

PAUL'S ADVICE TO WIVES AND HUSBANDS (EPHESIANS 5:21-33)
AND THE TRAUMA OF SLAVERY

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Oregon Conference of Seventh-day Adventists
Adventist Society for Religious Studies Annual Meeting, November 2025

Introduction

A mainstream, academic view of the household codes of the New Testament in general¹ and that in Eph 5:21-6:9 in particular has held that the function of the codes is a culture-affirming one, functioning to buttress patriarchal authority in Christian congregations in line with patterns in the wider culture. Regarding the counsel to Christian wives and husbands in Eph 5:21-33, this approach has assumed that women, under the sway of Paul's inclusive and egalitarian teaching, have expressed themselves in ways that could be (mis-)understood by non-believers as undermining the social order. The counsel functions to correct this situation, with the hope of restoring Christian faith to respectability.² The

¹ While Eph 5:21-6:9 and Col 3:18-4:1 follow the classical order of Aristotle (*Politics* 1.2.1-2, 1253b 1-14; 1.5.3-4, 1259b 18-33; 3.4.4-5, 1278b 31-40) most closely, 1 Pet 2:13-3:7 is most similar to the codes in Ephesians and Colossians, while other passages treat various family and congregational relationships in a somewhat similar way: 1 Tim 2:1-3:13; 5:1-6:2, 17-19; Titus 2:1-10; 1 Pet 5:1-5. While the motivation to win the goodwill of wider society is mentioned elsewhere (e.g. 1 Pet 2:15, "For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish"; Titus 2:10, which concludes counsel to slave with the motivational statement, "...so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior"), that impetus leaves little mark on the code in Ephesians.

² Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's views have been influential: *In Memory of Her: A Feminist and Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: Crossroad, 1995). See esp. "Ephesians and the Household Code," pp. 266-69. Minna Shkul's monograph represents a thorough reflection on and extension of this mainstream view: *Reading Ephesians: Exploring Social Entrepreneurship in the Text*, Library of New Testament Studies, 408 (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2009). See esp. 204-11. My simple taxonomy of two views is enriched by Margaret Y. MacDonald's essay on history of scholarship. She concludes that the codes are "ideologically complex (neither purely culturally compliant, nor purely culturally resistant) expressions of the challenge of being the *ekklesia* in the Roman imperial world." "Beyond Identification of the Topos of Household Management: Reading the Household Codes in Light of Recent Methodologies and Theoretical Perspectives in the Study of the New Testament," *New Testament Studies* 57 (2010): 65-90. doi:10.1017/S0028688510000251. The citation is from p. 90.

code is reacting to external pressures and concerns for the respectability of the Christian faith.

A growing, minority opinion holds that the household code in Ephesians represents countercultural communication. It bounds, limits, and radically reshapes patriarchal authority as it functions within the house churches in Ephesus by applying the values of the gospel to the flawed social structures of the time.³ The Code does not so much align with cultural expectations as push back against them.

With regard to Paul's counsel to husband and wives in Eph 5:21-33, this essay builds on this minority perspective, arguing that hermeneutical and exegetical insights combine to affirm that the following viewpoint concerning the function of the passage deserves consideration: Paul writes, not to reinforce patriarchal authority, but to offer Gospel-linked strategies for ameliorating trauma for believers, especially for those who are both enslaved and partners in informal marriages. Paul's counsel is decidedly countercultural.

I. A Hermeneutical Frame for a Countercultural and Slavery-Conscious Reading of Ephesians 5:21-33

This novel thesis rests on several hermeneutical moves, the first of which is to align with the countercultural approach to the passage summarized above. A second is to argue that Eph 5:21-33 is best considered in the context of the household code as a whole, especially in acknowledging the significant presence of the enslaved, enslavers, and slavery among the house churches it addresses.⁴

