Biblical Interpretation and the Epistle to the Ephesians

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Introduction

Where and how we start in our interpretation of Scripture determines where we will end up. When seeking to understand the relevance of the Bible's teaching for our lives, interpretive starting points are particularly significant. The method by which we read and derive meaning from Scripture is the fundamental determinant of the nature of the meaning we will derive.

Nevertheless, we can make several affirmations about the Bible and its meaning. First, we can affirm that Scripture holds relevance and truth for our lives and our Christian faith, because we believe that Scripture is the word of God. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God speaks through Scripture in ways that transcend our best academic and scientific analysis of the Bible. Secondly, we can affirm that we possess clear and helpful methods and resources for understanding and applying Scripture to our lives. As we gain deeper insight into the historical, literary, and social settings of the Bible, we encounter fresh and deeper understandings of its meaning for our lives.

These two affirmations—that the Bible is the word of God and that we have tools to interpret Scripture—enable us to assert that Scripture contains accessible and applicable truth.

In light of Ephesians 5:21–33 and its teachings regarding the Christian community, women, and marriage, let us examine the methods and resources for interpretation. This passage says:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. (NIV 1984)

Cultural translation

Most Christians are familiar with the task of cultural translation while interpreting Scripture. We recognize that the Bible was written in a different context than our own and seek to understand its relevance for our lives. When interpreting and appropriating the book of Ephesians, therefore, we naturally and necessarily engage in cultural translation. For example, the admonitions concerning slaves in Ephesians 6 are properly and almost universally acknowledged to be nontransferable to our present context in the Western world. We readily reject the institution of slavery as evil, and do not hesitate to avoid the direct application of the command “Slaves, obey your earthly masters.” As we do, we are interpreting the commands of Scripture in light of our present social, political, and theological contexts.

The location from which we begin our interpretation of Ephesians 6—for example, in the case of twenty-first-century North Americans living after the civil rights movement, in a democratic country and globalized world—influences how we apply this passage to our lives. Although a seemingly elementary affirmation, the previous statement holds great significance for our interpretation of Ephesians's teaching on women.

Interestingly, the modes of interpretation and cultural translation used by Christians are often inconsistent when approaching Ephesians's commands regarding slaves and women. While few Christians interpret Ephesians as a justification for slavery, many hold to a supposedly "direct" application of its commands concerning women in chapter 5. Paul's exhortation "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord" is interpreted and applied literally as supporting male dominance in the church and home. This common inconsistency between readings of Ephesians's commands regarding slaves and women indicates that many Christians possess preconceived and extraneous assumptions about the roles of women, which they bring to their interpretation of the text.

Those who hold that Ephesians 5:21–33 supports the authority of husbands over their wives start their interpretation of this passage with preconceived beliefs in gender inequality and patriarchy. When such preconceived beliefs and interpretations are brought to the passage, the cultural context of the first century is abandoned and the thrust of the message is missed. Fair interpretation necessitates that, in the same spirit by which we evaluate Ephesians's teaching regarding slaves, we acknowledge how the cultural and social norms regarding women in the first century underlie the author's instructions regarding women and marriage. Starting with a solid understanding of the social and historical context is essential to arriving at a balanced and thoughtful interpretation of the Bible.

The historical, social context of Ephesians

During the first century, when Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians, the social and cultural context was significantly different. Wives were commonly twelve to fifteen years younger and far less educated than their husbands. Furthermore, women in Greek

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culture during the first century were considered largely property of their fathers and husbands. The predominant cultural assumption regarding women at this time was patriarchy and inequality.

Gordon Fee, in his 2002 article, offers a helpful description of the Greco-Roman household of Paul’s day. According to Fee, the household was a place of production, run by a man, wherein slaves, women, and children existed in hierarchical relationships that benefitted the male-dominated household business. Marriage was not based on love, but existed for the purposes of bearing children and maintaining the household structure. Men and women were not considered equals and did not exist in loving marriage relationships as we understand them. Thus, Paul’s words to the Ephesians, especially those concerning household relationships, address a particular context and culture quite foreign to our own—so much so that great care must be taken when seeking to apply his instructions to our present circumstances.

In Ephesians 5, Paul takes the normative social structures of his day for granted. He addresses the relationship between husbands and wives in a descriptive manner that would have made sense to his original readers. Thus, Ephesians does not provide prescriptive guidelines for marriage. As Philip Payne has stated, “While Paul’s wording was framed in order to speak to people in his own social structure, one must not assume that he intended to make those social structures normative for all societies.”

