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Re-reading "Submit" in Ephesians 5:21–24: A Biblical-Theological and Afrocentric Exegetical Study of Hypotassō

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Abstract

Ephesians 5:22 occupies a prominent place in African Christian marriage discourse, where "submission" is frequently invoked as a biblical warrant for wifely subordination. This study argues that such reception rests on compound exegetical oversights involving grammar, textual history, lexical meaning, literary structure, and cultural pre-understanding. Using exegetical analysis as its primary method and African Cultural Hermeneutics as its contextual evaluative lens, the study examines hypotassō (ὑποτάσσω) in Ephesians 5:21–24 in relation to the

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mutual submission frame of 5:21, the debated textual status of the verb in 5:22, the semantic range of hypotassō, and the Christological constraint created by kephalē (κεφαλή) and the sōtēr qualifier in 5:23. It further assesses how African patriarchal assumptions, translation habits, paragraphing, and selective preaching have often made submission function as a one-directional command against women. The study finds that Paul presents submission as a Spirit-shaped, voluntary, relational, and Christological accountable posture within the wider framework of mutual submission. It therefore calls African Christian communities to teach marital order as mutual honour, sacrificial responsibility, and Christlike service rather than coercive hierarchy.

Keywords: Hypotassō; Ephesians 5:21–24; mutual submission; kephalē; African Christianity; African Cultural Hermeneutics; Pauline Haustafeln.

Introduction

Biblical interpretation does not happen in a vacuum. From the early Christian church to the present, interpretation has been shaped by the cultural settings in which Scripture is read, and the relationship between text and culture is rarely straightforward.[6] Cultural assumptions frequently enter the interpretive process before the reader has opened the text, determining in advance what the text is expected to say and, consequently, what it is heard to say. This dynamic is especially visible in the reception of Ephesians 5:21–24 within many African Christian settings, where the Greek term *hypotassō* (ὑποτάσσω), conventionally rendered "submit," has often functioned as the primary biblical warrant for an understanding of wifely submission that appears both culturally familiar and scripturally settled.

The central problem this study addresses is not whether Ephesians speaks of submission in marriage. It does. The problem is whether the dominant African Christian use of Ephesians 5:22 as an unconditional mandate for female subordination adequately represents the grammar, textual history, lexical field, literary structure, and theological logic of the passage. The study's research gap may be stated more sharply: although Western scholarship has debated the grammatical relationship between Ephesians 5:21 and 5:22, African Christian reception of *hypotassō* has not sufficiently examined how translation, paragraphing, cultural patriarchy, and selective preaching have combined to make "submission" function as a one-directional command against women.

This study therefore argues that the dominant African Christian reading of *hypotassō* in Ephesians 5:22–24 as unconditional female subordination is not demanded by the text but is frequently produced by a convergence of cultural pre-understanding and selective literary reception. Read in its full context, *hypotassō* points to a Spirit-shaped, voluntary, relational, and Christologically accountable posture within the wider framework of mutual submission. The wife's submission is not detached from the husband's obligation, nor is the husband's headship a warrant for coercive control. The passage reconfigures

[6] Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 1–17; David T. Adamo, "African Biblical Studies: Illusions, Realities and Challenges," *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 50, no. 1 (2016): a1972, https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i1.1972.

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marital order through reverence for Christ, cruciform love, and reciprocal responsibility.

The scholarly evidence supporting this claim begins with the textual and grammatical relation between verses 21 and 22. The oldest papyrus containing the relevant portion of Ephesians, Papyrus 46, is often dated to the second or third century and does not include an independent verb of submission in Ephesians 5:22; Codex Vaticanus also omits it.[7] Modern critical Greek texts such as NA28 and the SBL Greek New Testament likewise do not print an independent verb in verse 22.[8] Payne argues that the submission idea in verse 22 is therefore carried forward from verse 21, where *hypotassomenoi* governs the mutual submission of believers to one another as an expression of Spirit-filled communal life.[9] Merkle, Lincoln, Hoehner, Keener, and Barron likewise recognise that the grammatical and paragraphing relation between 5:21 and 5:22 is foundational for interpreting the household code.[10]

At the same time, the textual issue must be handled cautiously. The absence of an independent verb in major early witnesses and critical editions is exegetically significant, but it does not by itself settle the whole interpretation of the passage. Gurry has argued that the longer reading deserves renewed text-critical consideration, and the history of the variant remains debated.[11] The safer point is this: whether one follows the shorter reading printed in many critical editions or accepts an explicit verb in some manuscript traditions, verse 22 cannot responsibly be isolated from the Spirit-filled mutual submission frame of verse 21. The question is not merely whether a verb appears in 5:22, but how the wife's conduct is located within the wider syntax, theology, and Christological pattern of 5:18–33.

