

# A Critical Analysis of Ephesians 5:21-33 in the Light of Christian Marriage in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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## Abstract

Ephesians 5:21-33 focused on the relationship between husband and wife. However, the teachings of Ephesians 5:21-33 have been greatly ignored by some Christian couples in Ebonyi State and, consequently, resulted in marital problems such as domestic violence, divorce, frequent quarrelling, and so on. The study addressed this problem from the optic of Ephesians 5:21-33. The historical-critical method was used to study the text, while in-depth interviews served as a means of data collection. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select ten respondents who were willing to participate in the study. All data generated in the study were qualitatively analysed. The findings indicated that the call for wives to submit to their husbands does not imply inferiority but absolute obedience to the divine order in marriage. Also, the husband's headship over the wife does not denote dominance but care, protection, service and love. The study encouraged Christian husbands and wives, especially in Ebonyi State, to love and submit to one another, thereby affirming the equality of husband and wife in dignity without denying their different roles.

**Keywords:** Ephesians 5:21–33; husband; wife; marital problems; Christian marriage; Ebonyi State

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## Introduction

In Ephesians 5:21–33, Paul singled out the husband and wife and gave them crucial instructions concerning their marital relationship. As put forward by Coontz (2006), Paul argues that since God, in his divine wisdom, has positioned the husband as head of the family, in a similar way Jesus is made the head of the church. Therefore, the wife is to follow the church's example of submission. However, this divine arrangement, as pointed out by Turaki (2006,1462), does not imply "that women are in any way inferior to men, or men are superior to women. Instead, both the wife and the husband have been assigned domestic duties to foster unity in marriage." Turaki's accentuation suggests that when there is submission and love in a marital relationship, peace, harmony, progress, and unity become inevitable. This interpretation holds promise for Christian marriages, particularly in the contemporary Ebonyi State, where marital problems such as divorce, infidelity, and domestic violence are at their climax in some Christian homes (Nnachi 2021).

There are no reliable statistics that could depict the extent and prevalence of marital problems among Christian couples in Ebonyi State. However, familiar sources such as IDI and media reportage unpack the complex reality of this social problem and provide insight into the magnitude of the problem. For example, Interviewee 1 (personal comm., August 19, 2023), during an interview at his parish in Mgbaneze Isu, Onicha Local Government Area (LGA) of Ebonyi State, lamented about the uncoordinated but frequent cases of marital disharmony among many of his church members who are married. Also, Nnachi (2021) reported on Punch Newspaper about a woman named Elizabeth in Ohaukwu LGA, Ebonyi State, who has been turned into a bunch bag by her husband due to marital disharmony.

In an attempt to proffer a solution to this problem, this research, therefore, pegs its fulcrum on Ephesians 5:21–33. The periscope, to a reasonable extent, embodies an important aspect of Paul's teachings on the husband-wife relationship. Put differently, in the pericope, Paul carefully shifts his audience's understanding of marriage away from known and familiar cultural forms to an alternative marriage model patterned after the Christ-Church relationship. Being, therefore, a text that deals with issues of husband-wife relationships in marriage, this research, establishing Paul's understanding of the role of husband and wife in marriage, seeks to draw its implication for Christian marriage in Ebonyi State today.

## Methodology

The study adopted the historical-critical approach. By adopting this methodology in the study, the researcher tends to study Ephesians 5:21–33 in the context of its socio-historical setting, as well as other related issues in the text. Since the target population of the study covers the entire Christian couples in Ebonyi State, the researcher employed simple random sampling to select five (5) LGAs out of 13 LGAs in the study area. The

five selected LGAs include Onicha, Izzi, Ohaukwu, Ikwo, and Ishielu. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select respondents who were willing to participate in the study. This was based on the researcher's previous phone contacts and Zoom meetings with the respondents, who invited them to participate in the study.