³ A good place to begin exploring this view is Timothy Gombis, "A Radically New Humanity: The Function of the *Haustafel* in Ephesians," *JETS* 48.2 (2005): 317-30. Other proponents include Lynn H. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020) and "Loving and Submitting to One Another in Marriage: Ephesians 5:21-33 and Colossians 3:18-19" in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, eds. Ronald W. Pierce, and Cynthia Long Westfall (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity, 2021), 160-76; Mark J. Keown, "Paul's Vision of a New Masculinity (Eph 5:21-6:9)," *Colloquium* 48.1 (2016): 47-60; Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 133-224, 258-79; Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007); N. T. Wright, *The Vision of Ephesians: The Task of the Church and the Glory of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2025). Focused contributions include: Cynthia Long Westfall, "This Is a Great Metaphor!: Reciprocity in the Ephesians Household Code" in *Christian Origins and Greco-Roman Culture: Social and Literary Contexts for the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2013), 561-98 and Michelle Lee-Barnewall, "Turning *Kephālē* on Its Head: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Ephesians 5:21-33," 599-614 in the same volume.

⁴ See Chance Bonar and Christy Cobb, "The Rhetoric and Ethic of Translating and Representing Enslaved Persons in New Testament and Early Christian Studies," *JSNT OnlineFirst* [48.1] (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X251326121>. Bonar and Cobb "argue for agency centered translations for each of these words [*doulos/doulē, pais, paidiskē, and kurios*] such as enslaved worker, enslaved person,

Bible scholars of all stripes have tended to hermetically seal Eph 6:5-9, Paul's counsel to slaves and slave holders, assuming the passage to be the one place in the letter where Paul addresses the topic of slavery. An analogy would be the way a "children's story" in worship services is often treated as the one segment of the service directed to children. Children are not intended to listen to or participate in the rest of the service. Paul, though, does not just address the topic of slavery. He addresses enslaved persons and enslavers as members of the body of Christ. Therefore, we may assume that enslaved persons and slavery are very much a part of the house churches in Ephesus and that Paul has them in view throughout his letter, which is destined to be read in those gatherings. If this is true, we are invited to read Paul's counsel to wives and husbands (5:21-33) in the context of his counsel to slaves and slave masters (6:5-9) and the traumatic presence of slavery and its dynamics within early Christian congregations.

A related hermeneutical move is to read Paul's counsel to wives and husbands (5:21-33) in the context of the full letter in another way: The passage should be considered in conjunction with the considerable and sometimes blunt teaching offered in the letter concerning Christian sexual ethics (2:1-10; 4:17-32; 5:1-20). It should be assumed that this teaching applies to both enslaved persons and enslavers and is offered in view of, rather than in isolation from, the dynamics of slavery. It is assumed that Paul's counsel to wives and husbands (5:21-33) functions in close relationship to his earlier counsel concerning Christian sexual ethics. This hermeneutical approach is detailed exegetically in the next section.

A final hermeneutical assumption is to acknowledge the value of drawing on scholarship of Greco-Roman slavery to inform our understandings, especially in identifying well-documented dynamics of the slavery of the time. For our purposes, two such features of first century slavery are of special importance: (1) Marriage between male and female enslaved persons was common but informal and occurred under the complete control of the enslaver.⁵ From the standpoint of Greco-Roman law, the only legal and valid marriage in

enslaved man/woman, and enslaver" (p. 5). In this paper I have largely adopted the suggestions of Bonar and Cobb except when quoting Bible passages, for which I have followed the NRSVue. With regard to understanding the scope of the enslaved among early Christian house churches, Mary E. Sommer holds that the "enslaved population" in "the territories that made up the empire" ranged "from 10 to 30 percent of the overall inhabitants." "The New Testament and Slavery" in *The Slaves of the Churches: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 12-37. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190073268.003.0002>. Lynn H. Cohick suggests an estimate in line with this for the house church in Colossae, "Male and female slaves made up perhaps 20 percent of the church." "Loving and Submitting to One Another in Marriage," 164.

⁵ "It was in slaveholders' financial interests that their slaves, considered a form of property, be as liquid and disposable as possible. A male and female slaves could only contract *contubernium* ("cohabitation"), informal marriage, and never an official marriage.... Since the familial ties of slaves had no legal and little

a well-to-do Greco-Roman household was likely that between the enslaver and his wife⁶; (2) In the wider society of the time, the enslaver had ready access to sexual favors from the enslaved, irrespective of the enslaved person's (informal) marital status, and could expand this access to others.⁷ These are not minor or disputed features of first century slavery. They are widely attested and appear to be ubiquitous elements of the institution.