The interpretation of *kephalē* (κεφαλή) in Ephesians 5:23 has generated another major debate. Grudem argues that *kephalē* commonly conveys "authority over," while Cervin, Payne, and Westfall challenge this conclusion and emphasise meanings such as source, origin, prominence, or relational

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[7] Barbara Aland et al., eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), Eph. 5:21–22; Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 278–283.

[8] Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Eph. 5:21–22; Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature; Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010), Eph. 5:21–22.

[9] Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 278–290; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary 42 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 362–366.

[10] Benjamin L. Merkle, "The Start of Instruction to Wives and Husbands: Ephesians 5:21 or 5:22?," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 174, no. 694 (2017): 165–183; Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 716–720; Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 162–165; Joshua Robert Barron, "Mutual Submission, Mutual Respect: Reciprocal *Enkanyit* in Ephesians 5 in the Maasai Context," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 7, no. 1 (2021): 1–6, https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2021.v7n1.a33.

[11] Peter J. Gurry, "The Text of Eph 5.22 and the Start of the Ephesian Household Code," *New Testament Studies* 67, no. 4 (2021): 560–581, https://doi.org/10.1017/S002868852100014X.

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completion.[12] The present study does not need to settle the entire *kephalē* debate in order to make its central point. Whatever nuance one assigns to *kephalē*, Ephesians 5:23 immediately qualifies Christ's headship with the phrase "he himself [being] Saviour of the body." The husband is not invited to imitate an abstract hierarchy; he is measured by Christ's saving, self-giving relation to the church. Thus, the passage challenges not only wives but also husbands, not only domestic disorder but also cultural forms of patriarchy that seek biblical legitimacy without Christlike accountability.

Methodologically, the study employs exegetical analysis as its primary method, attending to the Greek text of Ephesians 5:21–24 with lexical, grammatical, textual, literary, and theological care. Its contextual application is shaped by African Cultural Hermeneutics (ACH). ACH is used here not to control the text but to evaluate how African cultural assumptions shape the reception of the text. The method proceeds in five steps: first, identifying the African cultural pre-understandings that accompany the reading of Ephesians 5:22; second, examining how those assumptions shape reception, preaching, and marital practice; third, returning to the grammatical and theological features of the biblical text; fourth, evaluating points of convergence and distortion between African cultural assumptions and the text; and fifth, proposing a corrected African Christian reading that is exegetically responsible and pastorally useful.[13] The contribution of the article lies in bringing Greek exegesis, text-critical caution, African hermeneutical evaluation, and pastoral concern into one argument. It shows that the submission question in Ephesians 5:21–24 is not resolved by choosing between the biblical text and the African context. It is resolved by allowing the text to speak in its own grammatical and theological voice while critically examining the cultural forces that have shaped its reception.

Background: The Ephesian Letter and Its Household Code

Ephesians is a letter of extraordinary theological density, addressed to a predominantly Gentile community living within the religiously complex and socially stratified environment of first-century Ephesus. The letter moves from the grand indicative of what God has accomplished in Christ—reconciliation, adoption, and the mystery of the church—to the ethical imperative of what believers are therefore called to embody in common life. The household code of 5:21–6:9 sits within this ethical section as the application of Spirit-filled living

[12] Wayne A. Grudem, "Does *Kephalē* ('Head') Mean 'Source' or 'Authority Over' in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples," *Trinity Journal* 6, no. 1 (1985): 38–59; Richard S. Cervin, "Does *Kephalē* Mean 'Source' or 'Authority Over' in Greek Literature? A Rebuttal," *Trinity Journal* 10, no. 1 (1989): 85–112; Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 117–137; Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 35–58; Julie Walsh and Jeffrey D. Miller, "Translating Ephesians 5.33," *The Bible Translator* 74, no. 1 (2023): 93–109, https://doi.org/10.1177/20516770231151420.

