

Marriage and Christ

Ephesians 5:21 ... submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.
²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.
²³ 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.
²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.
²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,
²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,
²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.
²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.
²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church,
³⁰ because we are members of his body.
³¹ "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."
³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.
³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

(Eph 5:21-33)

Love and Divorce

Genesis 2:24 is well-known. It states, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” The NT directly quotes this verse in **four places**, one of which is the same story repeated, and one of which is found in Eph 5 (**Matt 19:5** and **Mark 10:7-8; 1Co 6:16; Eph 5:31**).

The one repeated twice is found in a story of **the Pharisees** coming to test Jesus. They ask him, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” (**Matt 19:3**). More literally it says, “Is it lawful for *a man* to divorce his wife for any cause?” I’ve recently modified my understanding of what is being asked him. Along with most commentators, I assumed the Pharisees were asking if *anyone* could divorce *their spouse* for any reason. Men, women, it doesn’t matter. But then I understood that the Pharisees were particularly asking only about a man divorcing his wife.¹

It is important to understand here that the Pharisees have an **OT passage** in mind. It is **Deuteronomy 24:1**. After

¹ John Murray notices it is an assumption. See **Murray**, *Divorce* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1961), 98. Also **Colin Hamer**, “How the Church Redefined Marriage as a Neoplatonic Union Rather Than a Social Contract,” Paper given at Union School of Theology, Bridgend, Wales (Jan 2019), 12. I will consult several papers by Hamer in this sermon. He did his Dissertation on Marital Imagery in the Bible and has a particularly interesting take on our passage in Ephesians. From what I’ve gathered, he is also a Reformed Baptist.

Jesus responds, they ask, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?” (19:7). The only place “a certificate of divorce” is found is in Deuteronomy 24:1. “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some unclean thing in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce...” This law is addressed to the man divorcing his wife, which is exactly what the Pharisees were asking about.

Furthermore, when they are asking about divorcing for “any reason,” they were actually referencing a current rabbinical debate over the meaning of the “unclean thing” and “in his eyes.” Three schools of opinion gave two very different answers. The first was very conservative. “The House of [rabbi] Shammai says: A man must not divorce his wife unless he has found her unfaithful. As was said (Dt 24:1), ‘Because he has found some uncleanness in her.’” The next two are much more liberal. “The House of [rabbi] Hillel says: He may divorce her if she only spoiled a dish for him because it was said: Uncleanness is anything. Rabbi Akiba says: He may divorce her if he found another that is more beautiful than his wife, because it was said: (Dt 24:1), ‘If it come to pass that she find no favor in his eyes.’”²

² This is in the Talmud. Cited in Murray, 10 n. 10.

In fact, divorce was **extremely common** in Israel in those days, and Hillel and Akiba were two of the most popular teachers around promoting it. Marriage was treated as a throw-away thing. Women were treated like chattel (property, slaves, goods). Buy and sell as you please. **Love meant very little**. After all, you have to remember, almost all **marriages were arranged**. In fact, you could be betrothed as a child to a man or woman you would not even meet until your wedding day!³ The only way you could get out of the betrothal was if you had a certificate of divorce, meaning that **betrothal was viewed as legal marriage**; it is not like dating or even courting.

What Jesus does is reinforce the Mosaic teaching. He loves God's law! **"Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."** (9). He is telling them that this is what **Deut 24:1** means. A man has one and only one ground in that culture for divorce: His wife is unfaithful.

³ **Going Deeper**. It is important to understand the idea of **betrothal**. Here is one dictionary entry. **"Be-troth'ing, an engagement of marriage between a man and woman. Anciently, these engagements were made or arranged by the parents of the parties, often when they were mere children and when they had not seen each other. It is still one of the customs of Oriental countries. Although after this betrothment the parties lived apart until the day appointed for their marriage, they were nevertheless regarded as so bound together that separation could be effected only by death or divorce. Mary, our Lord's mother, was thus betrothed to Joseph, and, according to the history (Matt. 1:18–20), the engagement was considered as equivalent to marriage."** **Thomas J. Shepherd**, "Bethothing," in *The Westminster Bible Dictionary* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1880), 89.