Lynn Cohick writes starkly of this second dark feature as it impacted early Christian congregations, implying the inescapable trauma it introduced:

The sexual use of slave children effected the church, inasmuch as sexually used children attended, and likely the adult slave members had been used for sexual pleasure by their owners.⁸

II. Episodes in a Countercultural and Slavery-Conscious Reading of Ephesians 5:21-33

Give that hermeneutical frame, what are we to make of Paul's counsel to husbands and wives (5:21-33)? Specifically, what is the function of the passage? What does Paul hope to accomplish by composing it?

customary force, they could be severed at the discretion of a master." Peter Hunt, "Sex and Family Life," chapter 7 in *Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery* (John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 112.

⁶ However, other marriages with legal standing may have been represented among the wide circle that likely constituted early house churches, especially marriages among the freeborn or among freedmen and freedwomen who were part of the clients and customers of the household and perhaps marriages of other householders and their wives who affiliated with a given house church.

⁷ "References to sex between masters and slaves, often coerced, are frequent and do not give the impression that this was anything exceptional.... A master's legal rights over his slaves included the right to have sex with them, just as it included the right to force them to work as prostitutes." Hunt, "Sex and Family Life," 106, 108. "Male and female slaves were always employable for sexual purposes. Attractive girls and young women were at the mercy of their male masters." James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 224. Even if an enslaved woman was manumitted, "the previous owner would not be charged with committing adultery with his former slave, now a freedwoman." Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 398.

⁸ *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 380. Cohick continues, "Paul's insistence throughout Ephesians that believers have put on Christ, are 'in Christ,' and are accepted as members in God's household must have sounded almost too good to be true to those who suffered sexual violation. And believers who owned slaves now were challenged to view their slaves as in Christ; to violate a believing slave was to violate Christ."

Ephesians and Trauma: Ephesians Chapter 2 in Context

Since the household code is the last segment of the letter prior to the ringing, battle-themed conclusion (6:10-20), it would be expected that the Code would refract what has gone before. How might earlier sections of the letter prepare for Paul's counsel to wives and husbands in Eph 5:21-33?

Ephesians chapters 1-3 may be understood as a collection of conversion stories.⁹ Among these, Eph 2:1-10 portrays the pre-conversion existence of the believers in Ephesus as one marked by the practice of “trespasses and sins” (v. 1), “the passions of our flesh,” and the “desires of the body and the mind” (v. 3).¹⁰ The trauma induced in their lives as a result of this all-consuming lifestyle was so destructive that it killed them: “You were dead” (v. 1), spiritually deceased. Paul traces this sad state of affairs to their domination by two powers: (1) “the course of this world” (κατὰ τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου), that is “the customs and behavior in the wider society of Ephesus that misshaped human life into rebellion against God”;¹¹ (2) “the prince of the power of the air” who inspires “disobedience” (v. 2).

Pre-conversion believers experienced such trauma that it required the exaltation of Jesus over the demonic powers dominating their lives (cf. 1:20-23). The only remedy was their participation in the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus (vv. 5- 6), which opens to them a whole new, countercultural pattern of existence in which they become God's own handiwork, “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (v. 10).

While Eph 2:1-10 deals with their traumatic pre-history as hamartiology, Eph 2:11-22 reviews it from a relational perspective. In their pre-Christian past, they experienced the compounded trauma of verbal abuse (v. 11), an extreme state of separation and alienation (v. 12a), and the status of being strangers and aliens (vv. 12b, 19). Having portrayed their

⁹ Eph 1:3-14: The conversion/election of all believers; 1:15-23: Praying for recent converts; 2:1-10: Dead in trespasses to resurrected, ascended, and exalted with Jesus; 2:11-22: The conversion of Gentiles; Eph 3:1-13: Paul's role in the conversion of Gentiles.