[13] Peter O. O. Ottuh and Moses Idemudia, "Navigating Trajectories in African Biblical Studies: D. T. Adamo and the Future of African Cultural Hermeneutics," *Ianna Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 55–64; David T. Adamo, "The Task and Distinctiveness of African Biblical Hermeneutics," *Old Testament Essays* 28, no. 1 (2015): 31–52.

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to the most intimate and ordered sphere of human existence: the household (*oikos*).[14]

The literary form of the household code (*Haustafeln*) was not invented by Paul.[15] It had precedents in Greco-Roman moral philosophy and household management literature, especially in discussions of the three relational pairs of husband and wife, parent and child, master and slave. These codes typically assigned authority to the male head of the household and expected compliance from those beneath him. Paul employs this recognised cultural form but transforms its moral logic from within. Fee, Thielman, Arnold, and Lincoln note that while Paul retains the conventional three-pair structure, he places it within a framework of Spirit-filled mutuality and Christological self-giving rather than social utility, male privilege, or rational hierarchy.[16]

This transformation is most visible at the point where the code begins. Verse 21—"submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ"—functions not as a detachable ethical saying but as the governing hinge on which the household code turns. Thielman and Arnold argue that the placement of verse 21 as both the culmination of the Spirit-filled living section and the introduction to the household code is structurally deliberate.[17] The husband-wife relationship addressed in 5:22–33 is therefore the first and most extended application of this mutual submission principle, not its negation.

Exegetical Analysis of Hypotassō in Ephesians 5:21–24

The crux of this study lies in the grammatical and theological relationship between Ephesians 5:21 and 5:22: whether the wife's submission in verse 22 is an independent command for unilateral female subordination or a specific application of the mutual submission already established in verse 21. The study argues for the latter, showing that *hypotassō* in this context describes a voluntary, Spirit-shaped relational posture governed by reverence for Christ and constrained by the Christological pattern of self-giving headship in verse 23.

Greek Transliteration:

> *Hypotassomenoi allēlois en phobō Christou, hai gynaikes tois idiois andrasin hōs tō kyriō, hoti anēr estin kephalē tēs*

[14] While this study refers to Paul as the author in keeping with the letter's self-presentation and much ecclesial usage, it recognises that Ephesians' authorship remains debated in critical scholarship. See Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 1–26; Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 28–36.

[15] The term *Haustafeln* is commonly used to describe New Testament household codes addressing household relationships. See Gordon D. Fee, "The Cultural Context of Ephesians 5:18–6:9," *Priscilla Papers* 16, no. 1 (2002): 3–8; Markus Barth, *Ephesians 4–6*, Anchor Bible 34A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 607–615.

[16] Fee, "Cultural Context," 3–8; Thielman, *Ephesians*, 365–371; Arnold, *Ephesians*, 349–356; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 358–365.

[17] Thielman, *Ephesians*, 365–371; Arnold, *Ephesians*, 349–356; Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 716–720.

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gynaikos hōs kai ho Christos kephalē tēs ekklēsias, autos sōtēr tou sōmatos.

Translation:

Submitting to one another in the fear of Christ, wives to their own husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife as also Christ is the head of the church, he himself being the Savior of the body.

The Lexical Field of *Hypotassō*

The verb *hypotassō* is formed from *hypo* ("under") and *tassō* ("to arrange," "to order," or "to assign to a place"). Lexically, it can denote ordered subordination, arrangement under authority, or the placing of oneself under another's direction.[18] Its use in military and administrative contexts is important, but it should not be made to carry more weight than context allows. Etymology and military background alone cannot determine the meaning of the term in Ephesians 5:21–24.

This caution is necessary because the manuscript's earlier formulation leaned too heavily on the idea that *hypotassō* is inherently voluntary in every Pauline context. That claim would be too broad. In Romans 13:1, for example, submission to governing authorities is not voluntary in precisely the same sense as the mutual submission of believers in Ephesians 5:21. The word's force depends on context. In Ephesians 5:21–22, the voluntary and relational nuance arises less from etymology alone and more from the participial form, reciprocal object (*allēlois*, "to one another"), Spirit-filled context, and grounding "in the fear of Christ."[19]

BDAG lists a range of meanings for *hypotassō*, including to subject, to subordinate, to subject oneself, and to place oneself under direction.[20] Payne and Westfall rightly stress that in the Pauline household contexts, the verb is qualified by the relationship, purpose, and theological frame in which it appears.[21] Thus, *hypotassō* in Ephesians 5 does not authorise absolute cultural subordination. It speaks of ordered relational conduct within a community already called to mutual submission and Spirit-filled reverence for Christ.

