

CHAPTER TEN

THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST AND THE CHURCH: Head and Body, “One Flesh”*

Introduction

Ephesians 5:22–33 has been an important passage in recent debates on headship and submission in marriage.¹ An important aspect of this passage that has not received proper attention, however, is the reference to a “great mystery” in Eph 5:32. As the term **μυστήριον** occurs consistently throughout Ephesians, an understanding of Paul’s use of the term will help in the interpretation of Eph 5:22–33. How is the term **μυστήριον** used? What does it refer to in the present passage? Is it the “sacrament” of marriage? Is it the typological relationship between marriage and the union of Christ and the church? Or is it the union of Christ and the church itself?

Depending on how one answers these questions, one will come to different understandings of the biblical view of marriage. If one adopts the “sacramental” view, one will see marriage as a relationship which symbolizes, in a “mystical” way, Christ’s relationship with the church. One’s focus will be on the inscrutable, transcendent nature of marriage and its “sacramental” nature in the church.

If one holds to a typological view, one will view marriage according to the way in which its various elements are related to Christ’s union with the

*This essay first appeared in *Trinity Journal* 12 NS (1991): 79–94 and is reprinted with permission.

¹Cf. Wayne Grudem, “The Meaning of **κεφαλή** (‘Head’): A Response to Recent Studies,” *TrinJ* 11 NS (1990): 3–72, for an interaction with recent literature on the issue of headship and submission. Cf. now also the recent compendium edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood—A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991).

church. The following will all be seen as connected by typology, allegory, or some other form of “deeper meaning”: Adam and Christ, Eve and the church, and marriage and Christ’s union with the church. The marriage partners will understand their relationship in the context of these connections and attempt to live out their roles accordingly.

If, however, **μυστήριον** is taken as referring to Christ and the church, and not directly to marriage, there will still be important implications for the marriage relationship. One will see marriage in the larger framework of God’s purpose “in Christ”: the restoration of a united body under one head, Jesus Christ. One will view Paul’s use of Gen 2:24 as indicative of God’s purpose to restore marriage to its original design, in analogy to Christ’s union with the church.

The Term Μυστήριον

The background of Paul’s use of **μυστήριον** has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate.² Even though some see Paul’s use of **μυστήριον** as influenced by Hellenistic mystery religions,³ most commentators prefer a background in the Old Testament concept of God’s disclosing his secrets to men, a concept that was further developed in Jewish literature.⁴

Interest in (hidden) wisdom was widespread in the ancient world. Semitic and Hellenistic peoples were no exception. The Greek world

²The Pauline authorship of Ephesians is assumed in this paper. Cf. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (revised ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 496–528, for a survey of the argument and a defense of the Pauline authorship of Ephesians. The epistle shares a significant amount of terminology and theology with Colossians (which is usually regarded as Pauline) including the use of the term **μυστήριον**. For example, the first chapter of **Colossians forms a close parallel to Paul’s theology in Ephesians. Cf. Col 1:18 with Eph 5:23, and Col 1:25–27 with Eph 3:3–10. Cf. also Bruce Metzger, “Paul’s Vision of the Church,” *TToday* 6 (1949): 49, n. 1.**

³So A. H. Harvey, “The Use of Mystery Language in the Bible,” *JTS* 31 (1980): 320–36; cf. also Chrys C. Caragounis, *The Ephesian Mysterion: Meaning and Content* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1977).

⁴Cf. George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 383–86; Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term “Mystery” in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968); and Markus N. A. Bockmühl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990).

used **μυστήριον** with regard to “mystery religions.”⁵ The most famous were the “Eleusinian mysteries” which took place about twenty-five miles west of Athens, near the Isthmus of Corinth. The “mystery religions” were still commonly observed in New Testament times. The term **μυστήριον** was used for the religious rites performed in these “mystery religions,” as well as for the sacred objects used during the various ceremonies.⁶ The primary denotation of **μυστήριον**, however, was that of a secret knowledge of the ineffable, incomprehensible, impenetrable, “divine,” a knowledge which was reserved for religious initiates. If Paul were using **μυστήριον** in this way, he would refer to the spiritual insights into transcendent divine truths given to a group of Christian “initiates.”

On the other hand, **μυστήριον** is the term used in the LXX to translate the Aramaic **רר** in Dan 2:18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47, and 4:6. The term occurs in the context of Daniel’s interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. God, a “revealer of mysteries” (Dan 2:28), disclosed the dream and its meaning to Daniel, and Daniel interpreted it to the king. The divine truths here related to the unfolding of world history and the eventual establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. The notion of “something *intrinsically* ineffable” which is so prominent in the Hellenistic use of **μυστήριον** is absent here. The obstacle to human knowledge and understanding of the “mysteries” is not their ineffability but their undisclosedness by God at the time.

The same word also plays a very important role in the Qumran writings (in Hebrew).⁷ Besides referring to “mysteries of divine providence” (1QS 3:20–23; 4:18; 1QH 9:23–24; 1QM 14:14; 17:8–9; 1QpHab 2:1–2; 7:8, 13–14), cosmic (1QH 1:11–12, 21) and evil mysteries (1QS 5:36), **רר** also refers to the sect’s interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures (1QS 4:6; 5:1; 6:5; 9:18–19; 11:5–8; 1QH 5:11–12; 8:4–36; CD 3:12–14, 18–20). Similar to the use in Daniel is the reference to knowledge of divine truth

⁵Cf. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 197–240. This author categorically states, “The New Testament did not use the technical vocabulary of the mysteries” (p. 240). Cf. also Joscelyn Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

⁶Cf. Caragounis, *Ephesian Mysterion*, 14ff., for a detailed reconstruction of the “Eleusinian mysteries.”

