

Session 6. This Is a Great Mystery

Movement II. Christ Restores It

Passages: Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:18-4:1; 1 Peter 3:1-7; Genesis 2:24

Part 1. Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. That the group compares the New Testament household passages against each other, discovers what St. Paul does differently, and finds for itself that Ephesians 5 answers the domination of Genesis 3:16 rather than endorsing it.

Catholic Touchstone. Christian marriage between the baptized signifies and shares in the covenant of Christ and the Church. That is why the Church calls it a sacrament, and why the model for a husband's authority is a man being crucified (CCC 1616-1617, 1642).

SAFEGUARDING NOTE (LEADER ONLY, READ BEFORE THE SESSION)

This is the passage most often misused to justify control, and you must say so from the front rather than leaving it to be inferred.

Say clearly during the session: no Catholic teaching can require a wife to submit to sin, to abuse, to coercion, or to danger. A husband who cites this passage to demand compliance has inverted its plain meaning, which puts the demand on him.

If anything in tonight's discussion raises a concern about coercion or violence, do not address it in the group. Speak to the person alone afterward, notify the priest or deacon preparing the couple, and if there is any indication of immediate danger contact emergency services. In the United States the National Domestic Violence Hotline is available at 1-800-799-7233 or by texting START to 88788. Do not investigate, mediate, or attempt to assess the relationship yourself.

Know your own obligations before the session begins. If you are a mandated reporter under the law of your state or under diocesan policy, or if the parish has a safe environment coordinator, know that in advance rather than looking it up afterward.

What You Need to Know

This is the pivot of the study. Everything before tonight has been preparing the room to read one passage without flinching, and everything after tonight depends on the room having read it honestly.

Expect tension. Somebody arrives tonight already braced. Somebody else arrives ready to use this passage as a weapon. Both of them need to leave with the text having done something to them.

VERSE 21 IS NOT AN INTRODUCTION, IT IS THE SENTENCE

The single most important thing you can teach tonight is grammatical, and it is verifiable by anyone with a decent Bible.

Ephesians 5:21 says be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. In the Greek, the participle governing that sentence carries forward into what follows, and in the best manuscript evidence verse 22 has no verb of its own at all. Wives, to your husbands, as to the Lord. The verb has to be borrowed from verse 21.

Many English translations, including the RSV, supply *be subject* in verse 22 for readability, and a footnote in most study Bibles will tell you the verb is not there in the earliest witnesses.

The consequence is straightforward. Whatever St. Paul is asking of wives is a particular case of something he has just asked of everybody.

THE HOUSEHOLD CODES AND WHAT PAUL DOES TO THEM

Lists of duties within a household were a standard literary form in the ancient world, and they commonly ran one direction: they told the person in charge how to manage wives, children, and slaves. Ancient practice was more varied than a flat contrast allows, so present what follows as a notable difference rather than as something unprecedented. Comparable material appears in Colossians 3 and 1 Peter 2 and 3.

Two things are strange about the Christian versions. First, the subordinate parties are addressed directly, as moral agents with their own consciences, rather than being discussed in the third person, which is notable against many contemporary codes. Second, in Ephesians the person with power gets the longest and heaviest instruction by a wide margin. Wives receive roughly three verses. Husbands receive nine, and the content of those nine is death.

Let the group count the verses themselves. It is the fastest way to dismantle the assumption that this passage is a management manual.

HEAD, AND WHAT IT DOES AND DOES NOT SETTLE

Verse 23 calls the husband the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church. Be honest about the state of the question. The Greek word *kephalē* is argued over: some scholars stress authority, others stress source or origin, and the evidence is genuinely mixed. Do not tell your room that the debate is settled in either direction.

What settles the meaning in this passage is not the lexicon but the comparison Paul chooses. Christ's headship over the Church is defined three verses later as handing himself over to death for her. If that is the model, then any account of headship here must be governed by Christ's self-emptying love. It cannot license coercion or domination, and in this passage it looks like the obligation to go first into the sacrifice.

The Catholic tradition has held that there is a real order in the family and that the husband bears a genuine responsibility, while insisting that this order is one of love and service and never of domination (see Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii*, which teaches it explicitly; CCC 1645 states the equal personal dignity of the spouses). Note that the Catholic rite of marriage does not ask a bride to promise obedience.