Verse 22 and Its Dependence on Verse 21

The most significant grammatical feature of Ephesians 5:22 is that, in many critical reconstructions of the earliest text, the verse has no independent main verb. It reads: *hai gynaikes tois idiois andrasin hōs tō kyriō*—"wives, to their own husbands as to the Lord." The verbal idea is supplied by ellipsis from verse 21:

[18] Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. "ὑποτάσσω"; Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), s.v. "ὑποτάσσω."
[19] Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 716–718; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 362–365; Thielman, *Ephesians*, 366–370.
[20] Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1042, s.v. "ὑποτάσσω."
[21] Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 278–290; Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 88–96.

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hypotassomenoi allēlois—"submitting to one another."[22] This means that verse 22 depends grammatically and conceptually on verse 21.

This dependence has major theological implications. If verse 22 borrows its verbal idea from verse 21, then it inherits the character of the submission already described there. That submission is mutual, since it is directed to "one another"; Spirit-generated, since it belongs to the participial sequence flowing from the command to be filled with the Spirit in 5:18; and Christologically grounded, since it is practised "in the fear of Christ." The wife's submission is therefore not an isolated command detached from the rest of Christian ethics. It is a particular domestic expression of a wider communal posture required of all believers.[23]

The later inclusion of an explicit verb in some manuscript traditions should also be described carefully. It is better not to say that later manuscripts created patriarchy or that the insertion was simply a narrowing of the text's meaning. A more cautious and academically defensible claim is that the later insertion of an explicit verb may have clarified the assumed sense for readers, but it also made it easier for later reception history to treat verse 22 as an independent command rather than as an elliptical continuation of verse 21. In African Christian preaching, this independence is often reinforced not only by translation but also by paragraph divisions, Bible headings, and pulpit habits that begin the marital instruction at verse 22 rather than verse 21.[24]

Two further phrases in verse 22 require attention. First, *tois idiois andrasin* means "to their own husbands." This phrase limits the marital instruction to the wife's relationship with her own husband; it does not establish the general subordination of women to men. Second, *hōs tō kyriō* ("as to the Lord") does not identify the husband with the Lord or make the husband the wife's absolute spiritual authority. Rather, it locates the wife's conduct within her prior allegiance to Christ. Submission is therefore Christologically accountable, not culturally unlimited. The wife's posture toward her husband must be understood within, not above, her reverence for Christ.

The Christological Constraint: *Kephalē* and *Sōtēr*

Ephesians 5:23 qualifies the wife's submission by anchoring it in a specific Christological analogy: "because the husband is the head (*kephalē*) of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, he himself being Saviour (*sōtēr*) of the body." The meaning of *kephalē* remains debated. Some scholars argue for "authority over," while others stress "source," "origin," prominence, responsibility, or

[22] Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Eph. 5:21–22; Holmes, *Greek New Testament: SBL Edition*, Eph. 5:21–22; Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 278–283; Merkle, "Start of Instruction," 165–183.
[23] Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 718–720; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 362–365; Thielman, *Ephesians*, 367–370.
[24] Merkle, "Start of Instruction," 165–183; Barron, "Mutual Submission, Mutual Respect," 1–6; Gurry, "Text of Eph 5.22," 560–581.

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relational completion.[25] In this context, however, the immediate qualifier "Saviour of the body" prevents any reading of headship as coercive dominance.

The decisive point is not that *kephalē* can never bear any authority-related meaning. The safer and stronger argument is that, in Ephesians 5:23, any form of headship is defined by the way Christ relates to the church. Christ's headship is not exercised through domination but through saving self-giving. Best, Thielman, Barth, and Lincoln all observe that the *sōtēr* qualifier places the weight of the analogy on Christ's saving action toward the body.[26] Verse 25 makes the ethical consequence explicit: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

This Christological constraint fundamentally limits how the husband-wife relationship can be structured from this text. The wife's submission is directed toward a headship that is defined by Christological self-giving, not by cultural privilege. When submission is placed beside a headship of this character, it ceases to resemble unconditional subordination and begins to resemble a freely chosen, relationally ordered posture of trust toward a husband whose own responsibility is measured by sacrificial love.

