Bible Study on Ephesians 5:21-33

First, someone should please volunteer to act as a **time-keeper** (who reminds you that it is time to move to the next stage). Also, someone should act as a **scribe** who takes notes so that the group can report at the end – though it does not have to be the same person for the whole Bible Study.

There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers as such: the point of this Bible Study is to allow people to speak as freely and honestly as possible. It is unlikely that we will be able to explore all aspects of this text – but we can make a good start.

Be prepared for different views in your group. If groups are large, bear in mind that everyone should be able to speak, if they wish to – therefore, please keep your own contributions reasonably short and to the point, and listen carefully to others.

Finally, please don't forget that the text comes from a letter with a complex argument: be prepared to read carefully. Do not be afraid to ask searching questions of the text.

**Stage 1**  
(15 minutes)

Having heard read Eph 5:21-33 being read aloud, please consider this question:

• What is this text all about?

This is an open question: feel free to bring up anything that comes to mind when you read this text.

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Bible Study on Ephesians 5:21-33 (in the context of 5:15-33)

**Stage 2**  
(20 minutes)

A. Take a look at the structure of the text of Eph 5:15-33 in the handout. The structured text handout is designed to show how vv. 21-33 fit into the context of the argument in 5:15-33, and also how the argument of the whole text flows.

• What can we learn from vv. 15-20 about vv. 21-33?
• What can we learn from the structure in the handout? Is it useful? Are there other ways of structuring the text which would perhaps better represent what it has to say?

B. The theme of Ephesians could be called “overcoming enmity” (division based on hate), first between Jew and Gentile, but then also beyond that: perhaps one person could read aloud 2:11-22, especially vv.14-16. The letter writer later relates his very own purpose of existence to that theme (3:1-13, especially v. 6). As a result, the encouragement to live well and just (Eph 4-6) is also based on that theme (read 4:1-3).

• How does our text (5:15-33) relate to the letter's overall theme of 'overcoming enmity'?
Bible Study on Ephesians 5:21-33 (in the context of 5:15-33)
Stage 3  (45 minutes)

A. Focus on 'the husband'.

- The longest part of the text is addressed to husbands (vv. 25-32). What are husbands meant to do, and why?
- The fundamental analogy that supports the argument in this whole text is this: the husband-wife relationship is like the Christ-church relationship. But what is actually said about Christ-church relationship?
  - How does Christ love / relate to the church, according to this text? (Also see: Eph 5:2)
  - Beyond this text, what does Christ do for the church / people? Think of the gospels, for example: do any texts come to mind that are similar to Eph 5:2 and our text?
  - Summarise what we can learn from all this.

B. Focus on 'the wife'.

- What are wives meant to do, and why? Consider, for example:
  - What does it mean that the wife is 'to subject' herself (vv. 22-24) in the context of this text? What reasons are given?
  - “… just as Christ is the head of the church”: how is Christ the head of the church? How does the analogy to the wife-husband relationship actually function?

C. The whole section of vv. 22-33 may be considered as an extension of the end of v. 21: “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ”.

- What can we learn from the relationship between v. 21 and vv. 22-33?

Related to this:

- Does the wife's subjecttion to the husband mean that she does not love her husband? Why / why not?
- Conversely, does the husband's love of his wife mean that he is not subject to her? Why / why not?

Stage 4  (30 minutes)

A. Bearing in mind everything we have discussed so far, please consider this questions:

- Is violence towards the marital partner (or anyone else) justified in Eph 5:15-33? Why / why not?

B. What are you going to do about what you have learned?
Think about this both personally / individually, and collectively. Please do not concentrate exclusively on what others (for example, “the leaders”) should do, but also on what you can do.
Ephesians 5:15-33

Translation: NRSV (paragraph structure adapted to show the sense units and their relationships to each other). I have made a couple of changes to the NRSV wording (changes in *italics*) in order to reflect the Greek text better, with the replaced NRSV text in brackets.

Feel free at any point to compare individual text sections with the Bible translations you brought with you.