⁷Cf. J. Coppens, “Le ‘mystère’ dans la théologie paulinienne et ses parallèles qumrâniens,” *Littérature et théologie pauliniennes* (Recherches bibliques 5 [1960]), 142–65; E. Vogt, “‘Mysteria’ in textibus Qumran,” *Bib 37* (1956): 247–57; Béda Rigaux, “Révélation des Mystères et perfection à Qumran et dans le Nouveau Testament,” *NTS 4* (1958): 237–62.

that had previously been hidden but now revealed. In Qumran, it was the “Teacher of Righteousness” who had the prerogative to interpret the Scriptures with regard to the sect’s contemporary situation.⁸ The Semitic background of **μυστήριον** thus accentuates the revelation of previously hidden divine truth through divinely commissioned interpreters. The difference between Paul’s usage and Qumran’s, however, is that Paul does not resort to the often far-fetched “contemporizing” hermeneutic methodology so common in the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁹

A survey of the uses of **μυστήριον** in the Pauline writings shows that it is the Old Testament usage that is most consistent with Paul’s use of the term. Paul does not teach that there is a body of religious truths that is reserved for Christian “initiates.” Divine truth can be known by all Christians. It is not, as in the mystery religions, considered as communication with the intrinsically ineffable. It is therefore inaccurate to equate the meaning of the modern English term “mystery” with the Greek term **μυστήριον**. Even if **μυστήριον** in Eph 5:32 refers to marriage, it would be anachronistic to render the expression as “the mystery of marriage.”¹⁰ Rather, **μυστήριον** consistently denotes a divine truth which was once hidden but has now been revealed. Ephesians contains the largest number of references to **μυστήριον** in the New Testament. The term occurs throughout the letter (1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19)¹¹ and consistently refers to God’s eschatological purpose in Christ. It is usually related to aspects of ecclesiology.¹²

Once the interpreter has decided on the background of Paul’s use of **μυστήριον** in Eph 5:32, the question still remains: what does the term

⁸Cf. 1QpHab.

⁹Concerning Paul’s use of the OT, see footnote 37 below.

¹⁰As does, for example, the Anglican writer Mike Mason in *The Mystery of Marriage* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1985).

¹¹Of the twenty-seven or twenty-eight times **μυστήριον** is used in the New Testament (there is a textual variant in 1 Cor 2:1), twenty or twenty-one are by Paul. The other references are: Rom 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor 2:1 (variant **μαρτύριον**); 2:7; 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51; Col. 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3; 2 Thess 2:7; 1 Tim 3:9, 16. The non-Pauline references are found in the Synoptics (Matt 13:11 = Mark 4:11 = Luke 8:10) and Revelation (1:20; 10:7; 17:5, 7).

¹²Eph 1:10: “an administration suitable to the fulness of the times, the summing up of all things in Christ”; 3:1–10: “the **μυστήριον** of Christ” (v. 4) which was revealed “to his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit” (v. 5) is that “the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body” (v. 6), “in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places” (v. 10); 6:19: “the mystery of the gospel.”

refer to in the present context? There are three kinds of approaches to the interpretation of **μυστήριον** in Eph 5:32.¹³ The first sees **μυστήριον** as the symbol or “sacrament” of the human marriage relationship. Here, the term is understood in a similar way to its usage in the Hellenistic “mystery religions.” The second approach maintains that the **μυστήριον** of Eph 5:32 is the typology found in the human marriage relationship, a relationship that points to the union between Christ and the church. In this view, **μυστήριον** is interpreted similar to its usage in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The third approach holds that **μυστήριον** relates marriage to the union of Christ and the church by way of analogy. In the analogical view, the term is understood as it is used in the Old Testament (as translated in the LXX).¹⁴

These three approaches differ in the degree of emphasis they place on the two elements of Paul’s discussion (marriage and the union of Christ and the church). The sacramental approach understands Paul’s emphasis to be on marriage. The typological interpretation views Paul as relating various elements in marriage with their corresponding elements in the union between Christ and the church (emphasis equally on both). The analogical approach sees Paul’s primary reference to be to the union between Christ and the church in the light of which marriage is now to be understood (emphasis on the union of Christ and the church). Before critically evaluating these approaches, I will present a synopsis of Paul’s theology in Ephesians as it is relevant for an interpretation of the present passage. Some general observations on Eph 5:22–23 will follow.

¹³For a survey of the history of interpretation of Eph 5:22–33, cf. J. Cambier, “Le grand mystère concernant le Christ et son Eglise Ephésiens 5,22–33,” *Bib* 47 (1966): 43–90. He cites as proponents of the “sacramental approach” Ambrose, Augustine, Chrysostom, and Aquinas. The view that **μυστήριον** refers to the union of Christ and the church was held by Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin.