A total of 10 respondents were selected for the study, that is, two respondents representing each selected LGA. Both male and female Christians who are either married, divorced or separated were selected for the interview. Church leaders and Christian marriage counsellors also formed part of the sample. The above choices were made to gain a better picture of the variables associated with the problem of Christian marriage in the study area. In-depth interviews (IDIs) were used to source data from the respondents. The interview guide, designed by the researcher, is made up of semi-structured questions with probes to allow the researcher to pursue related questions arising from the responses of the respondents. The interviews were conducted at the convenience of the respondents and in Igbo and English, according to their preferences.

Respondents were duly informed about the research objective and were given assurance of their confidentiality and anonymity. This was achieved by reading the informed consent document to the respondents and getting their approval. The IDI was conducted based on the respondents' choice, as most of the interviews were conducted on Zoom meetings and phone calls because the respondents preferred such. Few interviews were conducted at the respondents' residences. With the consent of the respondents, the interviews were recorded using an audio recorder while non-verbal cues and other vital information were documented in the field note.

To avoid fatigue, each interview was scheduled to last for a maximum of 45 minutes. All the interviews conducted in the Igbo language were transcribed into English after the researcher listened to the audio multiple times. The transcribed version was compared with the recorded discussions to be sure that the original meaning of what the respondent said was not lost during translation. Pseudonyms are employed to maintain the anonymity of the respondents because the marital problem is a sensitive issue. All the data generated from the aforementioned sources are presented descriptively in the study.

### Socio-Cultural Context of Ephesians 5:21–33

The epistle to Ephesians did not clearly indicate its intended audience, but scholars such as Chadwick (1976, 981) and Turaki (2006, 1451) throw their support to the traditional belief that the letter was written by Paul and addressed to Christians in Ephesus. On the other hand, scholars like Kobelski (2007, 883) and Dahl and Juel (2000, 1113) contend that the epistle is merely a circular letter intended for the various churches that Paul visited. While this argument cannot be sufficiently adjudicated in this present study, it is pertinent to note that the purpose of Paul's epistle was to ensure that the church remained together against any ideas that threatened to split it apart or cause it to move

away from its heritage, (cf. 4:1–6). The passage (Eph. 5:21–33) under consideration is part of the broader section of the letter (5:21–6:9), and it focuses on the need for a sociocultural examination of ancient households and their codes of conduct.

The household code in Ephesians. 5:21–33 will only be appreciated if a plausible picture of the socio-cultural context of the pericope is well captured. Findings from the writings of scholars like Balch (1988) and Osiek and Balch (1990) demonstrate that in first-century society, the household was the basic form of kinship. A household in the Roman Empire was made up of all individuals who were by law under the paternal patronage (power, authority) of the male head. These individuals, according to Hanson (1996, 66), include “children, slaves, freed persons, and clients as well as the spouses of all these persons.” Therefore, the home, according to Hanson (1996, 66), was seen as “a unit of identity, solidarity, and status” and a microcosm of society.

The household in the Greco-Roman society was structured around patriarchy with “fatherly dominion and responsibility as legitimate rule over the entire household while the submission of women, children and slaves was merely taken for granted” (Girard 2000, 138–139). Marriages in this patriarchal Greco-Roman society, as grimly captured by Miles (2006), were not motivated by love. Instead, fathers set their female children up to promote their business and political interests. Moreover, in the Greco-Roman society, fathers were unwilling to raise female children, and there was a high mortality rate among women, which skewed the gender ratio in the Roman population, with maybe as few as seven women for every ten males (Miles 2006, 85). As a result, young girls between the ages of 12 and 14 or even at a younger age of 8 were given out in marriage to older men who were in their thirties (Russell 1958, 105). Because of their tenderness in age, these young girls were often accused of giving more allegiance and loyalty to their biological families instead of their husbands. It is also noteworthy that husbands view their emotional closeness to their spouses as a sign of weakness in this patriarchal society. Bartchy (2005, 65) notes that “if someone wanted an intimate confidant, he or she was more likely to go to a brother or sister than to a spouse”. This also contributed to a high rate of prostitution, domestic violence, and divorce in the Greco-Roman society of that time (cf. Baldon 1962: 103; Stark 1996, 117; Coontz 2006, 65–80).