15 Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, 16 making the most of the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore (*so*) do not be without understanding (*foolish*), but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit:

19 as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts,
20 giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
21 being (be) subject to one another out of reverence for Christ:

22 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as you are to the Lord.
23 For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior.† 24 Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

25 Husbands, love your wives,

just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

26 in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word,
27 so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

28 In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.
29 For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it:

just as Christ does for the church, 30 because we are members of his body.

31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." § 32 This is a great mystery,* and I am applying‡ it to Christ and the church.

33 Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

Notes

† “the body of which he is the Saviour” = (Christ is) the Saviour of the body (that is, the church)”
* “mystery”: the English word is misleading in the sense that the Greek mysterion refers to an aspect of true reality which can only be understood through divine revelation.
‡ “I am applying it to” = more literally, this translates as “I say (this) with regard to”

Holger Szesnat, 4 December 2014
The following short notes were written to follow on structured group work on Eph 5:15-32 in the context of gender-based violence. My comments are not meant to be 'the final word' on anything. Perhaps one could think of it as giving me the opportunity to say something, too, now that everyone else has had their say. Of course, that is not the whole story: after all, I have probably influenced you in some way already, simply by structuring the group work, offering questions and focus areas. Nevertheless, a few thoughts on the topic – but only as much as I can fit on two pages.

1. I begin by picking up an area I put last in the Bible Study: does this text justify violence? If we read the text carefully, I have no doubt that the answer has to be 'no'. Eph 5 does not in any way justify violence; indeed, what it encourages or expects is the very opposite of violence. If we look at the whole of Ephesians, that becomes even clearer: the letter states that enmity among humankind has been overcome by or through Christ. Violence has absolutely no place among Christians. Nevertheless, I have heard arguments among Christians (both men and women) along the following lines: Eph 5 establishes some kind of fixed divine order that establishes a hierarchy between men and women (and specifically: husbands and wives). Based on that supposedly fixed status hierarchy, it is then claimed that a woman who does not do what her husband tells her to do deserves to be beaten. But whatever we make of the issue of status (more about that later), the claim that 'disobedience', or whatever we may call it, somehow calls for violence has no basis in this text. In fact, there is nothing in the Scriptures I can think of that justifies husbands to beat their wives. In the sense that the Scriptures use the terms, neither 'love' nor 'respect' can in any way include violence between men and women, let alone husbands and wives.

Nevertheless, Eph 5 as well as a number of other texts is often used to justify the foundations of that chain of argument, namely that there is a hierarchy between men and women, or more specifically, husbands and wives. This is a complex question, and the Bible Study I invited you to work through was largely designed to explore this. There are indeed a range of opinions on this matter among Christians. (a) Some people argue that texts like Eph 5 establish some kind of fixed divine order that establishes a hierarchy between men and women (and specifically: husbands and wives): let's call this the 'fixed gender hierarchy' approach. (b) Others suggest that the scriptural texts we are reading were written in a cultural context which already assumed that women were inferior to men: therefore, it is said, the writers of the Scriptures addressed something that may have been appropriate within that context, but this is not a fixed, eternal matter. If society changes (and not all change is negative), such texts become irrelevant. One could call this the 'cultural context approach'.

3. I am not inclined to follow either argument. Let me start with that 'cultural context approach'. While it may be attractive at first, it also bears its own dangers. For example: if we follow the cultural argument, we would also have to follow this line of thinking for any other matters in the Scriptures which happen to be in line with the culture from which it comes. Logically, this would mean we could only take things in the Scriptures as 'relevant' that contradict the cultural environment. I am not convinced that this is a useful approach.

On the other hand, I am not convinced by the 'fixed gender hierarchy' approach either. This is because the study of the Scriptures does not, in the end, convince me that gender hierarchies are ultimately fixed – nor, indeed, any human hierarchies, or any status-based thinking. Obviously, this is a big claim which I cannot fully support in a short paper like this: one would need to write several books to do so properly. Still, I base my claim on a careful reading of the Scriptures, and I would like to offer a few notes on Eph 5 in this respect. It is worth noting here that the letters of the New Testament are essentially propositional: that is, they are largely arguments meant to persuade their readers. At first sight, Eph 5 seems to state clearly how husbands and wives are supposed to relate: wives, respect your husbands; and husbands, love your wives (Eph 5:22-33). But once we start to look more closely, I suggest, we will find that this is less clear than what a first reading seems to find:

4. The structure of the argument clearly suggests that vv. 22-33 depend on v. 21 ("being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ"), which is itself the last of a series of examples of what it means "to be filled by the Spirit" (v. 18): it is this imperative 'to be filled with the Spirit' that is the main point on which everything else hangs. The writer clearly thinks that mutual subjection of people is called for in a spirit-filled life. That is an idea we can find in many parts of the Scriptures, such as in the gospels (e.g., Mt 20:25-26), and Christ himself is, as in our text in Eph 5, shown to be a role model worth imitating (e.g., Phil 2:5-11).