¹⁴Besides the three approaches outlined in this paper, there are various mediating positions. John Paul Sampley (*And the Two Shall Become One Flesh: A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5:21–33* [Cambridge: University Press, 1971] 146–47) holds that “the author of Ephesians interprets Gen 2:24 to refer *not only* to the human marriage *but also* to the marriage of Christ and the Church.” Sampley, however, still needs to answer the question, “*Which of these two* does Paul call a ‘mystery’?” Are there *two* mysteries, a “lesser” and a “greater” one, marriage and Christ’s union with the church?

Paul's Theology in Ephesians as Relevant for Interpreting 5:22-33

John Stott, in his helpful exposition *The Message of Ephesians*, points out that the phrase “in Christ” encapsulates the message of the book.¹⁵ He defines this phrase as the believer’s state of being “organically related to him [Christ] by faith.”¹⁶ In Christ, God has bestowed on the believer a multitude of spiritual blessings (1:3-14). Paul defines God’s program in 1:9-10 as “the summing up (ἀνακεφαλαιώ) of all things in Christ.” The term **μυστήριον** is first used in this context.

In chap. two, Paul gives the first example of God’s breaking down barriers in Christ. Jews and Gentiles are “reconciled *both in one body* (2:16).”¹⁷ The term **μυστήριον** is used in 3:3, 4, and 9 to describe this divine truth which had been hidden but has now been revealed. Stott writes,

To sum up, we may say that the “mystery of Christ” is the complete union of Jews and Gentiles with each other through the union of both with Christ. It is this double union, with Christ and with each other, which was the substance of the “mystery.”¹⁸

As far as the Gentiles were concerned, they had been alienated, but were now brought near (2:12, 13). Paul develops the theme of unity at great length in chap. four. He describes God’s purpose for the church as its attaining to “the unity of the faith,” growing up “in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ” (4:13, 15).

In chap. five, the Christian life is sketched as an essentially new life “in Christ.” The believers are to be filled with the Spirit (5:18) in their marriages, their parenting, and their work relationships (5:21-6:9). As is argued below, the term **μυστήριον** is used in 5:32 with reference to **Christ’s union with the church. Paul, according to this view, quotes Gen 2:24 because it describes God’s original design for marriage. It is this union which can be restored in the light of the μυστήριον** of the union of

¹⁵John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 25. The phrase **ἐν (τῷ) Χριστῷ** or **ἐν αὐτῷ** with reference to Christ occurs in Ephesians twenty-five times: 1:1, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 (twice), 15, 20; 2:6, 7, 10, 13, 16, 21, 22; 3:6, 11, 12, 21; 4:21, 32. Other forms of **Χριστός** occur frequently as well, as does the phrase **ἐν κυρίῳ**.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Cf. the phrases **τοὺς ἀμφοτέρους ἐν ἐνὶ σώματι** (2:16) and **οἱ ἀμφοτέροι ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι** (2:18) with **οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν** (Eph 5:31 = Gen 2:24).

¹⁸Stott, *Message of Ephesians*, 117.

Christ and the church. The μυστήριον is the ground for the restored relationship between husband and wife, much like it is the ground for the restored relationship between Jews and Gentiles (cf. Gal 3:28).

*General Observations on the Passage*¹⁹

Paul adapts the *Haustafel* pattern to relate the Christian marriage relationship to the union of Christ and the church.²⁰ The sections of Eph 5:22–24 and 5:25–28a are subunits of the *Haustafel*. Both units are structured in a similar way. First, a command is given (to “wives” and “husbands,” respectively); then Christ’s relationship to the church is presented as the model to emulate (“as . . . Christ” [v. 24]; “just as Christ” [v. 25]); lastly, the command is reiterated (“so also wives . . .” [v. 24]; “in this same way . . .” [v. 28]). The only significant variation is that Paul elaborates in more detail about Christ’s relationship to the church in the second section than he does in the first.

In 5:28b, Paul expands the *Hanstafel* format. The section does not start with a command (as the previous units), but with a participle stating a general principle. Also, a change of grammatical subject and a shift of subject matter are detectable. While the example of Christ (“just as Christ also” [v. 29c]) provides continuity with the previous section, the summary statement is quite different: ὅτι μέλη ἐσμὲν τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ (“because we [change of subject] are *members of his body* [change of subject matter]”). Thus the immediate antecedent of the Gen 2:24 quotation in Eph 5:31 is not the marital relationship, but the union of Christ and the church, his “body.”

The quotation has three parts: (1) ἀντὶ τούτου καταλείπει ἄνθρωπος τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὴν μητέρα (“for this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother”); (2) καὶ προσκολληθήσεται πρὸς τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ (“and shall cleave to his wife”); and (3) καὶ ἔσονται οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν (“and the two shall be one flesh”). Paul then comments, τὸ μυστήριον

¹⁹Cf. Sampley, *One Flesh*, 86–108. Sampley discusses the “Hermeneutical Problems in Eph 5:31–32” (pp. 86–102), and “The Movement of Thought in Eph 5:31–32” (pp. 103–108).

²⁰Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 919–20. The origin of this genre is still the subject of much scholarly debate. The general format is a series of addresses to various family members and participants in relationships (“wives . . . husbands”; “children . . . parents”; “slaves . . . masters”), usually moving from the subordinate part to the one(s) placed in a role of authority. Cf. also Col 3:18–4:1; 1 Pet 3:1–7.