GENESIS 3:16 ANSWERED

Have this ready, because the group met it in Session 2. There, domination of the woman by the man was named as part of the damage. Here, the man is told that his role is to hand himself over for her, to nourish and cherish her, and to love her as his own body. Neither passage names the other, so the connection is a reading rather than a stated cross reference. On that reading the wound is not ratified but answered, at the level of the man's own will.

WASHING, WORD, AND THE GREAT MYSTERY

Verses 26 and 27 describe Christ cleansing the Church by the washing of water with the word, which the tradition reads as baptism. Notice that the husband is being told to do something for his wife's holiness, which is a remarkable thing to make a man responsible for.

Then verse 31 quotes Genesis 2:24, the verse the group has now met in Sessions 1, 4, and tonight. And verse 32 says this is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church.

The Greek word is *mysterion*. In Latin it was rendered *sacramentum*. That translation is one strand in the history of how the Church came to speak of marriage as a sacrament, and a Protestant objector will say the doctrine rests on a translation error. Do not fight that battle tonight. Session 7 is built for it. Tonight, stay with what St. Paul actually says: he quotes a verse about a man and a woman becoming one flesh and says he is talking about Christ and the Church.

WHAT THAT REVERSAL MEANS

Read the logic in the direction Paul writes it. He does not say Christ and the Church are like a marriage. He takes the Genesis verse about marriage and refers it to Christ and the Church, which the Church reads as revealing what marriage was pointing at all along (CCC 1616-1617). Marriage is the sign; the union of Christ and his Church is the reality that the sign was made to point at.

That is why a wedding is not a private event with religious decoration, and it is why what your couples do in their marriage will preach whether or not they intend it.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- Genesis 2:24 is quoted directly at Ephesians 5:31. The group has now met it three times.
- Genesis 3:16 is answered here, as the domination named there is replaced by a command to self surrender.
- The prophetic marriage covenant of Session 3 is the direct background: God as husband to an unfaithful people, loving her back into fidelity.
- Ezekiel 16:9-14, where God washes and clothes and adorns his bride, may echo behind Ephesians 5:26-27. The group read it three weeks ago; see whether anyone connects it.
- Revelation 19:7-8, where the bride has made herself ready and is clothed with fine linen, completes the image. Session 14.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM ON WHAT A HUSBAND IS FOR

In his homily on this passage, St. John Chrysostom told husbands that the love they owe their wives is measured by Christ's love for the Church, which means it is measured by the cross. He taught in substance that a husband should be willing to be cut into a thousand pieces for her, and that a man who rules his wife by fear has failed at the only thing he was asked to do.

He also insisted that the reverence asked of a wife in verse 33 is not the fear of a slave, and that a husband who produces that kind of fear has misread the passage entirely.

Summary of his teaching in Homily 20 on Ephesians.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN PAUL II ON MUTUAL SUBJECTION

St. John Paul II taught that verse 21 governs the whole passage, and that the subjection asked of a wife is one side of a mutual subjection asked of both spouses out of reverence for Christ. He saw no contradiction between the general exhortation and the particular one, because the particular one is a case of the general.

He also argued that this passage introduces something genuinely new into the ancient world.

Summary of his teaching in Mulieris Dignitatem, section 24.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: POPE PIUS XI ON ORDER AND LOVE IN A HOUSEHOLD

Writing on Christian marriage, Pope Pius XI taught that the order within a family does not deny the wife her liberty or her dignity as a person, does not oblige her to obey every request of a husband regardless of its reasonableness, and does not treat her as a minor.

He is a useful voice precisely because he is writing from a tradition-minded position and still draws the line clearly.

Summary of his teaching in the encyclical Casti Connubii. Note for the leader: a papal encyclical, not the voice of a canonized saint.

Catechism Connection

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 1616-1617 is the heart of tonight: St. Paul says that spouses are to love one another as Christ loved the Church, and that Christian marriage is an efficacious sign of that covenant.

CCC 1642 states that the grace of the sacrament perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their unity, and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life, and it is where the Church's language of mutual self giving belongs.

CCC 2204-2206 treats the family as the domestic church and describes the relations within it in terms of respect and service. Session 14 returns here.

CCC 369-372 is worth having ready if the equality question comes up sharply, since it states the equal personal dignity of man and woman directly.

A note on scope: none of these paragraphs settles the lexical dispute about the word head, and you should not present them as though they do.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

One Flesh pays off tonight and the group should get there without help. When you reach verse 31 and St. Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, stop reading and wait. This is the third appearance and someone will say it. Then read verse 32 and let it land.

