**WHAT THE CHRIST TO HIS CHURCH PARALLEL LOOKS LIKE IN A HUSBAND’S LOVE FOR HIS WIFE**

***Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26******to make her holy, cleansing her*** ***by the washing with water through the word, 27and*** ***to present her to himself as a radiant church,*** ***without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but*** ***holy and blameless. 28******In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.*** ***He who loves his wife loves himself. 29******After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— 30******for we are members of his body.31******“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” 32******This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. 33******However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband***

Ephesians 5:25-33 (NIV)

‘*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her’* (5:25). Paul’s word for ‘love’ is agapao, the God-kind of love, the unselfish love that does everything for the other’s ultimate good, and the love that was perfectly modelled by Christ when laid down His own life for the Church. In a marriage, this love will make a husband willing to lay down his own will and pleasure to genuinely bless his wife.

Christ died for the Church ‘*to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word’* (5:26). We normally distinguish justification as an act from sanctification as a process but the tense tells us Paul meant something different. ‘*Cleansing’* is literally ‘having cleansed’ meaning the cleansing happened first but ‘*to make her* *holy’* is aorist tense. This ‘making her holy’ was a single act and not a continuing experience. So the ‘making holy’ and ‘*cleansing’* are both single acts. If the ‘*cleansing’* was first, the ‘making holy’ immediately followed. We are ‘*cleansed’* from the old and consecrated to the new. How? *‘…by the washing with water through the word’* (5:26) or more literally, ‘by washing and word.’ Most commentators relate the ‘*washing’* to water baptism and the ‘*word’* to the gospel (Calvin spoke of the sign [water baptism] and the promise [the gospel]).

Having cleansed His bride and having made her ‘*holy’*, the heavenly Bridegroom’s plan is ‘*to present her to himself’* (5:27). This will take place when Christ returns to take His bride to Himself. She will be ‘*a radiant church*.’ Our word for ‘*radiant’* is *endoxan* (literally: in glory). Because *doxa* normally means ‘the glory of God,’ the open manifestation of His otherwise hidden being, so too the church’s true nature will become apparent. On earth she may be seen stained, despised and persecuted, but one day she will be seen for who she is, the bride of Christ, ‘*without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and* *blameless’* (5:27). She can only be unaffected by sin (*‘without stain’*) or age (‘*or wrinkle’*) by His sanctifying and renewing work*; ‘holy and blameless’* (5:27) repeats the phrase first used in 1:4. This is the whole purpose and goal of Christ’s work (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:2; Colossians 1:28).

The love of husbands for their wives is to be modelled on the love of Christ for His church. The love of Christ and His desire for His church are pictured as the preparation of a bride for her husband. Paul continues, ‘*In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives’* (5:28). The love of a husband for his wife is not just because she is beautiful but to make her even more beautiful. Christ sees the church in all her weakness and failure and yet loves her as His body, and seeks her ultimate sanctification. ‘*In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.* *He who loves his wife loves himself* ‘(5:28) Paul probably realises how hard husbands would find it to apply this standard to the realities of everyday life and so brings the parallel down to a more mundane level. We all know how we love ourselves and how Jesus said we should treat others the way we would want to be treated (Matthew 7:12). The word for ‘*love’* is again ‘agapao.’ Paul assumes a Christian husband wants to reach the mark of the highest spiritual stature for himself, and if he loves his wife as he loves himself (and that loves spurs him to reach that mark for himself), he will want the same for his wife.

Paul develops this a bit further. ‘After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church’ (5:29). ‘Feed and care’ are words used for the nurture of children (6:4; 1 Thessalonians 2:7). It is natural to look after ourselves. From one perspective it is the law of life, and the extension, to similarly care for our life-partner, is the law of marriage. ‘As Christ does the church’ (5:29). Again, Christ is taken as the perfect example. He makes perfect provision for the church. In God’s purposes, the wife becomes part of the very life of her husband, and he nourishes and cares for her, even as Christ does for us as members of Himself, part of His own life that He has joined to Himself.

So far Paul has used two analogies for a husband’s love for his wife: Christ’s loving sacrifice for His bride, the church, and the husband’s loving care of his own body. Now he fuses the two. Christ’s bride and Christ’s body are the same (5:23) ‘for we are members of his body’ (5:30). He has incorporated us into Himself, made us part of Himself in an indissoluble union. This leads Paul to quote Genesis 2:24 ‘“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”’ (5:30) and to declare that ‘This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church’ (5:31). The ‘one flesh’ experience of a husband and wife is describing their sexual union when the two become one.

In Paul’s ministry as an apostle, he was preoccupied with the thought of the church prepared as a bride for her marriage, and as living as a wife in love and unity and loyalty with her husband. He saw the beauty of the divine pattern an ideal for marriage, and strove and exhorted husbands and wives to work out that pattern in daily living. But Paul kept returning to the divine pattern. ‘This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church’ (5:32). A mystery is a revealed truth and the profound mystery here, the church’s union with Christ, is closely akin to that of the Jewish-Gentile unity in the body of Christ, which had been revealed to him and which he wrote about in 3:1-6. He sees the marriage relationship as a beautiful model of the church’s union in and with Christ. When applied to Christ and the church, the ‘one flesh’ is identical with the ‘one new man’ of 2:15. The three pictures of the church which Paul develops in Ephesians – the body, the building and the bride – all emphasise the reality of its unity because of its unity with Christ.

The final verse is a summary of what Paul has been writing: ‘However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband’ (5:33). Paul continues to use ‘agapao’ for the love husbands are to show their wives. ‘Respect’ translates a word that literally means ‘fear’ but in context leans more to ‘reverence’ or the NIV’s ‘respect’ (cf. 5:21; I John 5:18 ‘There is no fear in love’).

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

‘The Epistles to the Colossians and the Ephesians’ (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) by F. F. Bruce (William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984)

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The Message of Ephesians (The Bible Speaks Today Series) by John R. W. Stott (Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, England, 1999)

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‘Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words’ by W. E. Vine (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1996)