The difference between the context in which the text was written and our present context necessitates that we thoughtfully and creatively reimagine how we might follow the principles and commands of this passage. Thus, the interpretive task for us as Christians in the twenty-first century is to understand and determine what Paul was telling the Christians in first-century Ephesus, why his message was significant at that time, and how we might appropriate the meaning of his commands in our own lives. We ought, as I. Howard Marshall describes, to engage in “continuing evaluation of society in light of the gospel.”

Metaphorical language in Ephesians 5:21–33

In verse 23 of Ephesians 5, Paul utilizes a metaphor and a simile when he states, “For the husband is head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.” The relationship between Christ and the church is presented as analogous to the relationship of husbands to their wives. Paul makes further use of simile when, in verse 25, he charges husbands to “love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” and in verse 28 states, “[H]usbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.” The relationship between Christ and the church and the relationship between husbands and wives are similar insofar as they relate analogically, but they are not identical.

Ephesians 5:21–33, as is common throughout Scripture and literature, utilizes the literary mechanism of analogy as a tool for conveying meaning. A simile is a figure of speech using like or as (a metaphor omits these) in which a comparison is made between two unlike things which, in fact, have something in common. The comparison relates two unfamiliar things in a manner that presents them as substitutes for one another.

There is not a one-to-one, unequivocal relationship between things joined in metaphors and similes, because such figures of speech highlight the points of connection or similarity between two unlike things. When two things are related through metaphors and similes, they necessarily possess both points of similarity and points of difference. A simile ceases to function as a simile if the two things being related are viewed either as completely identical or utterly different. This is particularly important to remember when seeking to interpret and apply scriptural similes.

In order to be understood, similes and metaphors require imagination. In fact, I offer that humans’ ability to create and understand metaphor is our highest form of cognitive capacity—an ability that sets us apart from all other species. Further confirmation of this idea is evidenced in an analogy’s ability to advance empathy, an intellectual identification with the feelings, thoughts, and actions of another. Empathy flows from an understanding of similarity and unity. When we acknowledge the full humanity of others, we participate in a comparative exercise of empathically recognizing the similarity between our lives and those of others.

I suggest, therefore, that understanding comparative figures of speech is centrally important to the Christian gospel and mission. We cannot love our neighbors unless we acknowledge our common origin as children of God. Furthermore, the message of Christ is dependent upon a plethora of analogical constructions, and the gospel can only be advanced through the utilization and comprehension of these comparisons. Examining biblical metaphors and similes and applying their significance to our own lives demands that we creatively engage with their historical and literary foundations and imagine how they might be translated into our own context.

Metaphors and similes are not timeless, but, rather, reflect the unique context of their creator. They have cultural and historical limits, and the original, authorially intended points of similarity and points of difference are frozen in a particular social and historical thought world—one that must be penetrated and understood if the full sense is to be comprehended.

At the same time, metaphors and similes are rich and living. They can, and do, take on new and additional meanings over time. As their meanings change and develop, they demand continual engagement and exploration in order to be understood. Often, over time, the meaning conveyed through a figure of speech might be more accurately expressed through a different referent. The task of Christian theology and the church is, thus, to engage the metaphors and similes of Christianity and its Scriptures in order to see new and pertinent meaning in them.

Reading Ephesians in light of the gospel

The book of Ephesians and its teaching on wives and husbands must likewise be read with attention to the gospel message and the circumstances surrounding its authorship. In “Mutual Love and Submission in Marriage,” I. Howard Marshall states, “Paul’s teaching remains authoritative for today, but is authoritative, just as he himself would insist, as an expression of the gospel.” The teachings of Jesus and the redemptive history of God’s work must serve as the lens through which we interpret Scripture, particularly those sections, like Ephesians, that address early church communities in specific contexts.

In particular, we must examine the gospel’s teachings on relationships, and study how Jesus’ ministry addressed social relationships at the time in which the New Testament was writ-
ten. The Christian faith offers us a fundamental understanding of what it means to be human—what it means to be created in the image of God and exist in relationship with God and other humans. Thus, at stake in every discussion about gender identities and roles within the church and home is theological anthropology. More than seeking to locate and name the fundamental differences between men and women, our task in interpreting Scripture should be to understand what it means to be humans, male and female, together, created in the image of God.

