The phone rings just as I sit down to dinner. The voice asks, “Is this the head of the house?” Should my answer be brave or honest? I reply, “It depends on what you mean by head.”

The answer to the title question is similar. Yes, there is a head of the house at home, but probably not the one the caller had in mind. For the Christian household, Christ is the true head.

Ephesians 5:21–6:9 is a Hausentafel (a code of household duties) and a central Pauline passage on the Christian home. Often quoted in wedding ceremonies, these well-worn verses are sometimes used to support a traditional view of male superiority and female submission in marriage relationships. The thesis of this article is that Ephesians 5:21–6:9 upholds a model of mutual submission under the lordship of Christ.

Jewish and Gentile moralists commonly wrote guidelines to govern the behavior of family members. Biblical scholars presume Ephesians 5:21–6:9 was part of catechetical instruction given to new converts in Christian churches along with other teachings (cf. Col. 3:18–4:1; Titus 2:1–10; 1 Peter 2:13–3:7). The apostle Paul added a new element in his household codes: the Christian home was to be different from the typical Graeco-Roman family. Every member of the Christian family was to live under the lordship of Christ, and that revolutionized domestic relationships.

Paul’s teachings about the home may have arisen because of the breakdown of the family in the New Testament world. In Jewish families, the wife had no rights at all and was regarded more as a possession than a person. The woman’s position in the Greek world was worse, for the respectable Greek woman lived a secluded life; confined to her quarters, she did not emerge even for meals. Normally she appeared in public only once or twice a year: during religious festivals or at a relative’s funeral. The reason for her seclusion is related to the role of the Greek wife. Demosthenes explained the accepted rule: “We have courtesans [hetairai] for our pleasure, prostitutes [that is, young female slaves] for daily physical use, wives to bring up legitimate children and to be faithful stewards in household matters.” The wife’s primary function was to bear a male heir for her husband; love and companionship were to be found elsewhere.

In Roman society, a woman had greater practical freedom. A Roman wife could appear in public with her husband and was allowed by law to initiate divorce, but beyond that, her rights were limited. In the Roman pantheon and the Roman theater, women were thoroughly degraded.

In stark contrast to the universal denigration of females and the deterioration of marriage in the first century, Jesus’ attitude was totally countercultural. Sweeping aside centuries of tradition and prejudice, Jesus’ treatment of women was revolutionary. What did he do? Christ simply related to women as he did to men, never regarding them as inferior in any way. Christ also reaffirmed God’s original intent for marriage, which Paul quotes in this passage: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Eph. 5:31; see Matt. 19:5).

The Christian faith did much for women and even more for children. In the Roman world, life was perilous for the child. Under the Roman patria potestas, a Roman father had absolute power over his family. Any member could be sold as a slave, required to work in chains, or even given the
death penalty. The power of the Roman father extended over the whole life of the child, as long as the father lived. Though public opinion seldom allowed it, history records some instances of a Roman father condemning his son and executing him.9

Child exposure was also common. When a child was born, the infant was placed at the father’s feet. If the father picked up the child, that meant he would keep it. If he walked away, the child was rejected. A Roman child always risked being repudiated and exposed. Unwanted children were often left in the Roman forum, where they were collected and raised by people to be slaves or prostitutes. The sickly or deformed child was treated with even greater cruelty—often drowned, according to Seneca.10

Symptomatic of the pervasive moral corruption of the first-century world were not only the common practices of infanticide and the denigration of women, but also slavery. One authority estimated that in the Roman Empire of Paul’s day there were 60 million slaves, 20 million in Italy alone and 650,000 in Rome.11 Almost all labor was performed by slaves, for work was beneath the dignity of a Roman citizen. The slave was not a person, but a thing. Aristotle taught that slave and master could never be friends, for the two had nothing in common, “for a slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave.”12

The master possessed the power of life or death over a slave. If the slave ran away, he could be killed upon capture, or, at best, branded on the forehead with the letter F for fugitivus (fugitive). A Roman writer summarized the accepted code: “Whatever a master does to a slave, undeservedly, in anger, willingly, unwillingly in forgetfulness, after careful thought, knowingly, unknowingly, is judgment, justice and law.”13

This was Paul’s world—a world of vicious immorality in which women, children, and slaves in the home suffered injustice, cruelty, and death. Against this stark background Paul gave challenging advice to wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters.