The Bridegroom converges tonight. Session 3 gave them God as husband. Session 5 gave them a wedding dated by the cross. Tonight St. Paul says outright that marriage was always about Christ and the Church. Do not complete the arc; the marriage supper is Session 14.

They Have No Wine is silent tonight. It returns in Session 10.

Sealed guess check. Two sessions from now the sheets get opened. Remind the room tonight that the sheets exist, that they should not be discussed, and that nobody is going to be graded.

IF A COUPLE IS IN AN IRREGULAR SITUATION (LEADER ONLY)

A fiance who arrives having already decided this passage is the problem. Do not argue. Ask them to count the verses assigned to each party and to read verse 21 aloud. The text does more for you here than any defense of it.

A fiance who arrives eager to use it. This is the more dangerous case. Watch for a man who is pleased by verse 22 and bored by verse 25. Address it in the room by staying relentlessly on the husband's nine verses, and follow up privately afterward if the pattern is marked.

A woman who goes very quiet. Follow up privately within a day. Ask an open question and let silence do the work. If anything concerning emerges, see the safeguarding note.

A couple from a tradition that teaches strict male headship. Be respectful and precise. The Catholic tradition does hold a genuine order and responsibility in the family, and it also rules out domination and does not ask a bride to promise obedience. Both halves are true and you should say both.

Session Goals

1. Every participant can state that verse 21 governs the passage and can explain why verse 22 depends on it.
2. The group counts the verses given to wives and to husbands and draws the obvious conclusion themselves.
3. The group compares Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 Peter and identifies what the Christian household codes do differently from the surrounding culture.
4. The lexical dispute about the word head is presented honestly, and the group can say why the comparison to Christ settles the meaning here regardless of how the dispute is resolved.
5. Every participant can connect Ephesians 5:25 back to Genesis 3:16 and say what is being reversed.
6. Nobody leaves this room believing that this passage licenses control, and nobody leaves believing the Church has quietly dropped it.

Time Note and Pre-Chosen Cuts

Ninety-minute plan. Opening prayer, 5 minutes. Win questions, 10. Reading Ephesians 5:21-33 aloud, 5. Build questions 1 through 4, 22. Live discovery moment on the household codes, 15. Build questions 5 through 8 and the steelman, 24. Send and Live It, 6. Closing prayer, 3.

Seventy-five minute plan. Cut Build question 6 and the Dig Deeper box. Do the household code comparison with Colossians only, dropping 1 Peter.

Do not cut the steelman under any circumstances tonight. If you run out of time, cut the Send section and hold the steelman. An unanswered objection on this passage does more damage than an unfinished session.

Part 2. Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

OPENING PRAYER

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord Jesus, tonight we read a passage that has been loved and misused in almost equal measure. Give us clear eyes. Do not let us hear what we came expecting to hear. Show the men in this room what you are actually asking of them, and show the women what you have promised them. Make our marriages into a sign that tells the truth about you. Amen.

Win. Getting Started

Open questions. No wrong answers, no answer box. Let every couple speak once before anyone speaks twice.

- A.** Before tonight, what did you think Ephesians 5 said? Be honest, including if you have only heard about it secondhand.
- B.** Describe a time somebody in authority over you used it well. What did they actually do?

Build. Into the Text

Read Ephesians 5:21-33 aloud, slowly, all of it. Then ask the room to sit for ten seconds before anyone speaks.

- 1.** Look at verse 21 and verse 22 in your Bible. What does verse 21 say, and what do you notice about the grammar of verse 22?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Verse 21 says be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

In the earliest Greek manuscripts, verse 22 has no verb of its own. It reads, in effect, wives, to your husbands, as to the Lord, and the verb has to be carried over from verse 21. Most English versions, including the RSV, supply the verb for readability, and most study Bibles note it. Have someone check their footnotes in the room.

The consequence: whatever is being asked of wives is a specific case of something already asked of everyone. You cannot quote verse 22 without verse 21 and still be quoting St. Paul.

- 2.** Count the verses. How many are addressed to wives, and how many to husbands? What is the content of each?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Roughly three to wives, and nine to husbands. Let them count it rather than telling them.

The wives' instruction is about respect and subjection. The husbands' instruction is: love as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, make her holy, nourish and cherish her, love her as your own body, and leave your father and mother for her.

Ask the room which assignment they would rather have. The passage that gets quoted to control women spends three quarters of its length telling a man to die.