Based on the above, many Greek and Roman philosophers, including Plutarch and Aristotle, compiled codes of conduct, also known as household codes, to maintain orderliness in the home and society (Keener 1992, 167–68). While these secular writings reinforced obedience upon slaves, children, and wives, they encouraged family patriarchs to “rule” or “exercise authority” over those under them (Keener 1992). On the other hand, the household codes found in the New Testament are primarily intended to serve an apologetic purpose. Christians are encouraged to exhibit God's inclusive household in society. They are to live in peace and harmony as God's newly established people in Christ.

In Ephesians 5:21-33, Paul re-imagined the household ethos from a Christological point of view. By encouraging husbands and wives to love and submit to one another, Dahl and Juel (2000, 1–18) propose that Paul modifies the common tendency to hold only the man of the house accountable for maintaining order in the entire household. Advancing this idea, Gombis (2005, 327) postulates that there are no other first-century household codes that contain the mandate for husbands to love their wives (5:25, 28) other than those found in the Pauline letters. Also, it is pertinent to note that the kind of masculine behaviour Paul advocated in Ephesians 5:21–33 is different from what was obtainable in the Greco-Roman society of that time. For instance, Greco-Roman men were expected to be macho, domineering, and virulent (cf. Gombis 2005). Hence, the idea of "nourishing and cherishing" in verse 29 did not correspond to first-century "real man" behaviour. Also, it is important to note that Paul was asking men who were in their late 30s to show love and care for young girls who were only eight years old because of marriage. In urging a man to love and care for his wife as he does himself, Paul posed a serious challenge to patriarchal motives for marriage in the first-century world, where the husband primarily marries a wife to fulfil their own needs for a legitimate heir and to manage the household (Balla 2003).

Paul introduces new attitudes in Ephesians 5:21–33 that are subtly intended to confront and subvert exploitative elements of the ancient household ethos, even though he does not explicitly abolish the traditional hierarchical structures of first-century society (cf. Balla 2003, 165–178; Mollenkott 2003, 45–53). Put differently, Paul's aim is probably to change relationships within hierarchical structures in the home and counteract the destructive effects of the powers upon human relationships. Underestimating this would allow for significant misunderstandings and misuse of the code. It seems to remind husbands and wives of their radically different orientation in Christ, which simultaneously alienates them from (life-denying aspects of) their traditional household culture and invites them to identify with its familiar ethos.

## Closing Reading of Ephesians 5:21–33

Thematically, the text of Eph. 5: 21–33 is structured as follows: Reciprocal Submission of Husbands and Wives (v. 21), Submission of wives to their husbands (vv. 22–24), Husband's love to their wives (vv. 25–31), and Summary of exhortation (vv. 32–33).

### **vv. 21: Reciprocal Submission of Husband and Wife**

The husband-wife's relationship and the driving force behind it are described in v. 21. The mutual relationship of the husband and the wife is described with the middle participle *hypotassomenoi* (from *hypotassō*), which functions here as imperative.<sup>1</sup> The

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1 For further discussions on the possibility of participles functioning as imperative, see Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, SPIB, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963, 129; Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of the New Testament Syntax*, (Michigan: Zondervan, 2000), 283.

middle of *hypotassō* is often employed to denote the expected behavioural mood of the individuals being addressed. It means “to submit” or “to subject oneself” (cf. 1 Pet 3:1; Rom. 13:1; Col 3:18). It suggests willingly submitting to another's authority or voluntarily accepting their authority. The main obstacle to comprehending this verse, as Miles (2013,77) rightly observes, is that this verb is frequently taken to mean “to be docile,” “to be obedient,” or “to need guidance” when used in a passive sense. The reciprocal pronoun *allēlois* (to one another) denotes a mutual relationship in which putting oneself beneath another person is intended.

