



EWI Fellowship Research Programme

EPHESIANS 5:21-33: METAPHORS UNDER SCRUTINY

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Biography



Bruna Velčić was born in Rijeka in 1977. She completed her graduate studies in theology in Rijeka, at the regional branch of the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Zagreb, going on to obtain her licentiate and PhD in the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. For a short time, she worked as a catechist and as the head of Archbishop Mate Uzinić's office in Rijeka. She has taught courses in the Old Testament at the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Rijeka and at the University Center for Protestant Theology Matthias Flacius Illyricus in Zagreb, where she now works as assistant professor. She is a member of the *Society of Biblical Literature*, the Croatian section of the *European Society of Women in Theological Research* (ESWTR-CS) and the organising committee of the *Mediterranean Theological Meetings* of the Rijeka Archdiocese. She has published a number of research papers in national and foreign journals and edited volumes and has participated in several national and international academic conferences in Croatia and abroad. She has also translated several scholarly books in her field from English, German and Italian into Croatian. She is a regular contributor to the magazines *Biblija danas* (The Bible Today) and *Zvona* (The Bells) and the Croatian TV programme *Biblija* (The Bible).

Abstract

It is widely accepted among scholars that in Ephesians 5:21-33, two intertwined representations of Christ and the Church emerge: Christ is portrayed as the “head” and the “bridegroom”, while the Church is depicted as his “body” and his “bride”. The nuptial imagery present in the text is often used to argue that only men can represent Christ in ordained ministry. This paper reassesses the metaphors in Ephesians 5:21-33 by examining the broader context of the Pauline epistles. It argues that there is no nuptial imagery in the passage. Instead, Ephesians 5:21-33 represents the relationship between Christ and the Church exclusively through the head and body metaphors. The paper demonstrates that these metaphors integrate seamlessly into the broader metaphorical depiction of the relationship between Christ and the Church in the Pauline letters, particularly in Colossians and Ephesians, where the head and body metaphors are used together to signify the vital connection between Christ and the Church (Col 1:18; 2:19; Eph 1:22-23; 4:15-16). While in Colossians and Ephesians, this vital link between “head” and “body” is expressed through the image of growth (Col 2:19; Eph 4:15-16), in Ephesians 5 the focus shifts to the sanctification, purification, presentation and care for the body. Furthermore, while elsewhere in Pauline literature the horizontal unity of the “body” is emphasized (Rom 12:4; 1 Cor 10:17; 12:12, 13, 20; Col 3:15; Eph 2:15-16; 3:6; 4:4), Ephesians 5:31-32 emphasizes vertical unity by stating that the “head” and the “body” are “one flesh.”

Keywords: Ephesians, Nuptial Imagery, Head Metaphor, Body Metaphor, Feminist Criticism.

Introduction

It is widely accepted among scholars that in Ephesians 5:21-33, two intertwined images of Christ and the Church emerge: Christ is depicted as the “head” and the “bridegroom” while the Church is portrayed as his “body” and his “bride”. In various interpretations, the nuptial imagery often takes center stage. This is evident in chapter 7 of Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, titled “The Church as the Bride of Christ”, where the nuptial imagery in Ephesians 5 is used to argue against the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood. To express that Christ is the “bridegroom”, the document asserts, the Eucharist must be celebrated by a man.¹

Surprisingly, however, in Ephesians 5:21-33, the terms “bridegroom” and “bride” do not appear. Instead, the term *sōma* (“body”) appears three times (vv. 23, 28, 30), the term *sarks* (“flesh”) twice (vv. 29, 31), and the term *melē* (“members of the body”) once (v. 30). Furthermore, in 5:23, it is explicitly stated that Christ is the “head” of the Church, and the Church is his “body”. In an earlier paper published in 2022, I conducted a close reading of this text with the conclusion that there is no nuptial imagery within it, and hence no basis for speaking of “bridegroom” and “bride.” Rather, Ephesians 5:21-33 presents the relationship between Christ and the Church as that between the “head” and “body”. Drawing an analogy between the marital relationship and the relationship between Christ and the Church, the text exhorts the Christian wife to submit to the husband, and the husband to act as the “head” of the wife, following the example of Christ.²

In this paper, I take a further step and examine the metaphors in Ephesians 5:21-33 more closely, reassessing the validity of my earlier conclusions and investigating similar metaphors and vocabulary in other Pauline epistles.³ The paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, I briefly review the metaphors for Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5:21-33, and in the second, I analyze the head and body metaphors, along with the related vocabulary, in other Pauline letters.

¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieris Dignitatem. Apostolic Letter on the the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year* (15/VIII/1988), in: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html (accessed 5/XI/2024).

² Cf. Bruna VELČIĆ, Nuptial Imagery and the Bridegroom and Bride Metaphors in Ephesians 5:21-33: A Reconsideration, in: Lilly NORTJE – MEYER (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Biblical Literature*, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 2022, 156-172.

³ This research paper was created within the framework of the 2024 Ecumenical Women's Initiative Fellowship Program (EWI EFP 2024) awarding academic research grants to women scholars and activists.

The research demonstrates that head and body metaphors in Ephesians 5:21-33 align with the broader metaphorical representation of the relationship between Christ and the Church found in Pauline letters, supporting the conclusion that Ephesians 5:21-33 contains no nuptial imagery but instead relies solely on the head and body metaphors for Christ and the Church.

1. Head and Body Metaphors in Ephesians 5:21-33

Ephesians 5:21-33 is the first part of a “household code” found in 5:21 – 6:9 and provides ethical instructions concerning the marital relationship within the Christian household. The passage is divided into two sections: in 5:21-24, there is the exhortation to wives (v. 22: command; vv. 23-24: rationale); in 5:25-33, the exhortation to husbands (v. 25a: command; vv. 25b-27: first rationale; vv. 28-33: second rationale).⁴ I shall analyze briefly each section, paying special attention to the metaphors used for Christ and the Church.