African Cultural Hermeneutics and the Reception of Ephesians 5:21–24

African Cultural Hermeneutics provides the interpretive lens through which the exegetical findings above can be brought into critical dialogue with African Christian contexts. As Ottuh and Idemudia show in their mapping of the trajectories of African biblical studies, African hermeneutics does not treat the African sociocultural context as a neutral background but as an active interpretive location with its own questions, assumptions, values, and risks.[27] Adamo's work similarly insists that African biblical interpretation must take the African context seriously while also allowing the biblical text to interrogate that context.[28]

Applied to Ephesians 5:21–24, ACH exposes a characteristic pattern of distortion. Across many African societies, marriage has historically been structured within patrilineal and patriarchal frameworks that assign authority to the husband as a culturally constitutive role. He is head of the household not necessarily because of a specific ethical quality or covenantal responsibility but because of gender, lineage expectation, bridewealth, and social position.[29] This

[25] Grudem, "Does *Kephalē* Mean 'Source' or 'Authority Over'?," 38–59; Cervin, "Does *Kephalē* Mean 'Source' or 'Authority Over'?," 85–112; Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 117–137; Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 35–58.
[26] Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 533–537; Thielman, *Ephesians*, 373–376; Barth, *Ephesians 4–6*, 607–615; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 366–372.
[27] Ottuh and Idemudia, "Navigating Trajectories," 55–64.
[28] Adamo, "Task and Distinctiveness," 31–52; Adamo, "African Biblical Studies," a1972.
[29] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 67–74; Constance Awinpoka Akurugu, Isaac Dery, and Paul Bata Domanban, "Marriage, Bridewealth and Power: Critical Reflections on Women's Autonomy across Settings in Africa," *Evolutionary Human Sciences* 4 (2022): e30, https://doi.org/10.1017/ehs.2022.27; J. M. Wood, "Gender Inequality: The Problem of

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cultural pre-understanding often approaches Ephesians 5:22 with an expectation already in place: the text is expected to confirm what culture has long assumed, namely, the wife's unconditional subordination to the husband's authority.

The evidence should not be stated as though every African Christian community reads the text in exactly the same way. African Christianity is diverse. Nevertheless, several African contexts display a recurring pattern in which the submission language of Ephesians 5:22 is foregrounded while the mutual submission frame of verse 21 and the husband's sacrificial obligations in verses 25–33 are underemphasised. Ademiluka's study of Nigerian Christian marriage shows how patriarchal reception of Ephesians 5:22–33 can contribute to marital disharmony when the wife's submission is detached from the husband's responsibility.[30] Akurugu, Dery, and Domanban's work on bridewealth and power further demonstrates how marriage practices in patriarchal settings can shape women's autonomy and social positioning.[31]

Isiorhovoja and Okoh's Nigerian reading of the Ephesian household codes argues that the reception of Ephesians 5:22–24 is sustained not only by cultural assumptions but also by literary fragmentation, especially the reading of verses 22–24 apart from verse 21 and apart from verses 25–33.[32] Barron's Maasai contextual study confirms that the location of the paragraph break and the interpretation of reciprocal respect can significantly affect how the passage functions in church and family life.[33] Uwaegbute's social-scientific reading among Igbo communities makes a related point: when the *Haustafeln* is read through the lens of male authority, the text's demands on husbands can become culturally invisible.[34]

The ACH evaluative function therefore produces a diagnostic conclusion: the dominant African Christian reading of *hypotassō* as unconditional female subordination is not derived from the passage read in its full grammatical and theological context. It is frequently imposed upon the passage by cultural pre-understandings that the text itself qualifies. The mutual submission frame of verse 21, the contextual force of *hypotassō*, the limiting phrase "to their own husbands," the Christological orientation of "as to the Lord," and the *sōtēr* qualifier of verse 23 all resist a culturally absolute reading of submission.

Harmful, Patriarchal, Traditional and Cultural Gender Practices in the Church," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2019): a5177, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5177.

[30] Solomon O. Ademiluka, "Patriarchy and Marital Disharmony amongst Nigerian Christians: Ephesians 5:22–33 as a Response," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021): a5991, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.5991.

