

**Ephesians 5:21-33<sup>1</sup>**

*\*\*Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.*

*This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between the verse range listed above and the notes given below.*

**2. Application ([5:22-6:9](#))****a. Wives and husbands ([5:22-33](#))**

<sup>22</sup>For wives, this means submit to your husbands as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup>For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of his body, the church. <sup>24</sup>As the church submits to Christ, so you wives should submit to your husbands in everything.

<sup>25</sup>For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her <sup>26</sup>to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word. <sup>27</sup>He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault. <sup>28</sup>In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man who loves his wife actually shows love for himself. <sup>29</sup>No one hates his own body but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church. <sup>30</sup>And we are members of his body.

<sup>31</sup>As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." <sup>32</sup>This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one. <sup>33</sup>So again I say, each man must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

**Notes****[5:22](#)**

**submit to your husbands.**—The verb "submit" is not present in the best witnesses (□46 B Clement) but must be supplied from the previous verse.

**[5:25](#)**

**this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church.**—Jesus stated that he is the good shepherd and he will lay down his life for the sheep ([John 10:11](#), [15](#), [17](#)). Also, there is no greater love than when one lays down his life for his friends ([John 15:13](#)). Christ laid down his life of his accord and in doing that he willingly did the Father's will. So also the husband should exhibit sacrificial love.

**[5:26](#)**

**to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word.**—Lit., "in order that he might sanctify her having cleansed [her] with the washing of the water with the word."

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1. Philip W. Comfort, ed., *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary – Volume 16: Ephesians-2 Thessalonians, Philemon*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 110-119.

## [5:28](#)

**In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies.**—“In the same way” refers to Christ’s sacrificial love for the church ([5:25](#)). Likewise, husbands ought to love their wives as Christ loves the church.

## [5:30](#)

**And we are members of his body.**—In the Greek text the causal conjunction *hoti* [<sup>TG</sup><G3754>, <sup>ZG</sup>4022] (because) introduces the reason why Christ lovingly cares for the church; that is, because we are members of his body. A textual problem is posed by the additional wording found in some manuscripts, namely, “of his flesh and of his bones.” Although most of the Western and Byzantine witnesses (D F G □ it syr) add these words, it is generally accepted that they are not original but had been added by a scribe who took them from [Gen 2:23](#). NLT has omitted them, per the testimony of □46 ✕ B 048 33 1739\*.

## [5:31](#)

**As the Scriptures say.**—The Greek text has “for this reason” and then quotes [Gen 2:24](#) as follows: “A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.” Paul quotes [Gen 2:24](#) with only two minor changes from the text of the LXX: He uses different Greek words for “for this reason” and he excludes the personal pronoun “his” (LXX “a man leaves *his* father and *his* mother”).

**united into one.**—Rather than “the two are united into one,” Paul (following LXX and MT) has “the two shall be one flesh.” This refers back to [5:29](#), where Paul states that no one hates his own “flesh,” though the NLT has rendered it “body.”

## [5:32](#)

**but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.**—This is difficult to translate, and the NLT may have overstated it. The text reads, “but I speak [with reference] to Christ and the church.”

## [5:33](#)

**the wife must respect her husband.**—The word “respect” is a translation of the Greek word for “fear.” As in [5:21](#), also here, it is best understood as “reverential fear” or “reverential respect.”

## Commentary

### Overview of [5:22-6:9](#).

In the previous section, Paul indicated that those who are filled by the Spirit should be characterized by (1) communication with one another by means of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; (2) singing songs and psalms with their hearts; (3) giving thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of Christ; and (4) submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ ([5:19-21](#)). While all of these characteristics relate to a church setting, the last relates to life both inside and outside the church. Believers’ submission to one another not only serves as a final characteristic of a life filled by the Spirit but it also serves as an introduction to the next section. Since there is no conjunction introducing the new section, it is possible that it was not intended as a new section but as a continuation of the concept of wise living begun in

[5:15](#). Unfortunately, all too often the next section ([5:22-6:9](#)) is viewed as isolated from the previous context. Rather, it adds to and elaborates on what has just been stated. It is relatively easy to exhibit for a few hours in church the characteristics of one who is being filled by the Spirit. However, Paul's injunction to be filled with the Spirit extends beyond a church service to lives at home and at work, where believers will be under scrutiny 24 hours a day. The power of the Spirit is absolutely necessary to live a life pleasing to the Lord in daily life at home or at work.