1.1. *Ephesians 5:21-24: Exhortations to the Wives*

The pericope begins with the theme of mutual submission, setting the tone for the instructions on the relationship between husbands and wives (v. 21).⁵ It then continues with an exhortation for wives to submit to their husbands, just as the Church is subject to Christ (vv. 22, 24). The rationale for this is that the husband is the “head” of the wife, just as Christ is the “head” of the Church and the savior of the “body” (v. 23). The parallelism between the phrases “head of the Church” and “savior of the body” in v. 23 suggests that the relationship between Christ and the Church is depicted here through the metaphors of “head” and “body”, which, according to the context of 5:21-24, convey a hierarchical structure of the Christ – Church relationship: Christ’s authority and leadership, and the Church’s submission.⁶ Christian wives’ disposition toward their husbands should reflect that of the Church toward Christ (cf. Col 3:18; Titus 2:5; also 1 Pet 3:1). Although wives are not explicitly identified as their husbands’ “bodies”, their

⁴ For the structure of the pericope see cf. Roman MAZUR, *La retorica della Lettera agli Efesini*, Milano, 2010, 325-348.

⁵ The verbless sentence in Ephesians 5:22 suggests that 5:21 is a part of the pericope, since its verb must be supplied from v. 21, and by the notion of “fear” that forms an inclusion with v. 33; cf. Andrew LINCOLN, *Ephesians*, Dallas, 1990, 352.

⁶ Cf. Andrew LINCOLN, *Ephesians*, 369; Gregory W. DAWES, *The Body in Question: Metaphor and Meaning in the Interpretation of Ephesians 5:21–33*, Leiden, 1998, 131; Frank THIELMAN, *Ephesians*, 377. Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, 377. How Christ exercises authority over the Church is illustrated in Ephesians 5:25-30: Christ acts toward the Church with loving care.

correspondence to the Church suggests they may be understood as such. This conclusion is reinforced in v. 28, which states that husbands should love their wives as their own “bodies”.

1.2. Ephesians 5:25-33: Exhortation to the Husbands

The second part of the pericope conveys an exhortation for husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church.⁷ It begins by highlighting the greatness of Christ’s love for the Church: he loved her so much that he gave his life for her (cf. Eph 5:2; Gal 2:20).⁸ His love is vividly described in vv. 25-27 and 29. Scholars who argue for the presence of nuptial imagery in Ephesians 5:21-33 suggest that in these verses the Church is presented as Christ’s bride. By giving his life for the Church (v. 25) Christ paid the price that, according to Old Testament and rabbinic teaching, bridegrooms would pay to acquire a bride (cf. Gen 34:12; 1 Sam 18:20-27).⁹ He sanctified her (v. 26), meaning he “set her apart” as his wife, and then he washed her, symbolically performing the prenuptial bridal bath (cf. Ez 16:9).¹⁰ Finally, he presented her to himself in all her glory, holy and blameless, just as Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:2 presents the Corinthian church to Christ, the “husband”, “as a pure virgin”.¹¹ Some scholars suggest that this imagery continues in v. 29, where the Church is likened to a “child-bride being brought to

⁷ The main theme of this section is “love” (cf. *agapaō* in 5:25-2x, 29-3x, 33). Love is an important theme in Ephesians: Paul speaks of God the Father’s love for Christ Jesus (1:6), of God’s love for believers (2:4), of Christ’s love for believers (3:17, 19; 2:5:1-2, 25), of the love that believers should have for one another (1:4, 15; 4:2, 15-16; 5:2; 6:23), and of the love of believers for the Lord Jesus Christ (6:24); cf. Frank THIELMAN, *Ephesians*, 133.

⁸ The “giving up” of Christ refers to his death on the cross (cf. Rom 4:25; 8:32).

⁹ Cf. also Ruth 4:1-7.10; Hos 3:2; Isa 43:3-4; Bab. Qidd. 2a; 7a-9a; 11a-13b and see Markus K. BARTH, *Ephesians 4-6. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Garden City, NY, 1974, 670-671.

¹⁰ The verb *hagiazō* (“to sanctify”) would denote here, as also in rabbinic literature, the selection, the “separation” of a woman for a wife. Cf. J. Paul SAMPLEY, “*And the Two shall become One Flesh*”: *A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5:21-33*, Cambridge, 1971, 42; Markus K. BARTH, *Ephesians 4-6*, 689. That Ephesians 5:26 envisions a bridal bath is commonly accepted among exegetes. See Thomas K. ABBOTT, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, Edinburgh, 1897, 168-169; J. Paul SAMPLEY, “*And the Two shall become One Flesh*”, 41-42; Richard A. BATEY, *New Testament Nuptial Imagery*, Leiden, 1971, 28; Markus K. BARTH, *Ephesians 4-6*, 693; Frederick F. BRUCE, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, Grand Rapids, MI, 1984, 387-389; Andrew LINCOLN, *Ephesians*, 375-376; Ernest BEST, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, Edinburgh, 1998, 541-544; Charles H. TALBERT, *Ephesians and Colossians*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, 141-142; Clinton E. ARNOLD, *Ephesians*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, 386-389; Frank THIELMAN, *Ephesians*, 385; André VILLENEUVE, *Nuptial Symbolism in Second Temple Writings, the New Testament and Rabbinic Literature: Divine Marriage at Key Moments of Salvation History*, Leiden – Boston, MA, 2016, 234-236.

¹¹ This idea is reinforced by the images of the Song of Songs, where the Beloved is said to be “without a flaw” (*mōmos*; 4:7) and is brought to and presented to the bridegroom on their wedding day (3:6-11). See J. Paul SAMPLEY, “*And the Two shall become One Flesh*”, 48-49; Richard A. BATEY, *New Testament Nuptial Imagery*, 29; Frederick F. BRUCE, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 389-391; Andrew LINCOLN, *Ephesians*, 376-378; Ernest BEST, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, 544-547; Charles H. TALBERT, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 142; Clinton E. ARNOLD, *Ephesians*, 389-390; Markus K. BARTH, *Ephesians 4-6*, 627-629, 678-684; Frank THIELMAN, *Ephesians*, 385-387; André VILLENEUVE, *Nuptial Symbolism in Second Temple Writings, the New Testament and Rabbinic Literature*, 236-240.

maturity by the bridegroom's care".¹² Finally, the quotation of Genesis 2:24 in v. 31 is interpreted as symbolizing the mystical marriage between Christ, the bridegroom, and the Church, his bride.¹³

This is an appealing interpretation: the image of a young, beautiful bride, pure and without wrinkles or blemishes, being presented to her bridegroom. Nevertheless, there are two issues with this understanding. The first is that the text does not indicate a shift from the head and body metaphors present in the first part of the passage, to nuptial imagery in the second part: the terms "bridegroom" and "bride" are absent, while, on the other hand, the term "body" (*sōma*) appears in vv. 28 and 30, along with "flesh" (*sarx*) in vv. 29 and 31, and "members" (*melē*) in v. 30. The second issue is the *inclusio* in vv. 25-28a, which suggests that the metaphor used for the Church here is "the body". Specifically, the exhortation begins in v. 25 with "Husbands, love your wives, just as (*kathōs*) Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...", and concludes in v. 28a, after the description of Christ's love, with the repetition: "In the same way (*houtōs*), husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies".¹⁴ This statement – that husbands should love their wives as their own *bodies* – makes sense only if vv. 25-27 are understood as describing Christ's love for his body, rather than for a bride.¹⁵ Thus, in Ephesians 5:25-27, 29, we do not find a depiction of the Church as a beautiful bride; rather, in continuation with the preceding vv. 21-24, it is portrayed as the body of Christ – a body that Christ has sanctified and cleansed to present to himself as glorious, holy and blameless.