[31] Akurugu, Dery, and Domanban, "Marriage, Bridewealth and Power," e30.

[32] Osbert U. Isiorhovoja and Dennis R. Okoh, "*Haustafeln*: A Deconstruction Reading of the Household Codes in Ephesians 5:22–25 for Sustainable Development in Nigerian Context," *NIU Journal of Humanities* 9, no. 1 (2024): 133–135, https://doi.org/10.58709/niujhu.v9i1.1834.

[33] Barron, "Mutual Submission, Mutual Respect," 10–14.

[34] Kingsley I. Uwaegbute, "A Social-Scientific Re-reading of Ephesians 5:21–33 and the Problem of Patriarchy among the Igbo People of Nigeria," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 45, no. 1 (2023): 108–133, https://doi.org/10.1163/18712207-12341464.

Toward an Afrocentric Reading of Ephesians 5:21–24

The exegetical and hermeneutical findings of this study do not lead to the conclusion that submission is absent from Ephesians 5:21–24 or that the wife's submission should be discarded as patriarchal language. What they establish is that the submission Paul envisions is of a different character from the unconditional female subordination often constructed from the text. A corrected Afrocentric reading should display four defining characteristics.

First, it should be **mutual in frame**. The wife's submission in verse 22 is a specific application of the mutual submission principle of verse 21. An Afrocentric reading that takes verse 21 seriously cannot treat the wife's submission as one-directional while exempting the husband from the mutual submission frame that governs the household code. Gorman's work on cruciformity helps clarify this point: the self-giving posture Paul calls submission in verse 21 is related to the self-giving love commanded of husbands in verse 25.[35]

Second, it should be **voluntary in character**. The submission envisioned in Ephesians 5 is not extracted by coercion, threat, domestic violence, social shaming, or church pressure. In Paul's frame, submission is a Spirit-shaped response, not an act forced by power. This does not weaken the ethical demand; it clarifies its nature. Coerced submission may produce outward compliance, but it does not produce the Spirit-filled relational posture described in the passage.

Third, it should be **Christologically constrained in application**. The wife's conduct is located "as to the Lord," and the husband's headship is measured by Christ's saving self-giving. Arnold notes that the Christological grounding of the household code reorients the cultural patterns of household authority that Paul's Greco-Roman readers would have assumed.[36] In African Christian contexts, the same logic applies: marital order cannot be defined by patriarchal prerogative but by cruciform responsibility.

Fourth, it should be **ethically symmetrical in demand.** Ephesians 5:21–33 cannot be preached faithfully if the three verses addressed to wives receive sustained emphasis while the longer and more demanding instruction to husbands is treated as secondary. Hoehner and Thielman both recognise that the passage places major ethical weight on the husband's obligation to love, nourish, cherish, and give himself for his wife.[37] Unachukwu's contextual study confirms that selective emphasis on wifely submission while neglecting sacrificial love has harmful pastoral consequences in Nigerian Christian communities.[38]

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[35] Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 155–160.
[36] Arnold, *Ephesians*, 356–360.
[37] Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 720–724; Thielman, *Ephesians*, 377–380.
[38] Daniel Clement Unachukwu, "A Critical Analysis of Ephesians 5:21–33 in the Light of Christian Marriage in Ebonyi State, Nigeria," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 50, no. 3 (2024): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/17072.

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Principles for African Christian Interpretation

A revised African Christian interpretation of Ephesians 5:21–24 should therefore be governed by six corrective principles. First, verse 22 should not be detached from verse 21. Second, "submission" should not be defined by cultural patriarchy but by Spirit-filled mutuality. Third, "to their own husbands" should not be universalised into the subordination of women to men. Fourth, "as to the Lord" should be read as Christological accountability, not as the deification of the husband. Fifth, headship should be interpreted through Christ's self-giving care, not through male entitlement. Sixth, preaching and counselling should give full weight to verses 25–33 so that the husband's responsibility is not hidden behind the wife's duty.

These principles preserve the ethical seriousness of the text without allowing African patriarchal structures to distort it. They also allow African churches to speak more responsibly to marriage, gender dignity, domestic abuse, pastoral counselling, and Christian family formation.

