

## The Mystery of Marriage in Ephesians 5:21–33 and Implications for African Christians

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### Abstract

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The misconception of the true meaning and nature of biblical marriage, especially in the present time in Africa, has led to a distorted image of the human person, especially women. Marriage which is supposed to be a lifelong partnership of two equals, a man and a woman, created in the image and likeness of God, is often seen in terms of a master-servant relationship. This is evident in the upsurge in domestic violence, divorces, maltreatment of women within marriage, and widows. Paul in Ephesians 5:21–33 gives true meaning and nature of marriage and defines the relationship between husband and wife. Using the historical-critical method of exegesis, this paper studies this text to draw out its meaning and apply it to the African context. The analysis demonstrates that marriage is a permanent union between a man and a woman characterized by reciprocal love and respect and likened to the love between Jesus Christ and the church. A proper exegesis and application of the biblical teachings and principles of marriage can transform the African understanding of marriage and restore the dignity of man and woman within marriage.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Husband, Wife, Christ, Church, African Culture, Love, Submission

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### Introduction

Marriage is a critical institution to human society; yet, it is an institution that has suffered a lot of abuses due to the unbiblical conception of its nature and the relationship between a husband and wife. As a result, this has led to a distorted image of the human person, especially the female folk.<sup>1</sup> It manifests in the relationship between husband and wife, how

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<sup>1</sup> For more discussion on poor perception of women within marriage and issues of gender inequality in Africa, see D.C. Arinze-Umobi, “The Hermeneutics of Equality of Spouses within Marriage: A Tall Order for African

women are treated within marriage, the husband's relatives' perception of the wife, and the kind of treatment meted on widows. Traditional and cultural understanding of marriage and women's roles in it continue to influence how African Christians understand and live out their marital lives. On account of patriarchy and male chauvinism prevalent in many African cultures, the status of women within most marriages ranges from servant/maid to property.<sup>2</sup> Such perception has given rise to inhuman treatment like beating at the slightest provocation, infidelity, rape, and divorce. In addition, the dowry paid at marriage, commonly referred to as bride price, makes some husbands perceive their wives as properties purchased at marriage. With this understanding, some married men feel they have the right to treat their wives any way they like.<sup>3</sup>

Ephesians 5:21–33 presents marriage's true meaning and nature and the appropriate relationship between husband and wife. This text, in recent times, has been a subject of intense studies ranging from family life and Christian discipleship,<sup>4</sup> the sanctity and unity of Christian marriage,<sup>5</sup> the husband as the head of the wife,<sup>6</sup> and the roles of husband and wife in the Christian marriage relationship.<sup>7</sup> It is a text often misunderstood as favouring women's subjugation, male domination, and patriarchy.<sup>8</sup> It is equally a text that has generated a lot of debate on the true meaning of some of its contents, like submission, headship, and mystery, among others. Unlike other New Testament texts that are limited to the appropriate relationship between husband and wife (Col 3:18–4:1; 1 Pet 3:1–7; 1Tim 2:8–15; Titus 2:1–10), this text goes beyond to present the nature of marriage and its comparable nature to the

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Women"; A. Casimir, M.C. Chukwulelobe and C. Ugwu, "The Church and Gender Equality in Africa," *Journal of Philosophy*, 4 (2014), 166-173. Web. Accessed: 13 Jun. 2022.

<sup>2</sup> According to S. O. Ademiluka, in Yoruba culture, a wife has to kneel down to greet her husbands and to give him food and if she fails to do that she will be considered arrogant ("For the Husband is the Head of the Wife": A Contextual Re-reading of Ephesians 5:22–33 among Nigerian Yoruba Christians, *der Skriflig* 55, 1 (2021), Web. 10 Feb. 2022).

<sup>3</sup> According to I.M.C. Obinwa, in Nigeria like in most African countries, some men see their wives as personalities paid for and so owned by them ("Marriage as Divine Institution and Vocation" *Journal of Inculturation Theology* (JIT) 15, 2 (2018), 229-242, 229. This is also the view of V. Onwukaeme who maintains that "some men in Africa treat their wives as if they were bought slaves" ("Ephesians 5:21–6:9: The Most Important New Testament Text on the Sanctity and Unity of Christian Marriage and Family" in *The Family in the Bible*, ACBAN 7, 2016, 185-197, 196. Both Iwe and Obielosi maintain that in Africa, sex inequality and subordinate place of women are strong belief among most men (N.S.S. Iwe, *Christianity, Culture and Colonialism in Africa*, Port Harcourt: Department of Religious Studies, 1985, 168; D. Obielosi, "For the Husband is the Head of the Wife," An Exegetical and Hermeneutical Application of Eph. 5:23" in *The Family in the Bible*, 153).

<sup>4</sup> J. Okechukwu, "Family Life as a Call to Christian Discipleship: A Study of Ephesians 5:21–6:4 in the Nigerian Christian Context," *The Family in the Bible*, 167-184.

<sup>5</sup> Onwukeme, "Ephesians 5:21–6:9," 185-198.

<sup>6</sup> Ademiluka, "For the Husband is the Head of the Wife."

<sup>7</sup> N. Lovše, "Roles of Husband and Wives in the Christian Marriage Relationship (Ephesian 5)," *KAIROS – Evangelical Journal of Theology*, 3.2, (2009): 113-134. Web. 13 Jun. 2022.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this, see Carrie A. Miles "Patriarchy or Gender Equality? The Letter to the Ephesians on Submission, Headship and Slavery." Web. 14 Jun 22.

relationship between Christ and the church. On this account, the Christ-Church relationship becomes a model and motivation for the husband-wife relationship. This paper, using the historical-critical method, studies the text of Ephesians 5:21–33 to draw out its teaching on the nature of marriage and the appropriate relationship between a husband and wife. Further, it examines how biblical teaching can address the wrong perception of marriage among some Africans. The study is divided into three parts: the exegesis of the text, the theological synthesis, and the Implications for Christians in the African socio-cultural context.