However, scholars disagree on whether *hypotassomenoi* is meant for all forms of relationships within the household codes, including those between parents and children, master and servants, and husband and wife, or just for one specific kind of relationship, such as that between a husband and wife. Some scholars, such as Keener (1992), Miles (2006), and Belz (2013), contend that it applies only to married couples and requires reciprocal submission on the part of the husband and wife, while Bruce (1984), Hendrix (1988), Dahl and Juel (2000), and Gombis, (2005) argue that it applies to all Christians in various types of relationships. This study is of the view that *hypotassomenoi* in v. 21 regulates relationships between husband and wife as well as other relationships within the Ephesian household codes (5:21–6:9). Furthermore, the expressions “having the same master in heaven” and “reverence for Christ” do not exclude mutual submission between husband and wife. Lending credence to this, Keener (1993) adumbrates that spouses ought to “act in a loving, considerate, self-giving way towards one another.” What this probably implies is that Paul views husband and wife as partners with equal respect and dignity.

### **vv. 22-24: Submission of Wives to Their Husbands**

Verse 22 starts with the statement *Αἱ γυναῖκες τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν ὡς τῷ Κυρίῳ* (“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord”). Paul starts his plea to wives by saying that since their husbands are the head of the household and Christ is the head of the church, they should submit to them as well. The word *γυναῖκες* is a feminine noun which probably comes from the base of *γίνομαι*. However, *γυναῖκες* is often used to refer to women in its generic sense. In this context, however, *γυναῖκες* is specifically used to describe married women (wives) because of the presence of “*ἰδίοις*”, a possessive adjective that gives *γυναῖκες* a personal connotation about *ἀνδράσιν* (husbands), rather than men, (Balz and Schneider 1990, 131).

More so, the verb “*ὑποτάσσεσθε*” (submit), which is in its plural middle or passive imperative, is originally absent from some early manuscripts, including Codex Vaticanus and Papyrus 46. Nevertheless, it appears in the majority of manuscripts, including Codex Alexandrinus, Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis, Codex Cambridge, Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Dresden, Codex Washington, among others, either as a third

person present hortatory subjunctive (ὑποτάσσεσθσαν) or as a second person present middle or passive imperative (ὑποτάσσεσθε). Since the previous and subsequent contexts use the second-person present imperative, it can be concluded that the verb was omitted from the original text and was scribal interpolated for clarity. Furthermore, it would be the same as the Colossian 3:18 parallel passage. George and Scott (1968, 818) explain that the verb “ὑποτάσσεσθε” means “to be subject, subordinate,” and it is the present middle or passive of ὑποτάσσω. It is frequently translated as “submit yourselves” or “subject yourselves,” or even as “in subjection” or “put under.”

The middle version of ὑποτάσσεσθε suggests that the subject chooses to submit voluntarily, acting as a free agent, whereas the passive version conveys the idea of someone being coerced into submission by a superior authority. According to Hoehner (2006, 732), there are three primary reasons why the middle version of ὑποτάσσεσθε seems to fit the context. First of all, there is no indication that the church is being coerced into submitting to Christ. Second, the active imperative, which requires the subject to take action to love his wife, is used to express the husband's duty. Thirdly, in the preceding context (5:18–21), the fifth participle is viewed as the middle, where the subject is in charge of the action. At the same time, the other four particles are dependent on the imperative “to be filled by the Holy Spirit” and are, therefore, active. As a result, it would be better and more appropriate to interpret “submission” in this context as a middle ground in which the wife acts freely before God. Adding to this, Chadwick (1976:984) postulates that the wife's submission to her husband is “an earthly enactment of the heavenly relation between the church and Christ.” Henry (2006, 2317) develops this idea further by speculating that the wife honours and obeys her husband following the Church's submission to and reverence for Christ, thereby acknowledging God's instruction. As a result, the wives' submissions represent their acceptance of the institutional order established by God in the home and church. It follows that submission promotes harmony and order in the church.