An accurate reading and explication of Ephesians 5:18—6:9 can occur only with attention to the entirety of Paul’s message in this letter. This section is located within a larger passage that addresses Christian relationships and living. Paul’s concern here is that followers of Christ live lives of holiness—lives characterized by righteousness and newness of life. Becoming a Christian means that one’s understanding of oneself, and, consequently, one’s actions, are changed. Christians are “to be made new” (4:23) and to “put off” (4:22) the corruption and sin of their former, unbelieving lives. Truthfulness, peace, respect, reconciliation, encouragement, compassion, love, and forgiveness are to characterize all followers of Christ, because they reflect Christ himself.

Paul’s words concerning wives and husbands in Ephesians occur within this understanding that the lives of Christians are to reflect unique moral standards characterized by holiness. Here, Paul addresses three relationships: wives and husbands, slaves and masters, and children and fathers. Gordon Fee notes that these three relationships were primary to the Greco-Roman household of the first century and that addressing these relationships would have been common practice.7

Many scholars, including Gordon Fee and I. Howard Marshall, suggest that the interpretive key to Paul’s writing on Christian holiness in these three relationships is found in the command in 5:18, to “be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Therefore, the holiness and newness of life to which Paul is calling the church can only be realized through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This passage continues by describing what Spirit-filled lives look like. The Holy Spirit’s power enables Christians to “[b]e completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (4:2), acknowledge that “[w]e are all members of one body” (4:25), “[b]e kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other” (4:32), “[l]ive a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (5:1). Finally, and most significantly for our discussion, the Holy Spirit enables Christians to “[s]ubmit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). Submission is, therefore, presented here as a characteristic of our new humanity in Christ, not merely a feminine ideal.

This passage is teaching all Christians to submit to one another in love and humility—an idea which, at that time, would have transformed the normative understanding of social relationships. The hierarchical social structures of the period in which this letter was written would have been incompatible with the social ethic Paul was presenting to the church in Ephesians. Rather than prescribing patriarchal relationships within marriage, Paul was challenging the patriarchy of his day by calling the whole church—men, women, slaves, and free—to be filled with the life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit and so to submit to one another.

Paul’s commands about marriage in this passage are given for the purpose of explaining Christians “new life in Christ.” The submission to which Paul was calling the church was a submission of equals. His use of the reciprocal pronoun allelois in Greek to form the construction “Submit to one another” in 5:21 indicates action that is free and collective. Thus, Paul’s use of this construction is incompatible with a patriarchal interpretation of his later commands concerning marriage. Read in view of this authorial intention, as well as the historical circumstances of his day, Paul’s teaching on women and marriage in Ephesians cannot be interpreted so as to justify the subordination of women.

The command for wives to submit to their husbands is directly dependent upon the command for everyone within the Christian community to submit to each other. “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands” cannot properly be interpreted and applied apart from the preceding and prerequisite command, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

The “head” metaphor in Ephesians 5:21–33

Ephesians 5:21–33 offers, by way of analogy and metaphor, examples of how the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, through the salvation of Jesus Christ, might transform relationships within the Christian community. One of the most well-known and misunderstood metaphors (followed by a simile) for marriage in the New Testament is found in this passage when Paul says, “For the husband is head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.” This metaphor invites readers to imagine and interpret the relationship between head and body in order to understand more fully how new life in the Holy Spirit transforms marriage. Like all metaphors, head, as Paul uses it, is rich and living. Its proper interpretation demands care and understanding.

Paul’s assertion that husbands are the heads of their wives is commonly interpreted by some Christians in a hierarchical manner, meaning ruler or authority. The original Greek text of Ephesians, however, does not allow for such an ordered interpretation. In this passage, the limits of the English language blur important distinctions among several meanings of the term translated head in English. Rather than indicating hierarchy and therefore wives’ submission to their husbands, the Greek word kephalē in this context is properly understood to convey the ideas of dependence and unity and can be translated source.8 It was commonly used in Paul’s day as a military term to describe one who went into battle before the rest of the troops.9 Thus, it indicated chronology rather than leadership or position of authority. Kephalē indicates those who willingly sacrifice and lay down their lives. Such understanding is consistent with Paul’s metaphorical assertion that Christ is the kephalē of the church.