## 1. Exegesis of Ephesians 5:21–33

### 1.1. Literary Context of Ephesians 5:21–33

Ephesians falls under the deutero-Pauline epistles.<sup>9</sup> In the Early Church, the authorship of Ephesians was not a subject of dispute as it was generally accepted as written by Paul, the apostle.<sup>10</sup> However, in 1826 De Wette questioned this tradition.<sup>11</sup> The proponents of Pauline authorship argue that the ideas expressed in the letter are typically Pauline and that the depth and complexity of the letter are beyond what a disciple of Paul can produce. Those opposed to this position cite the undue dependence on Colossians, absence of personal greetings, and lack of personal touch in the letter, bearing in mind that Paul laboured in Ephesus for three years as.<sup>12</sup> These critics also refer to some variance in style and vocabulary, theological viewpoint, and portrayal of Paul when compared with undisputed letters of Paul.<sup>13</sup> They highlight the “kinship” between Ephesians and Colossians, where about one-third of words match.<sup>14</sup> In recent scholarship, the majority of scholars are of the view that the letter is pseudonymous. According to Brown, about 80% of the scholars believe that Paul did not write the letter.<sup>15</sup> However, it is believed that Paul is the authority behind the letter.<sup>16</sup> This work treats the epistle as Pauline because it is canonically classified as Pauline.

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<sup>9</sup> It means that it is one of the letters whose Pauline authorship is contested. For more on this see Margaret Y. MacDonald. “Ephesians.” *International Bible Commentary*, 1672; Paul J. Kobelski. “The Letter to the Ephesians” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), 883-890, 884.

<sup>10</sup> MacDonald. *Colossians and Ephesians*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> De Wette denied that Ephesian was written by Paul the Apostle on the basis its address, style and close relationship with Colossians: W.G. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, (London: SCM, 1979), 357.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this, see Kummel, *Introduction* 352-355; Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Ephesians” *International Bible Commentary*, 1671-1672.

<sup>13</sup> For detailed study on this, see Victor Paul Furnish, “Ephesians, Epistle to” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, (New York: Doubleday: 1992), 535-542, 540.

<sup>14</sup> For more on this argument, see Kummel 357-363.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 620.

<sup>16</sup> For more on this, see John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, (Bangalore: Asian Trading Cooperation, 1998), 240-241.

The letter's destination is equally contested based on the understanding that the phrase "in Ephesus" is not found in some ancient and significant manuscripts (P<sup>46</sup> Ⲡ\* B\* 6. 1739). As a result, some scholars believe it was initially an encyclical letter meant for the churches in Asia Minor and that "in Ephesus" is a later insertion.<sup>17</sup>

Ephesians may be structured as follows: 1:1–2: Salutation; 1:3–2:3 Thanksgiving; 2:1–3:21: the doctrinal section; 4:1–6:20: exhortations; 6:21–24: conclusion.<sup>18</sup> Section 5:21–33 falls within the exhortations (4:1–6:20), which can be divided into three subsections: 4:1–5:20: general exhortation bothering on unity, pastoral ministry, walking like children of light, and avoiding ways of darkness; 5:21–6:9: household codes, and 6:10–20: an invitation to put on the armor of God against spiritual attacks. The household codes are as follows: 5:21–33 dealing with the relationship between husband and wife; 6:1–4: on parents-children relationship, and 6:5–10 on a master-slave relationship.

## 1.2. Translation

21. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, (22) wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord (23) because husband is the head of his wife as Christ is also the head of the church, himself the Saviour of his body; 24. nonetheless, as the church submits to Christ, so also are the wives (to submit) to their husbands in all things. 25. Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loves the church and gives up himself for her (26) in order to sanctify her cleansing her with the washing of water with the word (27) in order that he may present the church to himself resplendent, not having spot or wrinkle or any of such, instead that she may be holy and blameless. 28. In the same way, husbands owe (it as a duty) to love their wives as their own bodies. One who loves his own wife loves himself. 29. For no one, therefore, hates his own flesh but provides and cares for it, just as Christ (provides and cares) for the Church, (30) because we are members of his body. 31. On account of this, a man will leave (behind) his father and his mother and will be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great but I say this with reference to Christ and the church. 33. Nevertheless, let each one of you love his own wife as himself and let the wife fear her husband.<sup>19</sup>

## 1.4. Analysis of Ephesians 5:21–33

Ephesians stresses the bond of unity that exists between Christ and the church. This unity is the work of God, who blessed and chose Christians in Christ, redeemed, and made them one

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<sup>17</sup> For more details on the authorship and destination of the Letter to the Ephesians, see Kummel 352-356.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, 621.

<sup>19</sup> The translation is mine and it is based on Barbara Aland and Kurt Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27<sup>th</sup> Edition, Stuttgart: Biblegesellschaft, 1993.

body with Christ. This extraordinary favor calls for a pattern of life as per the new state. After giving a general exhortation on how Ephesians as Christians should live as people redeemed and united in Christ, Paul gives instructions on how different groups that make up that community should live. This section which is part of the household code (*haustafeln*) that ends in 6:9, deals with the type of relationship expected of husbands and wives. Commentators differ on whether verse 21 should be treated as part of what preceded it or as part of what comes after it.<sup>20</sup> Thematically, it is related to what comes after it. However, since the Greek participle can, under some circumstances, function as imperative, as is the case here, it is better to see it as part of what comes after it. It, therefore, serves as a preface summarising the idea presented in this pericope. Verses 22–24 deal with how wives should relate to their husbands, while verses 25–30 deal with how husbands should relate to their wives. This instruction is supported by a scriptural quotation (v. 31). Finally, the whole relationship is described as a mystery similar to Christ and the church (v. 32), verse 33 being the summary and conclusion.