As previously stated, the submission mentioned in [5:22](#) serves not only as the last resultant characteristic of a life that is being filled by the Spirit, but also as an introduction to the next section ([5:22-6:9](#)). In these next verses Paul discusses three sets of relationships: wife and husband, children and parents, and slaves and masters. In each instance the one who is to submit is discussed first—namely, the wife, the children, and the slaves. Paul then discusses the responsibility of those in position of authority, namely, the husband, the parents, and the masters.

In recent times there has been much discussion on the household codes—that is, the rules for the household as portrayed in [Ephesians 5:22-6:9](#); [Col 3:18-4:1](#); [1 Pet 2:18-3:7](#); [1 Tim 2:8-15](#); [6:1-10](#); [Titus 2:1-10](#). Some have attempted to identify the source of the New Testament household codes. However, even though the New Testament household codes may have similarities to Stoic, Jewish, Hellenistic Jewish, or Roman codes, care must be taken in the attempt to identify any one of these as *the* source. Each society had its own rules for maintaining order. Although there may be similarities to other codes, the New Testament household codes are presented as a new Christian ethic for believers to follow. They serve to instruct believers in their conduct with one another and within the secular society. Believers, as new people in Christ, have a new code of conduct that befits their new position. Its intended function is to enable believers to implement the theme of Ephesians—namely, the unity of the church. The practical outworking of this unity in the present context is for believers to live wisely by being filled by the Spirit ([5:15-21](#)), and the household code ([5:22-6:9](#)) gives details for enhancing this unity.

The first of the three pairs discussed in the household code concerns wives and husbands. This section is disproportionately large, consisting of twelve verses. The second pair, children and parents, is discussed in four verses ([6:1-4](#)), and the final pair, slaves and masters, occupies five verses ([6:5-9](#)). As mentioned above, first there are instructions to those who are to submit and then exhortations to those in the position of authority.

### **Husbands and wives ([5:22-33](#)).**

Paul discussed the responsibility of wives in [5:22-24](#), followed by the responsibility of husbands in [5:25-32](#), and finally he reviewed each partner's responsibilities ([5:33](#)). Although most commentators do not accept the verb "to submit" as a genuine reading (because it is missing from a few manuscripts, and it is easy to surmise a scribal insertion—see note on [5:22](#)), the same verb is supplied from the previous verse with an imperatival force. Whether one accepts the verb as genuine in [5:22](#) or not is dependent on the participle in [5:21](#); both are either middle or passive in form. The middle is preferable, where the subject volitionally submits as the act of a free agent, because it is in keeping with the context. There is no indication that the church's submission to Christ is forced. Also, the duty of the husband is expressed in the active imperative, whereby the subject chooses to love his wife. Finally, in the previous context ([5:18-21](#)), four out of the five participles are active, but the fifth is best assessed as middle (rather than passive) where the subject is responsible for the action. In light of this, submission here is best viewed as in the middle voice, with the wife acting freely before God.

How does this instruction correlate with [5:21](#), where Paul states that all believers are to be submissive to one another? Some suggest that [5:21](#) contains the controlling thought of mutual submission, and the rest