τοῦτο μέγα ἐστίν (“this mystery is a great one”). The statement could refer to the whole quotation, part of it, or the explanation immediately following it. It may be significant that Paul agrees with the LXX in an instance where it differs from the Hebrew text. The phrase “the two” is added before the words “will become one flesh.”²¹ Paul may here accentuate the paradox of “the two” becoming “one.” If so, **τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο** should be seen primarily as tying the third part of the quotation, “the two shall be one flesh,” to the explanation that follows: “now I am speaking about Christ and the church.”²²

The whole section Eph 5:22–33 is concluded with a summary statement to husband and wife. Verse 33 combines the exhortations given to the individual marriage partners in vv. 24b and 28a. This concluding verse ties in Paul’s adaptation of the *Haustafel* format (5:22–28a) with his excursus on the union between Christ and his church (5:28b–32).²³

Structurally, the relationship “Christ”/“church” is the constant of Eph 5:22–33. The question is: is the marriage relationship used to illustrate the union between Christ and the church or vice versa? Paul first uses the union between Christ and the church as a pattern for the marital partners to follow. However, at Eph 5:28b he starts shifting focus and emphasis. What was the model, i.e., the union of Christ and the church, now becomes the primary subject. The marital union, which had been the subject, now briefly retreats into the background.

²¹Cf. Markus Barth, *Ephesians 4–6* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1974), 720.

²²Cf. also the discussion below. The wording **λέγω εἰς** is unusual. Usually **λέγω** uses **περί** or the dative. The phrase is otherwise only found in Luke 22:65 (“against Him”) and in Acts 2:25. In the latter reference Peter quotes Ps 16:8–11 and introduces his quotation by “For David said *of* Him [Christ]” (**Δαυὶδ γὰρ λέγει εἰς αὐτόν**). The preposition indicates the *reference* of David’s statement. The quotation could be paraphrased as, “David spoke *with reference to* Him.” Paul’s statement in Eph 5:32 can similarly be rendered as, “But I am referring to Christ and the church.” Cf. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 595, for a use of **εἰς** like a dative with the connotation “with reference to.”

²³Cf. Sampley, *One Flesh*, 147. Note that the *Haustafel* continues in Eph 6:1–9 with exhortations to children and parents, slaves and masters. Common subordination to God and proper subordination to one another in the church are to reflect a proper (creation) order of God in Christ. Cf. Paul’s exhortation in 1 Cor 11:3: **θέλω δὲ ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι ὅτι παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἡ κεφαλὴ ὁ Χριστὸς ἐστίν, κεφαλὴ δὲ γυναικὸς ὁ ἀνὴρ, κεφαλὴ δὲ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ὁ θεός.**

Table 5: Shift of Primary Subjects in Eph 5:22–32

Verses	Marital Union	Union of Christ & Church
Eph 5:22–28a	Primary Subject	Illustration
Eph 5:28b–32	Illustration	Primary Subject

Evaluation of Alternate Approaches to the Interpretation of Eph 5:32

*Evaluation of Interpretation of **μυστήριον** Referring to Marriage*

The view that **μυστήριον** refers to the marriage relationship is often taken by Roman Catholic theologians, who view the term within the framework of their “sacramental” ecclesiology. Roman Catholic dogma holds that the institution of marriage conveys grace. Marriage in this view “indicates participation in ultimate reality, the operation of grace in an effective sign, the permanence received in sacredness.”²⁴ As Barth notes,

The Christians who support the equation of marriage with a sacrament intend to say that marriage is a means of grace by which man and woman participate in the mystery of creation, incarnation, redemption, reconciliation, perfection.²⁵

Eph 5:22–33, according to this view, teaches the “mystical” nature of marriage. Barth’s criticism is helpful. He charges the “sacramental view” of marriage with the following inaccuracies:

(1) It neglects the singularity of Christ’s betrothal to the church by making every marriage a reenactment of Christ’s union with the church. Marriage is this-worldly, “not a semiheavenly repetition of Christ’s romance.”

(2) The thesis that marriage is a sacrament amounts to a sacralization or mystification of a structure or institution in human society.

(3) There is a syncretistic element introduced from pagan religion where partners use each other to come closer to the divine.²⁶

Marriage is just part of Paul’s theological presentation in Ephesians. His focus is on the doctrine of the church as the “body of Christ.” Thus it would be more consistent with Paul’s overall argument to see **μυστήριον**

²⁴Barth, *Ephesians*, 4–6, 747.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 748–49.

as a reference to his larger theme, the union of Christ and the church, and view marriage as one of a number of applications of this “great mystery.” There is no obvious reason for Paul in the present context to call marriage a **μυστήριον**. Considering that the term in Ephesians usually connotes a truth that was previously hidden but has now been revealed, marriage can hardly be seen as a previously hidden “mystery.”

The structure of Eph 5:22–33 indicates a shift in emphasis from the marital union to the church as the “body of Christ” in 5:28a–32, thus making Christ and the church the most natural referent of **μυστήριον**. Note that the immediate antecedent of the Gen 2:24 quotation is the clause “for we are members of his body,” which gives the reason for Christ’s nurture of his church. One would expect Paul to continue this train of thought through the Gen 2:24 quotation.

On exegetical grounds, the demonstrative pronoun **τοῦτο** likely points only to a certain aspect of the marital union—i.e., “the two becoming one flesh”—for the purpose of relating this aspect to the relationship between Christ and the church.²⁷ Also, **ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω** (“but I am speaking”) indicates a change in subject matter from marriage to the relationship between Christ and the church.