The imagery in vv. 25-27 draws on the Old Testament rites of consecration and purification, as described in the Books of Exodus and Leviticus. In fact, the verb *katharizō* – "to cleanse" (v. 26) – appears in the Septuagint in texts related to ritual purity, particularly in Leviticus 11-15, indicating purification achieved through bathing in water, that is, by the washing of bodies.¹⁶

¹² Andrew LINCOLN, *Ephesians*, 379.

¹³ Cf. *Idem*, 381. See also Peter T. O'BRIEN, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, 432.

¹⁴ Ephesians 5:25-28a is defined by the repeated exhortation for husbands to love their wives (vv. 25, 28a), and the section 5:28b-33 by the reiteration of the idea that love for one's wife is like love for oneself (vv. 28b, 33). The adverb *houtōs* is to be connected with the *kathōs* in v. 25, and points to the manner of Christ's love for the church as has just been described in 5:25-27; cf. Jean - Noël ALETTI, *Saint Paul épître aux Éphésiens, Introduction, traduction et commentaire*, Paris, 2001, 282; Frank THIELMAN, *Ephesians*, 387; Andrew LINCOLN, *Ephesians*, 378.

¹⁵ Those who see in the text the presence of the nuptial imagery judge the expression "as your own bodies" as surprising and as an anticipation of Ephesians 5:31, where the author speaks of husband and wife as "one flesh". Cf. J. Paul SAMPLEY, "And the Two shall become One Flesh" 141; Andrew LINCOLN, *Ephesians*, 378; Peter T. O'BRIEN, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 426-427; Jean - Noël ALETTI, *Saint Paul épître aux Éphésiens*, 283.

¹⁶ For the verb *katharizō* cf. LXX Lev 13:6; 14:2,4,7-8,11,14,17-20,23,25,28-29,31,48,57; 15:13,28; 22:4. For bathing in water (*louō* + *hydōr*) cf. LXX Lev 14:8,9; 15:5,6,7,8,10,11,13,16,18,21,22,27; 22:6.

These purity rituals included presenting a person – their body – to the priest and to God for cleansing or to confirm ritual purity (cf. Lev 12:7; 13:2, 6, 9, 34; 14:7-9; 15:14, 30).¹⁷ Furthermore, while Ephesians 5 mentions “spots” and “wrinkles” (sing. *spilos* and *rutis*; v. 27) Leviticus contains similar terms referring to spots and skin blemishes, such as *oulē* (“swelling”; LXX Lev 13:2, 10, 19, 23, 28; 14:56), *sēmasia* (“mark, rash”; LXX Lev 13:2, 6-8; 14:56), and *tēlaugēma* (“bright spot, whitened area”; LXX Lev 13:23). The entire set of purity laws in Leviticus 11-15 is rooted in the idea that the Lord is “holy”, and therefore the Israelites should also be “holy”, avoiding defilement and keeping their bodies clean (Lev 11:44-45) in order to approach the sanctuary and God (Lev 12:4). Additionally, the verb *hagiazō* – “to sanctify / consecrate” – and the adjectives “glorious” (*endoxos*), “holy” (*hagios*), and “blameless” (*amōmos*), which appear in Ephesians 5:25-27, are closely related to the regulations and rituals of priestly consecration in Exodus and Leviticus. The bodies of the priests, as well as the bodies of sacrificial animals, were required to be “blameless” (cf. *amōmos* in 1 Macc 4:42), meaning without any “defect” (*mōmos*; LXX Lev 21:17, 18, 21, 23). To enter sanctuary service, priests had to wash their bodies in water (Ex 29:4; Lev 8:6) and be sanctified, that is, “consecrated” (*hagiazō* in LXX Exod 28:41; 29:1, 21, 33, 44).¹⁸ Finally, they were to be clothed in “sacred vestments for glorious adornment” (LXX Exod 28:2; cf. *doxa* in LXX Exod 28:40; *hagios* in LXX Exod 28:2, 4; 29:6, 29).¹⁹

Thus, based on the details in Ephesians 5:25-28a and the connections with Old Testament purification and consecration rituals, it is plausible to conclude that in 5:25-27 the author continues to apply to Christ and the Church the head and body metaphors introduced in 5:21-24.

This image of Christ’s caring love for the Church – his body – continues through to the end of the passage. The last section is framed by an *inclusio* in vv. 28b and 33, where a husband’s love for his wife is compared to his love for himself. This concept is explored in vv. 29-30, which

¹⁷ According to *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, the motif of presenting someone to God to give evidence of ritual cleanness (cf. Lk 17:14) may underlie certain figurative expressions such as Col 1:22, 28 or 2 Tim 2:15. In my view, this motif also underlies the “presentation” in Ephesians 5:27. Cf. Georg BERTRAM – Bo REICKE, *παρίστημι παριστάνω*, in: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, V, Grand Rapids, MI, 1968, 837-841, here 841.

¹⁸ Lincoln notices that sanctification and purification were associated with ritual washing also at Qumran; cf. Andrew LINCOLN, *Ephesians*, 375.