of the passage should be seen as mutual submission between husbands and wives rather than the submission of wives only (Wall 1988:276, 280-284; Beck 1989:61-66; Scholer 1996:43-44, 51). One needs to note, however, that [5:21](#) refers to all believers, whereas in the household code specific roles of submission and authority are addressed. There is no indication in the household codes that husbands are to submit to their wives, parents to their children, or masters to their slaves. This does not indicate an inherent contradiction between [5:21](#) and [5:22](#). Rather, as stated earlier, Paul's statement in [5:21](#) concludes the section of [5:15-21](#) regarding the characteristics of believers filled by the Spirit. The last of these is the general resultant characteristic of submission to one another—that is, within the body of believers. Proceeding to the household code, Paul addresses the wives specifically ([5:22-24](#)). This is analogous to the broad general command to walk in love ([5:2](#)), which is directed to all believers, but in the household code is addressed specifically to husbands ([5:25](#), [28](#), [33](#)). Others consider that Paul's instruction for wives to submit to their husbands was engendered by the time in which he lived, where women were considered inferior to men and thereby should be subject to their husbands (Scholer 1987:416-417). But Paul clearly states in [Galatians 3:28](#) that men and women are equal before God. Further, he taught that husbands and wives are equal concerning conjugal rights ([1 Cor 7:2-4](#)), a concept that was unheard of in that day. There is, however, a distinction between equality and lines of authority. For example, all citizens of a country are equal, but there are also many different ranks in the power structure of the country. This does not mean that those in authority are better citizens of the country than those whom they rule. There is no qualitative difference between rulers and citizens. By way of example, there is equality and yet lines of authority within the Godhead. All three persons of God are qualitatively equal ([4:4-6](#); [Matt 28:19](#); [2 Cor 13:14](#); [1 Pet 1:2](#); cf. also [John 13:16](#); [17:21](#)), but there is also the subordination of the Son to the Father ([Matt 10:40](#); [26:39](#), [42](#); [John 8:29](#), [42](#); [12:49](#)), Holy Spirit to the Father ([John 14:26](#); [15:26](#); [16:13-15](#)), and the Holy Spirit to the Son ([John 16:7](#); cf. [14:26](#); [15:26](#)). Thus, lines of authority do not imply qualitative inequity.

Next, Paul gives the motivation for wives to submit to their husband—that is, they are to submit to their husbands as they also submit to Christ. In other words, since the Lord has instructed wives to submit to their husbands, by doing so they are also submissive to the Lord. A wife's submission, then, has to do with the lines of authority. The husband's headship over his wife corresponds to Christ's headship over the church ([5:23](#)). As discussed in [1:22](#), the term "head" connotes the idea of authority over someone. Christ's headship over the church is a model for the husband's headship over the wife. This concept of the wife's submission to her husband and the husband's authority over his wife was at odds with the structure of the Roman family in Paul's day. At that time the father had absolute power over his entire family (*patria potestas*), even the power of life and death, and a married woman was still under her father's authority, and he could even initiate the divorce of his daughter (although during Roman history there were changes). Thus, Paul's injunction for the wife to submit to her husband countered the social structure of that day. The husband's replacement of the father in authority over his wife places him at the head of the new family (cf. [5:31](#) which quotes [Gen 2:24](#)).

The statement "He is the Savior of his body, the church" ([5:23](#)) is literally, "he is the savior of the body." Although most commentators think it has sole reference to Christ (Abbott 1897:166; Barth 1974:615-617; Lincoln 1990:370), the absence of "the Church" in the Greek leads some to think that Paul intended both Christ and the husband here (Robinson 1903:124, 205; Hendriksen 1967:248-249), thus making the husband the savior of his wife. However, the context suggests that the former interpretation is correct, for the husband could not be savior of the body in the same sense as Christ, who redeemed sinners from eternal doom. Nonetheless, the term "savior" could apply to the husband in a limited way as the protector of the wife (see [5:29-30](#)) in times of both physical and spiritual danger. For example, under the Mosaic law, the husband could protect his wife from carrying out a rash vow ([Num 30:6-14](#)), thus protecting her reputation. Adam failed as a husband in the area of protecting his wife—he did not protect Eve from the serpent's lie. The husband, then, does not save the wife from eternal doom, as Christ does the church, but rather he acts as her protector in a temporal sense. This concept of husband as "savior" in this sense should be viewed as application rather than interpretation.

Paul related that the church's submission to Christ serves as an illustration of the wives' submission (5:24). The words "in everything" are problematic. A similar expression is used for children's obedience to their parents (Col 3:20, NLT: "always") and slaves to their masters (Col 3:22; Titus 2:9). It is difficult to know the precise meaning of this and is best viewed in the light of other Scripture. Most likely, it denotes full submission of wives to their husbands but certainly would not suggest that a wife should submit to her husband in anything that is contrary to the commands of God, for one needs to obey God over people (Acts 5:29). In other words, the wife is not to submit to her husband in anything sinful. In light of the physical abuse so rampant in today's society, it should also be included as a sin to which a wife should not and must not submit. No Christian is to do something that is contrary to God's commands or God's will. If the husband orders his wife to steal or kill a person, for example, then she is not to submit to the husband's order. In conclusion, two observations should be made. First, there is no indication that a wife's submission is based on the degree to which her husband demonstrates his love. Second, her submission is to be of her own accord in obedience to the Lord (5:22), not by the demand of her husband.