¹⁰ In this segment on Eph 2:1-10, all Bible quotations are drawn from the ESV. In the rest of the paper, translations are drawn from the NRSVue unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ John K. McVay, *Ephesians*, Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide 513, July-Sept 2023 (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2023), 31. “The first external force that once dominated the lives of the addressees is identified as **the course of this world**, though the Greek word translated as **the course**, *aiōn*, can describe a supernatural being or power, an Aeon. While this meaning seems possible in some passages (here as well as 3:9 and Col 1:26), it is best to translate it in line with its use elsewhere in Ephesians (1:21; 2:7) to mean “a segment of time” or “an age.” Paul uses the phrase **the course of this world** to describe how the customs and behavior that hold sway in **this world** misshape human life into rebellion against God.” John K. McVay, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, Seventh-day Adventist International Bible Commentary (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, Forthcoming). Bolded phrases indicate the wording of both the NJKV and ESV.

pre-Christian existence as relationally traumatic, Paul paints a dramatic change. Belief in Christ brings peace (or the cessation of hostility, vv. 14b-16), unity, and reconciliation (vv. 13, 14a, 16-18). An equally dramatic change in status ensues as they now become “fellow citizens” and “members of the household of God” (v. 19).

While Eph 2:1-10 and 2:11-22 might imply to the reader that converts to Christ have exchanged a trauma-ridden existence for a trauma-free one, the wider context of the letter will assert that believers have actually exchanged the deep trauma of a life in rebellion against God for the very different but equally real trauma of living against the grain of social structures (4:1-6:9) and experiencing conflict with “the powers” (6:10-20).

Paul’s Prior Treatments of Sexual Ethics (Eph 4:17-32, 5:1-20) as Preparation for Ephesians 5:21-33

In Eph 2:1-10, 4:17-32, and 5:1-20, Paul is decidedly countercultural, arguing in the latter two segments that sexual immorality should be banned from Christian community. The tart way that he addresses the issue and its connection to gathered worship (5:18-20) suggest that he is alive to considerable trauma introduced into the house churches in Ephesus as a result of immoral, sexual behavior.

In Eph 4:17-32, he warns believers away from a gentile-like “licentiousness,” which is “greedy” (ἐν πλεονεξίᾳ, “in covetousness” or “greediness”) to practice every kind of impurity” (v. 19). He exhorts believers to “put away your former way of life,” marked by the exercise of “deceitful” or “covetous desires” (κατὰ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας τῆς ἀπάτης, v. 22, my translation, cf. 2:3; cf. Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21 LXX, which use the cognate verb, ἐπιθυμῶ, “covet”). Instead, Paul instructs believers to “clothe yourselves with the new self” (v. 24), exhibiting that they have “learned Christ” (v. 20). His counsel merges into a new but related theme, abandoning falsehood and speech of ill-will (vv. 25-27, 29a, 30-31) in favor of truth and Christ-shaped speech that builds up the other (vv. 29b, 31-32).

Ephesians 5:1-20 parallels the earlier section, with a more detailed and focused ban on sexual immorality among Christians: “But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness (πλεονεξία) must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints” (v. 3, ESV). Paul again merges his concerns about sexual immorality with the theme of Christian speech, now with a narrower focus on sexually explicit speech: “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking (εὐτραπελία), which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” (v. 4, ESV).

Paul provides eschatological motivation to support his ban: “Be sure of this, that no sexually immoral or impure person or one who is greedy [πλεονέκτης] (that is, an idolater)

has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (v. 5). The three nouns Paul uses for the perpetrators of sin in verse 5 are the cognates for the three vices he has named in verse 3. In both verses, it is best to understand that the three terms refer to sexual sin.¹² The summary term “idolater” likely also refers to sexual sin, mirroring the frequent Old Testament equation between idolatry and sexual sin.¹³

He then restates the eschatological implications of the issue: “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient” (v. 6). In the context, these deceptive and empty words would be salacious ones, perhaps advocating that immorality may be practiced by Christians.¹⁴

The detailed ban on immorality and lascivious speech returns in vv. 11-12: “It is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly.” Paul’s substitute for immorality and sexually-laden speech is shared, Christian worship, which features music (“psalms and hymns and spiritual songs ... singing and making melody,” v. 19), thanksgiving to God (v. 20), and mutual submission (v. 21).¹⁵

Of particular interest is Paul’s repeated use of “covetousness” (πλεονεξία, 4:19; 5:3; cf. πλεονέκτης, 5:5; ἐπιθυμία, 2:3), which can be understood in the context of the Ten Commandments, to which Paul has frequent recourse in Ephesians.¹⁶ As alluded to above,

¹² See Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), 322; Margaret Y. McDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, SP 17 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000), 311; William J. Larkin, *Ephesians: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, BHGNT (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 108, 110.