Historically, the interpretation of **μυστήριον** in Eph 5:32 as referring to marriage has been based on an equation of the term with the Latin *sacramentum*²⁸ in line with Catholic theology. Jerome’s Vulgate used this term to translate **μυστήριον**. When Roman Catholic theology began to develop, with the element of mysticism expressed in its “sacraments,” the original meaning of **μυστήριον** began to fade in favor of the meaning that the term *sacramentum* had begun to acquire. This use, however, is foreign to the New Testament.²⁹

There is nothing in marriage itself as an institution that “mystically” dispenses divine grace. It is not the case, as the Roman Catholic Church

²⁷Cf. Sampley, *One Flesh*, 86, citing BAGD, 66, for support, who comment that “**τοῦτο** . . . could conceivably refer to any *part* or *parts* of the section beginning with 5:21.” The use of **τοῦτο** in Eph 5:32 is somewhat ambivalent because Paul immediately redirects the demonstrative pronoun from its original referent (the aspect of the two becoming one flesh), as in the antecedent quotation, to a new referent (the union of Christ and the church).

²⁸*Sacramentum* originally referred to a military oath of allegiance (cf. Webster’s *Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1035). Later the term’s meaning was changed to denote “a formal religious act that is sacred as a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality, especially one believed to have been instituted or recognized by Jesus Christ” (ibid.).

²⁹Cf. Hans von Soden, “**ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ** und sacramentum in den ersten zwei Jahrhunderten der Kirche,” *ZNW* 12 (1911): 188–227.

maintains, that when marriage is entered into under the auspices of the Church it is in itself an institution where Christ is “personally present” in a mystical way. There is no intrinsic power in the oath or marriage vows themselves. The prerequisite for a Christian marriage is not the “sacramental blessing” of the institutionalized church, but becoming “new creatures” in Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 4:23–24), by being regenerated, “born again” in him (cf. Titus 3:5).

*Evaluation of Interpretation of **Μυστήριον** as a Typology*

The view that **μυστήριον** refers to the typology found in the human marriage relationship as pointing to the union between Christ and the church is more difficult to evaluate. The term “typology” is used in different ways.³⁰ A “type” may be an example, i.e., a pattern, found in one instance and related to a later instance in Scripture. Usually an eschatological advance in the New Testament antitype over against the Old Testament type is considered essential to true typology. But is the typology *prospective* or *retrospective*? Does the Old Testament type have a genuinely predictive function, or is typology simply a way of looking back at the Old Testament and drawing out resemblances?³¹ If Paul uses typology in the present passage at all, it is a retrospective form of typology: Paul uses a principle regarding marriage found in Gen 2:24 and relates it to his contemporary reference, the union of Christ and the church.³²

A variant of the typological approach is the view that Paul finds a “deeper meaning” in Gen 2:24, as if there were a hidden meaning under the surface that awaited its revelation in the “last days” (*sensus plenior*).³³

³⁰Cf. the discussion by Douglas J. Moo, “The Problem of Sensus Plenior,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 175–212. Moo cautions against the assumption that certain exegetical methods (in his context, Jewish methods like *peshet*) “necessarily result in a perversion of the meaning of the text” (p. 193). Moo quotes E. Earle Ellis explaining Paul’s procedure in using the OT: “His idea of a quotation was not a worshiping of the letter or ‘parroting’ of the text; neither was it an eisegesis which arbitrarily imposed a foreign meaning upon the text. It was rather, in his eyes a quotation-exposition, a *midrash peshet*, which drew from the text the meaning originally implanted there by the Holy Spirit and expressed that meaning in the most appropriate words and phrases known to him” (p. 195).

³¹Cf. *ibid.*, 195–98.

³²Cf. footnote 40 below.

³³Cf. again Moo, “Sensus Plenior,” 201–204. He quotes Brown as distinguishing *sensus plenior* from typology in that the former has to do with the deeper meaning of *words*, and the latter with the extended meaning of *things* (p. 202). I would argue, if at all, for typology rather than *sensus plenior* in Eph 5:32.

Gen 2:24, though literally referring to marriage, is believed to be typologically structured so that husband and wife function as the type of which Christ and the church are the antitype. Paul, as an inspired New Testament author, is seen to make this latent typology explicit.³⁴ Similarly to the practice of the Qumran community, Paul is represented as using a *midrash pesher* type of approach.³⁵ If such is understood to involve a “reading into” an Old Testament text of what is not there explicitly,³⁶ one should note that there is no indication in the present passage for this kind of practice. The view is based on inference. It seems presumptuous to maintain that Gen 2:24 is typologically structured based on Paul’s use of it in Eph 5:31–32. *Sensus plenior* is not required to make sense of Paul’s statement.³⁷ A better explanation for the way Paul uses the quotation, if there is typology at all, is to regard the reference as retrospective typology.

Moo’s criteria of “whether it is necessary and adequate to explain the phenomena” and “whether it coheres with an acceptable theory of inspiration” (p. 203) seem to apply.