Now, this is not a sermon on divorce. It is a sermon on **marriage**. So, look at how Jesus justifies this. He sends them, not to Moses, but to **Genesis 2:24**. “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘*Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*’” (**Matt 19:4-5**). Jesus is talking about that stage in the relationship when a man leaves mother and father, the dowry has been paid, the house has been prepared for her, the man “**leaves and cleaves**” and takes his bride into his home, and they become **one family** together.

I’m going to turn to Genesis in a later. But first, I want to make it clear **why it matters that all of this relates to the husband**. You see, what many do not realize is that this is not the only place in the Law that speaks to divorce and reasons it could be justified. **Exodus 21:10-11** is a significant passage on this. And unlike **Deut 24:1**, “**There was very little debate concerning the Exodus passage.**”⁴

It is **addressed to the wife**, but not merely the wife, a **slave-wife** (like Hagar; see **vs. 7**). The law tells us that this man has marital obligations to her and if they are not met,

⁴ **D. Instone-Brewer**, “Divorce,” ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition* (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; IVP, 2013), 213.

she “shall go out for nothing.” It says, “And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money.” She doesn’t even have to return the dowry, which was a heavy price the husband had to pay to her before their marriage could be consummated. Joe Sprinkle, in an excellent article analyzing various divorces in the OT says,

The expression ‘she is to go free’ can mean no less than formal divorce. The point being made is that if this woman, sold as a slave-wife, is no longer to be a wife she cannot be kept as a slave on the pretext that she is the man’s wife. Instead she is to be given her freedom. The purpose of this law, then, was humanitarian: to assure that a woman sold for the purpose of marriage would not be taken advantage of by being reduced instead to ordinary slavery.⁵

These then are the obligations. “If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her *food*, her *clothing*, or her *marital rights*.” One dictionary summarizes them as “**food, clothing, and love**” (emphasis added). First-century rabbis

⁵ Joe Sprinkle, “Old Testament Perspectives on Divorce and Remarriage,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:4 (1997): 534. Someone recently asked me about how God could allow slavery at all; why not just overthrow the entire institution. We will deal with this question when we come to Ephesians 6.

agreed that neglecting these duties constituted legal grounds for divorce. We even have some 1st-2nd century divorce certificates that **use this very passage** as those grounds.⁶ All I want to point out here is that summary word: **love**. The husband was commanded to love his wife, and this was expressed in his care for her and his willingness to give himself to her in body, or as one of those certificates says, “**in bed.**” Not only the food and clothing, but their act of union together was proof of his love for her. He was to love his wife. That’s why it matters that we parse these laws properly and not impose 21st century egalitarianism upon them. It was literally harder for a man to divorce than for the woman, because life was much more difficult for the woman than the man, and **God loves those who have life more difficult.**

Husbands and Wives Recap

We turn now to our passage. We are in the second of two sermons on **Ephesians 5:21-33**. We saw that this passage begins a list called the “**Household Code.**” It deals with

⁶ The **Instone-Brewer** article (noted above) lists a couple. You can read all 10 of them in **Colin Hamer**, “Marriage and Divorce in the Judean Desert Documents: A Key to New Testament Interpretation?” <https://chester.academia.edu/ColinHamer>. This is excerpted from his dissertation.

wives and husbands, children and parents (especially fathers), and slaves and masters. In this way, the same man will be addressed in all three lists. God refuses to let him off the hook for anything. His responsibilities are extremely important, and he must know what God expects of him.

Last time we looked especially at the two basic commands given to husbands and wives. Wives were to *submit* to their husbands and husbands were to *love* their wives. This is curious, given what we've just seen. It was not at all even a cultural stigma when a husband refused to love his wife. Frankly, it was probably the norm. Again, remember, this whole idea of *marrying for love* purely because you want to is actually a *relatively recent innovation* in the institution of marriage. There were many other things to consider, and love was way down on the list. So, this command was in some ways revolutionary. But in other ways, all Paul is doing is upholding the OT Law of **Exodus 21:10-11**, among other places.

As *the reasons* are given for both commands, the Apostle inserts a higher justification. In both instances, *it has to do with Christ*. As far as “submission” goes, Christ is the head of the church, and is its Savior (**23**). This “church” is here called “*his body*.” Body is a very important term that will

return again, and it is clearly related to “**flesh**” from the Genesis story and quote. As far as “love” goes, Christ loved the church and even as he is her Savior, he also died for it (25). Therefore, both commands to the Christian wife and husband are **rooted in the same special saving activities** of Jesus Christ for his church. We obey because he loved us enough to die that we might have salvation. He is our selfless Master.