### **Reciprocal Submission of Husbands and Wives (verse 21)**

Verse 21 indicates the relationship between husband and wife and the motivating factor for such. The relationship is presented with the middle participle *hypotassomenoi* (from *hypotassō*), which functions here as imperative.<sup>21</sup> The middle of *hypotassō* is often used in exhortation to indicate the mood of behaviour expected of the people addressed. It has the sense of “to subject oneself” or “to submit” (cf. Rom. 13:1 Col 3:18; 1 Pet 3:1). It implies wilful acceptance of another’s authority or voluntarily placing oneself under another. As Miles rightly pointed out, the major impediment to understanding this verse is that this verb is often understood in a passive sense to mean “to be obedient,” “to be docile,” or “to be in need of guidance.”<sup>22</sup> This relationship of placing oneself under another person should be mutual, as indicated by the reciprocal pronoun, *allēlois* (to one another). However, scholars are divided on whether it is meant for a particular type of relationship, namely husband and wife, or all forms of relationships within the household codes, namely, husband and wife, parents and children, and master and servants. While some scholars like Miles, Keener, and Belz maintain that it is limited to husband and wife and entails mutual submission between

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<sup>20</sup> This is based on the understanding that it begins with a participle, and participles are usually dependent on the main verb. This favours the view that it should be treated as part of what preceded it.

<sup>21</sup> On the possibility of participles being used as imperative, see Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, SPIB, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963, 129; Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of the New Testament Syntax*, (Michigan: Zondervan, 2000), 283.

<sup>22</sup> Carrie Miles. “Patriarchy or Gender Equality? The Letter to the Ephesians on Submission, Headship and Slavery,” *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought*, 39, 2 (2016), 70-95, 77.

husband and wife,<sup>23</sup> others like Chapell and Bruce hold that it is meant for all Christians in different forms of relationship.<sup>24</sup> This paper is of the view that *hypotassomenoi* in verse 21 governs not only husband-wife relations but other relationships within the household codes of Ephesians 5:21–6:9. In addition, the phrases with “reverence for Christ” and “having the same master in heaven,” does not exclude mutual submission between husband and wife. It means that husbands and wives should “act in a loving, considerate, self-giving way towards one another.” This is a departure from what is seen in many African cultures, where submission to one’s spouse is the sole duty of the wife.<sup>25</sup> It shows that Paul considers husband and wife partners who enjoy equal status and dignity. The meaning of mutual submission is made more explicit in the subsequent verses. Therefore, St Paul urges husband and wife to serve each other (cf. Gal 5:13) and to allow the other to be master in their relations (cf. 1 Cor 7:4).

The primary motivation for this mutual submission is *en phobō Christou* (lit. in fear of Christ). This phrase which is only found here in the New Testament, has its basis in the Old Testament notion of fear of God/Yahweh (cf. Gen 20:11; Deut 25:18; 2 Sam 23:3; 2 Chron 26:5; Ps 55:19). The “Fear of God” is the appropriate response required of the people of Israel on account of their covenantal relationship with God. That relationship with God was characterized by reverent submission, trust, and obedience.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, fear of Christ is not merely respect but reverence for Christ that makes one do things required of the person. Being submissive to one another is one of the ways husbands and wives manifest their devotion and love of Christ.

### **Submission of Wives to their Husbands (Verses 22–24)**

The implication of “submit to one another” with reference to the wives is elaborated in verses 22–24, with verse 22 stating its nature, verse 23, the basis, and 24, the conclusion. Verse 22 consists of two parts governed by one subject and one implied verb (*hypotassō*). The first

<sup>23</sup> Miles, “Patriarchy or Gender Equality?” 77; C.S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, (Leicester: Intervarsity, 1993), 551; L.M. Belz, *The Rhetoric of Gender in the Household of God: Ephesians 5:21-33 and Its Place in Pauline Tradition*, Ph.D. Dissertation, (Loyola University, Chicago, 2013), 98.

<sup>24</sup> B. Chapell opines that the verb entails submission of one person to another with higher authority and therefore cannot entail reciprocity (Ephesians, 293). For Bruce, the submission in verse 21 is for all Christians but submission between husband and wife is not reciprocal (Bruce, 1984, 383).

<sup>25</sup> According to A. Casmir, M.C. Chukwuelobe and C. Ugwu, in African Societies, the traditional gender roles are maintained by system of patriarchy that sees men as a pre-eminent human beings and women as complement to men (The Church and Gender Equality in Africa,” Questioning Culture and Theological Paradigm of Women Oppression,” *Open Journal of Philosophy* 4 (2014), 166-173//doi. org/1.4236. Web. 13 Jun. 2022.

<sup>26</sup> G. Wanke “Phobos in Old Testament” in Gerhard Fredrick, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. IX, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM.B. Eerdmans, 1974), 197-205.

part, “wives (submit) to your husband,” draws its force (*hypotassomenoi*) from verse 21. According to Barth, the absence of a stated imperative in verse 22 indicates that the wives’ submission to their husband should be understood within the framework of mutual submission of husband and wife already stated in verse 21.<sup>27</sup> The text calls for wives’ submission to their husbands (*tois idiois andrasin*). Like in verse 21, submissiveness is not seen as servile subjugation but self-giving that befits a partner. The second part, “as to the Lord,” further explains the manner of the wife’s submission. The function of the particle *hōs* (as) is here primarily motivational. The wife’s submission to her husband is compared with her submission to Christ, but significantly, the latter becomes a model and inspiration for the former.