Implications for African Christian Marriages and Communities

For Christian marriages, this study calls for a shift from domination to covenantal responsibility. Ephesians 5:21–24 does not dissolve marital distinction, but it rejects any use of distinction as a basis for superiority or coercion. A husband who claims headship must embody the Christlike pattern by which that headship is defined. A wife's submission, likewise, should be taught as a Spirit-shaped relational posture within the safety and accountability of Christian love, not as a licence for her silencing.

The passage must never be used to counsel women to remain silently under violence, intimidation, or dehumanising control. Ugwu, Okoye, and Eze document the danger of church responses that spiritualise endurance while failing to confront domestic violence.[39] A reading of Ephesians 5 that protects abuse in the name of submission contradicts the very Christological ethic that governs the passage. Where abuse is present, pastoral care must prioritise safety, truth, accountability, and justice.

Pastoral counselling should teach that submission is not coercion and headship is not control. Couples should be helped to see the whole literary unit of Ephesians 5:21–33 rather than isolating verse 22. In premarital and marital counselling, husbands should be asked not merely whether their wives submit, but whether their own conduct reflects the sacrificial love, nourishing care, and Christlike responsibility required by the passage.

For pulpit teaching, the most immediate implication is textual integrity. The consistent isolation of Ephesians 5:22–24 from verse 21 and verses 25–33 is

[39] Ndidiamaka V. Ugwu, Kanayochukwu M. Okoye, and Uchenna V. Eze, "Church of Nigeria's (Anglican Communion) Response to Domestic Violence against Women in Nsukka Local Government Area," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81, no. 1 (2025): a10826, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10826.

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exegetically weak and pastorally harmful. Faithful preaching should begin with the Spirit-filled context of 5:18–21, explain the dependence of 5:22 on 5:21, clarify the meaning of "as to the Lord," and then give full attention to the husband's obligation to love as Christ loved the church.

Theological education in African seminaries, Bible colleges, and church leadership programmes should train pastors to recognise how cultural assumptions shape interpretation. ACH is useful here because it helps students examine both the African context and the biblical text critically. It asks not only, "What does this text mean?" but also, "What has our culture made us expect this text to mean?" This second question is indispensable for responsible African biblical interpretation.

At the level of cultural reform, the study calls African Christian communities to distinguish between cultural values that may support biblical marriage and cultural assumptions that distort it. Honour, family solidarity, covenant responsibility, and communal accountability can enrich Christian marriage. However, bridewealth systems, male privilege, and lineage expectations become theologically dangerous when they reduce wives to acquired persons or make husbands unaccountable. Phiri's work on violence against women in African Christian communities shows the urgency of challenging any religious language that preserves women's suffering in the name of marital order.[40]

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study concludes that Ephesians 5:21–24 does not authorise unconditional female subordination or culturally absolutised male dominance. Rather, it presents *hypotassō* as a Spirit-shaped, voluntary, relational, and Christologically constrained posture within the wider framework of mutual submission. The wife's submission is not an isolated command detached from the husband's responsibility, nor is the husband's headship a warrant for control, intimidation, entitlement, or hierarchy without accountability. Instead, the passage redefines marital order through reverence for Christ, reciprocal responsibility, cruciform love, and self-giving service.

This conclusion is especially important in African Christian contexts, where cultural assumptions about patriarchy, bridewealth, male privilege, and domestic authority have often shaped the reading of Ephesians 5:22 more strongly than the grammar, lexical field, textual history, and theological logic of the passage itself. The article's contribution to African biblical scholarship is its demonstration that a responsible Afrocentric reading must be both culturally aware and textually disciplined: it must take African marital realities seriously without allowing those realities to overrule the text.

Therefore, African churches, pastors, theologians, marriage educators, and family-life ministries should teach Ephesians 5:21–24 within the full literary unit of Ephesians 5:21–33. Premarital counselling, pulpit teaching, theological education, and marriage seminars should emphasise that submission is not

[40] Isabel Apawo Phiri, "Why Does God Allow Our Husbands to Hurt Us? Overcoming Violence against Women," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 114 (2002): 19–30.

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coercion, headship is not domination, and Christian marriage is not a hierarchy of worth but a covenantal space of mutual honour, sacrificial love, and Spirit-filled responsibility. Such a reading preserves marital distinction without oppression, affirms leadership without abuse, and calls African Christian marriages to reflect the redemptive pattern of Christ and the church.

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