Bride of Christ: OT and NT

It is at this point that a new idea enters. Paul uses the word “**her**” to refer to his church. “**He gave himself up for her.**” He is now going to exploit **a metaphor** that is developed in other places, particularly the book of Revelation: **The church is the “bride” of Christ.** But this metaphor finds its roots in the OT.

For instance, as many of our fathers in the faith have taught, the **Song of Solomon** is a metaphor of this marriage (some want it to *only* be a metaphor, but it is clearly to be read as a very earthy love story of a husband to his bride). The very first words from the bride are. “**Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!**” (**SS 1:2**). “**Husbands, love**

your wives” (Eph 5:25). Again, “You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you” (SS 4:7); “My dove, my perfect one, is the only one, the only one of her mother, pure to her who bore her” (SS 6:9). “So that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:27).

The ancient *Glossa ordinaria* (biblical margin notes from the Early Fathers) on SS 4:9-15 says this “calls attention to the union of Christ and the Church, for as the apostle says, they are ‘two’ in ‘one flesh’ (Eph 5:31).”⁷ Augustine mixes The Song and Ephesians together saying, “[The church] is one dove, modest and chaste, a bride without spot or wrinkle, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed, an orchard of pomegranates with pleasant fruits” (*On Baptism* 6.3.5).⁸ A modern writer says that the last few verses of the book, which is a “celebration of the bride’s purity (SS 8:8-13) reminds me of Christ’s deep desire for His church to be holy (Eph 5:26-

⁷ In Richard A. Norris Jr. and Robert Louis Wilken, eds., *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators*, trans. Richard A. Norris Jr., The Church’s Bible (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 180.

⁸ In J. Robert Wright, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 9 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 339.

27).”⁹ Tremper Longman sums it up, “Christians should read the Song in the light of Ephesians and rejoice in the intimate relationship that they enjoy with Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

Less allegorically, yet still on the level of a metaphor,¹¹ Scripture tells us that Israel’s relationship to the LORD was a marriage. Jeremiah is clear, “‘Return, faithless people,’ declares the LORD, ‘for *I am your husband*. I will choose you—one from a town and two from a clan—and bring you to Zion’” (Jer 3:14). So is Isaiah, “For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name” (Isa 54:5).

Whose husband? Someone writes representing many Dispensationalists, “The nation Israel is unlikely to be the Lamb’s bride because she has already been wed. God the Father is Israel’s husband.”¹² But this is a fundamental misun-

⁹ David Roach, “FIRST-PERSON: Does the Song of Solomon Point to Jesus?” *Baptist Press* (Sept 18, 2013), <http://www.bpnews.net/41119/firstperson-does-the-song-of-solomon-point-to-jesus>.

¹⁰ Tremper Longman III, “Song of Solomon, Theology Of,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, electronic ed., Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 743.

¹¹ Remember, metaphor does not mean “unreal.” “Christ is the door” does not mean he is a literal door made of wood with hinges. Nevertheless, he truly is in a metaphorical sense the only way to the Father, you must enter through him. So while the marriage of Christ to Israel is not physical, it is nevertheless true in the spiritual realm. This is the reason idolatry to other gods is so insufferable to him. Idolatry is the spiritual equivalent of adultery; it is running after a different spouse.

¹² Dr. Tony Garland, *Commentary on the Book of Revelation: A Testimony of Jesus Christ Volume 2*, SpiritandTruth.org (2004), 287.

derstanding of both how God comes to people in the Scripture and who it was that took Israel. God always comes through the Son. Always. And as the sons of God received the nations as their inheritance, so the LORD (the Son of God) received Israel as his (Dt 32:8-9).

When did they become his bride? When God entered into a covenant with them. “If you will indeed obey my voice *and keep my covenant*, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine” (Ex 19:5). But Israel broke that covenant. Listen to the words of the Son of God speaking as the Angel of the LORD in Judges. “I brought you up from Egypt and brought you into the land that I swore to give to your fathers. I said, ‘I will never break *my covenant* with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed *my voice*. What is this you have done?” (Jdg 2:1-2). They broke their covenant *with him*, with the Angel. *He* brought them out. *He* covenanted with them. *He* was their husband. *He*, the Son of God.