Apart from reverence for Christ, the text gives two reasons for this submission. First, the husband is the head (*kephalē*) of the wife. Secondly, his headship is likened to Christ’s headship of the church. However, in what sense is a husband the head of the wife? The word *kephalē* literally means head, and figuratively, that which is first, supreme or extreme, whole person, outstanding.<sup>28</sup> Its meaning in this verse is a subject of debate among scholars. For Miles, it means head as used in relation to the body;<sup>29</sup> for Lovše<sup>30</sup> and Arnold,<sup>31</sup> it is about leadership or authority, while for Lincoln, it is about the source.<sup>32</sup> Since the headship of the husband is likened to that of Christ with reference to the church, it means that its true meaning can only be ascertained in the light of the headship of Christ. Two Ephesians passages help us understand in what sense Christ is the head of the church. The first is Ephesians 5:25–27. Here Christ, as the head of the church, sacrifices himself for the church, cares for, and nourishes her. The second text is Ephesians 4:15–16, in which Christ as the head unites the body, coordinates its activity, and supports its development. The two texts show that Christ’s headship of the church is evident through care, service, and unity. Likewise, the husband’s headship does not denote superiority or an exercise of authority but leadership, service, and unity. As O’Brien noted, at the center of this submission is the notion of order and not authority.<sup>33</sup> According to Obielosi, the emphasis here is on the unity between Christ and the church.<sup>34</sup> Apart from affirming the equal status of husband and wife, the text

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<sup>27</sup> Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, 610.

<sup>28</sup> H. Schlier, “*kephalē*” TDNT III, 763–682, 673; D. Obielosi, 163.

<sup>29</sup> Miles, 83.

<sup>30</sup> Lovše, 126

<sup>31</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 381.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 369.

<sup>33</sup> O’Brien, Peter T. *The Letter to the Ephesians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans, 1999), 411. Web. 14 Jun. 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Obielosi, 164.

affirms the headship and leadership of the husband. The wife, therefore, submits to her husband through acceptance of his headship, leadership, care, and love. The submission required of the wife is total, likened to what she gives to Christ and what the church renders to her head, Jesus Christ.

Christ is not only the head of the church, but he is also her Saviour (*sōter*). Verses 25–27 clarify the sense that Christ is the Saviour of his body. What should concern us here is whether Paul intends this clause to be part of the analogy or just elucidation on the headship of Christ. In other words, does he intend that husband as head should also be Saviour of his wife? Most commentators see it as referring exclusively to Christ.<sup>35</sup> According to Barth, it is a parenthetical statement added to explain what Christ means for the church because the term “head” does not fully bring out the reality about the person of Christ with reference to the church.

### **Husband’s Love for the Wife (verses 25–30)**

The duty of the husband towards the wife is summarized by the imperative, *agapate* (love) in verse 25a and likened to Christ’s love of the church and love of one’s own body. Verses 25b–27 deal with Christ’s love of the church while 28–29b treat one’s love of oneself, with verses 29c–30 as a conclusion. The way husbands live out their submission to their wives, as earlier indicated in verse 21, is made manifest with the imperative, *agapate* from the verb, *agapaō*,<sup>36</sup> which means “to love generously and selflessly.”<sup>37</sup> In the New Testament, it is often used to indicate God’s love for humans and, by derivation, the type of love required among Christians. For Mitton, this love entails “a practical concern for the welfare of the other... a continual readiness to subordinate one’s pleasure and advantage for the benefit of the other.”<sup>38</sup> The imperative *agapate* here calls the husbands to love their wives generously and selflessly. This is made explicit by likening it to Christ’s love for the church, which is the basis and model of human love.

Verses 25b–27 present Christ’s love for the church by indicating its nature (v. 25c), its immediate purpose (v. 26), and its ultimate purpose (v. 27). This love is indicated with two verbs, *ēgapēsen* and *paredōken* (*heauton*) coordinated with the second as a further

<sup>35</sup> MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 327; Barth 616; C. Laslie Mitton, *Ephesians*, NCBC, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B Eerdmans, 1989), 200.

<sup>36</sup> Greek uses three verbs, namely *phileō*, *eraō* and *agapaō* and their derivatives to render the English word, love. Of the three, the most common and frequent is *phileō* which is used to denote love between friends, relative or love of a thing like knowledge or wisdom (*philosophia*).

<sup>37</sup> W. Gunther, H. G. Link, “*Agapaō*” Collin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol 2, (Exeter: The Pater Noster Press, 1976), 537–347, 538.

<sup>38</sup> Mitton, 201.



clarification of the first. The first shows that it is generous and selfless, while the second indicates self-sacrificial. Christ's relationship with the church is characterized by selfless and generous love manifested through his sacrificial death on the cross (*heauton paredōken*). This is equivalent to what Jesus says in John 15:13. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down his life for his friends" (NRSV). His death was not because others handed him over but because he voluntarily chose to lay down his life to manifest his love.

The immediate purpose of this sacrificial love is the sanctification of the church. The church as the body of Christ has to be like her head. The verb *hagiazō*, to sanctify, combines its triple meaning of setting apart for God, including into the inner circle of what is holy and eliminating that which is incompatible with holiness.<sup>39</sup> Christ's love for the church sets her apart, unites her with himself, and eliminates that which is incompatible with such union. The participle *katharisas* (cleansing) also means purification. Since *katharisas* is an aorist participle, scholars are divided on whether cleansing precedes sanctification or is concurrent with it. Scholars like Meyer (294), Scott (227), and versions like ASV, NAS, and RV maintain that cleansing precedes sanctification and translate it as "having cleansed," while others like Barth (629, Lincoln (375), Schnackenburg (249) as well as versions like AV, NJB, NEB, and NRS see cleansing as happening concurrently with sanctification. As some scholars noted, it is better to consider it as a participle of means, which indicates the means through which the action of the main verb (*hagiazō*) is accomplished.<sup>40</sup>

How is cleansing done? Is it by washing with water (*tō loutrō tou hudatos*), word (*en rēmati*), or both? Bible versions render it differently.<sup>41</sup> St. Augustine sees it as a reference to baptism, where washing with water provides the matter, and the word, the form. Most commentators follow this interpretation line, but few see it differently. Barth argues that it is unlikely that the phrase "by word" qualifies water or bath or both and is employed to emphasize that spoken word must be added to material element to make it a sacrament.<sup>42</sup> Though the syntax is ambiguous, it is likely that both *tō loutro tou hudatos* and "*en rēmati*" qualify *katharisas* thereby indicating the means through which the cleansing is accomplished.