¹⁹ In the LXX, *amōmos* is most commonly used for physical perfection as presupposition of cultic use of the offering or for the priest; cf. Friedrich HAUCK, “μῶμος ἄμωμος ἀμώμητος”, in: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, IV, Grand Rapids, MI, 1967, 829-831, here 830-831. The adjective *hagios* is also a cultic concept and indicates a quality possessed by things and persons that could approach divinity; cf. Walter BAUER, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Frederick W. Danker, ed., Chicago, 2000, 10-11.

state that “no one ever hates his own flesh, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the Church, for we are members of his body”. In these verses, the head and body metaphors are clearly applied to Christ and the Church. Alongside the repeated emphasis that the Church is Christ’s “body” (*sōma*) and the addition that Christians are its “members” (*melē*) in v. 30, v. 29 describes Christ as caring for (*thalpō*; cf. LXX Deut 22:6; Job 39:14) and nourishing (*ektrepō*; cf. LXX Gen 45:11; 47:17) the Church as his own “flesh” (*sarks*).²⁰

The term “flesh” (*sarks*) reappears in Ephesians 5:31, in the quotation from LXX Genesis 2:24, where it is said that a man shall cleave to his wife, and “the two shall become one flesh”. According to 5:32 this is a great “mystery” (*mystērion*) in reference to Christ and the Church. Taking into account everything said so far, the image here is one of the unity between Christ the “head” and the Church, his “body”: together they form one body, “one flesh”. Finally, Ephesians 5:33 concludes the text by once again urging husbands to “love” their wives (cf. vv. 25, 28, 33) and instructing wives to “fear” their husbands (cf. vv. 21, 33), thereby linking the two main sections of the pericope (5: 21-24, 25-33).

2. Metaphors and Vocabulary of Ephesians 5:21-33 in Pauline literature

After examining the text of Ephesians 5:21-33, I now proceed to explore how the metaphors of “head” and “body” used for Christ and the Church – along with related images of “one body”, the sanctification, purification, presentation, and care for the body – integrate into the broader portrayal of the relationship between Christ and the Church throughout the Pauline letters. I will begin by examining the “head” and “body” metaphors as applied to Christ and the Church, followed by an exploration of how the Pauline literature addresses concepts of sanctification, purification, and the presentation of holy and blameless bodies to Christ or God, as well as ideas of care for the body and being “one body”.

2.1. Christ is the Head of the Body – the Church (Eph 5:23)

The body metaphor is the most prominent image for the Church in the Pauline corpus. Paul uses this metaphor in 1 Corinthians and Romans to emphasize the importance of unity in diversity: although the members of the Church are many, they form one body. Believers are

²⁰ The verb *thalpō* “literally means ‘to keep warm’, but it is figuratively applied to comforting or cherishing someone; cf. *Idem*, 442. For the meaning of *ektrepō* see *Idem*, 311.

intimately united with Christ and one another through faith and baptism (1 Cor 12:13), a union that is further nourished through the eucharistic bread and wine (1 Cor 10:16-17) and expressed through love (Gal 2:20; 5:6; cf. Eph 3:16-17). Each member is distinct and possesses different gifts and roles, but each one is integral to the life of the Church (1 Cor 12:12-27; Rom 12:4-8; cf. 1 Cor 6:15).²¹ In contrast, the “head” metaphor is applied to Christ in 1 Cor 11:3, where he is described as the “head of every man”. The precise meaning of the term *kefalē* is debated among scholars, with two main interpretations: “authority” and “source”.²²

Besides these letters, the head and body metaphors are also applied to Christ and the Church in the letters to Colossians and Ephesians.²³ The image of the “body” (*sōma*) is used for the Church in Col 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15 and in Eph 1:23; 2:16; 3:6; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:23, 30, while the image of the “head” (*kefalē*) is used for Christ in Col 1:18; 2:10, 19 and in Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:23. The two metaphors appear together in Col 1:18; 2:19 and in Eph 1:22-23; 4:15-16, as well as in our passage – Eph 5:23 – where Christ is explicitly described as the head of the body, which is the Church. Thus the combination of head and body metaphors for Christ and the Church appears only in later Pauline letters and represents a particularity of the letters to Colossians and Ephesians. Since Ephesians 5:21-33 is one of five passages in the letters to the Colossians and Ephesians where the head and body metaphors are applied to Christ and the Church, it is important to examine their use in these letters more closely.

The connection of the “head” and “body” metaphors in Colossians and Ephesians represents a development from 1 Corinthians and Romans, likely drawing on Greco-Roman imagery. In classical contexts, these metaphors were used to signify the unity of individuals within a human society and to clarify the relationship between the state (as the “body”) and the

²¹ Several studies have been dedicated to the use of this metaphor in the Pauline literature. See, e.g., Ernest BEST, *One Body in Christ. A Study in the Relationship of the Church to Christ in the Epistles of the Apostle Paul*, London, 1955; Gosnell L.O.R. YORKE, *The Church as the Body of Christ in the Pauline Corpus: A Re-examination*, Lanham, 1991; Ivan SICHKARYK, *Corpo (σῶμα) come punto focale nell'insegnamento paolino. Ricerca esegetica e teologica-biblica*, Roma, 2011. See also Paul S. MINEAR, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Philadelphia, 1960, 173-220.

²² For this discussion see Stephen BEDALE, The Meaning of κεφαλή in the Pauline Epistles, in: *Journal of Theological Studies*, 5 (1954), 211-215; Wayne GRUDEM, Does kephalē (‘head’) Mean ‘Source’ or ‘Authority Over’ in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples, in: *Trinity Journal*, 6 (1985), 38-59; Wayne GRUDEM, The Meaning of Κεφαλή (‘Head’): A Response to Recent Studies, in: *Trinity Journal*, 11 (1990), 3-72; Joseph A. FITZMYER, Kephale in 1 Corinthians 11:3, in: *Interpretation*, 47 (1993), 52-59.

²³ The authorship of these letters is disputed: while some scholars attribute them to Paul, others consider Colossians and Ephesians deutero-pauline epistles; cf. Frederick F. BRUCE, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 28-34. 237-240; Markus K. BARTH, *Ephesians 1-3. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Garden City, NY, 1974, 36-41.

emperor (as the “head”).²⁴ In Colossians and Ephesians, however, the “head” metaphor indicates the primacy and supremacy of Christ over the cosmos as a whole (Col 2:10; Eph 1:22) and over the Church specifically (Col 1:18; 2:19; Eph 1:22-23; 4:15-16).²⁵ Christ is “the head of every ruler and authority” (Col 2:10) and “the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything” (Col 1:18). God has raised him from the dead, seated him at his right hand, placed all things under his feet, and “made him the head over all things for the Church, which is his body” (Eph 1:22-23). Thus, Christ holds authority over all things as their “head”, but only the Church is identified as his “body”. This establishes a distinct relationship between Christ and the Church that extends beyond all other created things.²⁶ The Church belongs to Christ – it is “the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12; cf. 1 Cor 6:15; 12:27), “his body” (Col 1:24; Eph 1:23), and “the fullness of him” (Eph 1:23), over which he reigns supreme.²⁷ While in Colossians attention is focused primarily on the cosmic role and significance of Christ (1:19; 2:9), Ephesians considers the implications of this for the Church as his body: according to Ephesians 1:23 the Church is the *plērōma* (“fullness”) of Christ and “it has a ministry to fulfill among all creatures, especially the principalities and powers”²⁸ (cf. Eph 1:4; 2:1-7; 3:10; 6:12-20).