Eventually, *he* divorced Israel. “For all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce” (Jer 3:8; cf. Isa 50:1). *But there was a promise*. It is a promise pictured in story form in the book of Hosea. You

don't see it at first. Hosea is commanded to take a prostitute for a wife. He obeys. He is commanded to have children with her. He obeys. He then must name them names such as Lo-ruhama (No Mercy; **Hos 1:6**) and Lo-ammi (Not My People; **vs. 9**). God will abandon his wife for she had abandoned him. Hosea's wife then does to him what Israel had done to God. So that the prophet might enter into understanding Christ's side of this.

But in those very names, the **promise** was embedded. “Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea ... in the place where it was said to them ‘You are not my people,’ it shall be said to them, ‘Children of the living God’” (**10**). It immediately says that in fact you are my people and you have received mercy (**2:1**). And though “she is not my wife, and I am not her husband” (**2**), she will soon say, “I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now” (**7**). And “In that day, you will call me ‘My Husband’” (**16**). Isaiah predicts the same thing, “As a young man marries a young woman, so will your Builder marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you” (**Isa 62:5**). So some kind of return to the marriage is promised in the future.

How? Who? There was a **covenantal promise** that would soon be made which would reestablish the marriage. That's the "how": **through covenant**. Jeremiah again tells us about it. "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD when I will make *a new covenant* with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" even though "they broke my covenant, though I was their husband" (**Jer 31:31-32**). That promise says "I will write my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest ... I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (**33-34**).

The astonishing thing is that the NT uses both the Hosea passage (**Rom 9**) and the Jeremiah passage (**Heb 10**) to tell us that now, in Christ, these things have come to pass. **The new covenant has been established** in the blood of Christ. He has taken his bride in **a betrothal** through his death and resurrection. As Paul says, "I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ" (**2Co 11:2**). But this did not take the form or shape that most were expecting. Instead, this new bride would consist both of the natural born

children (**Jews**) and children born of the promise (**Gentiles**). Together, they would make up one Body of Christ, one Bride. **That's the who**. It is still Israel, but now Israel herself has been transformed.

This has been spoken about in Ephesians no less than five times up to this point (**Eph 1:9; 3:3, 4, 6, 9**) and one more time in ch. 6 (**6:19**). In every instance, this great “**mystery**” as he calls it, that the Apostle wants to unfold in this letter, is the inclusion of Gentiles into the church, the temple, the family of God, the body of Christ. Every time. This will become important for what we are about to dive into.

The Common Interpretation of the Genesis 2:24 Quote

We left off the last time somewhere around **Eph 5:30**. After giving these instructions for why the husband is to love the wife, the verse reads, “**Because we are members of his body**.” Recall that earlier I said the word “**body**” would reappear. He told the wives that Christ is the head of the church, *his body* (**23**). Now he says we are all members of *his body*. But for some reason, and this is important to see, this causes the Apostle to launch into his quote from Genesis.

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Eph 5:31). It isn’t the husband and wife relationship *per se* that has caused him to think of this verse. It is the fact that we are all members of his body. Somehow “his body” causes him to think of Genesis 2. But why? Does that even make any sense?

Before answering, let’s first think about how most people interpret Paul’s words. Most people assume that Paul is talking about Adam and Eve because of this quote. In this way, they connect Genesis 2:24 to 2:23. Here are the two verses:

- Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. (23)
- Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (24)

Assuming for a moment that this is right, the idea is to focus in on the “one flesh” part through **typology**. Adam and Eve and their marriage is a type of the marriage of Christ and his church which is the antitype. They were “one flesh” and we

now, as his body, are “one flesh” with Christ. More specifically, their union is a type of the union we have in Christ. The focus is on the sacredness of the physical union that consummates a marriage that is the type/antitype.

Notice how **vs. 32** ends, “I am saying that *it* refers to Christ and the church.” The “it” would then refer to the “one flesh.” This becomes a chief reason why the sexual imagery in the Song of Solomon is so often simply allegorized to “really mean” Christ and the church.