LIVE DISCOVERY MOMENT

Do not explain the household codes. Send them looking.

The instruction: read Ephesians 5:21-6:9, then Colossians 3:18-4:1, then 1 Peter 2:18-3:7. Answer two questions in pairs, twelve minutes.

One. Who is spoken to directly in each list, and who is only spoken about?

Two. In Ephesians, which party gets the most words, and what are they told to do?

What they will find: in all three, the parties with less power, wives, children, and slaves, are addressed directly, as people with consciences of their own, which is notable against many contemporary codes. And in Ephesians the husband receives by far the longest instruction, and its content is self surrender rather than command.

Then ask, and let it be uncomfortable: the same passage that speaks to wives also speaks to slaves. What do we do with that? Take answers. Do not resolve it. The steelman is coming and this is exactly the objection it will make.

3. Verse 23 calls the husband the head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church. What does the passage itself say Christ's headship looks like?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Verse 25 answers it: he gave himself up for her. Verse 26, he makes her holy. Verse 29, he nourishes and cherishes her.

Be honest that the Greek word behind head is genuinely argued over, with some scholars stressing authority and others source or origin, and the evidence is mixed. Do not claim the dispute is settled.

Then point out that the dispute does not decide this passage. St. Paul supplies the definition himself by naming the model, and the model is a man being crucified. Whatever headship is, it is defined here by the one being imitated, who did not use his authority as a right to be obeyed but handed himself over.

Practical form for your couples: in this passage, the husband's authority is the authority to go first into the sacrifice.

4. Go back to Genesis 3:16 from Session 2. What did it say would happen between a husband and a wife? Now read Ephesians 5:25 next to it.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Genesis 3:16 said he shall rule over you, and named it as part of the damage, alongside thorns and pain.

Ephesians 5:25 tells him to hand himself over for her. Many Catholic readers hear that as an answer to the ruling rather than a modification of it, addressed to the will of the man himself. Say that it is a reading, because neither passage cites the other.

Say plainly: the New Testament does not ratify the consequence of the fall. It undoes it, starting with the person who benefited from it.

BUILD THEN PRESS: EPHESIANS 5 IS PATRIARCHY WITH A HALO

Build it at full strength.

Build it at full strength and do not soften a word of it. Someone in your room has already thought all of this and has not said it.

Whatever the internal logic, the passage tells wives to be subject and does not tell husbands to be subject to their wives in the same words. It sits inside a list that also tells slaves to obey their masters with fear and trembling, and no Christian today thinks that instruction stands as written. If we have rightly concluded that the slave material reflects a social arrangement the Gospel eventually dissolved, consistency demands the same conclusion about the marriage material. Insisting that the husband is head, while explaining at length that head does not mean what it sounds like, looks like keeping the word and quietly deleting the content in order to avoid admitting that the Church got something wrong. And a real cost has been paid for keeping it: women have been counseled to endure violence on the authority of this chapter.

Then press.

Concede everything true, and there is a lot. The passage has been used to justify abuse. Women have been told to stay in danger. That was a betrayal of the text and of them, and the Church today is clear that no one is obliged to remain in danger. Concede also that the slave material is not a model for social arrangements, and that Christians took far too long to say so.

Then press on the disanalogy, and press carefully because this is where the argument is won or lost. Marriage is rooted in creation and is affirmed by Christ himself as something from the beginning. Slavery is nowhere presented as such. When Paul grounds the marriage instruction, he does not ground it in Roman household order at all; he grounds it in Christ and the Church and in Genesis 2. The two halves of the code have different foundations, and one of them survives the removal of its cultural setting.

Press second on the direction of the demand. If the aim were to preserve male privilege, the passage is written strangely: it gives the man three times the instruction and defines his position by the cross. A social arrangement being defended does not usually require the beneficiary to die.

Press third on what the Church actually asks. The Catholic rite of marriage does not ask a bride to promise obedience. The Church affirms the equal personal dignity of husband and wife (CCC 369, 1645) and condemns domination. If the accusation is that the Church has quietly deleted the content, the honest answer is that she has taught the dignity, charity, and mutual self gift that are actually here, through formulations that have varied over time and have needed correction. Do not claim an uncomplicated uniform history.

Do not overclaim. Do not pretend the exegetical questions are settled, and do not pretend that Christian husbands have generally lived this. The passage is a standard the Church has failed to meet, which is a different thing from a passage the Church should discard.