Paul gives a reason for wives' submission in verses 23–24 as he continues his exhortation on the duties of wives. As such, Paul employs a metaphor when he uses the word Κεφαλή (“head”). Henry (2006, 2317) states that “the metaphor is taken from the head in the natural body, which being the seat of reason, wisdom, and knowledge as well as the fountain of sense and motion, is more excellent than the rest of the body.” Worthy of note, Κεφαλή has been used in reference to Christ in two previous verses (1:22 and 4:15). For example, in v. 1:22, Christ is shown to be the ruler of everything. To put it more succinctly, Best (1998, 535) argues that Christ is Κεφαλή over all principalities, powers, and the cosmos; therefore, headship denotes source, authority, and rule.

In this present study, the headship of the husband is compared to that of Christ, who is the ruler and has power and authority over all creation. More vividly, O'Brien (1999, 413) observed that Christ's headship and provision of care and nourishment are manifestations of his rule over humanity, which is necessary to accomplish divine

purposes. In their contribution, Wolfg and Musculus (2011, 386) argue that a wife must submit to her husband because he is the head of the household and is distinguished by his strength, authority, intelligence, and creation in God's image. This study, however, feels that Wolfg and Musculus's interpretation of submission appears to be biased in this particular context. It seems that Wolfg and Musculus are saying that a woman should submit to her husband because she is inferior to him in every way. Conversely, some scriptural verses declare that men and women are equal and made in God's image (cf. Gen. 1:27; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; Rom. 10:12). Therefore, headship in this context clearly expresses the idea of service and benevolent leadership rather than implying dominance and superiority.

#### **vv. 25-31: Husband's Love for His Wife**

Paul shifts his emphasis from the wife's responsibility to that of the husband in verse 25. The verse opens with Οἱ ἄνδρες, ἀγαπᾶτε τὰς γυναῖκας, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς ἠγάπησεν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς (“Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it”). The word ἀγαπᾶτε (“love”) is a plural verb derived from ἀγαπάω (“to love”). As a present imperative active, the word ἀγαπᾶτε shows that the husband's love for the wife is a continuous process. For Hoehner (2006, 772), ἀγαπᾶτε is a kind of love that is “unconditional, it loves when not loved back, gives without getting; a love that seeks the highest good in a person.” This implies that husbands are supposed to love their spouses even when they are unloving and undeserving.

Furthermore, the husband's love is independent of the wife's submission, just as the wife's submission is independent of her husband's love. The kind of love that Christ demonstrated to the church encapsulates what a husband must have. He emptied himself for the church in return for nothing. Thus, the husband's love for his wife is given a Christological meaning here, with selflessness as the epicentre of such love.

In vv. 25b – 27, Paul compares husbands' love for their wives to that of Christ to church. The goal of such love is presented by using the ἴνα clause. The first word in verse 25b, καθὼς, is a comparative particle that compares the husband's love to that of Christ. Christ turns into the ideal representation of love. Paul emphasised that Christ loved the church to sanctify her and present her to himself as a radiant, holy, and blameless church. The expression "τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος ἐν ῥήματι" (by the washing of water with the word) most likely refers to baptism, or possibly the redemptive act of Christ rather than the baptismal ritual (cf. Tit. 3:5).

In v. 28, Paul makes a compelling case for the husband's obligation to love his wife as his own body. This is a very clear statement. Paul seems to be taking cues from Lev. 19:18, which states, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” In response to this verse, Sampley (2004,94) offered an insightful observation, stating that “...the husband should be able to love his wife as he loves himself. Since he can love himself without thinking, he ought to be able to love his wife in the same intuitive way.” Relying heavily on



Sampley's view, it can be concluded that a husband's love for his wife is constant and consistent with his nature rather than a duty. Naturally, this brings up the idea of unconditional love, which transcends all other forms of love, including sexual love.