³⁴For interpretations in the direction of *sensus plenior*, cf. Barth (*Ephesians* 4–6, 734), who contends that “‘the secret meaning’ (5:32) of the verse in Genesis is *the promise that Christ will elect the church to be his own.*” Barth continues by elaborating on the union of Christ and the church as “one flesh” (ibid., 736–37). While I reject the “hidden sense” part of Barth’s interpretation, I agree with his focus on the “one flesh” aspect of Christ’s union with the church. Similarly, Brown (*Semitic Background*, 65–66), who says that the reference to *μυστήριον* in Eph 5:32 is “to a scriptural passage [i.e., Gen 2:24] which contains a deeper meaning than that which appears at first sight.” Cf. also F. F. Bruce (*The Epistle to the Ephesians* [London: Pickering & Inglis, 1961], 119) who comments that “the words of Gen 2:24 *enshrine a greater truth than that which lies on the surface,*” i.e., “‘I am treating the man as *symbolic* of Christ and the woman as *symbolic* of the Church.’” Cf. also A. Skevington Wood (*Ephesians* [EBC, Vol. 11; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978], 32), who states, “Gen 2:24 *enunciates a more profound truth than was realized till Christ came to win His bride, the church, by giving Himself for her on the cross.*” Cf. also Bockmühl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 205. Bockmühl interprets Eph 5:32 as “an exegetical mystery: a deeper (in this case either allegorical or prophetic) meaning of a Scriptural text which has been elicited by means of some form of inspired exegesis. In other words, the deeper meaning of Gen 2:24 points typologically to Christ and the church.”

³⁵Cf. Moo, “Sensus Plenior,” 193, and 400–401, notes 54 and 57, for bibliographical information regarding this interpretational practice.

³⁶Ibid., 193.

³⁷Concerning Paul’s use of the OT, cf. D. Moody Smith, “The Old Testament in the New Testament: The Pauline Literature,” in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture* (ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: University Press, 1988), 265–91. The author remarks: “there is a

In that case, Paul would look for a way to illustrate the union of Christ and the Church and use the principle enunciated in Gen 2:24 regarding the “one flesh” marital union.

Others call Paul’s interpretive method “allegorical.” This interpretation is similar to the typological approach. Moo differentiates typology from allegory as follows: “While allegory looks for meaning *behind* the text, typology bases meaning on events narrated in the text itself.”³⁸ Similar criticisms as the ones just raised against the typological view apply also to the allegorical approach. When Paul is speaking allegorically in Gal 4:21–31, he gives a lengthy exposition of the counterparts in his allegory: Hagar and Sarah are two covenants, the Sinaitic and the New Covenant. When Jesus tells the allegory of the vine and the branches in John 15:1–8, he establishes the allegorical correlations as well: the Father is the vinedresser, Jesus is the vine, and his disciples are the branches. In Eph 5:31–32, no such allegorical connections are established. The allegorical approach to the interpretation of **μυστήριον** in Eph 5:32 is thus an argument from silence. One would expect that Paul would have made his allegory more explicit if it was indeed his intention to draw one. How else would his readers have known how to interpret it?

kind of unpredictability about Paul’s use of the OT, except that he almost always reads it in light of the events of Christian revelation” (p. 278). He continues: “there are unmistakable signs of his originality as his own exegetical work develops” (ibid.). Ethical application [e.g., Eph 5:31], typology, allegory, categories of promise and fulfillment are all part of Paul’s repertoire in using the Old Testament for his theological argument (p. 279). Ephesians is the only “prison epistle” to include Old Testament quotations. Of the six references, only two are formally introduced. In 4:8 (quoting Ps 68:18) and 5:14 (Isaiah?), Paul uses the rather informal **διὸ λέγει**. In the other four instances, Paul interweaves the Old Testament into his argument: in 4:25, 26 (quoting Zech 8:16; Ps 4:4); 5:31 (Gen 2:24); and 6:2 (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16). Cf. 4:25, 26, commenting on **ὅτι μέλη ἐσμὲν ἀλλήλων μέλη** and 5:32 elaborating on **ὅτι μέλη ἐσμὲν τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ**. Cf. also Paul’s quoting Gen 2:24 in 1 Cor 6:16 and his conclusion (v. 17): **ὁ δὲ κολλώμενος τῷ κυρίῳ ἐν πνεύμα ἔστιν**. Note also that Paul adds **οἱ δύο**, which is not found in the Hebrew MT (for emphasis?—cf. Barth, *Ephesians 4–6*, 720–21, for a thorough discussion of the various textual issues).

³⁸Cf. Moo, “Sensus Plenior,” 195. For an allegorical interpretation, cf. G. Bornkamm, *TDNT* 4 (1967): 823: “Since an exhortatory conclusion regarding marital life is drawn from the *text* and its *exposition*, **μυστήριον** refers to the **text and not to the institution of marriage itself**. The **μυστήριον** is thus *the allegorical meaning of the Old Testament saying, its mysteriously concealed prophecy of the relationship of Christ to the ἐκκλησία*. . . . The eschatological marriage of Christ and the Church is mysteriously prefigured in Gen 2:24.”

Rather than focusing on typology or allegory, however, Paul takes the Gen 2:24 quotation literally as referring to the fact that “the two” become “one flesh” in human marriage.³⁹ He then implies that, in the union between Christ and the church also, “the two” become “one flesh.” It is this spiritual union itself that Paul calls a “mystery,” not the typological correspondence between marriage and the relationship between Christ and the church.⁴⁰ Paul himself does not elaborate on any typological connection.⁴¹ The interpreter thus should be careful to avoid fanciful developments.⁴²

³⁹A detailed discussion of the expression “one flesh” is beyond the scope of this paper. Cf. A. Skevington Wood (*Ephesians*, 78), who limits the term to sexual intercourse; Barth (*Ephesians 4–6*, 734–35), who includes social and spiritual components; and cf. also Richard Batey, *New Testament Nuptial Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 30–37; idem, “The *mia sarx* union of Christ and the Church,” *NTS* 13 (1966–67): 270–81.

