



**Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church**  
Sanford, North Carolina

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**“Mystical Union”**  
**Ephesians 5:21-33**

They were the Youngs, V. L. and Bercha. To listen to them, you'd think they never got along! They were always bickering, but in reality, they were incredibly close. They had been married for sixty years. When she died, it sucked the life out of him.

They did love to get under each other's skin, though! As I visited in their home one day, I noticed a couple of plaques on the wall in their den, and I knew there had to be a story behind them. One day, Mr. Young had come in and hung up the first plaque—one that I've always hated. It said:

*Four Things a Woman Should Know*

*How to look like a girl,  
How to act like a lady,  
How to think like a man,  
How to work like a dog.*

Not to be outdone, Mrs. Young came in a few days later, and hung another plaque under the first. It read:

*The opinions expressed  
by the husband of this household  
are not necessarily those of its management.*

Mrs. Young never did like this passage of Scripture. In fact, though she loved the Lord, and accepted and respected the Bible as God's Word, I heard her argue with Paul in this passage on more than one occasion!

I know. I understand. These words from Paul grate on our twenty-first century sensibilities like fingernails on a chalkboard! I mean, in our contemporary world, does Paul *really* expect things to work this way? In his day, even up to sixty years ago, what he *appears* to be saying worked OK (at least from the husband's perspective). But we live on the other side of women's liberation in the West! And Paul wants wives to submit to their husbands?

Then again, is what he's saying to husbands realistic? We love our wives, yes. But to the point of loving them as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her? Aren't we talking crucifixion here?

Many times the reality is much more like the young man sitting on the porch swing with his sweetheart, describing his great love for her: “Darling, I’d climb the highest mountain to be with you.” She smiles a little smile. “I’d cross the largest, hottest desert to get to be with you.” Her smile widens. “I’d swim the widest, deepest ocean, just to get to be with you!” Now, she’s blushing, and says to him, “That’s so sweet. By the way, are you coming over tomorrow night?” And he answers, “If it’s not raining.”

Is this *all* Paul was saying here as he drags his fingernails across the chalkboard? Is he just laying down the law that wives are little more than slaves to husbands who are supposed to be noble?

Well, Paul *is* talking to the Ephesians here about the marriage relationship—from a Christian perspective. “Household codes,” as scholars call them, were not at all uncommon in his day. They were found among the pagans and Jews as well as among the Christians. After all, hasn’t the family always been the basic foundational unit of society? Is it really any surprise that the ancients thought it wise to provide some guidance for how a family should operate?

But when we say “family,” are we even talking about the same thing as they were in the ancient world, where “family” also included extended family and slaves or servants—and the family business?

And for them, was a wife a partner, or was she more a slave to be at the beck and call of her husband? Could she attend to her needs and desires? Or had her husband married her to keep the household running smoothly, bear and rear the children, and keep happy a husband who could divorce her at the drop of a hat for any reason or no reason? And she was supposed to do all this, no matter how he treated her?

When Paul offers these very clear instructions for husbands and wives, is he talking just to people who lived very long ago and very far away, or is he talking to us as well? Is he just doing what everybody else (Jews and pagans, as well as Christians) did in his day?

Or is he doing something more? Yes, Paul *is* offering an ethic for marriage *from a Christian perspective*. But does he just pull it out of the air, or does he base it on something solid? What does he offer as a basis for these instructions to the Ephesians?

Did you notice how Paul has woven throughout the passage comments about the relationship between Christ and his church?

A husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, and is himself the Savior of the body. Therefore, as the church submits to Christ, so wives should to their husbands (oops—there go the fingernails again!).

Husbands, on the other hand, must love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water with the word (a reference to baptism, perhaps analogous to the ancient ceremonial bridal bath). In doing so, he is taking away every spot, wrinkle, or any such thing, so he might present her to himself holy and faultless. As believers, we are members of Christ’s church, members of his body, which he nourishes and cares for.

Maybe there’s more here than meets the eye. Paul is talking about a Christian marriage ethic, yes. But he’s providing an awesome *theological basis* for his argument—Christ’s relationship with his church.

In fact, when, to bolster his argument about the kind of commitment husbands ought to have to their wives, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 (“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two will become one flesh,” 5:31),<sup>1</sup> he stuns us with this comment: “This is a profound mystery; but *I* am saying that it is about Christ and the church.”

The church *is* the bride of Christ, but it’s all really more about the bridegroom, Christ, than about the bride, the church! It’s about what ancient Christian preachers and writers called the “mystical union” of Christ and the church (the old Episcopal wedding ceremony uses this language).

God is making the church one with Christ in an eternal, mystical union! Christ loves his church. He is her head, and he is preparing her to present her to himself in splendor, glory, and perfection. He has given all he could possibly give to her and for her, for he has given up himself, his very life, for her—to give her life, to make her what he intends for her to be! And in all this, he has brought her into an eternal, mystical union with himself—a union that transcends understanding, definition, or even description, a union that is not of this world, but of that other, real world, the realm of eternity!