5. When we turn to what is being said to wives (Eph 5:22-24) and husbands (5:25-32), it would appear that suddenly only wives are supposed to be subject (to their husbands), whereas husbands are meant to love their wives. This is puzzling: what
happened to mutual subjection (v. 21)? For both wives and husbands, the reasons given for their relationship rest on the same fundamental analogy: that of the Christ – Church relationship. That however, raises the question of just how Christ and the church are related.

5a. It is useful here to start with the husbands, in part because much more is said about them than about wives. The key, it seems to me, lies in the very first point: “love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (5:25), which repeats a point that was made in Eph 5:2. Christ's love for the church (and as other texts indicate, the whole of creation) is characterised by what one could call his self-sacrifice. To illustrate that point, the writer first uses an image that we already see in the prophets (e.g., Ez 16): the people of God are like a bride to God in the sense that God is so in love with his people that God wants them to be radiant in splendour: that is, they radiate holiness. The second argument (separate, but linked) is based on what we might call a 'common sense' approach (5:28-29): we look after our own bodies; we 'tend and care for them'. This point is appropriate because the church is the body of Christ. The logic of the final point (vv. 31-32), which recalls Gen 2:24, is more difficult to understand, though it seems to me that it is designed to explain why Christ (or indeed God) loves people, and why the people of God are the body of Christ. – The outcome of all this is that the way a husband ought to relate to his wife is based on a self-sacrificing love which treats 'the other half' as carefully and lovingly as oneself. This whole line of reasoning in Eph 5:25-32 is in keeping, I would argue, with the notion of mutual subjection: I subject myself to the other by loving the other.¹

5b. Wives are encouraged to subject themselves to their husbands as the church subjects itself to Christ. This does not make the husband Christ-like (the husband is not the Saviour of the wife; Christ is the Saviour of both!). Rather, the point of the analogy lies in the relationship aspect: the key point is “just as Christ is the head of the church” (5:23). But just how is Christ the head of the church? It is dangerous to jump to our own ideas here as to what this 'headship' is. I propose that it is more appropriate to look at how the text itself characterises how Christ is 'the head': the Scriptures frequently use concepts that seem familiar to us, but then firmly twist their meaning to subvert our assumptions.² It seems to me that the very thing that is said about Christ in respect of his love of the people (Eph 5:2 and 5:25) is crucial here: I subject myself to Christ precisely because of Christ's love.

6. In the end, mutual subjection is a logical impossibility: taken literally, it would create an eternal loop along the lines of “no, you first”, – “but no, you first”, and so on, for eternity. That hardly seems to be the point. Rather, mutual subjection has the effect of undermining the very basis of status-based thinking and action. Our text does not openly attack hierarchical structures in the way that, say, Gal 3:28 does: it is more subtle than that, but just as subversive of our human tendency to think in status terms.

Some literature

Good books are hard to get hold of in Fiji, but some have access to the internet (though much relevant material on the internet is dubious). I did not aim to be representative of all views; nor do I necessarily agree with the arguments offered.


¹ It may be useful here to think of what is said in 1 Cor 7:4 about the sexual aspect of the relationship between husbands and wives: “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.” Clearly, the notion of mutual subjection is taken very seriously here.

² The very term 'Saviour' is part of that: the Roman emperor claimed to be the saviour of the world. By calling Jesus 'Saviour', the New Testament not only calls the emperor a liar, but also subverts the violent nature of the emperor's understanding of what a saviour is; Jesus' self-sacrifice is the supreme act of salvation; it is the 'slain lamb' (see Rev) that is victorious.