¹³ In all the most notable OT passages accusing Israel and Judah of spiritual adultery in turning away from Yahweh to serve other gods (e.g. Lev 18, 20; Num 25; Jer 2:20-25; Hosea 1-3; Ezek 6, 16, 23), false worship that involves sexual immorality is discussed or implied. This is so much the case that the use of the term “idolater” as a synonym for a practitioner of sexual sin should not surprise.

¹⁴ This suggestion rests on the repeated link between false teaching and advocacy of immorality as normative, Christian behavior that is exhibited in the NT, e.g. 2 Pet 2; Jude 4-8; Rev 2:12-29.

¹⁵ Paul’s discussion suggests that his strong comments on sexual immorality may be offered in view of the evening banquets (*symposia*) that featured prominently in Greco-Roman society. These banquets for the elite regularly exhibited sexually arousing musical performances (by the “flute players”) and created an environment in which slaves were expected to feed, groom, and provide sexual favors to the participants. If such evening banquets are in view, Paul’s substitute (cf. v. 4) is a dramatic one, with the debauched and immoral replaced by the sacred: Sexually explicit speech, (“crude joking,” v. 4) is replaced by “thanksgiving” offered as worship to God (vv. 5, 20), sexually explicit concerts are replaced by “making melody to the Lord” (v. 19), and the degradation of slaves replaced by the mutual submission-in-worship of the members of the diverse Christian house churches to one another “out of reverence for Christ” (v. 21). For a helpful survey of ancient banquet practices, see Dennis E. Smith, “Meals and Morality in Paul and His World,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1982 Seminar Papers*, ed. Kent Harold Richards, SBLSPS 40 (Chico, CA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1982), 319-25.

¹⁶ While at least one author argues for the presence of all ten commandments in the letter (Scott Moonen, “Ephesians and the Ten Commandments,” I gotta have my orange juice [blog], October 21, 2013, <https://scottmoonen.com/2013/10/21/ephesians-and-the-ten-commandments/>), a more circumspect list

Paul is likely reflecting the Tenth Commandment: “Neither shall you covet (ἐπιθυμῶ) your neighbor's wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male slave, or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Deut 5:21; cf. Exod 20:17).¹⁷

If in Eph 5:21-33 Paul is addressing the abuse of enslaved women by Christian enslavers, he has prepared well for that discussion in his earlier segments on Christian sexual ethics (4:17-32; 5:1-20). His strong rhetoric banning sexual immorality and sexual “covetousness” together with the repeated eschatological curse upon practitioners would be reactivated for the hearers. Behavior that is culturally affirmed, such as the sexual access of enslavers to enslaved women who are the common law wives of other men, may nonetheless stand outside of God's will for Christian believers.

Paul's Intensive Language about the Relationships of Husbands & Wives

Attentiveness to one's own spouse is an obvious and dominant thought in the Greek text of Eph 5:21-33, one applied to both wives (v. 22, and arguably underlined afresh by the language of v. 23) and husbands (repetitively in vv. 25-33, with the thought presaged by the use of reflexive and third-person pronouns to describe Christ's attentiveness to his ecclesial bride in vv. 25-27).

Paul uses an intensive, cross-referential, and interlocking array of definite articles, a wide variety of pronouns (reciprocal, personal, possessive, reflexive, distributive) and other elements to clarify that his topic has to do with the relationship of a wife with her own and specific husband and the relationship of a husband to his own and specific wife.¹⁸ This language is so pervasive and repetitive that it is difficult to do justice to its intensity and produce a smooth, literate translation. This interlocking array stands out in comparison to the simpler, succinct language of Col. 3:18-19: Αἱ γυναῖκες, ὑποτάσσεσθε τοῖς ἀνδράσιν,... οἱ

would offer that, in addition to the citation of the fifth commandment (6:1-3), the letter draws on the ninth commandment concerning bearing false witness (4:25-32, esp. 4:25); the eighth commandment banning stealing (4:28); the seventh commandment countering adultery (5:3-14, 21-33); and the tenth commandment, which addresses coveting (as discussed here).