### **v. 32-33: Summary of Exhortation**

Summarising his exhortation, Paul, in v. 32, first claimed that it is a mystery. Nevertheless, some scholars, including Moritez (1996) and Wolfg and Musculus (2011), believe that the “mystery” Paul alludes to here represents a deeper significance of human marriage in Gen. 2:24. Sampley (2004, 96), however, issued a strong warning against this interpretation, stating that “this cannot be the case because Gen. 2:24 is just an illustration of that spirit union and the text already makes mention of the Christians as the body of Christ.” Paul signals the end of his discussion with the word *πλὴν*, which appears at the beginning of v. 33. Thus, this particular verse serves as a succinct recap of the pericope's contents. Wives are to fear their husbands, and husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church. There are two common interpretations of what “fear” means. It can, on the one hand, mean “reverence” or “respect.” (cf: Lk. 1:50, 2 Cor. 7:1, Rom. 3:18, and Rev. 11:18). Alternatively, it could signify “alarm, dread, fright,” which is the self-regarding fear of the slave or criminal due to guilt (cf. Lk. 12:5, Jn. 14:27, Rom. 8:15, Heb. 13:16, 2 Tim. 1:7). In this context, fear is used to refer to reverencing or respecting her husband.

## **Overview of Christian Marriage in Ebonyi State**

Christian marriages are designed, among other reasons, to mirror the relationship between Christ and the Church, which entails love, peace, happiness, forbearance and rest from many challenges in life; however, in many Christian marriages in Ebonyi State, the opposite, instead, seems to be the case. Many married couples in Ebonyi State are bedevilled with fear, restlessness and trepidation, especially when they remember what awaits them at their respective homes (Interviewee 1, personal comm. August 14, 2023). Confirming this, Interviewee 2 (personal comm. August 22, 2023), whose 6-month-old marriage is in a state of quagmire, admitted that he has never known peace ever since he got married because of his wife's stubbornness and hostility. He also added that his wife's provocative behaviour has increased his blood pressure, and this now makes him to always travel outside the State almost every weekend to have peace of mind.

Adding to the above, Interviewee 3 (personal comm. September 13, 2023) narrated how her husband, who is also a pastor in Ishelu Local Government Area, beat her daily at any slightest provocation. To substantiate this, Interviewee 3 cited the most recent case that made her run away from the marriage. She narrates that:

As a pastor's wife, a lot of people thought my marriage was hitch-free but they do not know what I am going through at the hand of my husband who claimed to be a man of God. As you can see, I am eight months pregnant, but can you imagine that my so-called

husband, that wicked man nearly strangled me last week with his bare hand after I confronted him over a message with erotic content I saw on his phone? You see all these.... There are various degrees of injuries I sustained after his attack. Because no one would believe me as everyone saw him as a peacemaker, I packed my belongings and ran away.

Furthermore, while acknowledging that some Christian marriages in Ebonyi State are facing many challenges, Interviewee 4 (personal comm. July 27, 2023) reveals that some Christian marriages in Ebonyi State today have either collapsed or are on the verge of collapse. He clearly stated thus:

In my twenty-two years of pastoring, I have come to realize that some Christians, especially those from Pentecostal Churches in Ebonyi State, see marriage as an emergency measure to curtail sexual feelings/pressure, loneliness, societal, cultural, economic and political pressures, and so on. They only think marriage is an avenue for enjoyment and meeting some personal expectations. Therefore, many of them rush to me and say, "Daddy, I want to marry." Their expressions show that they are unaware or unprepared to face the challenges of marriage. If I try to help them, they run away to another church and get married. I tell you, any marriage contracted on faulty grounds will result in a series of breakdowns at the glimpse of challenges.

From the ongoing, it is evident that in the contemporary Ebonyi state, there is a misunderstanding and abuse of Christian marriage in a way that affects not just the individuals but the church and society in general. Hence, if the factors responsible for the high rate of break-down of Christian marriages, especially in Ebonyi State and its effects are understood by couples and intending couples, Church leaders and marriage counsellors, many Christian marriages will be saved.