⁴⁰At best, it is not marriage as a whole that is related typologically to the union between Christ and the church, but only the paradoxical principle of “two becoming one flesh.” That this kind of typology is present in this passage is not impossible. However, there are no clear contextual cues to confirm this contention. Unlike in other places where Paul uses typology (Rom 5:12–21; 7:1–6; 1 Cor 15:45–47; Gal 4:21–31), he does not elaborate on the typological relationships he seeks to establish. Furthermore, there seems to be no compelling reason for Paul to use typology in the present passage. It is true that Paul had available a rich typological imagery from both Old Testament and intertestamental Judaism picturing God’s relationship with his people in marital terms. Paul was no doubt aware of this imagery and uses it in other places (e.g., 2 Cor 11:2, 3). To argue for Paul’s use of typology in Eph 5:22–33, however, is based on inference rather than explicitly found in the text. It is true that Paul compares the marital union with Christ’s union with the church in Eph 5:23–24, and especially 5:25–27, but note that he always uses *ὡς* (v. 23) or *καθώς* (vv. 25, 29). The construction in 5:32, however, is different (*λέγω εἰς*).

⁴¹Cf. Sampley (*One Flesh*, 89–90), who argues that the reason why Paul can be so brief in his discussion of the *μυστήριον* in Eph 5:31–32 is that he has already set forth his interpretation of Gen 2:24 in Eph 5:21–30. **Another possibility is that Paul could be using deliberate ambiguity in his phraseology. It is important to remember that Ephesians is not a formal exposé, but an epistle. It may well be that as Paul wrote the letter he gradually digressed from his initial subject of marriage into a brief treatment of the union of Christ and the church.**

⁴²Cf. Richard A. Batey (*Nuptial Imagery*, 31), who elaborates and cautions: “This verse has frequently been allegorized to refer to Christ’s leaving of his Father and his Mother, the heavenly Jerusalem in order to come to earth and be joined to the church. . . . Those who view the coming [of Christ] as being the historical Jesus are eager to find parallels in Hellenistic mystery cults, where a dominant motif was the descent of the savior-god into the cosmos in order to establish order and save mankind. To see in this Old Testament quotation a reference to either the *ἱερός γάμος* of the mystery religions, of the return of the Son of Man on ‘the clouds of glory’ is an unnecessary intrusion. . . . Since the

*Evaluation of Interpretation of **μυστήριον** as a Reference to the Union of Christ and the Church*

The third kind of approach considers **μυστήριον** in Eph 5:32 a direct reference to the union of Christ and his church. This seems to be the most straightforward reading of the text. After all, does not Paul himself say, “But I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church”? As husband and wife are “one flesh,” Paul argues, Christ and the church are “one flesh”: “head” (5:32) and “body” (5:30). Thus, in one sense, Paul envisions Christ and his church as one person, inextricably united in this world, just like husband and wife (cf. Gen 2:24).⁴³

This interpretation is the most consistent with regard to the content of the term **μυστήριον** in Ephesians and the other Pauline writings. The **divine truth that once had been hidden but now, in the train of Christ’s coming and work, is revealed, is God’s oneness with His people as realized to a far greater degree than in the OT. While God’s faithful love for his wayward people was revealed through the prophets, it was Jesus Christ who took on human flesh and redeemed the Church as his own body on earth. This body, he would nurture (cf. Eph 5:30: “for we are members of His body”). Paul, a “steward of God’s mysteries (cf. 1 Cor 4:1),” was the herald of the **μυστήριον**.**⁴⁴

The interpretation that **μυστήριον** in Eph 5:32 refers to the union of Christ and the church fits well with Paul’s overall theology in Ephesians and his other letters.⁴⁵ It is true that this is the only place where Paul uses

Ephesian writer makes no other use of the passage than to express the unity established by marriage, efforts to find other meanings distort the purpose of the quotation.” Batey interprets **μυστήριον** in Eph 5:32 as “not an enigma, but the revelation of a secret which was once hidden but now revealed” (ibid.).

⁴³Concerning Paul’s very first experience of Christ’s close identification with his church, cf. Acts 9:4, where Christ asks him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *Me*?” To persecute the church is to persecute her Lord.

⁴⁴Note that even though Paul’s theology of the church as the body of Christ and their “one flesh” union is new, it is certainly not a *creatio ex nihilo*. The Old Testament frequently uses the metaphor of husband and wife for God and his people (cf. Ps 45; Isa 50:1; 54:1–8; 62:3–5; Jer 2:32; 3:1–18; 31:31–34; Ezek 16; Hosea 1–3; 11:8; 14:4). For New Testament references, cf. Matt 9:15; Mark 2:18ff; John 3:29; 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 19:7; 21:2, 9.