Having discussed the responsibility of the wives to husbands (5:22-24), Paul turned to the responsibility of husbands to wives (5:25-32). Significantly, in addressing their responsibility Paul used 116 words (he uses only 10 words in Col 3:19), as compared with the 41 words used in his exhortation to wives. He again used the analogy of Christ and the church by instructing husbands to love their wives as Christ sacrificially loved the church. The amount of space given to the subject and the analogy of Christ's love signifies the unique importance of a husband's responsibility to his wife. Paul's instruction to wives in 5:22-24 states the measure of their submission, and his teaching in 5:25-32 expresses the measure of the husband's love. Properly fulfilling this responsibility will not only enrich their wives but will also bring harmony to marriages and thus to the believing community.

"For husbands this means love your wives" (5:25a). The verb "to love" (*agapaō* [<sup>TG</sup><G25>, <sup>ZG</sup>26]), a key word in this section, is used six times (5:25 [twice], 28 [three times], 33). It refers to love irrespective of merit, even to the undeserving. In other words, husbands are to love their wives unconditionally. Just as the wife's submission is not dependent on the husband's response, likewise, a husband's love is not dependent on the wife's response. Also, the present imperative reinforces the idea that the husband's love for his wife is to be an ongoing process, not governed by the vagaries of emotion but rather by an act of the will. This is not to say that love is an act of the will that is entirely devoid of any emotion, but if based entirely on emotion, the husband's love would be based only on a good response. This exhortation to husbands to love their wives is unique. It is not found in the Old Testament, rabbinic literature, or in the household codes of the Greco-Roman era. Although the patriarchal model of the home is maintained, it is amended by this revolutionary exhortation that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church.

As submission of wives to husbands is illustrated by the church's submission to Christ, likewise husbands' love toward wives is illustrated by Christ's love for the church (5:25b-27). In the present analogy between husbands and Christ, it should be noted that the emphasis is not on headship but on love—that is, not "be heads over your wives" but "love your wives." Christ's unconditional love serves as the model. Interestingly, this is the only time in the New Testament that there is specific mention of Christ's love for the church. He demonstrated this love by voluntarily offering himself as a sacrifice for our redemption. Paul points out that Christ's supreme sacrifice is the evidence of his love.

Christ's sacrificial love for the church continues to operate by his cleansing of the church (5:26). The conjunction *hina* [<sup>TG</sup><G2443>, <sup>ZG</sup>2671] (in order that) signifies that the purpose of Christ's love for the church is to make her holy—that is, sanctified. To sanctify or to make holy means to set apart or consecrate to God or to God's service. But how does God accomplish this? Verse 26 states that the church is cleansed by the washing of the water with the word. The description given here has engendered much discussion. Essentially, to sanctify or to make holy is the positive aspect of being set



apart to God, while the cleansing is the negative aspect of being purified of defilement from sin. The two aspects are two sides of the same coin. Paul continued the sanctification metaphor with the additional words in the Greek text “with the washing of water.” Some think the “water” refers to baptism (Abbott 1897:160; Lincoln 1990:375; Schnackenburg 1991:249-250), but this is reading patristic and modern liturgy into the first century. There is no indication from the context that it is speaking about a baptismal rite. The rite of baptism does not cleanse one from sin. Even the Qumran community recognized that the ritual washing did not cleanse them; only God was able to wipe out their transgression and justify them. Nor is this a reference to the baptism of the Spirit (Barth 1974:695-698; Dunn 1970:163-164) because there is nothing in the present context to suggest this. Instead, it is best to view this as a metaphorical expression of redemption using the imagery of the bridal bath practiced in the first century (O’Brien 1999:422-423; Hoehner 2002:753-754). It was a prenuptial bath taken by the bride-to-be so as to prepare herself to be ready for her husband. It was a Jewish marital custom that reflected the imagery of God’s marriage to Israel related in [Ezekiel 16](#). Ezekiel declared that at the time of Israel’s birth, it was in a pitiable condition; so when she grew up, God entered into a covenant with her and bathed her with water, anointed her with oil, and clothed her with the finest materials, making her exceedingly beautiful, fit to be queen. It is fitting, then, to view the cleansing in the present verse as analogous to this. Only this time, it involves Christ and his church instead of God and Israel.