## Variables Associated with the Problem of Christian Marriage in Ebonyi State

Insights from IDI uncover several variables responsible for the problem of Christian marriage in contemporary Ebonyi State. Some of them include:

### **Patriarchy**

Like most African communities, the culture of Igbo traditional society is essentially patriarchal. To substantiate this, Casimir, Chukwuelobe and Ugwu (2014) observe that in Igbo society, the traditional gender roles are usually maintained by a system of patriarchy which sees men as pre-eminent human beings and women as secondary whose roles are meant to complement those of men.

In Ebonyi State, the idea that men are naturally superior to women still permeates every aspect of people's lives, including their religion. After their conversion to Christianity, many Christians in Ebonyi State still carry a lot of their traditional beliefs, customs, and cultural values, including patriarchy, into their new faith. While acknowledging the fact

that patriarchy is one of the main challenges facing Christian marriages in Ebonyi State, Interviewee 5 (personal comm. September 7, 2023) argues that Pauline's injunction that the husband is the head seems to reiterate the traditional idea of patriarchy in the mind of many (Christian) husbands in Ebonyi State as they often quote this scripture in the defence of their unpleasant actions against their wives.

### **Childlessness**

Childlessness is unacceptable to a society such as the Igbo that values children. In Igbo society, generally, a woman cannot be considered a mother without a child of her own. Basden (1966:68) captures the importance of children to Igbo women more succinctly when he argues that “to be childless is the greatest calamity that can befall a woman.” For an Igbo man, producing children, especially male children, is very necessary to continue the family lineage; otherwise, the family would become extinct (Interviewee 6, personal comm. September 13, 2023).

In the contemporary Ebonyi State, some Christian couples cling tenaciously to this age-old conviction. Collaborating this, Interviewee 7 (personal comm. September 15, 2023), who has been an Archdeacon for more than four years in Ishielu LGA, confirms that some Christian couples in his Archdeaconry still believe that a marriage that is not blessed with children is not yet considered to have achieved its primary aim. He further stated that this issue has shattered the love and harmony between many Christian couples in his Church. From the ongoing, it is obvious that infertility in marriage is still considered one of the major problems facing Christian marriages in Ebonyi State.

### **Postmodernism**

Postmodernism is an intellectual stance which claims that morality comes from the greater demand of people (Nuyen 1992). In other words, people decide what is right or wrong, not God. This ideology is seriously threatening some of the basic New Testament concepts, especially those that have to do with gender roles, such as the concept of submission, headship, and so on. Lending credence to this, Interviewee 8 (personal comm. September 11, 2023) explained that we live in a world where postmodernism is challenging biblical teachings, especially about gender roles in marriage. Postmodernism makes certain biblical injunctions such as “wife submit to your husband...” to be relative, and many Christians, especially in Ebonyi State, are confused as to what to believe and accept as a moral standard (Interviewee 8, personal comm. September 11, 2023).

The heightened cases of domestic violence and divorce in most Christian marriages in Ebonyi State today, as observed by Interviewee 9 (personal comm. September 20, 2023), are some areas that reveal the challenge of postmodernism on Christian marriage. Interviewee 10 (personal comm. September 24, 2023) also makes an interesting revelation on the ongoing when she associated the current trend of women's liberation

movements and feminism with the prevalence of marital breakdown among Christian marriages, especially in Ebonyi State today. On this, Interviewee 10 explains thus:

The majority of Christian women in today's world, particularly the educated ones, have realized how important it is to be properly acknowledged for their status. The majority of these women firmly feel that it is time for them to escape the grasp of tradition, which dehumanizes and prejudices them by placing them beneath males. They often misrepresent some of the divine precepts of marriage, such as tolerance and mutual submission, in their endeavour. They also think that there are political issues with women's and men's relationships. Their goal is equal rights for men and women in marriage. Unfortunately, some Christian women are following this mindset, which has caused some marriages to fail, particularly in Ebonyi State.