⁴⁵Note, for example, the close relationship of Col 1:18, 22, and 28 to Paul’s theology in Eph 5:22–33. For an advocacy of an interpretation of Eph 5:32 consistent with the other Pauline usages of **μυστήριον** in Ephesians, cf. Sampley, *One Flesh*, 94–95. He writes: the usual referent is “something that was hidden, but now is revealed. Does this apply to 5:21–33? What might be at stake in this context is a heretofore undisclosed relationship that now subsists between Christ

the marital union to teach about the union of Christ and the church. It is also true that this is the only place where Paul calls the union between Christ and the church a “mystery.” Yet, Paul had been in the process of developing his theology of the church as the body of Christ in his previous letters to the Romans and Corinthians.⁴⁶ In Ephesians, Paul applies this theology to his development of the *μυστήριον* theology.⁴⁷ Thus, Paul’s theology of the church as the body of Christ culminates in his explanation that there is a union between Christ and the church like the union between husband and his wife in the marriage relationship.

This interpretation is also the most natural one exegetically. It is the one that is most coherent with Paul’s movement of thought in Eph 5:22–33 (see “General Observations on the Passage” above). While the Catholic “sacramental” interpretation fails properly to identify both the content and referent of *μυστήριον*, the typological interpretation is largely based on inference and cannot clearly be demonstrated from the text. The interpretation that *μυστήριον* in Eph 5:32 refers to the union of Christ and the church is the only one that correctly identifies both the content and referent of *μυστήριον*, and adequately accounts for the text of the passage without resorting to unnecessary extratextual explanations.

Conclusion

The referent of *μυστήριον* in Eph 5:32 is the union of Christ and the church. Paul, in seeking to teach about the union of the two entities, Christ and the church, draws on the paradox present in the marital union,

and the church.”

⁴⁶Cf. Rom 12:4, 5; 1 Cor 12:12–27. Note that there are two aspects to the metaphor of the church as “the body of Christ”: (1) the Church is animated by the Spirit of Christ, and the Christians are the various members of his “body”; and (2) Christ is the “head” and the church the “body.” In Eph 5:21–33, the second aspect is in view.

⁴⁷Paul has demonstrated the way in which Christ cares for his church (Eph 5:29) by using another Old Testament quotation in Eph 4:8. In Eph 4:7–16, Paul applies this quotation to the church: Christ gave to the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers, to the building up of the body of Christ (4:11). God’s purposes are the unity, maturity, and “fulness” of the “body of Christ” under its “head, Christ.” Thus, structurally as well as theologically, the interpretation of *μυστήριον* as a new divine truth concerning the spiritual union of Christ and his church is consistent with Paul’s argument in Ephesians.

where two entities, husband and wife, become “one flesh.” The “great mystery” Paul reveals is that just as the marital partners are “one flesh,” so are Christ and the church, as “head” and “body.”

Eph 5:32 cannot properly be used to support a view of marriage as a “sacrament” or “mystery” in the modern sense of the word. Neither can the passage be cited as evidence for the typological significance of marriage.

While the focus in Eph 5:22–28a is on the actual roles to be taken in marriage, Paul’s discussion in Eph 5:28b–32 puts marriage in perspective.⁴⁸ As follows from the discussion here, the primary application of the latter passage is to God’s plan of restoration “in Christ” as worked out in the marriage relationship. While marriage is not the primary focus, there are still significant implications for how to view and live out the marital union. Eph 5:28b–32 helps one to think of marriage in relation to God’s larger purposes. Marriage is not an end in itself; it is part of a life under God in the church and in the world. Marriage is a relationship in the process of restoration. To the extent that a married couple sees itself as part of the global eschatological movement toward “summing up all things in Christ” (Eph 1:9), it will experience fulfillment and share the perspective on marriage Paul presents in the passage at hand.

The contemporary debate on the biblical view of marriage has witnessed a polarization of positions. It seems that both—those who stress headship and submission and those who emphasize equality—are affirming biblical truths. The proponents of these positions, however, should take care not to neglect (or deny) the balancing, corresponding truths.

⁴⁸Contra George W. Knight III, “Husbands and Wives as Analogues of Christ and the Church,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, 175–76. Knight assumes that Paul’s primary subject in 5:30–32 is still marriage. He considers Christ and the church as the analogy (section heading on p. 175; but the title of his article seems to suggest the reverse). Knight seems to combine the symbolic and typological (and analogical? [s.a.]) approaches when he calls marriage a “picture” (pp. 175, 176) and a “parable” (p. 175) of Christ and the church. He maintains that “mystery” in Eph 5:32 refers to the symbolism invested in marriage by God at creation regarding Christ and the church, which was revealed through Paul to the Ephesians (similarly John Piper, *ibid.*, p. 476, n. 16: “the ‘mystery’ of marriage is the truth that God designed male and female from the beginning to carry different responsibilities on the analogy of Christ and his church”). But why would Paul teach this to the Ephesian church? How does the teaching fit into the passage’s flow of thought and Paul’s theology of *μυστήριον*? A preoccupation with the contemporary agenda of male/female roles must not be permitted to cloud an unbiased reading of the text in its larger biblical theological framework.

Headship and submission, as well as God's plan to restore the original design of the husband/wife relationship without (post-fall) barriers, are both taught in Eph 5:22–33. It is erroneous to “separate what God has joined together”: a restored marriage relationship, and a pattern of headship and submission between the marriage partners. Yet it is important to recognize that Paul's teaching on headship and submission is given in the larger framework of his theology of the breaking down of old barriers and the restoration of united relationships. In that sense, then, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female” in God's new community. The marriage relationship shares in God's *μυστήριον* as it is revealed through Paul: the “heading up again” of all things under Christ.