¹⁷ For the idea that Paul is drawing on the Tenth Commandment, see Michael Allen, *Ephesians*, BTCB (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2020), 188-121; Stephen E. Fowl, *Ephesians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 165; Hoehner, Harold W. *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 653; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 322. In the LXX, the Tenth Commandment begins, “You shall not covet your neighbor's wife,” in both Deut 5:21 and Exod 20:17. In the MT, Exod 20:17 begins, “You shall not covet your neighbor's house.”

¹⁸ See the Appendix for an initial attempt at displaying this array graphically.

ἄνδρες, ἀγαπᾶτε τὰς γυναῖκας ... (literally, “The wives, submit to the husbands ... The husbands, love the wives ...”).

Intensive language of reciprocity and monogamy returns in an especially concentrated way in Paul’s final instruction to Christian husbands (v. 33a). The language here includes the intensive use of the first person plural personal pronoun ὑμεῖς (“you [pl.] yourselves”), the distributive use of the preposition κατὰ, the adjective/numeral εἷς (“one”), and more.

Nearly every word contributes to the idea of the singularity of the relationship:

πλὴν καὶ ὑμεῖς οἱ καθ’ ἓνα, ἕκαστος τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα οὕτως ἀγαπάτω ὡς ἑαυτόν

However, as for you yourselves, let each one [of you husbands] love your own wife in the same way as [you love] yourself.¹⁹

Since Paul addresses wives and husbands in the plural, rather than focusing on the legal marriage between the enslaver/householder and his wife, he seems to understand marriage in an inclusive way, likely assuming or asserting the validity of otherwise informal and unacknowledged marriages among the enslaved. If so, Paul’s perspectives would have resonated with enslaved believers among the audiences of Ephesians. More than 200,000 epitaphs from the graves of slaves or ex-slaves from around the Roman Empire offer some access to the perspectives of slaves themselves, especially their insistence on “the validity of their familial ties, despite their legal non-existence.” In their epitaphs, “slaves ... ignored the legal distinction between official and unofficial marriages: they used the official terms for husband and wife for their slave spouses.”²⁰

The advocacy for spouse-specific attentiveness to one’s marriage partner is so dominant a feature in Paul’s counsel to wives and husbands that it deserves careful attention in pondering the function of the passage.

The Enslaved Husband as “Savior” of His Enslaved Wife

Paul introduces the analogy between Christ as husband/bridegroom of the church and the Christian husband’s relationship to his wife in support of his implied command to wives to “submit” themselves to their husbands: “For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church” (v. 22). In doing so, Paul identifies both an analogy (there are ways in which the relationship between a Christian wife and husband is “like” that between the church and Christ) and the two very different registers in which the two sides

¹⁹ My literal rendering of the passage.

²⁰ Hunt, *Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery*, 113-15.

of the analogy operate (the limited and earthbound marital frame and the cosmic, salvific, and ecclesial one, cf. 3:10).

Paul's full statement of support is this: "For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior" (v. 23). The phrase ὡς καὶ ("even as") seems most naturally to govern the rest of the statement: The husband's role as "head" in relationship to his wife parallels in some way Christ's role as head and Savior of the ecclesial "body" (σῶμα), suggesting that the husband may in some sense be both "head" and "savior" of his wife. To read the passage in this way is to assume that Christ's unique role as Savior is no more threatened by the husband as savior than his unique role as "head" is diminished by the husband's role as "head" in a much lower register.²¹

In vv. 25-27, Paul builds on his analogy by setting forth Christ's salvific love for the church as the model for the Christian husband's marital love of his wife. Christ's salvific love of his ecclesial bride, the fact that he "gave himself up for her" (v. 25), is the example for husbands who are called to "nourish and cherish" their wives "in the same way" as Christ does in washing and adorning the church in view of the eschatological wedding to come (vv. 25-28). Note carefully that while the register is very different (marital vs. salvific love and actions), the analogy holds.