5. Verses 26 and 27 say Christ cleanses the Church by the washing of water with the word, to present her holy. What is being described, and what does it make the husband responsible for?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The tradition reads the washing as baptism. Christ acts to make his bride holy.

Applied to the husband, the passage puts him at the service of his wife's holiness, which is an astonishing thing to hand a man. He is not responsible for producing it, which is Christ's work, and he is certainly not responsible for her behavior. He is asked to protect and support her path to God.

Ask the men in the room what that would look like on a Tuesday. Practical answers only. Getting her to Mass, protecting her prayer, taking the children so she can go to confession, refusing to be the reason she is angry.

6. Read verses 31 and 32 again. What does St. Paul quote, and what does he then say he was talking about?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

He quotes Genesis 2:24, which the group has now met in Sessions 1, 4, and tonight. Then he says this is a great mystery, and he means it in reference to Christ and the Church.

Read the direction of that sentence carefully. He does not say Christ and the Church are like a marriage. He quotes the Genesis verse about marriage and refers it to Christ and the Church, which the Church reads as revealing what marriage was pointing at all along.

So marriage is the sign and the union of Christ and his Church is the reality. Their wedding will be saying something about God to everyone present, whether or not they intend it.

DIG DEEPER: MYSTERY AND SACRAMENT

The Greek word in verse 32 is mysterion. The Latin translation rendered it sacramentum, and that is part of the history of how the Church came to name marriage among the seven sacraments.

A Protestant objector will say the whole doctrine rests on a translation. It does not, and Session 7 answers that argument properly. Tonight, simply note the two words and hold the question.

COUPLE CONVERSATION (JUST THE TWO OF YOU, NOT THE ROOM)

Just the two of you.

Name one decision each of you has quietly assumed you would control after the wedding. Money, where you live, how often you see family, how you spend Sundays. Say it out loud without defending it.

To the one who will be the husband: name one specific thing you are willing to give up for her, this year, that costs you something real. Not a category. A thing.

7. Verse 33 summarizes: let each one love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. Why summarize with love and respect rather than repeating subjection?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Because that is what the passage has actually been about. The summary is the author telling you what he thought he was saying.

St. John Chrysostom, preaching on this passage, insisted that the reverence asked here is not the fear of a slave, and that a husband who produces that kind of fear has failed at his one assignment.

Practical question to close on: which of the two, love or respect, do you find easier to give, and which does your fiancé most need from you?

Send. Carrying It Out

Open questions again. No answer boxes.

- Y. If your marriage is a sign of Christ and the Church, what is the first thing about your daily life that will have to change?

Z. What is one lie about this passage that you are now able to correct if a friend brings it up?

Live It This Week

- **Husbands to be: do one costly thing this week.** Choose the specific sacrifice you named in the Couple Conversation and do it before the next session. Do not announce it afterward.
- **Read verses 21 to 33 aloud together once, slowly.** One of you reads the wives' verses and the other reads the husbands' verses, out loud, to each other.
- **Correct one misunderstanding.** The next time this passage comes up in conversation, and it will, explain verse 21 and the verse count. You now know something most people do not.
- **Read the Rite of Marriage consent questions before next session** if your parish can give them to you. Session 7 begins the movement toward the vows themselves.

Closing Prayer

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you loved the Church and handed yourself over for her, and you did not wait for her to deserve it. Teach these men what that costs and give them the courage to want it. Teach these women what they have been promised and give them the freedom to expect it. Take the wound of Eden out of our households. Make our marriages a sign that tells the truth about you, especially on the days when we would rather it did not.

St. John Chrysostom, pray for us. Holy Family of Nazareth, pray for us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Ephesians 5:25

Part 3. Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in the order it appears.

- Ephesians 5:21-33. The session text.
- Ephesians 5:21-6:9; Colossians 3:18-4:1; 1 Peter 2:18-3:7. The household code comparison, done by the group.
- Genesis 2:24. Quoted at Ephesians 5:31. Third appearance in the study.
- Genesis 3:16. Read against Ephesians 5:25.
- Ezekiel 16:9-14. The washing and adorning of the bride, behind Ephesians 5:26-27.
- Revelation 19:7-8. Held for Session 14.

Catechism Paragraphs Used

CCC 369-372, 1616-1617, 1642, 1645, 2204-2206.

Before Next Session

Ask your parish for a copy of the consent questions and the vows from the Rite of Marriage, and bring them to Session 7 if you can get them.