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<sup>39</sup> Frederick William Danker, ed., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, BDAG, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 9-10.

<sup>40</sup> For more on this, see O'Brien, Letter to the Ephesians, 422; Lincoln, 375; R. Schnackenburg. *Ephesians: A Commentary*, (Edinburg: T&T, 1991), 249.

<sup>41</sup> For example, while New Revised Standard version (NRS) reads: "in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word," the New Living Translation (NLT) reads: "to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word."

<sup>42</sup> Barth, 624-625.

Christ purifies the church with the sacrament of baptism and the word in the form of preaching and catechesis.

The ultimate purpose of the sacrificial death of Christ is to present to himself the church as resplendent, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. Christ sanctifies and purifies the church so that he can present her to himself. Verse 27 continues along the imagery of Jewish nuptial preparation where the bride, having been prepared, is given to her husband (cf. Ezek. 16:10–14; 2 Cor. 11:2). However, the difference is that Christ is the one who both prepares and presents the bride to himself. The phrase “not having a spot or wrinkle” negatively explains what it means to be resplendent, while holy and blameless explains it positively. The sanctification eliminates from her all that makes her unworthy of her bridegroom, which in this case is sin. The word “resplendent” or “glorious” may indicate the eschatological status of the church rather than her present status.<sup>43</sup> Christ’s love for the church is selfless, sacrificial, uplifting, and perfective.

Verses 28–30 draw the implication of Christ’s love for the church and apply it as a model for the husband. The phrase *Houtos... agapan* links Christ’s love for the church with the husband’s love for his wife, with the former serving as the model for the latter, the former is a reality, and the latter an obligation. The sense of *opheilō* is not fully captured with the English word “ought” but with the verb “to owe” as debt or duty. Loving the wife after the model of Christ is the duty the husband owes the wife. Surprisingly, the verse, instead of likening such love to that between Christ and the church as in previous verses, compares it to the love of one’s body. It may appear as if it moves from the high and lofty model of Christ’s love for the church to something lower: love for oneself. However, that is not the case when one sees it as a continuation of body imagery already established.

As Nagy pointed out, Christ loved the church not only as his bride but also as his body.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the husband has to love the wife as his own body.<sup>45</sup> The sense is that the husband has to love his wife as he loves his body because his wife is his body. The opinions of scholars are divided on the meaning of “as their own bodies,” whether it means that husbands should love their wives in the same way they love their own bodies or that they

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<sup>43</sup> Barth, 628.

<sup>44</sup> L.M. Nagy, “Exegetical Paper, Ephesians 5:22-33.” Academia.edu.

<sup>45</sup> Barth argues that “the rendition ‘So the husbands ought to love their wives as [they love also] their own bodies’ is ambiguous, inaccurate, and contrary to the intent of the context.” According to him, *kai* placed before the husband in the best of the Mss; makes it clear that *houtos* at the beginning of this verse points back to the love of Christ described in verses 26–27 and not to husband’s self-love (*Ephesians*, 629).

should love their wives because their wives are their bodies.<sup>46</sup> Based on the model of the Christ-church relationship, what comes after this verse: “nobody hates his own body,” and the citation of Genesis 2:24. The point put across is that just as the church is the body of Christ, the wife is the body of the husband in the sense that both are one flesh. Therefore, he should love his wife, his body, just as Christ loves the church. This understanding is supported by the use of *sōma* and clarified by the following statement, “he who loves his wife loves his own self.” Loving one’s wife is like loving oneself because the wife is one with the husband.

Verse 29 further explains one’s natural love of one’s body. No one detests one’s body (literally, flesh) but cares for it. The transition from *sōma* to *sarks* anticipates the Scriptural quotation in verse 31 that describes the union of husband and wife as one flesh (*mia sarka*). Since it is natural for every human being to take good care of their body, a husband should love and care for his wife the same way he loves and cares for his body because his wife is one with him. This provides a balanced conclusion to the analogy of Christ’s love for the church as a model and basis of the husband’s love for the wife. The clause in verse 30, “because we are members of his body,” looks like a gloss, but it is not. Hitherto the writer has presented the church as if it is a reality independent of individual Christians, but with this, it makes it clear that Christians constitute the church. In other words, the church he talks about exists in the lives of individual Christians.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Scriptural Basis and the Great Mystery (verses 31–32)**

Verse 31 backs the explanation with a Scriptural quotation from Genesis 2:24. The text reads: “For this, a man will leave his father and his mother and be joined unto his wife and the two will become one flesh” (NRSV). The text provides an authoritative basis for the position of the author. Its purpose is to show that husband and wife are one; therefore, its most essential part is “and the two shall become one flesh.” Marriage entails a man leaving behind the blood and natural bond that tied him to his parents to become one with his wife. Since husband and wife are one body on account of their marriage, the husband’s loving his wife is actually loving himself because he is one with his wife. It also helps to explain the mysterious relationship between Christ and the church.

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<sup>46</sup> For scholars like Hoehner (763) and Nagy, what is meant is that husbands should love their wives because their wives are their bodies while for scholars like Mitton, husbands should love their wives the same way they love their bodies (204).

<sup>47</sup> Barth, 636.