In Colossians and Ephesians, the “head” metaphor not only signifies the authority of Christ but also indicates that he is the source of the Church’s life and growth. Just as the head governs and directs the growth of the human body, Christ is both the authority over the Church and the source of its vitality. Through the Spirit, Christ fills the Church with diverse gifts of grace (Col 1:24; Eph 1:23; 4:4-16; cf. 1 Cor 12 and Rom 12), which serve to foster unity and love (Eph 4:4-16; 5:21-33; Col 3:12-15) and promote the Church’s growth (Eph 4:4-16; Col 2:19). The Church grows from Christ, its head, “with a growth that is from God” (Col 2:19), but its growth also depends on the active participation of each of its members. Believers are encouraged to build up

²⁴ Cf. John K. MCVAY, Biblical Metaphors for the Church and Adventist Ecclesiology, in: *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 44 (2006), 285-315, here 292. See more on this metaphor in: Stephen F. BEDALE, The Theology of the Church, in: Frank L. CROSS (ed.), *Studies in Ephesians*, London, 1956, 64-75; Herman RIDDERBOS, *Paul. An Outline of his Theology*, London, 1977, 376-387; Gosnell L.O.R. YORKE, *The Church as the Body of Christ in the Pauline Corpus*, 1-7; Gregory W. DAWES, *The Body in Question*, 122-167; Edmundo DE LOS SANTOS, *La novedad de la metáfora 'kefalē-sōma' en la carta a los Efesios*, Roma, 2000, 361-367; Jill E. MARSHALL, Community Is a Body: Sex, Marriage, and Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 6:12-7:7 and Ephesians 5:21-33, in: *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 34 (2015), 833-847.

²⁵ Cf. Gosnell L.O.R. YORKE, *The Church as the Body of Christ in the Pauline Corpus*, 110-111.

²⁶ Cf. Gregory W. DAWES, *The Body in Question*, 141.

²⁷ Cf. Frank THIELMAN, *Ephesians*, 113-114.

²⁸ Cf. Markus K. BARTH, *Ephesians 1-3*, 33. See also Frederick F. BRUCE, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 231.

“the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12) until they attain maturity and “the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13). They are exhorted to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love” (Eph 4:15-16). The image of the Church as a body that grows from its head presents the relationship between Christ and Christians as organic, dynamic and active. While the Church grows on its own, it does so in dependence on the “head”: Christ is the source from which the body is nourished, and the goal to which it is growing.²⁹

Both Colossians and Ephesians depict the Church not merely as a local assembly, but as the universal Church – a global body of believers (Eph 1:22-23; 2:15-16; 3:6).³⁰ These letters emphasize that Gentiles, previously alienated from God, have now been brought near in Christ (Eph 2:11-22); within the Church, Jews and Gentiles are united and reconciled (Col 3:11-15; Eph 2:16; 3:6; 4:4-16), and Gentiles are now full members of Christ’s body, “members of the same body” (*susōma*; Eph 3:6). All believers are “one body” (*hen sōma*; Col 3:15; Eph 2:16; 4:4), and the importance of unity is underscored in Ephesians 4:4-6: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all”.

The head and body metaphors in Ephesians 5:21-33 complement and further develop the depiction of the relationship between Christ and the Church in Colossians, Ephesians, and in the Pauline corpus. In the context of the household code and the theme of the wife’s “submission” to her husband, the first part of the passage (Eph 5:21-24) emphasizes the “head” as leader and ruler, stressing Christ’s authority and guidance of the Church. In the second part (Eph 5:25-33), alongside the theme of “love,” the meaning of “head” as “source” becomes prominent, portraying Christ as the one who cares for the Church and serves as the source of her life. In this way,

²⁹ Cf. John Paul HEIL, *Ephesians. Empowerment to Walk in Love for the Unity of all in Christ*, Leiden – Boston, 2007, 242. Besides the image of the body, the Church is presented in Ephesians through a variety of additional images, many of which are interwoven and imply a growing entity, e.g., “one new man” (2:5), “mature man” (4:13), “household of God” (2:19), a “building” (2:21a), “a holy temple in the Lord” (2:21b) and “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (2:22); cf. Gary GROMACKI, Paul’s Ecclesiology of Ephesians, in: *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 19 (2015) 1, 82-115.

³⁰ Cf. Markus K. BARTH, *Ephesians 1-3*, 33; Frederick F. BRUCE, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 237; Frank THIELMAN, *Ephesians*, 110.

Ephesians 5:21-33 unites the two meanings of “head” as applied to Christ earlier in the letter: authority (Eph 1:22-23) and source (Eph 4:15-16).³¹

Nonetheless, the imagery of the head and body metaphors in Ephesians 5:21-33 differs from that in other passages of Ephesians and Colossians. While Colossians 2:19 and Ephesians 4:15-16 describe the Church as a “body” growing from the “head” to attain maturity and “the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:13), Ephesians 5 uses images of the body being sanctified, purified and presented to Christ (vv. 25-27); of Christ caring for and nourishing the body (v. 29); and of Christ, the head, being “one” with the Church, his body (vv. 31-32). What Ephesians 5:21-33 shares with other passages in Colossians and Ephesians is the portrayal of the Church’s dependence on Christ. The Church, as the body, cannot grow without Christ; it grows “from” the head and only in connection with him. Likewise, the Church cannot be purified or sanctified without Christ and depends on him for nourishment and care, emphasizing the vital link between Christ and the Church. However, while the focus in Colossians 2:19 and Ephesians 4:15-16 is on the body’s growth – a process familiar from everyday experience – Ephesians 5 shifts the focus to a different aspect: the care and nourishment of the body. Just as a body must be washed and nourished to live and thrive, so the Church depends on Christ, its head, as the source and guide of these sustaining actions. This vital link is expressed in Ephesians 5:31-32 through the image of the head and body being “one”. In Romans, 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and elsewhere in Ephesians, the focus is mainly on the horizontal unity of the body – the unity of its members and individual parts (cf. Rom 12:4; 1 Cor 10:17; 12:12, 13, 20; Col 3:15; Eph 2:15, 16; 3:6; 4:4). In contrast, Ephesians 5:31-32 emphasizes strongly vertical unity, the unity between the head and the body, that are “one flesh”. Both dimensions of unity are essential to the life of the Church, Christ’s body, which cannot live and grow without the mutual collaboration of its members and without its head.

