has misunderstood Paul's intention. Husbands cannot save or sanctify their saved wives. (More about the husband's Eph. 5 responsibilities here.)

Also, Stephen always links the word "spiritual" with the word "head," even though the term "spiritual head" is entirely absent in Ephesians 5. "Spiritual head" is an assumption he has

read into the text. And to say that “head” has the metaphorical meaning of “leader,” as it does in English, is simplistic and inaccurate.

Furthermore, the idea that the husband is the final arbiter in difficult decisions has no biblical basis whatsoever. The only biblical precedent I can find for decision-making in marriage is in 1 Corinthians 7:5 where it speaks about husbands and wives making a mutual decision. There are some other flaws in Stephen’s message, but what is worrying is that he begins by saying, “The Bible is very, very clear . . .” implying that what he is about to say is biblical and that his interpretation is the obvious and correct one. I completely disagree with his interpretation.

[4] Paul is not speaking about men and women in general but about husbands and wives.

[5] The masculine present middle-passive participle *hypotassomenoi* (of the verb *hypotassō*: “submit”) occurs in Ephesians 5:21 (in the context of mutual submission), but in a few of the most ancient Greek manuscripts, there is no participle or verb of *hypotassō* in verse 22. The continuing theme of submission is implied but not stated verse 22. Similarly, the Greek verb for “submit” occurs in verse 24a, in reference to the church submitting to Christ, but is implied in 24b, which is about wives and husbands. It is not at all unusual in ancient Greek for a verbal idea to continue on from a word in a previous verse, or previous passage, without being re-stated. (See also my article here on a similar idea.)

Here is Ephesians 5:21-22 in the SBL Greek New Testament with my literal translation:

21 ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις ἐν φόβῳ Χριστοῦ.  
Submitting to one another in reverence of Christ.

22 Αἱ γυναῖκες τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ,  
The wives to their own husbands as to the Lord,

The SBL Greek edition (based on many ancient Greek manuscripts) can be found here.

The oldest papyrus that we have of these verses is Papyrus 46 (third century), and it does not have a verb or participle of *hypotassō* in Ephesians 5:22, nor does Codex Vaticanus (fourth century). Most modern critical texts of the Greek New Testament, likewise, do not have a “submit” word in verse 22.

Note however that Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century) includes the verb *hypotassesthōsan* (a form of *hypotassō*) in Ephesians 5:22, and Codex Claromantanus (sixth century) includes the verb *hypotassesthe*. Stephanus’s 1550 text, a forerunner of the Textus Receptus also contains *hypotassesthe*. The new Tyndale House Greek New Testament includes *hypotassesthōsan*. (See here for information about textual variants in Eph. 5:22. My articles on the Greek grammar of Eph. 5:22 are here.)

[6] Looking at church history and the present day, I can't help but think that the example of submission from the church to Christ is a low bar.

[7] A head-body metaphor with the sense of unity is used elsewhere in Ephesians and in Colossians, as well as in other Greek literature (Eph. 4:15-16; Col. 1:17-18a; 2:19; 1 *Clem.* 37:5-38:1-2a; *Ign.Trall.* 11:2; Plutarch's *The Life of Pelopidas* 2.1, etc). The "head" is usually a person of higher status than the "body." Christ has a higher status than the church, and first-century men had a higher status than their wives. Paul, however, wanted husbands to relinquish the privileges that came with status. "Head" is often understood as meaning a person in authority over others. Jesus Christ certainly has authority, but there is no implicit sense of authority in the Greek word for "head" in and of itself. More on this here.

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Paul uses the word "love" 6 times when speaking to husbands in Ephesians 5. 6 times! (v. 25 X2, 28 X3, 33 X1)

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Paul uses words that mean "lead" or "leader" zero times when speaking to husbands in Ephesians 5. Zero times!

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Further Reading

I am indebted to Kristen Rosser for her three-part series where she points out that marriage is not an illustration or model of Christ and the church. More on this here and here and here.

Explore more

*Kephalē* and "Male Headship" in Paul's Letters

All my articles about *kephalē* ("head") in Paul's letters are here.

All my articles on mutual submission are here.

All my articles on Ephesians 5:22-33 are here.

Ephesians 5:22-33, in a Nutshell

The Responsibilities of Husbands in Ephesians 5

Fear or Respect in Christian Marriage (Eph. 5:33)?

The Household Codes are about Power, not Gender

A Suitable Helper in Genesis 2

Submission and Respect from Wives in 1 Peter 3:1-6

Submission and Respect from Husbands in 1 Peter 3:7-8

# SUMMARY OF EPHESIANS 5:22-33

- ~ Paul tells the Ephesian wives to submit themselves to their own husbands (not men in general) and he uses the example of the church submitting herself to Christ (Eph. 5:22-24).
- ~ He uses the words "head" and "body" in a head-body metaphor which primarily signifies unity.
- ~ Paul says nothing to men about leadership or authority. Rather, he uses the word love 6 times when addressing husbands (Eph. 5:25ff).
- ~ I suggest Paul wanted the husbands to lower themselves as Christ did (Eph. 5:25), but also to elevate their wives as Christ does the church in order to present the church to himself in splendour (Eph. 5:26-27).
- ~ The Ephesian husbands were to elevate their wives by loving them as their own (male) bodies, which in the first century had a much higher status than women's bodies (Eph. 5:28-31).
- ~ Paul wanted a levelling of status and a profound level of unity in marriage (Eph. 5:31-33). He did not intend to reinforce patriarchy or unilateral subordination. He prefaced the Ephesians 5-6 household code with an instruction for mutual submission (Eph. 5:21).

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sobre igualdade entre homens e mulheres no lar e na igreja

### 69 thoughts on “Paul’s Main Point in Ephesians 5:22-33”

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