Some foreign words

Paul’s inspired counsel to members of Christian households in the region of Ephesus contains several key words, written not only in a foreign language but also unfamiliar in their meaning. The correct interpretation of this passage rests heavily on the contextual meaning of three words: subject14 (hupotasso), head (kephale), and love (agapao).

One scholar notes that the way the Greek text has been paraphrased in English versions has compounded the exegetical problem.15 Modern translations of Ephesians 5:21–22 vary. Three versions (Amplified, ASV, and NASB) indicate that each verse is a separate paragraph. Four versions (Goodspeed, Phillips, TEV, and TCNT) mark that a new paragraph begins at verse 22, while five versions (Berkeley, Jerusalem Bible, Moffatt, NEB, and RSV) do not.16

The question raised by the paragraphing is related to our first key word, subject. Does “be subject” [hupotasso] to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21) relate to the previous paragraph or to the passage at hand? The fact that Paul did not use any form of the word subject in verse 22 (“wives to your husbands as you are to the Lord”) or in verse 24 (“wives ought to be, in everything to their husbands”) supports the latter. In each case, the verb found in 5:21 is implied, requiring us to link the submission of the wife in verses 22 and 24 to the concept of voluntary, mutual

Women As ‘Masters of the House’

People familiar with the debates about gender issues know how universally the patriarchalist position defines and applies the Greek word kephale as “authority” and “leader.” The word kephale is literally the anatomical component of the head, but commonly used metaphorically throughout literature and language.

Another Greek word, despotis (from which the English word despot originated) is used in Scripture to clearly mean “master” or “lord.” But the concept of authority carried by despotis is being forced by cultural patriarchalists into the Ephesians texts, among others, that use the word kephale instead. The correct contemporary metaphor of kephale, which is most clearly defined as “beginning, origin, or source,” is totally ignored.

This tactic forces into the English translation what would have been far better established by the use of despotis rather than kephale. For an example of the “beginning, origin, or source” concept of head, look at Colossians 1:16–18: “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.”

Here is a fine example of kephale being used in a “beginning, origin, source” context. Jesus as kephale is the source and sustainer of all creation. The connection to authority in the passage is that authority follows his status as the divine source. For instance, Colossians 1:15 describes Jesus as the prototokos (preeminent, having paramount dignity), not despotis of all creation. Prototokos is poorly translated “first-born,” connoting in English more of the despotis concept than is in the Greek. Despotis, or master, is ascribed to Jesus elsewhere, but not in this context. And further to the point, the entire text of Colossians 1:15–18 repeatedly echoes “beginning, origin, and source” in clear definition of kephale as “the beginning, the “prototokos” from the dead . . .”

Further in the text is this: “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is head over all rule and authority” (Col. 2:9–10, NASB). Surprisingly, the nas itself directs the reader to a footnote indicating that a more direct rendering of the text would be “head of all rule” rather than “head over all rule.” The word head is kephale. Being “head over” something connotes in English a rule, mastership, or authority. Being “head of” something easily carries meaning as the “beginning, origin, or source” of something.

What is even more important, if “head over all rule and authority” means “authority over all rule and authority,” the text would take on a clumsy redundancy and lose the grandeur of its context, which is our completeness of being, of createdness sourced in Christ because of the fullness of deity dwelling in him. This read-
submission in verse 21 (a participial form of hupotasso). Note also that Paul used the imperative case in his address to all five of the other family members: husbands (5:28), children (6:2), fathers (6:4), slaves (6:5), and masters (6:9). Is it possible that Paul anticipated confusion over the meaning of submission and made these two verb omissions in order to force us to understand the word in context only? An honest interpretation of the text requires us to pay more than lip service to these verbal omissions and their importance.