Verse 32 contains a statement whose meaning is key to this paper: “This mystery is great.” Many scholars acknowledge that the meaning of this statement is not easy to determine as it raises some critical questions: what does the term “mystery” in this verse mean? To what does the statement “this mystery is great” refer? We will begin with the second; views of scholars on this can be grouped into four:

- a. That the term mystery refers to the relationship between husband and wife
- b. That it refers to the union of Christ and the church
- c. That it relates to the union of Christ and the church as a typology for Christian marriage
- d. That it refers to both the union of husband and wife and that of Christ and the church, with the latter serving as a model of the former

Scholars like Moritz maintain that the referent is the marriage relationship between husband and wife, especially in the light of Genesis 2:24, which describes it as a union that makes them one flesh.<sup>48</sup> This view fails to stress the importance of the Christ-church relationship, which is fundamental to this pericope. Some scholars maintain that the term mystery in this verse refers to the union of Christ and the church. MacDonald remarked that most scholars favour this view, including J.P. Sampley and L. Nagy.<sup>49</sup> Some argue that in Ephesians, the church as the body of Christ is a dominant theme, thus can aid in understanding the mystery. The husband-wife relationship is a central instruction to the pericope. The third position O’Brien proposes maintains that the term refers to the union of Christ and the church as a typology for Christian marriage. He concludes thus: “the mystery is not any particular marriage or marriage itself, it is the union of Christ and the church which is reflected in a truly Christian marriage” (434). This position has some merits, but some of its conclusions must be revisited.

The fourth position, which is the position of this paper, is that the statement, “this is a great mystery,” refers to both husband-wife union and Christ-church union, with the latter serving as a model for the former.<sup>50</sup> This is based on the following arguments. First, Genesis 2:24 underpins Ephesians 5:28–30 and is used as a reference to human marriage. Second, the thrust of Ephesians 5:21–33 is to explain the nature of the relationship between husband and wife to bring out its practical implications for the Christians of Ephesus. Third, throughout

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<sup>48</sup> T. Moritz. *A Profound Mystery: The Use of the Old Testament in Ephesians*. (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 117-152.

<sup>49</sup> J.P. Sampley. “*And the Two Shall Become One Flesh*”: *A Study of Traditions in Eph. 5:21–33*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University P. 1971), 186; Nagy, “Ephesians 5:22–33.”

<sup>50</sup> This is also the view of MacDonald (331) that the term mystery here encompasses both human marriage seen as a reflection of divine reality and the relationship between Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:21–33, there is a parallel between the union of husband and wife and the union between Christ and the church. Fourth, though the union of Christ and the church is the model for the union between husband and wife, the former is used to explain the latter, not vice versa.<sup>51</sup> Fifth, the statement “this mystery is great” has its first referent as Genesis 2:24, which is a core Old Testament text on human marriage, and as a second referent, the union between Christ and the church. If it had referred to the union between Christ and the church, the second statement, “but I am speaking with reference to Christ, and the church,” would have been superfluous. From all these views, it is evident that what Paul set out to explain in Ephesians 5:21–33, which is generally recognized as household code, is the relationship between husband and wife, and to do that, he employs the union between Christ and the church.

Whereas the union between Christ and the church is both the model and basis of the union between the husband and wife, the pericope focuses on the relationship between husband and wife. In verse 31, by citing Genesis 2:24, Paul shows that what exists between husband and wife is not only a relationship but a union that makes them one flesh. It is this union between husband and wife that Paul considers a mystery. He then applies it in explaining the union between Christ and the church. Its greatness lies in the fact that it explains the union between husband and wife and the union between Christ and the church. This relationship and union between husband and wife, seen in the light of the relationship and union between Christ and the church, is what St. Paul regards as the great mystery. Outside this pericope, *mystērion* occurs four times in Ephesians (1:9; 3:3–6; and 6:19), referring to the hidden plan of God that is now made known to apostles and prophets. In line with his understanding of mystery in Ephesians, the hidden truth revealed in the light of Christ is that marriage, a union between man and woman has become the means of explaining the union between Christ and the church. Based on this, Christian marriage is a sacrament because it manifests the union between Christ and the church.

### **Conclusion (verse 33)**

Verse 33 sums up the instructions on husband and wife and how they should relate to one another. The word *plēn* (in any case) has adversative force. It implies that even if the Ephesians do not understand his analogy of using the relationship between Christ and the church to explain the relationship that should exist between husband and wife, they should not miss the core of the message. That is, husbands should love their wives as themselves,

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<sup>51</sup> For more on this, see the elaborate treatment of this by Moritz 117-152.

and wives should respect (fear) their husbands. There is no doubt that the word fear is used here in the sense of respect and doing what the other person wants, as in verse 21.

## 2. The Theological Synthesis: The Mystery of Christian Marriage

Ephesians 5:21–33, as is rightly pointed out, is a fundamental New Testament text on the sanctity and unity of Christian marriage.<sup>52</sup> It ingeniously combines three things: household codes, marriage, and ecclesiology. It treats Christian marriage within the framework of household codes (*Haustafeln*), using its understanding of the church to deepen it. Household code is the main instruction on the appropriate modes of behaviour expected of the family members. Though its origin is debated, it is often traced to the work of Aristotle.<sup>53</sup> However, some scholars are more interested in the existence of some resemblance between Greco-Roman household codes and Pauline instruction, and this has made some accuse Paul of encouraging and maintaining the Greco-Roman patriarchy and subjugation of women.<sup>54</sup> As many scholars have pointed out, though there may be some points of contact in hierarchical structures, Pauline household codes, especially in Ephesians 5:21–33, are both different and revolutionary.<sup>55</sup> For Lincoln, though the roles and duties may appear similar, the understanding and applications are different.<sup>56</sup> Unlike in the Greco-Roman society, where subordinates have little or less dignity, in Ephesians, those entrusted with authority and those under them have the same dignity. In the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman codes, headship entails domination and subjugation, but in Ephesians 5:22–33, headship means loving service and submission, voluntary acceptance of the leadership of the other.<sup>57</sup>

The text presents marriage as a union of a man and woman that constitutes them into one. This understanding is partly based on the creation of humankind (Gen 2:4b-25); and partly on the union between Christ and the church. In order to explain this union, the text cites Genesis 2:24, which concludes the account of the creation of a woman in Genesis 2:18–24. According to MacDonald, the purpose of this citation is threefold: first, to explain the origin of the union of man and woman in marriage; second, to show that this union is from God; and third, to use it to shed light on the mysterious relationship between Christ and the

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<sup>52</sup> Onwukaeme, 196.