Now, that verse begins with the word “**mystery.**” “*This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.*” Therefore, what is the mystery? The mystery is that the sexual union of a husband and wife that creates the “one flesh” relationship typifies Christ and his church. And that’s the reason Paul is quoting **Genesis 2:24** in the way most people understand this.

This is illustrated in the way this entire interpretation led to marriage becoming **a sacrament of the church**. Rome, using Jerome’s Latin Vulgate translation of the Greek “*mustērion*” to the Latin *sacramentum*, has taken the “mystery” to mean that marriage is a sacred sacrament of the church. This takes that which was originally part of the creation mandate, that all sons of Adam, believers or not, were

to participate in, and moves it entirely into the realm of the church. Therefore, marriage is no longer common, but completely sacred. I would argue this is all because of Rome's interpretation of this passage. Luther undid this for Protestants.¹³ "Luther argued instead that marriage was a public, civic matter: 'Marriage is a civic matter (*res politica*). It is really not, together with all its circumstances, the business of the church. It is so only when a matter of conscience is involved.'" We do not think of marriage as a sacrament, so that hasn't been much of a problem in our circles. But this whole thing shows just how tied to the meaning of the word "mystery" Paul's thinking is.¹⁴

Now, I'm not going to tell you that the oneness that occurs in this act does not in some way symbolize Christ and church. I think it does. But I will say it doesn't do so ... yet, at least not in the fullest sense. Yes, we are "in" Christ. But this interpretation is an over-realized eschatology. That is, it puts the consummation of the Bride and Groom in the "already," when in fact the church is still in the betrothal stage of marriage, as we saw Paul explain. The consummation

¹³ Justin Taylor, "Martin Luther's Reform of Marriage," in *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 232 [213-44].

¹⁴ For more, see the fascinating article Colin Hamer, "How the Church Redefined Marriage as a Neoplatonic Union Rather Than a Social Contract," Paper given at Union School of Theology, Bridgend, Wales (Jan 2019): 1-17.

happens on the day that Christ Returns to take his bride home to be with him in glory. That hasn't happened yet.

To understand this, you have to understand **the parts of an ancient marriage**. There were stages, even as we have today. We basically have the engagement, then the planning of a wedding, hopefully the preparation of a home, and then a ceremony and a feast, and then that night the consummation of the couple. The problem here is, however, that in a modern wedding, the engagement and planning and preparation are **not done by a married couple!**

In the ancient world, the marriage literally began with the **betrothal**. **Joseph** was still in this stage when Mary became pregnant with Christ (**Mt 1:18**). Do you recall that he sought to divorce her? Betrothal is not like an engagement. It is considered a marriage already. It just isn't consummated. Before a man could take her into his home, **several other things had to happen**. The groom had to prepare a place for his new bride. He had to pay a dowry to her, a rather expensive "down-payment" of his good-will. He had to make promises to care for her, ala **Exodus 21:10-11**. There had to be a wedding feast and invitations were given out. Then, the bride had to wait for her husband to come and for her and take her to his home to be his. This last part

could sometimes take quite a while, even after everything else was finished.

Jewish Wedding Traditions	Jesus' Earthly Ministry
Betrothal	Betrothal (2Co 11:2)
Wedding Feast	Wedding Feast (Mt 22:1-14)
Invitations to Guests	Invitations to Guests (Jn 4:5-29)
Groom Prepares a Place for Bride	Jesus Prepares a Place for the Church (Jn 14:1-3)
Groom Pays a <i>Mohar</i> (Bride-Price) for his Bride	Groom Pays a <i>Mohar</i> for his Church (1Co 6:19-20)
Groom Promises to Care for His Bride	Christ Cares for the Church (Eph 5:22-29)
Bride Waits for Groom	The Church Waits for Jesus (2Ti 2:10-13)
Groom Comes for his Bride	Jesus Comes for the Church (Mt 25:1-13)
Groom Takes His Bride to His Own Home	Jesus Takes Church to His Home (Rev 21:1-4)

Adapted from Hamer, "Ephesians 5:31-32 and the People of God," p. 11.

