

“A Profound Mystery”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

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“We were made for love, for sweet surrender.” (Mike Mason)

Ephesians 5:21-33

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Disappointment

As we come to Ephesians 5:21-33 I may disappoint two groups of people. The first group is those who would *dismiss* this passage as out-of-date or even harmful. George Bernard Shaw called the Apostle Paul “the eternal enemy of Woman.” If you want me to agree, I will disappoint you. Paul gets the benefit of my doubt every time.

I may also disappoint those who want me to *defend* Paul with common understandings of this passage. If you want me to say that this passage means the husband gets the tie-breaking vote or has a 51% share at the family board meeting, I may disappoint you. For some believers male priority in the home is next to the deity of Jesus in importance to the Christian faith.

I’ll tell you who I hope will not be disappointed by the sermon today – those who are not married – single, divorced, or widowed. That’s about one-fourth of the adult members of our congregation, and one-half of the population at large. The text and the sermon are primarily about marriage, but I want you to know I very much have you in mind. We have not always done well acknowledging and affirming you.

Before I continue, here are two very helpful books on today’s topic.

- *Paul Among the People*, by Sarah Ruden. Ruden is a translator of ancient Greek and Roman literature with impeccable academic credentials. She writes, “I just don’t see where Shaw and his fellow critics get off.”
- *The Mystery of Marriage*, by Mike Mason. This is by far the most profound book on Christian marriage I have ever read.

Mystery

Three words tower over this passage in importance, like redwoods among dogwoods. They are among the Apostle Paul's favorite words.

The first is "mystery." I want to begin where Paul ends in this text. Mike Mason says marriage between a man and a woman is the "helpless contemplation of the mystery of their love." (38). When Linda and I married, our officiant looked at me and reminded me of the words of Proverbs 30:18-19 – "the way of a man with a maiden" is "too amazing" for the mind to grasp. Mystery and marriage are intertwined.

Paul is primarily addressing husbands and wives in this section, but he says as much about Christ and his church.

- "Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior" (23).
- "The church submits to Christ" (24).
- "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (25-27).
- Christ feeds and cares for the church because "we are members of his body" (29-30).
- "This is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the church" (32).

Paul has already introduced "mystery" in this letter – once in chapter 1:9, "the mystery of his will" and at length in chapter 3 (vv. 3,4,6,9). This the only time in his letter he speaks of a "profound mystery" (literally a "mega-mystery"). As Pastor Amy said a few weeks ago in her sermon on chapter 3, Paul doesn't use the word "mystery" in the sense that we are a secret cult. He uses it more like a Nancy Drew or Hardy Boys book. At the end, you realize how many clues you had missed along the way.

For Paul, the revealed mystery is that in the gospel God has made both Gentiles heirs together with Jews, members of the same body who share in the promise of Jesus (3:6). A retrospective reading of the Old Testament makes that clear, but nobody seemed to get it until God revealed the mystery through Jesus, and then Paul.

Paul has already declared that his readers – especially Gentiles – had been "dead in their trespasses and sins" (2:1). But God.... God has made us alive, declared us holy and blameless, given us standing with Jesus in heaven. This is a mega-mystery – jaw-dropping in astonishment.

It came at great cost. Surprisingly, Paul hasn't said very much about the death of Christ in chapters 1-3 (the exception being "redemption through his blood" in 1:7). He focuses more on the glorified Christ. Here in chapter 5, as he discusses marriage, Paul speaks of how Christ "gave himself up" for his church – those who were dead in their

trespasses and sins! When he looks on his bride he sees her as “radiant,” “without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”

Do you see the group of sinners you worship with – the people who never quite seem to get it right – the way Jesus sees the church? They let you down. Both “bad and proud” Gentiles and “good and proud” Jews have the same problem – sin and death – and are seen as flawless by Jesus – individually and collectively.

This is why this passage is not only for married people. Paul intends to include every believer, married and single, in this wonder of loving and being loved by God in Christ. It is the church, collectively, that can revel in the mystery of love and unity. Jew and Gentile, slave and free, Black and white, Catholic and Protestant, Republican and Democrat, and yes, married and single – we are all together in Christ’s eyes a gorgeous bride. We sometimes say there is no perfect church; in another sense every church and every believer is perfect in the heart of our Savior. We are the bride of Christ.