<sup>53</sup> Aristotle, *Politica* 1.1253b; O'Brien 406 cited in O'Brien, 406.

<sup>54</sup> For more on this, see Miles 79.

<sup>55</sup> Ademiluka, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Lincoln, 123-124.

<sup>57</sup> Miles, 84.

church.<sup>58</sup> This account indicates that marriage is a divine institution established for the good of the spouses. It also demonstrates that through marriage, husband and wife become one body. This union is greater and stronger than that created through the natural bond of family ties.

To elaborate on the nature of marriage, Ephesians 5:21–33 likens this marriage union to Christ and the church. Christians, through their baptism, are incorporated into Christ, and they become one with him and members of his body (Eph 5:30). Belonging to the body of Christ brings out unity among Christians. According to Lincoln, this body imagery helps believers to see themselves as “a compact whole in relation to the exalted Christ.” The Holy Spirit brings this unity (Eph 4:3) and is based on the understanding that members as one body have one God, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism and are called to one hope (Eph 4:4–6). Christians are united among themselves and in Christ, who is the head and Saviour of the body. He directs the body’s activity, caring, nourishing, and purifying it to make it resplendent and blameless. This is where the ecclesiology of Ephesians differs from that of 1 Corinthians.<sup>59</sup> The church, as the body of Christ, accepts the leadership of Christ and submits to him in all things. This union of love, characterized by sacrifice, selflessness, care, and generosity on the part of Christ, and obedience and total submission on the part of the church, sheds light on the union of man and woman in marriage.

For the Apostle Paul, marriage is not simply about union; it is equally about a relationship, which should be characterized by mutual submission. By submission, he means lovingly placing oneself under the leadership and service of the other. Unlike what is obtainable in most cultures and societies, where submission is only the wife’s duty, in this case, both husband and wife are to be submissive to one another. It shows that husband and wife have the same dignity and status in accordance with Genesis 1:27 and 2:23. This also shows that the relationship between husband and wife should not be master-servant or master-slave type but equal partners. For Nagy, the wife’s submission to her husband is an act of faith that keeps her at par with her husband since both have the same Lord.<sup>60</sup> Miles maintains that equality of all kinds (race, class, and gender) is at the heart of Christian practice but clarifies that Christian’s sense of equality differs from modern feminist understanding based on the quest for power.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 330.

<sup>59</sup> 1 Corinthians 12 identifies Christians as members of Christ’s body who are endowed with different gifts and functions but it does not identify as head of the body.

<sup>60</sup> Nagy, “Ephesians 5:22-33”.

<sup>61</sup> Miles, 90.

On the contrary, mutual submission and equal partnership between husband and wife do not deny the fact that the husband is the head of the family. However, the concept of the head in a Christian family or circle denotes service, not superiority or exercise of power and authority. The total submission of the church to Christ becomes the model for wives' submission to their husbands.

Apostle Paul places more responsibility on the husband. His duty and relationship with his wife is summed up in one word: sacrificial and selfless love. It is likened to Christ's love for the church, which draws from God's love for the people of Israel in the form of a covenant. It is love in which God remains faithful despite the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel. Christ's love for the Church brings this love to a higher level through his sacrificial death on the cross. The love expected in marriage is unconditional. It is equally the love that cares for the wife's welfare, provides for her material and spiritual needs, and helps the other grow. It hinges on the understanding that through marriage, husband and wife become one body, and the husband as the head must care for and nurture his wife as his body.

The analogy of the union and relationship between Christ and the church in application to the union of husband and wife has merits and challenges. Positively, it goes deeper in explaining the union and relationship that could have been possible with mere descriptions. However, an analogy has its limitations. The two realities compared can never be the same. Christ is God-man and perfect, while husbands are men and imperfect. They can only aspire to love like Christ. The wives, though constituent members of the church, are not exactly the church. Therefore, the union of husbands and wives with Christ and the assistance of the Holy Spirit help them live out the demands of their status as husband-wife.

Marriage is a union of a man and a woman, a shadow of the greater union between Christ and the church. It is a union that entails mutual submission and love expressed through obedience, care, and seeking the well-being of the other. It is a relationship with the church's humble submission and Christ's selfless love and uplifting care as models.

### **3. Implications for Christians in the African Socio-Cultural Context**

Christians in Africa live and practice their faith under cultural and societal influences. These influences affect their notion and understanding of biblical teaching and practice on themes like marriage. The greater part of the church in Africa has not succeeded in integrating African traditional marriage rites with Christian marriage rites. Traditional marriage and Christian marriage often exist in parallel, and since the majority are more at home with the



former, Christian marriage is often seen as an unnecessary appendage. At this point, briefly presenting the traditional African understanding of marriage is necessary.