Similarly, [1 Corinthians 6:9-11](#) speaks of the believers who were washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God. Also in [Titus 3:5](#) there is the mention of washing of regeneration, indicating that cleansing is part of salvation and is necessary to make us acceptable before a holy God. Water is used in the metaphorical expression since water is the most common element used for washing (see [Heb 10:22](#)). Further Paul states that this washing of water is in connection with the “word.” It should be noted that the term “word” (*rhēma* [<sup>TG</sup> <G4487>, <sup>ZG</sup> 4839]), referring to the “spoken word,” is never used in connection with a ritual such as baptism. It probably refers to the preached word that tells of Christ’s love for the church, which was demonstrated in his giving of himself for her ([5:25](#)) in order to sanctify her by cleansing her with the washing of water ([5:26](#)). It was a Jewish custom that at the time of betrothal the young man would present his bride-to-be with a gift and say to her, “Behold, you are consecrated unto me, you are betrothed to me; behold, you are a wife unto me” (*b. Qiddushin* 5a). With this spoken word, they would be betrothed and then married about a year later. As discussed earlier, just before the wedding the bride was bathed to symbolize her being set apart to her husband. It was the spoken word that set her apart to the husband and not the bathing itself. In the same way Christ gave himself for the church to sanctify her on the basis of the fact that he cleansed her with the washing of the water. The cleansing is a metaphor for Christ’s sacrificial death, which is proclaimed by use of the spoken word.

The initial purpose of Christ’s death is to sanctify the church with the further purpose to present to himself a glorious church ([5:27](#)). In the first century, the bride prepared herself for the bridegroom, who then presented her to his father. In the spiritual realm, Christ, the bridegroom, prepares the bride by sanctification and then presents her to himself. Since he has overseen her preparation, it is certain that her appearance will be characterized by gloriousness. This quality of gloriousness is next explained, first negatively and then positively. Negatively, the glorious church will not be tainted in any way—not a stain or wrinkle or anything else that would suggest imperfection. In a positive sense, she will be holy and blameless. The allusion to the church’s holiness and blamelessness is important not only in the immediate context but also because it serves as a climax to the argument and theology of the whole book. Paul began in [1:4](#) by stating that God chose some to be holy and blameless before him in love. This was accomplished by the Father’s selection, Christ’s redemption, and the Holy Spirit’s sealing ([1:4-14](#)). New life was given to sinners ([2:1-10](#)), who were placed into a new entity, the church ([2:11-3:13](#)). This body of believers is to live in unity ([4:1-16](#)), holiness ([4:17-32](#)), love ([5:1-6](#)), light ([5:7-14](#)), and wisdom ([5:15-6:9](#)). That which was planned in eternity past ([1:4](#)) will be accomplished when Christ presents to himself a church that is holy and without blame ([5:27](#)). Presently, Christ is sanctifying the church as the body of Christ, but in the future Christ will present the church to himself as his bride.

Christ's love, as demonstrated in the redemption, sanctification, and presentation of the church to himself, serves as an illustration of husbands' love for their wives. It is to this subject that Paul now returns.

In developing the argument in [5:28-32](#), Paul declares again that as Christ sacrificially loved his body, the church, so husbands are responsible to love their wives as their own bodies ([5:28](#)). The intent of the comparative phrase "as their own bodies" is debated. Its force may be that husbands are to love in a similar fashion—to love even as they love their own physical bodies—or it may mean that husbands are to love their wives "as being" their own bodies. It could be a combination of these ideas but with emphasis on the second, because Paul states in the latter part of [5:28](#) that the one who loves his own wife loves himself, and in [5:31](#) he quotes [Genesis 2:24](#), which states that the husband and wife are one flesh. To love another in the same way as one loves oneself does not present itself as a duty but as something that is consistent with one's nature. This concept is further illustrated by describing how everyone cares for their own bodies ([5:29a](#)). A truism of nature is that no one hates one's own body but nurtures and takes tender care of it, even with all its imperfections. By way of application, husbands should care for their wives though they may be imperfect. Once again, Christ's care for the church ([5:29b-30](#)) serves as an illustration. He loves the church because its members are "members" of his body. The Greek term *melos* [<sup>TG</sup> <[G3196](#)>, <sup>ZG</sup>3517] (members) refers to limbs of a body, whether human or animal. It is never used of a member of an organization but always of a member of an organism. This portrayal demonstrates the close-knit relationship of the members with Christ. Paul continues in [5:31](#) by quoting [Genesis 2:24](#) (also quoted in [Matt 19:5](#); [Mark 10:7-8](#); [1 Cor 6:16](#)). The Genesis passage states only that the man is to leave his parents and to be joined to his wife, but Paul expanded on this by adding that the two become one flesh. Before marriage man and woman are two independent entities; after marriage they become glued or cemented (*proskollaomai* [<sup>TG</sup> <[G4347](#)>, <sup>ZG</sup>4681]) to each other, each maintaining their distinctive features. It is not the same as an alloy, which is an admixture of metals, because in that case the distinctiveness of each person would be lost. As a result of this union, the husband should nurture and tenderly care for the wife.