Love

The second key word is “love.” A husband is to love his wife “as Christ loved the church” – not to evaluate her or train her or rule over her but just to love her.

The comparison between Christ and the church on the one hand and husband and wife on the other is not, of course, a perfect parallel. Jesus, for one thing, is perfect, which no husband is. Furthermore, this union of husband and wife is a physical union. It’s not only *agape* (commitment); it is *eros* (passion) and *philos* (friendship).

As such it is all-consuming, and wonder-ful – the “way of a man with a maiden.” It’s mystery, what it does to us. Mike Mason says, “Marriage is a trap. It is a trap of pure love. The love is so pure, so intense, that it can be like a big iron gate that clangs shut behind us. And there we are. Imprisoned, of our own free will, in the dungeon of marriage.” When you “fall in love,” you have seem to have no choice but to pursue it until you can consummate it over and over again. You cannot *not* have her.

This is God’s idea, his plan. He is, after all, as Paul had said in chapter three, the Father from whom all fatherhood derives. This need for deep and intimate connection is what it means that we are made in the image of God – to know and be known, to love and be loved – as the Holy Trinity knows and loves throughout eternity.

Sometimes it doesn’t turn out well. To some it feels like a death trap. Some men become disillusioned with the woman who trapped them, with the unraveling of the feelings of love. Every married man lives with the ups and downs of daily life.

Paul says that the Christian man must never forget Jesus’ model for love. He is to never forget his bride’s wedding day radiance. He is to love her the way Christ loved and loves him, sacrificially and patiently, whether or not she is worthy.

“Love her like you love your own body,” Paul says. That is what Jesus does with his body, the church. Paul doesn’t mean that you “love your body,” as in you think you’re Mr. Universe. He means that you take care of your body – when you’re hungry you feed it, when you’re tired you rest it. You attend to the needs of your body. That’s what it means to love your wife. Pay attention to what she says – and doesn’t say. Love her like you did on your wedding day.

Submission

Mike Mason’s most masterful chapter may be the one on submission. “Marriage,” Mason writes, “reduces all decisions to one, one simple decision that must be made over and over, and there are no results more particular or far-reaching or catastrophic than the results of that initial and ongoing decision to invite one other person to interfere permanently in our lives.” Marriage is surrender – every marriage, every moment, both partners, for the rest of your life. “Marriage is the natural place to begin, and to practice daily, the curbing of our own freedoms wherever they prove offensive to the other person,” Mason says.

This is my problem with the idea that Paul is teaching here that a husband is the tie-breaker when they can’t come to agreement. Paul doesn’t say that a wife should submit when she and her husband can’t agree on an important decision. He says that a wife should submit to her husband as to the Lord in *everything*.

Mike Mason points out that the essence of a marriage is relinquishing control – for both partners, all the time. You surrender your autonomy, your authority, your desire to dominate and manipulate. “We were made for love, for sweet surrender,” he says. In marriage there must be “a willingness to abandon the self.” If both partners are not willing to yield to each other, the marriage will deteriorate and probably dissolve.

This is why the analogy of Christ and the church is so powerful. Paul has already set us up to discuss household relationships by saying we must make every effort to preserve unity in the church, we must build each other up, we must let go of rage, we must forgive as we have been forgiven.

We are not to be like the world but stand out in contrast to it. Marriage that aims for self-actualization is at best risky. Mike Mason says, “Any movement by either of the partners toward individuality...will prove to be treacherous in their love.” Marriage increasingly draws you into oneness, not separateness.

Is this not the essence of the Christian life for every person – married, single, new believer, mature Christian – a life of self-denial, of yielding. But how does one submit to a flawed partner? That’s the only option! To be married to a human being is to be married to a flawed human being. Mason says submission “means a willing involvement in another’s sin. It does not mean complicity with sin, but it does imply a

sharing of its cost, its wages.” Do you hear the echo of Jesus’ submission – not only to the Father, but to us, sharing fully in our sin and death?