The NT is crystal clear. Jesus has not returned to take his church with him to the home he is preparing for her. Yes, **he has paid her dowry**. This was his death-payment. But right now, she is in her waiting period, while everything is being prepared. Now is **the time for the invitations to go**

out. *Come, Come to the Wedding Feast of the Lamb!* That's the message all of the Disciples were so eager to tell. And so you must understand, beloved, that **you have the opportunity** not only to attend the wedding, but **to be the bride!** This bride is made up of many parts, people from every tribe and tongue and nation. She is not one individual, but one corporate person. She is the church, and Christ has not brought all of elect to her yet. Trust in Christ by faith, leave this world and its gods (as the OT and Ephesians would tell you) behind, start a new family with the Son of God and his church, for he invites you, and you will be at this wedding feast dressed in a white garment as a spotless virgin prepared for her husband if you hear and respond. That's the promise of the Holy Spirit even.

The Mystery Returns: The Meaning of Gen 2:24

As I've told you about the common interpretation, recall that I said **the mystery** revolves around the "one-flesh" and this is why people think Paul is quoting **Genesis 2:24**. I've said that there is a type-antitype going on in the one-flesh, but that this does not refer to the present moment of betrothal, but to the future when Christ will return for his

bride. Yet, Paul thinks that Genesis 2:24 underpins *a present reality*. Therefore, something has to be amiss in our interpretation.

I will argue that the key is *not* “one flesh,” but rather the word “mystery.” I brought this up earlier so that you could be prepared to understand. Recall that *every other time* the word is used in this letter it refers to the inclusion of *Gentiles* into the body of Christ. That is, this mystery allows me to tell you all sitting here today that Christ is holding a wedding feast sometime in the near future and that if you will trust in him, you will become the bride herself! Recall also that it was the thought that “we are [all] members of his body” that caused him to think of this mystery in the first place. So *why would we think* that suddenly, for the one and only time in the letter, this mystery would somehow mean something completely different? It makes good sense that this mystery is exactly the same here as it is everywhere else in the letter. But if that’s true, how in the world does Genesis 2:24 demonstrate this point?¹⁵

¹⁵ I was led to this interpretation by the work of *Colin Hamer*. In his treatment, he makes a big deal of the distinction between Genesis 2:23 and 2:24. The former, he says, is only about Adam and Eve; the latter is only about common marriages that take place after them. I think that he overstates his quite a bit, as I think the two verses are more intimately linked than his exegesis permits. However, I think that the basic end of his interpretation is correct. In fact, I do not think he needed to jump through all the hoops he did in order to arrive at his conclusion, as we will now see. For the works consulted, see the bibliography at the end of the sermon, but in this case see especially “How the Church Redefined Marriage as a Neoplatonic

Notice how the verse says, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast (cleave) to his wife.” It is this, and not the one flesh, that is the key to understanding Paul’s meaning. For this is something that happens now, while the other happens only later in our spiritual journey with Christ. We need to think about what this actually means.

Let’s think about Adam and Eve. God created Adam, alone. His relationship to God was like that of a father to a son (Luke 3:38).¹⁶ But, he said it is not good for man to be alone. So he created the woman literally out of the man’s rib. In this way, Adam and Eve had a very special relationship that no one else has ever had. She was literally bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh (Gen 2:23).

However, scholars have made a good case that this saying is more than a statement of what is. It is actually a wedding vow of what will be. You can see this by comparing it with 2Sa 5:1. In this story, representative tribes of the north visit David at Hebron. They say to him, “We are your bone

Union Rather Than a Social Contract,” Paper given at Union School of Theology, Bridgend, Wales (Jan 2019): 1-17.

¹⁶ I do think the direct relationship he had to God with through the Angel-Christ. This causes me to think of the prophecy that Christ would be the “everlasting father.” Not that he is Father God, but that there is some sense in which he is our father, even if he is also our brother.

and flesh.” As someone says, “This is not a statement of relationship (‘we have the same roots’) but a pledge of loyalty (‘we will support you in all kinds of circumstances’). Taken this way, [Adam’s *This at last*]¹⁷ is *bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh* becomes a covenantal statement of his commitment to her.¹⁸ In another word, it is his wedding vow.”¹⁹

That vow idea is carried over into the next verse in the word “cleave” (*dabaq*). This word “is used for the covenantal relationship in ancient treaties (cf. in biblical covenants, Deut 10:20; 30:20; Josh 23:8).”²⁰ How is a marriage enacted? Through covenant. Hence Malachi’s expression, “wife of thy covenant” (Mal 2:14f.; cf. Prov 2:17). Hence, Jeremiah talking about the new covenant enacting the gathering in of Gentiles to the church to be Christ’s bride.