Having considered the significance of the metaphors of 'head' and 'body' for Christ and the Church in Pauline literature, it can be concluded that their use in Ephesians 5:21-33 aligns closely with their broader application in Pauline writings. This usage is particularly similar to their function in Colossians and Ephesians, where these metaphors are interconnected.

³¹ Cf. Gregory W. DAWES, *The Body in Question*, 131, 147; Andrew LINCOLN, *Ephesians*, 369; Aldo MARTIN, *La tipologia adamica nella lettera agli Efesini*, Roma, 2005, 279.

2.2. Sanctification, Purification and Presentation of the Body (Eph 5:26-27)

According to Ephesians 5:25-27, Christ died in order to sanctify and cleanse the Church, so as to present her to himself glorious, holy and blameless. The language related to holiness and purity that dominates these verses clearly has cultic overtones. That aligns with the fact that in later Pauline literature, the “the concept of holiness approximates to that of purity”.³²

The sanctification of the Church is achieved through purification “by the washing (*loutron*) of water with the word”, what is frequently interpreted as an allusion to baptism, since the noun *loutron* appears as a reference to baptism in Titus 3:5.³³ The verbs *hagiazō* (“to make holy,” “to sanctify”) and *katharizō* (“to cleanse,” “to purify”), emphasize that through Christ’s death, the Church has been cleansed from sin and set apart for God.³⁴ These verbs are relatively uncommon in Pauline literature. The first, *hagiazō*, also appears in Rom 15:16; 1 Cor 1:2; 6:11; 7:14-2x; 1 Thess 5:23; 1 Tim 4:5; and 2 Tim 2:21, while *katharizō* is found in 2 Cor 7:1 and Titus 2:14. However, the concepts of sanctification and purification are recurring themes in the Pauline corpus, where believers are described as “sanctified (*hēgiasmenois*) in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor 1:2)³⁵ who “gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and purify (*katharisē*) for himself a people of his own, zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:14). Besides Ephesians 5:26, sanctification and purification appear together in several other Pauline passages, though with slightly different terminology. In 1 Corinthians 6:11, Paul tells believers: “you were washed (*apelousasthē*), you were sanctified (*hēgiasthēte*), you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God”.³⁶ Similarly, in 2 Timothy 2:21, we read: “all who cleanse (*ekkatharē*)

³² Otto PROCKSCH – Karl Georg KUHN, ἅγιος ἀγιάζω ἁγιασμός ἀγιότητος ἀγιωσύνη, in: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, I, Grand Rapids, MI, 1964, 88-115, here 112. See also George LYONS, Church and Holiness in Ephesians, in: Kent E. BROWER – Andy JOHNSON (eds.), *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, UK, 2007, 238-256.

³³ Cf. Thomas K. ABBOTT, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, 168-169; Frederick F. BRUCE, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 388; Ernest BEST, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, 542-543.

³⁴ Markus K. BARTH, *Ephesians 4–6*, 687. See more on the verb *hagiazō* in Otto PROCKSCH – Karl Georg KUHN, ἅγιος ἀγιάζω ἁγιασμός ἀγιότητος ἀγιωσύνη, 111-112. On the verb *katharizō* see Friedrich HAUCK – Rudolf MEYER, καθαρὸς καθαρίζω καθαίρω καθαρότης ἀκάθαρτος ἀκαθαρσία καθαρισμός ἐκκαθαίρω περικάθαρμα, in: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, III, Grand Rapids, MI, 1966, 413-426.

³⁵ In fact, members of the Christian community are frequently addressed in the Pauline letters as “saints” (Rom 1:1, 7; 8:27; 15:25, 26, 31; 16:2, 15; 1 Cor 1:2; 6:1, 2; 14:33; 16:1, 15; 2 Cor 1:1; 8:4; 9:1, 12; 13:12; Eph 1:1, 4, 15, 18; 2:19; 3:8, 18; 4:12; 5:3; 6:18; Phil 1:1; 4:21, 22; Col 1:2, 4, 12, 22, 26; 1 Thess 3:13; 2 Thess 1:10; 1 Tim 5:10; Philem 1:5, 7).

³⁶ In 1 Corinthians 6:11 Paul probably also refers to baptism; cf. Andrew LINCOLN, *Ephesians*, 375; Frank THIELMAN, *Ephesians*, 383.

themselves from these things will become special utensils (*skeuos*), holy (*hēgiasmenon*) and useful to the owner of the house, ready for every good work”.

After sanctification and purification, Christ “presents” the Church to himself. The theme of presenting someone to God, to Christ or to another, is common in Pauline literature. The verb *paristēmi* appears 16 times in the Pauline corpus, and – except in Rom 16:2 and 2 Tim 4:17 – denotes “presenting” and, in most of the cases, presenting someone to God or Christ and standing in the presence of God (Rom 6:13-2x, 6:16, 6:19-2x; 12:1; 14:10; 1 Cor 8:8; 2 Cor 4:14; 11:2; Eph 5:27; Col 1:22, 1:28; 2 Tim 2:15).³⁷ Along with the call to be holy (cf. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; Eph 1:4), the call to be blameless is a recurrent theme in Pauline literature (cf. Phil 2:15; 3:6; 1 Thess 2:10; 1 Tim 3:10; Titus 1:6-7), especially the concept of being pure and without blemish in preparation for the Lord’s coming (cf. 1 Thess 3:13; 5:23; 1 Cor 1:8; Phil 1:10). In Ephesians 5:27, blamelessness is conveyed by the adjective *amōmos*, used alongside *hagios* (“holy”), and the two appear together also in Ephesians 1:4, where it is said that God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless (*hagious kai amōmous*) before him in love,” and in Colossians 1:22, which states that Christ reconciled believers in his fleshly body through death, to “present” (*parastēsai*) them as “holy and blameless” (*hagious kai amōmous*) and irreproachable „before him“ (*katenōpion autou*).