Another Greek word, archē, was used in Paul’s time to convey the hierarchical ideas of leader or ruler, as well as point of origin and beginning.10 Had Paul used this word, Ephesians’ teaching on marriage would be more justifiably hierarchical. However, as constructed, the metaphor of head does not indicate subordination. It is significant that Paul chose the word kephalē to describe the relationship between husband and wife in the Christian community because the wider Greek culture of Paul’s time would have expected the use of the word archē in a description of the marriage relationship.
In saying that the husband is the head or kep̱halē of the wife, Paul is speaking to the chronology of creation history and his own historical situation rather than hierarchy within the marriage relationship. The instruction for husbands to be the head of their wives is an application of Genesis 2:24, which says that husband and wife are to form one flesh. Man and woman were created for a unified life with each other. Therefore, Paul’s metaphor in Ephesians implies mutual dependence rather than hierarchy in marriage. In this metaphor, the head and the body, which make up the one flesh of marriage, cannot survive apart from or over and against one another. In keeping with the thematic thrust of this passage, Paul states that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, husbands are to be the head of their wives by existing as one part of a unified and mutually dependent flesh.

**Christ as the head of the church**

In order to understand more fully Paul’s head metaphor in Ephesians, we must examine the relationship of Christ and the church to which the marriage relationship is likened. As already noted, analogical language, by its nature, highlights the similarity between two unlike things. Christ and the church are categorically different than man and woman. As the church’s foundation and Savior, Jesus in his relationship to the church can never be identically mirrored in the marriage relationship. The simile of the relationships of Christ and the church and husbands and wives would cease to be analogous if there were not significant differences between them.

However, in the church today, the distinction and differences between the Christ/church, husband/wife simile are often lost or denied. When this occurs, the idea of mutuality within marriage is lost, and husbands are often made out to be the ”saviors” or ”spiritual leaders” of their wives. Such an understanding denies women a fully free relationship with God.

That being noted, the points of similarity between these two relationships will be our focus. The point of commonality is found in the Greek word kep̱halē and its meaning of ”source.” Paul is saying that, just as Christ is the source of the church, so too the husband became the source of his wife’s existence when God used Adam’s rib to create Eve in Genesis.

With this simile, Paul was also seeking to highlight the unity and mutuality with which husbands and wives are to live. Christ and the church exist in a reciprocal and unified relationship. The church is dependent upon Christ for its wellbeing and life, and the church does Christ’s work on earth. Likewise, husbands and wives are to be united and reciprocally loving toward one another. Therefore, the analogy between the relationships of Christ and the church and husbands and wives is found in the idea of source and unity, rather than the commonly interpreted idea of hierarchy.

**Love your wife as Christ loved the church**

Paul’s admonition for wives to submit to their husbands is paralleled in this passage in another analogical construction when Paul says in 5:25, ”Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” This command further expounds Paul’s understanding of Christian marriage and two lives filled with the Holy Spirit’s power. The injunctions in this passage that ”husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies,” and ”each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself,” powerfully emphasize the love and service husbands are to extend in relationship with their wives.

For Paul, the ”headship” husbands are to have over their wives is exercised by loving their wives (5:25, 28, 33), cleansing them through the word (5:26–27), nourishing them (5:25, 28, 33), and cherishing them (5:29). I. Howard Marshall notes, ”Not only is this instruction to husbands to love their wives unusual and unconventional in the world of the New Testament, but the sheer intensity of the love demanded is extraordinary.” This idea of ”headship” would have been strange in the Greco–Roman household, but is consistent with Paul’s teaching on new life through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This interpretation of Ephesians is also congruent with Jesus’ life and teaching. The gospel offers a transformative ethic of authority, power, and relationships: ”Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43–44). Likewise, the Beatitudes of Matthew 5 present meekness, mercy, and peacemaking as values of the kingdom of God.

In Ephesians, Paul takes up and illuminates via metaphor and simile how these teachings of Christ are exemplified within marriage. Far from condoning hierarchy within marriage, he calls Christians to a new level of mutuality, love, and service in all of their relationships and, particularly, in their marriage relationships. His teaching is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ and reflects a new understanding of the Spirit’s transformative and powerful presence in the lives of Christians.

**Notes**

8. Fee, ”Male and Female in the New Creation,” 175; Marshall, ”Mutual Love,” 196.
9. See, for example, Catherine Clark Kroeger, ”Toward an Understanding of Ancient Conceptions of ‘Head,’” Priscilla Papers 20, no. 3 (Summer 2006), 4–8.