For Adam, this means that he will now leave God and cleave to his wife as they start a new family together. This is

¹⁷ Hamilton translates that as “This one, this time.”

¹⁸ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 179–180.

¹⁹ “The very first words from the mouth of Adam are nothing less than a wedding vow, effectively, ‘This woman is part of me, and I hereby take unconditional responsibility for her’” (see 2Sa 5:1). Mark Snoberger, “‘Bone of My Bones’: A Theology of Marriage in One Sentence,” *Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary* (Dec 13, 2016), <https://dbts.edu/2016/12/13/bone-of-my-bones-a-theology-of-marriage-in-one-sentence/>. I do think this interpretation is quite plausible.

²⁰ Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006), 71.

obviously a lot easier to see in **Genesis 2:24**, which does not have Adam in mind specifically, but everyone else who marries after him.²¹ In all of these cases, the marriage takes someone **from one situation in life** (singleness or betrothal) and moves them **into another** (marriage and a new name and family). Perhaps Ruth is a good illustration.

Not a Jew by birth, **Ruth** was a Moabite. But there comes a point when she follows her mother-in-law Naomi back to Israel after her sister “**returned to her people and to her gods**” (**Ruth 1:15**). This is her declaration: “**Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God**” (**16**). This was obviously not her marriage, but it set the stage for her to marry the Jew Boaz. When she did, the gods of Moab ceased being her gods and the LORD became her God as she came into union with her new husband and they started a family together, a family which ended up being in the line of David and Christ himself.

But this is exactly the point that Paul is seeing now. In fact, Ruth illustrates it perfectly. Ruth, a Gentile, is grafted

²¹ For example, vs. 23 clearly refers to “*The Adam*” in Hebrew, while vs. 24 refers to just “*ish*” (“a man”). This refers to any man after Adam who will leave his father and mother (Adam had no mother) and cleave to his wife.

into the church of the OT through a marriage to Boaz. Now, in Christ, Gentiles are grafted into the vine of the church which Jews had been in since their covenant with Abraham. This, you see, is the mystery. It remains consistent throughout Ephesians. This instance of the word fits with all the others.

In fact, we might even say that the one-flesh part of this supports this as well, but not in the way we have seen. You can make a case that there is, at the very least, a double-entendre in the Hebrew word “**flesh**” (*basar*). This is seen by comparing the language here with other instances.

Gn 2:24	Gn 29:14	Gn 37:27	2Sa 5:1 1Ch 11:1	2Sa 19:12	2Sa 19:13	Neh 5:5	Jdg 9:2
They shall become one flesh.	And Laban said to him, “Surely you are my bone and my flesh!” And he stayed with him a month.	Let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.	Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, “Behold, we are your bone and flesh.”	You are my brothers; you are my bone and my flesh.	Say to Amasa, “Are you not my bone and my flesh?”	Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers.	Remember that I am your bone and your flesh.

In all these cases, to be one flesh means to be kin, family. This is, in fact, the ultimate goal of Genesis 2:24. They are not married as an end to itself, but so that they can begin a

new family: humanity. Therefore, some have translated it, “**the two shall become one family.**”²² Neither word particularly captures both the already and the not yet, but this word at least helps us understand what Paul is saying in [Ephesians 5:32](#).

Therefore, What are You to Do?

[There is a great mystery in marriage.](#) That mystery is that somehow [two disparate people](#), unrelated to one another (except very distantly), can leave their own homes and [start a new one](#). This mystery points you to Christ and his church. There is only one more verse left in this passage. It is the perfect way to end from where we started. “**However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband**” ([Eph 5:33](#)).

Why? It is because in obeying these commands of the Lord, this [new family](#) runs smoothly and honorably. Divorce is not something that creeps in, let alone the plethora of abominations that we have seen enter the definition of “marriage” in the last few years, in my mind, because the church has been so flippant about its vows. When we mock

²² Hamer, “Neoplatonism,” 2-3 and n. 6.

marriage, we mock the church, because we mock the incredible grace of Jesus Christ who died that those far off in other lands might be betrothed to the resurrected Savior and enter his church as a spotless pure virgin.

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