In many African societies, marriage is considered a fundamental institution because of its connection with life and continuity of lineage. According to Mbiti, marriage is the meeting point for the three layers of human life: the dead who serve as the root on which the living stand, the living who serve as a link between the dead and the yet-to-be-born, and the not-yet-born who are like buds in the loins of the living, waiting to germinate and who makes the continuation of the lineage possible.<sup>62</sup> Similar to the African understanding of family, it comprises the nuclear family, the extended family, and the dead and the not-yet-born of the family. These three dimensions of the family are in constant relation and interaction for mutual benefit. The dead need the remembrance of the living for their growth in the afterlife, and the living need the protection and intercession of the dead. Also, the living and the dead need the not-yet-born for continuity of lineage and perpetuity of name. Thus, marriage becomes a bond or covenant between a man and a woman that binds families not by contract but by alliance.<sup>63</sup>

Marriage is not an individual affair but that of the family and, by extension, the community. On account of this, families play decisive and indispensable roles in marriage. According to Daniel Ebum Ogoma, in Yoruba culture, it is the parents that arrange the marriage of their children: “as Yourba would say: *bi omode ba lo loko, aa fun loko, bi o ba to l’ada, aa fun l’ada* (when a child is ripe for hoe, he is given a hoe and when he is ripe for cutlass, he is given a cutlass).” Arranged marriage is a common practice in many traditional African societies. Often the primary motivating factor is not romantic love but their well-being and the need of the family. Hence, marriage is seen more as a responsibility than as an expression of love. In many African societies, the primary purpose of marriage is procreation; as such, a childless marriage is considered a failure and disaster, and the man’s family will arrange for him another wife to bear him children. It is because the future and continuity of that lineage and caring for the dead members of the family depend on having children.

African rich understanding of marriage and family should be an advantage rather than a disadvantage to African Christians as it sets marriage on a firm foundation. As the families are fully involved in the marriage, they will see that it does not collapse. African emphasis on children in marriage is not totally out of place as children are God’s blessings and fruits of marriage. Its advantage is that it helps Christians to welcome children with joy, unlike in

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<sup>62</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, (London: Heinemann, 1975), 98.

<sup>63</sup> Benezet Bujo, “Vatican II and the Challenge of Marriage and Family in Africa,” 5. Web. 10 Oct. 2021.

some western countries where children are seen as a burden. However, Christians in Africa must understand that children are divine gifts and that a childless marriage is not a disaster or curse. Another area where African understanding of marriage challenges African Christians is the continuity of life after death. Most Africans desperately need children because they believe it is the only way to perpetuate their life on earth and enhance their well-being in the life after. However, what enhances one's life after death is the type of life one lives while on earth. While it is good to have people to take care of the old, one can adopt a child or seek the services of relatives. African Christian women easily accept that their husbands are the heads of their family in line with African culture,<sup>64</sup> but African Christian men find it difficult to see their wives as their co-equals. As Casmir, Chukwuelobe, and Ugwu observed, in most African societies, the traditional gender roles are commonly observed on account of a patriarchal system, placing men as pre-eminent human beings (170).

In so far as African cultural understanding of marriage has many good qualities, African Christians should allow the message of the good news to permeate such understanding and transforms those aspects that are still inconsistent with the Christian faith. Ephesians 5:21–33 agrees with some aspects of African understanding of marriage, like the headship of the husband, submission of a wife to his husband, and the husband to care for his wife. However, it corrects faulty understanding of women within marriage and places the couple's well-being as the primary purpose of marriage. The equality husband and wife enjoy comes from the fact that they are in the image and likeness of God. It does not negate the husband's role as the head of the family, with headship understood in terms of service rather than dominion. Love which is the foundation on which marriage is built can be expressed in ways like carrying out one's duties within the marriage. The wife expresses her love to her husband through submission and acceptance of his leadership, while the husband expresses his love by caring for his wife as he would care for himself. In this way, marriage, in line with African understanding, becomes responsibility with couples discharging their duties effectively within it. Children remain precious fruits of marriage and divine gifts. As a gift, it is a prerogative of God, and childless marriage remains successful. Childless couples should consider options like adoption or care for their relatives' children.

Ephesians 5:21–33, by implication, rules off divorce or even maltreatment of one's partner. Husband and wife are one body; since no one hates their own body, patience and

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<sup>64</sup> Ogoma maintains that in traditional Yoruba society, people know and accept their roles and positions without any sense of struggle or completion and women are taught before marriage that husband is the head and they are prepared to accept their position (101). For Ademiluka, the subservience of women is commonly accepted as an ideal in most parts of Nigeria (5).

forgiveness should be the response when one misbehaves. Husband and wife should help one another overcome their weaknesses as Christ helps the church grow. The text also guarantees the wife's steady place in her husband's house even at the husband's demise. Since she is one with her husband, her husband's things are equally hers, and nobody has the right to take them away from her unless she marries another man.

### **Conclusion**

Ephesians 5:21–33 treats Christian marriage from the perspective of the relationship between husband and wife and likens it to that between Christ and the church. It maintains that marriage is a union between a man and a woman, which makes them one, similar to Christ and the church. Oneness of husband and wife in marriage entails their equality in status and dignity, although they have different roles. The text uses the relationship between Christ and the church to explain how the relationship between husband and wife should be. The husband is his wife's head, but headship does not mean he should dominate and subjugate his wife. It rather entails that the husband should love and care for his wife as one cares for his body and as Christ loves and cares for his body, the church. A wife should submit to her husband, and by submission is not meant servile obedience but loving acceptance of the headship of the husband just as the church submits to Christ. Although Ephesians 5:21–33 gives a new understanding and perspective to the husband-wife relationship, a deviation from the prevailing Greco-Roman household codes. The text challenged the Greco-Roman household codes where a husband-wife relationship was characterised by domination and subjugation, with wives regarded as inferior partners in marriage. The text enjoins husband and wife to submit to one another, thereby affirming the equality of husband and wife in dignity and status without denying their different roles. Unlike the understanding among some scholars that Ephesians 5:21–33 encourages patriarchy and subjugation of women, it strongly discourages patriarchy and subjugation of women and restores their dignity in marriage. It equally corrects the wrong impression of some African Christians who see husbands as pre-eminent human beings and wives as inferior beings within marriage and who view marriage only from the prism of exercise of power and authority rather than of love and care.

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