The conclusion Paul presents in [5:32](#) is difficult to understand. He states that he speaks of a great mystery and follows this by stating that he speaks of Christ and the church. As mentioned in [3:3](#) the word "mystery" (*mustērion* [<sup>TG</sup> <[G3466](#)>, <sup>ZG</sup>3696]) is a secret plan hidden in God that cannot be unraveled or understood by human ingenuity or study. It is unveiled by God. In Ephesians ([3:3](#), [4](#), [9](#)) "mystery" refers to believing Jews and Gentiles who are united in one body, the church. But how is this concept of "mystery" used in this context?

Some, mainly Roman Catholics, think the mystery refers to the human marriage mentioned in [Genesis 2:24](#), and due to the Vulgate's translation of *mustērion* [<sup>TG</sup> <[G3466](#)>, <sup>ZG</sup>3696] as *sacramentum*, they interpret the institution of marriage as a sacrament of the church, which conveys grace (Gnilka 1971:288-289; Schnackenburg 1991:256). Therefore, they think the marriage of a Christian man and woman is a reenactment of the marriage of Christ and the church. Most outside the Roman Catholic Church find this unacceptable because [Genesis 2:24](#) does not suggest a "Christian" marriage as opposed to a secular marriage. Whether secular or religious, marriage is the joining of two into one flesh. Others think the mystery reflects a deeper meaning to the human marriage than in [Genesis 2:24](#)—namely, that it points typologically to the union of Christ and the church (Brown 1968:82-84; Bockmuehl 1990:204). However, this use of *mustērion* [<sup>TG</sup> <[G3466](#)>, <sup>ZG</sup>3696] is without parallel in Ephesians or anywhere in the entire New Testament. Finally, many view this mystery of "two becoming one" as a reference simply to the union of Christ and the church (Lincoln 1990:382-383; Best 1998:557; O'Brien 1999:432-435).

The third view has validity in that the only other time Paul quotes [Genesis 2:24](#) is in [1 Corinthians 6:16](#), where he declares that when a person and a prostitute are joined, they become one body. He immediately follows with the declaration that the one who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.

Likewise, here in Ephesians Paul moves from the spiritual ([5:30](#)) to the quotation from [Genesis 2:24](#), which speaks of physical union ([5:31](#)), and then shifts back to the spiritual by proclaiming that this mystery is great, referring to the spiritual union of Christ and the church ([5:32](#)). Thus, in both passages Paul uses the same pattern by going from the spiritual to the physical ([Gen 2:24](#)) and returning to the spiritual. Furthermore, the context portrays Christ as the model for the husband and the church as the model for the wife ([5:24-27](#)), and thus the union of the husband and wife into one flesh (“the two are united into one”) is a model for the union of Christ and the church ([5:31-32](#)). Hence, this mystery is not the union of believing Jews and Gentiles nor of human marriage but the union of Christ and the church (which serves as a model for human marriage). This is clarified by the following statement, “It is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.” Although [Genesis 2:24](#) refers to the union of husband and wife, Paul specifically applied it to the union of Christ and the church. And as there is the union of Christ and the church, so also there is the union of husband and wife.