Please don’t trivialize this passage into a teaching that a husband and wife should usually get along, but if he votes for McDonald’s and she wants to go to Chick-Fil-A, he gets the tie-breaker. Or that it’s her duty to satiate his sexual desires on demand. Marriage requires submission all the time in everything as to the Lord. Mason says, and I think he’s right, that “these two little words, *love* and *submit*, are for all practical purposes synonymous....To love is to submit and to submit is to love.”

This “mutual submission” is why we started in verse 21, toward the end of another long and complex sentence from Paul. Translators can’t even agree where one paragraph ends and where another starts. Paul begins with the command not to “be drunk with wine” but to “be filled with the Spirit” (18), then illustrates it with a string of participles – “speaking to each other,” “singing and making melody in your hearts,” “giving thanks at all times,” and “submitting yourselves to one another.” Togetherness – talking, singing, thanking, submitting – interdependence and mutual yielding is part of how we become more and more filled with God instead of with ourselves. That last participle then naturally for Paul leads to his “house table” of rules for husbands, wives, children, fathers, slaves, and masters. Jesus changes every relationship.

If the yielding is mutual, why does Paul use the word “submit” for wives and “love” for husbands if it’s basically the same thing? Why does he say the husband is to be the “head” as Christ is the head of the church?

We can confidently reject one wrong answer: Paul is a woman-hater. This is where Sarah Ruden’s book is profound as she contrasts Paul on this topic (and many others) with his own Greco-Roman context. Nobody in the ancient world elevates women like Paul does. Paul not only sees a woman as her husband’s spiritual equal, he equalizes the social status among women. Life in Jesus revolutionizes social distinction.

But there’s more. The husband is the “head” as Christ is the “head.” Doesn’t that mean he’s the control center? You can take this analogy in that direction, and many have. But how much does Jesus actively take control of the decisions in our church or the Church. Instead, as Head he initiates, waits, invites, protects, stabilizes, cares, and sacrifices as her Savior.

Universal truths

Whether you have been previously inclined to dismiss or defend Paul, you still may question the way I read this text. That’s OK. You’ve been wrong before. More importantly, I could be wrong now.

The idea that it’s not about “who wears the pants in the family” is reinforced in verse 33, where Paul gives his own summary of what he’s been talking about. Wives

must respect their husbands; husbands must love their wives. Almost nothing can be universally said about every man and every woman, but in general most men just want to be respected above anything else and most women place a premium on being loved unconditionally and permanently. This passage in my view is mostly about meeting the deepest felt needs of the other.

But we don't do it well, do we? I fail as a husband, as a pastor, as a follower of Jesus. And maybe that's really the main point for all of us. The underlying lessons are the same here. As he usually does, Paul applies some universal Christian truths and perspectives to a specific situation or church. In this case, the specific setting is Christian marriage in the context of a first century unChristian culture.

What are those underlying universal Christian truths and perspectives?

Embrace God's call. Anywhere you find yourself, stay there until you know God is calling elsewhere. Paul applies that same principle in 1 Corinthians 7 to marriage. If you're single, believe God has called you to be single – at least for now. If you're married, believe God called you to be married.

A bad reason to get married is because you're frustrated about not being married. A bad reason to get unmarried is because you're frustrated about being married. Live fully where God has placed you. It is not God's promise or intention to make life easy. It's his desire to draw you close.

Sacrifice like Jesus. There are causes worth all you've got to give. Singleness is one of them. Marriage is one of them, even marriage that requires more love than you feel you have to offer. Marriage was never designed to be your primary fulfillment. No human being can bring you happiness. For meaning and fulfillment we look to the Lord.

I don't know why God gives the gift of a lifelong, satisfying marriage to some and not to others. I don't know why some people grow up attracted to the opposite sex and some to the same sex. I don't know why some people deal with trauma and others not. What I know is that in any situation, the way forward is the way of humble service. Learning to love as Jesus did is not just for husbands. It's the way of the cross for all.

Be filled with the Spirit. Don't overlook that this is what prompted this whole discussion for Paul. Who or what is in control of your life? When the Spirit's in control, you move toward people, toward relationships, toward the body of Christ. Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another, singing to one another, giving thanks in all situations, and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

That's not a natural life. That's life under the control of the Holy Spirit. How he does that is a profound mystery. It's an invisible process. Our part is trust that he will finish what he started and will make us to be the holy people he has declared us to be in Christ. Amen.