



The Bride loved by Christ

Ephesians 5:21-33

Over the coming weeks in SBC, we'll be thinking afresh about the image of the Body of Christ, found in the letters of Paul as a way of describing the church, and also how we can reach out to others with the good news of the gospel. This week's passage includes a reference to the church as the Body but its purpose is not to teach us about interdependence on the roles we all play. Instead, we are asked to consider the intimate nature of the relationship Christ has with the church.

Near the end of Ephesians, Paul offers a series of instructions about how the gospel ought to affect the way Christians conduct themselves in their key relationships, both at home and in the workplace. Similar insights can be found in a shorter passage in Colossians 3:18-4:1. These texts are often referred to as the 'Household Code,' a title first used by Martin Luther.

A key feature of the version of these instructions found in Ephesians is the comparison it makes between the relationship of a wife and husband and that between the church and Christ. The Mennonite scholar Tom Yoder Neufeld observes that, 'While the immediate concern is clearly to offer guidance to wives and husbands for their relationship to each other, there is the overarching concern to illumine the relationship of the church to "her" Lord and Saviour.'¹

We need to acknowledge the controversy generated by this passage, and what could be interpreted as instructions which diminish the role and privileges of women. However, such a perspective surely ignores the appeal to Christ's love and self-sacrifice which seems to undermine any rights husbands might claim for themselves to demand unquestioning obedience from their wives. As Yoder Neufeld points out, this text actually seems to offer a new approach to marriage which reverses the bleak consequences of the fall described in Genesis 3: 'the husband is not invited to lord it over his wife (cf. Gen 3:16) but to love her with the same love with which Christ loved the church. In Genesis 3, the husband lording it over the woman was a divine curse pronounced as a response to sin; in Ephesians, the husband's love emulates God's blessing of creation in Christ (cf. Eph 1).'²

However, we should also note that the description of love found in this passage does not just convey ideas of gentleness and self-giving. It also suggests the passion which is necessary for any desire to be awakened and for intimacy to be sustained. The language of Ephesians 5:26,27 alludes to a bride who has ceremonially washed herself before marriage. Some readers may be uncomfortable with such an analogy but it taps into the tradition of the Old Testament, and the prophecies of Ezekiel and

¹ Tom Yoder Neufeld, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Ephesians*, 2002, 255-256

² Tom Yoder Neufeld, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Ephesians*, 2002, 261

Hosea,³ and also anticipates Revelation's description of the 'marriage supper of the Lamb.'⁴

1. It's easy to quick read Ephesians 5:21 and look past the instruction it offers. But why might this verse actually be a key to understanding everything else which Paul is about to say about relationships in the home and in the workplace?
2. As you read through verses 25-33, can you list of all the actions which Christ is described as having done for the church? What response is the appropriate one for us as a church, in light of this?
3. Do you think we are sometimes too quick to emphasise the difference Jesus makes to our status before God (focussing on atonement and justification), neglecting the more intimate descriptions of God's love like that which we find here? What might be lose out on if we forget the imagery of Ephesians 5?
4. Eugene Peterson has written on Paul's use of the image of marriage: 'No other relation that we enter into is more complex and difficult and demanding, or more fulfilling and pleasurable and satisfying. Similarities between marriage and church are extensive... Marriage and church are both composed of relationships that are a bold assault on the individualism in both church and society – the sin of individualism, the sin of wanting to have my own way with God, my own way with my spouse, my own way with my children.'⁵ How has thinking about church through the lens of marriage changed your understanding of it?
5. Some of us might think it's strange to reflect on this particular passage and theme at the beginning of a sermon series on mission and what it means to be the Body of Christ. What connections can you see between our passion for God and our desire to reach others for him? What dangers might arise if we have one without the other?

³ See, for example, Ezekiel 16 and Hosea 2

⁴ See Revelation 19:7-10

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Practise Resurrection*, 2010, 238