Having discussed the responsibility of wives ([5:22-24](#)) and the responsibility of husbands ([5:25-32](#)), Paul concluded with a summary review of each of their responsibilities ([5:33](#)). The introductory adverb *plēn* [<sup>TG</sup><[G4133](#)>, <sup>ZG</sup>4440] marks a contrast to what has been mentioned and draws one’s attention to what is essential. It can be rendered “nevertheless,” “in any case,” “however,” “so again.” Having just stated that the mystery is the union of Christ and the church ([5:29-32](#)), Paul used this adverb to return to the main subject of his discussion: marriage. This time he mentioned husbands first, since this flows logically from the immediately preceding discussion about their responsibility toward their wives. Also, he addressed each spouse in the singular rather than the plural (not done elsewhere in the NT household codes), possibly to emphasize individual responsibility. He reiterated that the husband is to love his wife as he loves himself. It is interesting to note that while this was repeated, he did not reiterate the submissive role of the wife. Rather, he mentioned, again, her duty to fear her husband. As discussed in [5:21](#) it seems fitting to view “fear” as reverential fear or respect. In regard to the wife, this fear could be defined as reverence for her husband’s position as head of the home. Thus, as believers are to submit themselves to one another in the fear of Christ ([5:21](#)), so the wife should submit to her husband with fear ([5:33](#)).

In conclusion, the first part of the household code has been concerned with the responsibility of wives and husbands. Wives are to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ, and the husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church. Much more space is devoted to the husbands’ responsibility than to the wives’. Marriage is the union of two individuals into one flesh ([Gen 2:24](#)), which should produce a loving harmonious relationship. Believers’ marital harmony is not to be dependent on their own ingenuity but rather should be motivated by obedience to God and by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. The successful development of this relationship requires Spirit-filled partners who are truly concerned for each other and who have a real desire to see God work in their lives. The primary goal of marriage is not to please oneself but to see God’s purposes work in and through each partner individually and corporately. Noteworthy is the fact that the illustration of the union of Christ and his church is used only for husband and wife. This indicates that their relationship holds a uniqueness not shared by the relationships discussed next, which follow in [chapter 6](#).



## *The Complete Biblical Library*

### *Ephesians 5:21-33<sup>2</sup>*

**5:22.** These statements about wives and husbands were very radical in an age that definitely belonged to men. This passage of Scripture clearly establishes the fact there should be no sense of inequality among God's people.

In the ideal Christian family, the wife should voluntarily submit to the leadership role of her husband as "priest" of the family. He is responsible for the spiritual welfare of the family. He should not force his wife to submit to him, nor should she take a passive approach in submitting. A woman who voluntarily submits to the leadership of her husband will be the main recipient of benefits derived from the action.

**5:23.** This verse should be considered in light of the phrase "as unto the Lord" in [verse 22](#). God certainly does not expect a Christian wife to do unscriptural things out of obedience to her unsaved husband. The term "head" here again relates to the function of the husband as the spiritual leader of the family. In a family where the husband is not a Christian the wife may have to accept the position of spiritual leadership while she is doing what the Bible instructs her so that her husband will also become a Christian ([1 Corinthians 7:10, 11](#)).

**5:24.** Again, this submission must be voluntary or it will not work. The term "every thing" also must be considered in the light of the qualifier in [verse 22](#), "as unto the Lord." The wife has a supportive role, something like soldiers under the leadership of an officer. They need each other.

**5:25.** The rest of the chapter describes the husband's responsibility. Just as the wife's primary responsibility can be summarized in "voluntary submission," so the husband's special duty is "love" (*agapaō*). Just as the submission of the Church to Christ serves as the wife's model, the love of Christ for the Church reflects the husband's attitude toward his wife. Christ loved His church enough to die for it. If the genuine love of the husband (like that of Christ for the Church) balances the loving, voluntary submission of the wife, she will find it easy to fulfill her role. Real love will not take advantage of the partner.

If a man truly loves his wife, he will want to share with her in every possible way. The arrangement God established between a wife and a husband does not imply that he is to make all the decisions. If he truly loves her, he will share the decision-making responsibilities with her, as long as he does not abdicate his position as the spiritual leader of the family.

**5:26.** Individuals are cleansed from their sins and become members of the body of Christ as they respond to the Word (*rhēma*, [Romans 10:8](#); [1 Peter 1:25](#)). Other passages describe the process of cleansing that occurs at conversion ([John 3:5](#); [Titus 3:5](#); [Hebrews 10:22](#)). Paul is here speaking of the cleansing power of the Word of God. The Scriptures often use water in a metaphoric sense, in relation to the work of regeneration. But the Word also continues to have a cleansing ministry throughout our Christian life.