Of particular importance for this research are verses where sanctification, cleansing and presentation are related to bodies. Examples are found in 1 Thessalonians 4:4, where Paul encourages believers to control “your own body (*skeuos*)”³⁸ in holiness (*en hagiasmō*) and honor”; and in 2 Corinthians 7:1 where he exhorts: “let us cleanse (*katharisōmen*) ourselves from every defilement of body (*sarkos*) and spirit, making holiness (*hagiōsunēn*) perfect in the fear of God”. The presentation in Ephesians 5:27 is often connected to that of the bride in 2 Corinthians 11:2, where Paul says of the church in Corinth: “I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present (*parastēsai*) you as a pure virgin (*parthenon hagnēn*) to Christ”. What is overlooked is that in Romans 6:13-19 and 12:1, Paul speaks of presenting “bodies” and “members” of bodies. In Romans 6:13, he exhorts believers: “No longer present (*paristanete*) your members (*melē*) to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present (*parastēsate*) yourselves to God as those who have

³⁷ The presentation seems to hint at a court procedure and is often linked with “service”; cf. Georg BERTRAM – Bo REICKE, *παρίστημι παριστάνω*, 840.

³⁸ The Greek word for “body” here is actually *skeuos* (vessel, utensil). Elsewhere in Pauline literature the noun *skeuos* is used as a metaphor that indicates human beings and their bodies (cf. Rom 9:21-23; 2 Cor 4:7; 2 Tim 2:20-21).

been brought from death to life, and your members (*melē*) to God as instruments of righteousness”. This exhortation is echoed in Romans 6:19: “For just as you once presented (*parestēsate*) your members (*melē*) as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing iniquity, now present (*parastēsate*) your members (*melē*) as slaves to righteousness for sanctification (*eis hāgiasmon*)”. And in Romans 12:1 we read: “I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present (*parastēsai*) your bodies (*sōmata*) as a living sacrifice, holy (*hagia*) and acceptable to God (*tō theō*), which is your spiritual worship”. Romans 12:1 is especially noteworthy because it speaks of presenting bodies as a “living sacrifice,” “holy,” and acceptable “to God.” This vocabulary is notably similar to that in Ephesians 5:27, where Christ presents the Church – his body – to himself as “glorious” (*endoxon*), “holy” (*hagia*), and “blameless” (*amōmos*).³⁹ The concepts of glory, holiness, and blamelessness are associated with bodies in several Pauline passages, including Phil 3:21, 1 Cor 7:34, and 1 Thess 5:23. In Philippians 3:21, Paul says that Christ “will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory (*tō sōmati tēs doxēs autou*)”; in 1 Corinthians 7:34, Paul notes that “the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body (*hagiai kai tō sōmati*) and spirit”. Additionally, in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, sanctification and the preservation of spirit, soul, and body in blamelessness at Christ’s coming are emphasized: “May the God of peace himself sanctify (*hagiasai*) you entirely; and may your spirit, soul, and body (*sōma*) be kept sound and blameless (*amemptōs*) at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”.

The overview of texts where the concepts of sanctification, purification, and presentation are applied to bodies indicates that within Pauline imagery, it was entirely possible to envision the Church as the body that Christ has sanctified, purified and presented to himself as glorious, holy and without blemish.

2.3. Care for the Body (Eph 5:29-30)

After exhorting husbands to love their wives as their own bodies, Ephesians 5:29-30 addresses the nourishment and care of the body: “For no one ever hates his own body (*sarka*), but he nourishes and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members

³⁹ The adjective *endoxos* appears elsewhere in Pauline writings only in 1 Corinthians 4:10, with the same meaning as in Ephesians 5:27, indicating persons “held in high esteem” (see also LXX 1 Sam. 22:14; 23:19 ecc.). We find it twice more in the NT: in Luke 7:25 it is used for “fine” clothing; in Luke 13:17 for “laudable” deeds.

(*melē*) of his body (*sōmatos*)". Here, the imagery shifts from sanctification and purification to the care and nourishment of the body. Christ cares for the Church – his body – and thus for each believer who is a member of it.⁴⁰ The verbs used, *ektrepō* and *thalpō*, are each found only once more in Paul's letters and in the entire New Testament, and they both convey the sense of caring for or nurturing, as with a child. The verb *ektrepō* appears again in Ephesians 6:4, where fathers are exhorted to "bring up" their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, while *thalpō* is found in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, where Paul compares his ministry to the Thessalonians to that of a nurse gently "caring" for her own children. A similar concept of care and nourishment is expressed in Colossians 2:19, where it is said that the Church, as the body of Christ, grows from the head, being "nourished" (*epichorēgoumenon*) and held together by its ligaments and sinews. However, while in Colossians 2:19 the body is nourished by its members, in Ephesians 5:29 the source of its nourishment, care, and sustenance is its head – Christ. It is suggested by some exegetes that this passage may allude to the eucharistic nourishment provided by Christ for the Church (cf. 1 Cor 10:16-17; 11:24).⁴¹

2.4. The Great Mystery: Being One Body (Eph 5:31-32)

The final image in the passage is that of a husband and wife becoming "one flesh" (*sarka mian*; 5:31), evoked through the quotation from LXX Genesis 2:24. The author applies this image to Christ and the Church, calling it a great "mystery" (*mysterion*; cf. 1:9, 3:3, 4, 9; 6:19).⁴² Building on all that has been discussed, this mysterious union of Christ and the Church can be envisioned as the union of "head" and "body": Christ and the Church – glorious, holy, and blameless – are united as "one body".

As mentioned earlier, the theme of the Church's unity is important in the Pauline corpus, according to which various members form "one body" (e.g., *hen sōma* – "one body" – in Rom 12:4; 1 Cor 10:17; 12:12, 13, 20; Col 3:15; Eph 2:16; 4:4; cf. *sussōmos* in Eph 3:6 and "one new human being / humanity" in Eph 2:15). In Ephesians, the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles within

⁴⁰ In Pauline literature the believers are often compared to the members of one body, Christ's body, which is the Church (Rom 12,4-5.12; 1 Cor 6,15; 12,12-2x.14.18.19.20.22.25.26-4x.27). Ephesians 5:30 is the only place in Ephesians where Christians are explicitly described as such (cf. Eph 4,16 where we find *meros*, "part").