To return to v. 23, why should the same not be true of Christ as deliverer or rescuer? He is "Savior" on a cosmic, ecclesial, and salvific plane. Might not the Christian husband be "savior" of his wife in the very different context of their marital relationship, stepping into his freshly validated role as husband and rescuing her from any trauma that threatens? The term σωτήρ (savior) is used "rarely" in the NT and its use emphasizes "redemption and deliverance,"²² suggesting that Paul's employment of the term in v. 23 is intentional and that

²¹ Commentators have been reticent to apply the term "savior" (v. 23) to Christian husbands, either by failing to entertain the possibility or by dismissing it as theologically inappropriate. For the former, see Cohick, *Ephesians*, 353-58 and A. B. Luter Jr., "Savior" in *DPL*, 867-69. For an example of the latter, see Darrell L. Bock, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019), 175. Bock writes, "The idea that the husband is the saviour of his wife is not in the passage. Only Christ is savior." However, in his next sentence, he approaches the view argued here: "Yet this one savior, Jesus, provides the example for the husband's role as head by the way Jesus cares for the church and honours her as his bride." The usual exegetical arguments barring the view that the husband is in some way to mimic Christ's role as "Savior" are weaker than they at first appear. The identity of Christ as savior is emphatic (αὐτὸς σωτήρ τοῦ σώματος) but the idea that this means that "only Christ is the savior" and the observation that the wife is not associated with the term σῶμα seem odd in the context of vv. 25, 28 (For these arguments, see Benjamin L. Merkle, *Ephesians*, EGGNT [Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016], 182-83 and Larkin, *Ephesians*, 131-32). If Paul intends to disassociate the husband from an identity as a "savior" of the wife's "body," he has done a rather poor job of it.

²² Cohick, *Ephesians*, 354-55.

he does so to accent the role of deliverance or rescue. Would the husband's identity as "savior" detract from Christ's unique status as "Savior" (v. 23) any more than the Christian husband "giving himself up for his wife" (v. 25) threatens Christ's unique role as our crucified Redeemer?

I offer these exegetical observations to affirm that it is at least arguable and at best probable that Paul intends for us to see the Christian husband, in some albeit limited sense, as the "savior" of his wife. Taking a further step, I would suggest a possible setting for Paul's invitation to Christian husbands to be "saviors" of their wives. Might Paul be recruiting obliquely the "common-law," enslaved husband to guard the safety of his enslaved wife from the trauma of being sexually available to the enslaver and his designees, αὐτὸς σωτὴρ τοῦ σώματος (he himself [being] savior of [her] body)? If in his clear language about wives being "submissive" only to their husbands Paul is validating slave marriages and thus the standing and authority of slave husbands, would it not be appropriate for him to activate that fresh understanding by inviting those husbands to model their behavior on that of Christ by courageously rescuing their wives?

Conclusion

Guided by our hermeneutical frame, our "episodes" in reading Eph 5:21-33 have highlighted Paul's awareness of the trauma associated with sexual immorality and have exposed us to his detailed, forthright opposition to such behavior (2:1-10; 4:17-32; 5:1-20), which alludes to the Tenth Commandment and its prohibition of "coveting" the wife of another. We also highlighted Paul's intensive array of language in Eph 5:21-33 that accents the relationship of a believing wife with her own husband and believing husband's relationship with his own wife and raised the possibility that Paul may be indirectly calling the enslaved, believing husband to play the role of "savior" or rescuer of his wife, ensuring that the enslaver and others do not sexually abuse her.

These features of Ephesians suggest that Paul means Eph 5:21-33 to function counterculturally to address infidelity and adulterous behavior among the house churches. Given the significant presence of slavery, enslavers, and the enslaved among these congregations, Paul's call to marital commitment is likely issued to affirm the informal marriages of the enslaved and to enforce a ban on the enslavers' use of the enslaved.

If this reading of Eph 5:21-33 deserves consideration, Paul may well be less concerned about male egos and authority than we have thought and more concerned about the safety and security of female members of Christian congregations than we have imagined. Far from being the lack of social mores shoring up the rights and privileges of enslavers, Paul

would be offering a strong, countercultural critique based on his convictions about the egalitarian nature of Christian community, a Christian ethic founded on the Torah, and patterns of behavior he sees exemplified by Christ. Paul's most culture-rattling argument in Ephesians may be to acknowledge the trauma caused by following usual practices associated with slavery and to recognize the common law marriages of enslaved persons as true and valid ones, albeit constrained within in the context of Christian faith and community.