**5:27.** Not only does Christ perform the initial work of cleansing at salvation, but He continues to work in believers to remove every stain and wrinkle. "Spot" or "stain" refers to impurity, and "wrinkle" is a sign of age or decay. Therefore Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, continues to purify those who are His, thereby removing from them the stains left by their former lives.

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2. Thoralf Gilbrant, ed., *The Complete Biblical Library – Galatians-Philemon*, (Springfield, IL: World Library Press, Inc., 1995), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 157-163.

Furthermore, in a real sense, even though the body may be deteriorating, the work of Christ in the continuous sanctification process is making the soul "younger." It is difficult to know exactly why the word "wrinkle" is used in the context, but perhaps it carries the idea of reversing the inward process of deterioration that was occurring before conversion.

**5:28.** This verse describes another reason for a husband to love his wife—the fact they are one flesh. No sane person destroys his own body, so for a husband to treat his wife merely as property means he is damaging himself in the process. The apostle already had used Christ's love for the Church as the model for the husband. Just as Christ never bullies His church, so the husband should not be guilty of that error.

The mystical union between a wife and a husband is one of the most marvelous relationships known to humans. Next to the spiritual relationship a Christian has with Jesus himself, the marital bond is no doubt the strongest tie any one person could have with another person. This is one reason the act of sexual intercourse is so sacred. It is the ultimate expression of two companions showing their love to each other. It should not be cheapened! Again, of course, the matter of voluntary submission comes into focus. Christians who truly follow Paul's instructions in [verse 21](#) are people who will enjoy their marital relationship.

**5:29.** The fact that Christ "nourisheth and cherisheth" or "feeds and cares for" His church is one of the most prominent truths taught in Scripture. As its organic Head, He gives the orders in a manner that expresses true concern. He alone truly knows the needs of His people, and He operates in them through the Holy Spirit in the light of those needs. He gave the written Word of God so that Christians would have answers to the pressing problems of life. A person who consistently studies the Bible will gain an understanding of Jesus that is not possible in any other way.

**5:30.** This verse encapsulates what the Bible teaches in detail in many other places. Notice how the institution of marriage is elevated throughout this passage by comparing it to the relationship between Christ and His body, the Church. Jesus is not just a figurehead; He truly is the operating Head of His church. As the "Vine," He is the One who possesses eternal life, but He shares it with the "branches" ([John 15:5](#)). Branches do not possess life in themselves, but draw upon the life that exists in the vine. In the same way the members of a body do not give orders to the head, just as the members of Christ's church should not presume to give orders to Him.

**5:31.** The Scriptures reinforce the truth that husbands must love their wives as Christ loves the Church by referring to [Genesis 2:24](#). This probably constitutes the most profound and fundamental statement in all Scripture relative to God's plan concerning marriage. It describes beautifully the leaving, cleaving, and weaving process through which people go as they leave their childhood homes and establish homes of their own ([Mark 10:7-9](#)).

First, there must be a definite leaving behind of the childhood family. While it may work in some cases, it probably would be much better for newly wedded couples not to live with their families, nor even extremely close to them. Secondly, they need to cleave to each other in every sense of the word. This means accepting the other person completely and not trying to reform each other. Thirdly, as they allow the process to work, the two will be experientially woven into one fabric. Legally this takes place when they are united in marriage, but experientially it takes an entire lifetime.

**5:32.** Paul's reflection on [Genesis 2:24](#) probably caused the apostle to exclaim, "This is a great mystery." The fact that people could become one with Christ as members of His body was almost too much to comprehend. The same wonder applies to the wife-husband relationship. Paul's own experience illustrated this truth. All of his life until he reached approximately 30 years of age, religion had been uppermost. He was so zealous for what he thought pleased God that he persecuted the Early Church severely. Suddenly, because of the manifestation of Christ to him, all this changed, and for the first time in his life he was able to enjoy an intimate relationship with Christ.

**5:33.** The entire passage concludes by again reminding the Ephesians of the total emphasis throughout, that husbands should love their wives, and wives should respect their husbands.