⁴¹ See Markus K. BARTH, *Ephesians 4-6*, 635.

⁴² According to Thielman, the term *mysterion* ("mystery") "refers in a general sense to God's gracious revelation to his people of something they could not possibly know unless he had made it known (cf. Dan. 2:17-30)"; Frank THIELMAN, *Ephesians*, 63.

one body of Christ is defined a “mystery”, “hidden for ages in God” and now made plain to everyone (cf. Eph 3:3, 4, 9; cf. 2:16). However, in Ephesians 5:31-32, it is not the mutual relationship and unity among the members that is emphasized, but rather the unity between the head and the body. The great mystery is the unity of Christ and the Church in one body: as the “two” – husband and wife – become “one flesh” (Gen 2:24), and as the “two” – believing Jews and Gentiles – become “one new human being / humanity” in Christ (Eph 2:15), so also the “two” – Christ and Church – are “one flesh” (Eph 5:31-32), one body.

The image in Ephesians 5:31-32 recalls that of Ephesians 4:15-16 and Colossians 2:18-19, where the unity of the body – the Church – with the head, Christ, is precisely what enables the body to grow “with a growth that is from God” (cf. Eph 2:16; 4:4, 16; Col 2:19; 3:15). This organic and vital union is called in Ephesians 5 a great mystery, echoing 1:9-10, where the “mystery” (*mystērion*) of God’s will is described as “a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up (*anakephalaiōsasthai*) all things in him [= Christ], things in heaven and things on earth”. Ephesians 5:31-32, depicting Christ, the head, united with his body, the Church, represents a key moment in the fulfillment of this plan, indicating that not only the many diverse members are united within the body of the Church, but also the Church, as Christ’s body, is mysteriously united with Christ – the head, thus anticipating the ultimate fulfillment of God’s plan, when all things will be united in Christ, the “head over all things” (Eph 1:22; cf. Col 1:17).⁴³

Conclusion

This paper reassesses the metaphors in Ephesians 5:21-33 by examining the broader context of the Pauline epistles. The research confirms that Ephesians 5:21-33 portrays the relationship between Christ and the Church exclusively through the head and body metaphors. It shows that these metaphors – along with related images of “one body”, the sanctification, purification, presentation, and care for the body – fit fully into the broader metaphorical portrayal of the relationship between Christ and the Church throughout the Pauline letters.

In fact, the head and body metaphors are used for Christ and the Church in 1 Corinthians and Romans (1 Cor 11:3; 12:12-27; Rom 12:4-8) and appear together in the letters to the Colossians (1:18; 2:19) and Ephesians (1:22-23; 4:15-16), where they signify the vital link

⁴³ Cf. Peter T. O’BRIEN, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 434; John Paul HEIL, *Ephesians*, 253.

between Christ and the Church: he is both the authority and the source of the Church's life and growth. However, while Colossians 2:19 and Ephesians 4:15-16 describe the Church as a "body" growing from the "head", Ephesians 5 uses images of the body being sanctified, purified, and presented to Christ (vv. 25-27), of Christ caring for and nourishing the body (v. 29), and of Christ, the head, being "one" with the Church, his body (vv. 31-32).

A deeper analysis of Ephesians 5:26-27, 29-33 indicates that, within Pauline imagery, it was entirely possible to envision the Church as the body that Christ has sanctified, purified, and presented to Himself as glorious, holy, and without blemish. Various texts in the Pauline corpus speak of the sanctification, purification, and presentation of holy and blameless bodies, or members of bodies, to God or Christ (1 Thess 4:4; 5:23; 2 Cor 7:1, 34; Rom 6:13-19; 12:1). The nourishment of the Church – the body of Christ – is addressed in Colossians 2:19, where the body is nourished by its members, while in Ephesians 5:29 the source of its nourishment, care, and sustenance is its head – Christ. Finally, while in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and elsewhere in Ephesians the horizontal unity of the body is emphasized (Rom 12:4; 1 Cor 10:17; 12:12, 13, 20; Col 3:15; Eph 2:15, 16; 3:6; 4:4), Ephesians 5:31-32 emphasizes vertical unity by stating that the "head" and the "body" are "one flesh." This mysterious union anticipates the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan, when all things will be brought together in Christ, the "head over all things" (Eph 1:22; cf. Col 1:17).

In her paper "The Bride of Christ: A Problematic Wedding" Carolyn Osiek suggests abandoning the nuptial imagery in Ephesians 5:21-33 because it encourages men to identify with Christ, and women with the Church, thus implying that "God is the ultimate male".⁴⁴ The results of the present study support this abandonment, confirming that there is no nuptial imagery in Ephesians 5:21-33. In addition, Ksenija Magda notices that "by calling the Ephesian husbands to love their wives as they would love their own bodies, Paul is proclaiming a truly countercultural message (...) Though his words conform with traditional cultural expectations for wives, he transforms the "headship" of the husband into a servitude of self-giving love and respect for the wife, which is modelled on the way Christ offered himself for the church, submitting himself to the needs of others."⁴⁵ Ephesians 5:21-33 is a very influential passage, a "beautiful, but

⁴⁴ Carolyn OSIEK, The Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33): A Problematic Wedding, in: *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32 (2002), 29-39, here 38.

⁴⁵ Ksenija MAGDA, *Blessing the Curse? A Biblical Approach for Restoring Relationships in the Church*, Carlisle, 2020, 142.

dangerous text”.⁴⁶ I hope this research will inspire and foster further discussion and potentially lead to a shift in its interpretation and use, both in terms of male-female relationships and the evaluation of women’s role and ministry in the Church.

This article was published in: *Feminist Theology: Thought and Practice in Central and Eastern European Contexts. Collection of Papers* (ed. Katica Knezović - Ksenija Magda - Irena Sever Globan - Bruna Velčić), published by ESWTR - CS i TFMVI, Zagreb, 2025, pp. 287-306.

This publication has been supported by the Ecumenical Women's Initiative from Omiš, Croatia. The content of the publication reflects the views of its authors alone and does not necessarily represent the official position held by EWI.

⁴⁶ Carolyn OSIEK, *The Bride of Christ* (Ephesians 5:22-33), 29.