### Lessons from Ephesians 5:21–33 for Christian Marriages in Ebonyi State

Based on the exegesis done in Eph. 5:21–33, the researcher identifies three implications for Christian marriages in Ebonyi State. These include:

#### **A Wife's Submission to Her Husband Does Not Imply Inferiority but Acceptance of Orderliness in the Home**

The wife's submission does not imply weakness or inferiority but rather obedience and acceptance of God's institutional order in the home and the church, as demonstrated in the exegetical interpretation of Ephesians 5:21–33. This submission fosters unity since it is in line with the church's duty to Christ and involves honouring, respecting, and obeying the husband. Many women in Ebonyi State have wrongly projected the act of submission to their husbands to mean inferiority and weakness, as observed in the variables associated with the problem of Christian marriage in the Ebonyi State. Ephesians 5:21–33 touches a tender chord in the heart of this issue and teaches Christian women in Ebonyi State that submission is a necessary component of peaceful coexistence in the home and an existential sign of acceptance and obedience of the divine institutional order in the family.

#### **The Headship of the Husband in the Home is Not a Sign of Dominance but Denotes Care, Protection, Service and Love**

From the exegesis of Ephesians 5:21–33, it is crystal clear that Paul addresses the patriarchal inclination of first-century men in a culture that expects them to be dominant, virile, authoritative, and “headmasters” over their spouses and the whole household. When Paul urged husbands to love, cherish, and care for their wives as much as they do themselves, he posed a serious threat to the patriarchal marriage motives of that time. By comparing Christ's headship over the Church to that of the husband over his wife, Paul made a point of saying that Christ's headship over the Church is manifested in his care and nourishment of the church to accomplish divine purpose. Therefore, rather than expressing authority and dominance, the husband's headship in the family should entail unconditional love, protection, care, selflessness and servant-leadership. It is not

surprising that this understanding is an antithesis of the current situation of some Christian marriages in Ebonyi State. Not only do some Christian husbands in Ebonyi State exhibit extravagant dominance and high-handedness in their marriage, but they also beat and mistreat their spouses over any slight misunderstanding. Ephesians 5:21–33 offers a serious invitation to these husbands in Ebonyi State to deeply ponder on the revealed mystery of the headship Christ exercises over the church and model it after their headship over their wives.

### **Marriage Unifies Husbands and Wives**

Ephesians 5:21–33 holds promise for husbands and wives who want a happy and peaceful marriage. When Paul declared in v. 31, “For this reason (of marriage) a man shall leave (behind) his father and mother (and all other things that define him as a bachelor) and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh,” it was obvious that he was alluding to Gen. 2:24. The message here is that marriage binds a man and a woman in all areas of life, which includes physical intimacy, thought, feelings, and interest. In other words, when one is weeping, the other should not rejoice. If one is in need, the other offers assistance as soon as possible. At all times and in all conditions, they are forever united in love.

Such an understanding of marriage is absent among some Christian couples in Ebonyi State. As already established, some Christian marriages in Ebonyi State seem to be a game of cat and kitten, especially in cases where there is childlessness, patriarchal tendencies, postmodernistic proclivity and so on. Ephesians 5:21–33 not only encourages the husband and wife to embrace one other's shortcomings but also depicts their union in all areas of life as a stabilising force against these marital hazards.

### **Conclusion**

Ephesians 5:21–33 treats Christian marriage from the perspective of the relationship between husband and wife and likens it to that between Christ and the church. It maintains that marriage is a union between a man and a woman, which makes them one, similar to Christ and the church. The oneness of husband and wife in marriage entails their equality in dignity, although they have different roles. The husband is his wife's head, but headship does not mean he should dominate and subjugate his wife. It rather entails that the husband should love and care for his wife as one cares for his body and as Christ loves and cares for his body, the church. A wife should submit to her husband, and submission is not meant to be servile obedience but a loving acceptance of the headship of the husband, just as the church submits to Christ. Eph. 5:21–33 gives a new understanding and perspective to the husband-wife relationship, which serves as a solution to the prevailing marital instability among Christians in Ebonyi State today.

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