Whatever one makes of the novel thesis of this essay, the exercise may bear positive fruit in querying how we will understand Eph 5:22. Will we emphasize the idea of the wife submitting to the husband (an idea which Paul introduces in a most subtle way by embedding the verb in the context of joint submission of believers to each other, v. 21, borrowing the verbal idea from that context without restating it)? Or will we perceive Paul's emphasis as placed elsewhere, on the identity of the one to whom the wife is to relate (in exclusion to all others)?

Appendix

Ephesians 5:21-33 from Michael W. Holmes, *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition* (Lexham; Society of Biblical Literature, 2011–2013).

21 ὑποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις ἐν φόβῳ
Χριστοῦ 22 Αἱ γυναῖκες τοῖς ἰδίοις ἡ ἀνδράσιν
ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ, 23 ὅτι ἀνὴρ ἐστὶν κεφαλὴ τῆς
ἐκκλησίας, ὡς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς κεφαλὴ τῆς
ἐκκλησίας, ὃς αὐτὸς σωτὴρ τοῦ σώματος. 24
ἀλλὰ ὡς ἡ ἐκκλησία ὑποτάσσεται τῷ
Χριστῷ, οὕτως καὶ αἱ γυναῖκες ὡς
ἀνδράσιν ἐν παντί. 25 Οἱ ἄνδρες, ἀγαπᾶτε
τὰς γυναῖκας, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς
ἡγάπησεν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ ἑαυτὸν
παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς, 26 ἵνα αὐτὴν ἁγιάσῃ
καθαρίσας τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος ἐν ῥήματι,
27 ἵνα παραστήσῃ ὡς αὐτὸς ἑαυτῷ ἑνδοξον τὴν
ἐκκλησίαν, μὴ ἔχουσαν στίλβον ἢ ῥυτίδα ἢ τι
τῶν τοιούτων, ἀλλ' ἵνα ᾦ ἁγία καὶ ἄμωμος.
28 οὕτως ὀφείλουσιν καὶ οἱ ἄνδρες ἀγαπᾶν
τὰς ἑαυτῶν γυναῖκας ὡς τὰ ἑαυτῶν σώματα·
ὁ ἀγαπῶν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα ἑαυτὸν ἀγαπᾷ,
29 οὐδεὶς γάρ ποτε τὴν ἑαυτοῦ σάρκα
ἐμίσησεν, ἀλλὰ ἐκτρέφει καὶ θάλπει αὐτήν,
καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν, 30 ὅτι
μέλη ἐσμὲν τοῦ σώματος ὡς αὐτοῦ. 31 ἀντὶ
τούτου καταλείπει ἄνθρωπος ὡς τὸν πατέρα
καὶ τὴν μητέρα καὶ προσκολληθήσεται τῇ
γυναικὶ ὡς αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἔσονται οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα
μίαν. 32 τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο μέγα ἐστίν, ἐγὼ
δὲ λέγω εἰς Χριστὸν καὶ εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν. 33
πλήν καὶ ὑμεῖς οἱ καθ' ἓνα ἕκαστος τὴν ἑαυτοῦ
γυναῖκα οὕτως ἀγαπάτω ὡς ἑαυτόν, ἡ δὲ
γυνὴ ἵνα φοβῇται τὸν ἄνδρα.

Key

Definite Articles = red

Pronouns

- Reciprocal = light pink
- Personal
 - 2nd per. pl., intensive use = bright blue
 - 3rd person sing., intensive use = bright green
 - 3rd per. sing., fem. acc. or gen. = orange
 - 3rd per. sing., masc., gen (possession) = avocado green
- Reflexive = bright pink
- Distributive = gray

Adjectives

- ἰδίοις – pl. of ἴδιος (“one’s own”) = bright yellow
- εἷς – adjective/cardinal number, “one” (in fem. & neut. forms) = light blue

Preposition

- κατὰ -- distributive use = purple

Notes:

- I have included terms modifying Christ or the church that participate in the analogy with husbands/wives
- I have not included nouns