One of the greatest joys I’ve had through the years I’ve been a pastor is to have a couple with whom I have counseled, and about whose love, understanding, and commitment I feel good, come before me in the sanctuary to declare their love and their vows of faithfulness and commitment in the presence of God and human witnesses. In that service, two things usually happen that serve as tokens of the love and commitments being pledged, and the union that’s being established.

First, the bride and groom give each other rings, signs of the purity and endlessness of their love and the commitments they’re making.

As they take the rings and place them on each other’s fingers, they repeat these words to each other: “With this ring I wed you, and I endow you with all my worldly goods. I am yours, and all that I have is yours.”

Then, in most of the weddings I do, the bride and groom move to a small candelabra with three candles, the two outside ones burning. As I talk about the significance of the candles, together they light the center candle—the *unity candle*—and extinguish their own separate candles. What a telling sign of the holy union they’re entering in this service!

As the couple begins their journey together, these tokens are important signs. If their marriage becomes successful, these signs become infused with the substance of their experience, taking on more and more meaning through the years. They experience what the one flame represents, and the rings hold more memories than can be recounted: memories of joys and sorrows shared, of mutual loving sacrifice and support—and mutual submission.

The tokens become tangible acts—acts like my wife Jo Ann’s Grandpa Dudney putting his beloved wheelchair-bound wife, who had been a semi-invalid for two decades, in their little Ford Courier pickup and taking her from the Cherry Grove community to Joe’s Barbecue in Whiteville (about twenty miles one-way) anytime she said, “I think I might could eat a little bit of barbecue.”

Or like Morton Kondracke, the no-nonsense, independent-thinking journalist who appears on shows like *The McLaughlin Group* and Fox’s *The Beltway Boys*. Some years ago, his beloved wife Milly was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. Since she had been a counselor at a

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations in this sermon are my own translations.

neurology clinic in Bethesda, Maryland, she was very familiar with the devastating effects Parkinson's can have on patients and their families.

In an interview with Dick Staub, Kondracke described how they first discovered that Milly had the disease—a glitch in her handwriting, then a tremor in her little finger, then a wobbly foot on the brake pedal when she was driving.

Her doctor prescribed her a medication but didn't tell her what it was. But when she looked at the bottle and saw the medication's name, she knew, and called Kondracke at work, totally distraught and hysterical. When he got there, she was standing in the bedroom with the medicine bottle in her hand, and told him, "This is a Parkinson's medicine. It can't be Parkinson's. I've seen Parkinson's. It's a horrible disease. I won't be able to talk. I won't be able to walk. I won't be able to swallow. I won't be able to eat. You'll have to take me to the bathroom. I'll be totally dependent. You won't love me anymore. You'll leave me."

He assured her that he would be with her and take care of her no matter what. In the interview, he told Staub:

You just ask God's help everyday, multiple times a day. I couldn't do this without God's help. I pray for help and strength and Milly's deliverance, all the time. I simply could not do this without feeling that I was doing God's work in a small way. I've asked God innumerable times, you know, *So what is my purpose here on Earth?* hoping that he will add a new and grandiose dimension to this, which he never does. The message always comes back the same: *Your job here is to take care of Milly.*<sup>2</sup>

One of my all-time favorite short stories is O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi."

It's the day before Christmas, and Della only has \$1.87 that she's scrimped and scraped to save to buy her beloved husband Jim a present.

He has a beautiful gold pocket watch that belonged to his grandfather, then his father, and it's his pride and joy. She wants to buy him a chain and fob, but she's only been able to save \$1.87. So she decides what she'll do—she'll sell *her* pride and joy, *her hair*, to get the money for it.

She goes and has her hair cut and sells it for \$20, then joyfully goes and buys a simple but elegant *platinum* chain and fob for Jim's watch. She's almost giddy with excitement, tinged by some fear of what he'll think about what she's done.

He comes in, sees her new hairdo, and he's taken back for a moment. She explains what she's done, and assures him her hair will grow back soon.

Then she says, "Do you want me to go put the chops on now?"

Jim snaps out of his momentary shock, and pulls a gift out of his overcoat.

She opens it, and it's the beautiful set of combs she's been wanting for her hair for so long. She's ecstatic.

Then she gives him his gift. He opens it, and she wants him to put it on his watch to see how it looks.

He tumbles down on the couch, puts his hands on the back of his head, and says, "Dell, let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "The Dick Staub Interview: Morton Kondracke" ChristianityToday.com (8-13-02). Cited on preachingtoday.com.

<sup>3</sup> This story is included in numerous collections and anthologies, including Alice Gray, compiler, *Stories for the Heart: Over 100 Stories to Encourage your Soul* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996), 141-146.

“Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her, that he might make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water with the word . . . The two shall become one flesh. This is a profound mystery, and *I* am saying that it is about Christ and the church.”

And the token of his love, the tangible act—the sign and substance of his commitment to us, the church, the bride of Christ? Isn't it obvious?

†*MEG*