

# *The Church as the Bride in Ephesians: the Great Mystery*

*by David Yoon*

In Ephesians 5 a familiar subject conceals a great mystery. Marriage in this chapter forms a shell that must be broken open in order to see the kernel of the divine revelation concerning the most profound mystery in the universe. In this passage Paul speaks of wives submitting to their husbands and of husbands loving their wives, but at the conclusion he utters an astonishing declaration, one that crystallizes his entire apostolic ministry: “This mystery is great, but I speak with regard to Christ and the church” (v. 32). Clearly, this chapter was not written merely to expound on the ethical conduct of Christian spouses but, far more significantly, to unveil the mysterious union of Christ and the church, the center and reality of God’s New Testament economy. This revelation is missed by many expositors, although some correctly identify the great mystery in Ephesians 5 to be the union of Christ and the church. Few, however, adequately discern the organic and spiritual nature of this union and how it is produced, developed, and consummated for the fulfillment of the divine economy. Rather, they narrowly focus on Christ’s self-sacrificing love demonstrated in His redeeming death (v. 25), a once-and-for-all event, and neglect or even deny the aspect of Christ’s love demonstrated in His life-imparting sanctification in resurrection, an ongoing process culminating in the presentation of a glorious bride to Christ at His coming (vv. 26-27). Some Reformed expositors even contend that Christ’s union with the church is primarily covenantal and merely symbolic in nature, thereby negating the reality of a deeply intimate and spiritual union between Christ and the church in the divine life. What is crucially absent from nearly all interpretations of Ephesians 5 is Paul’s central vision: the mystery of God’s economy, which is His plan and endeavor to dispense Himself in Christ as the Spirit into the believers in order to produce them as the church, His organic counterpart.

The book of Ephesians centers on this mystery. The first three chapters are devoted mainly to the revelation of the mystery concerning the church, and the last three chapters concern the believers’ walk according to this revelation in their practical living. Nevertheless, Paul’s teaching in the latter chapters is still governed by his commission to enlighten all to see the economy of the mystery (3:9). Hence, God’s economy remains central in Paul’s speaking concerning marriage. In 5:32 he unequivocally states that underlying his instructions to husbands and wives is a subject of far weightier significance: Christ and the church. Moreover, among the nine verses in Ephesians 5:25-33, only a few of them exhort husbands to love their wives (vv. 25, 28, 33), whereas most of them disclose the love of Christ for His church (vv. 25-32). To apprehend the depth and breadth of this love requires the backdrop of the entire divine economy. Only by seeing this economy will we begin to know Christ’s knowledge-surpassing love—love that motivated Him not only to give Himself up in order to deliver us from our sins through judicial redemption (Rev. 1:5) but also to bring us fully into glory through organic salvation in sanctification by dispensing Himself as life into us (Eph. 3:19, 21; 5:26-27; 2 Thes. 2:13; cf. John 17:22-24).