Therefore, what does submit mean in this context? Voluntary mutual submission between husband and wife is the principle upon which Christian marriage is built. Paul’s statement in 5:21 is an outflow of 5:18b, “Be filled with the Spirit.” Spirit-filled living transforms the Christian home. The New Testament calls believers to be servants (“slaves”) to one another without distinctions of status or gender (Gal. 5:13).

In Ephesians, Paul illustrates the principle of mutual submission in three areas: husband-wife (5:22–33), parent-child (6:1–4), and master-slave (6:5–9). Addressing the less powerful person in each dyad, Paul offers wives, children, and slaves hope and the possibility of transformation. In marriage, mutual submission is voluntary as unto the Lord and is joined with self-sacrificing love; in parenting, it combines obedience and nurture; and in the slavery relationship, it results in a mutuality that is radically out of place in that culture.

The second important but difficult word is head [kephale]: “For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church, the body of which he is Savior” (5:23). Significant exegetical studies on the meaning of this word in the Greek language have raised questions about the uncritical equation of “head” with “authority.” After examining the claim that kephale was used in ancient Greek texts to mean “ruler or person of superior authority or rank,” several scholars have concluded, “There is no instance in profane Greek literature where a ruler or hierarch is referred to as ‘head’ such as ‘Alexander was the head of the Greek armies.” Lexicographers also give no evidence of such a meaning.

The best illustration of the reluctance of the Greek language to render “head” as “authority” is in the Septuagint (LXX). In the 180 instances where the Hebrew word ro’sh (“leader, chief, authority”) appears, the normal Greek word is archon (“ruler, commander”). In only seven places did the translators use kephale—five of those have variant readings, and another four involve a head-tail metaphor, which leaves only eight instances out of 180 times the LXX translators chose kephale for ro’sh.

If head (kephale) did not normally mean “authority” in Greek, what did it mean? The common Greek meaning of the word is “source, source of life, source of origin, exaltation, originator and completer.” In English, we sometimes use head this way when we refer to the head (source) of a river.

In the seven passages in the New Testament where Paul uses kephale, the context of five of them (Col. 1:18; 2:10; 2:19; Eph. 1:20–23; 4:15) clearly point to this common meaning of source. The concept that head connotes a hierarchy with men in a role of authority over women rests largely on two passages: 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Ephesians 5:23. When we recognize the main meaning of kephale is “source,” it becomes clear that Paul is not establishing a chain of command—he is establishing origins. Rather than a “ruler”
over the wife, the husband is the “source” or “beginning” of woman (made from the side of Adam), even as God is the “origin” of Christ (1 Cor. 11:3). “If you think ‘head’ means ‘chief’ or ‘boss,’ “ declared Chrysostom, “you skew the godhead!”25

In Ephesians 5:23 head is used in a head-body metaphor to show the unity of husband and wife and of Christ and the church, a common Pauline analogy. Further, where “head” is used metaphorically to represent Christ’s relation to the church, it never means authority but always emphasizes Christ’s servant roles as Savior, provider, and fountainhead of life.26

The third word, agapao, is more familiar to most of us. Paul wrote, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (5:25). He repeats this admonition three more times, urging husbands to love their wives as they do their own bodies (5:28a) and their own selves (5:28b, 33). The word for love is agape, a distinctive type of love. The example of Christ defines the nature of agape love as it applies to marriage: it is a sacrificial love (5:25), a purifying love (5:26–27), a caring love (5:28–29), and an unbreakable love (5:31). Frank Stagg described the attitude of husbands:

They are not to be brutish, crude, and rude; but they are to be understanding and considerate of their wives as being persons with feelings and rights. The wife is a person to be loved and respected, not a thing to be used.27

As the love of the Messiah for his church is concrete, historic, and pragmatic, paid with no less price than his death, so this agape love is the ground and model of the concrete, historic, and pragmatic love of the husband to the wife.28 Ray Summers observed:

If he [Christ] had conducted his life according to his own best interest, there would have been no Gethsemane, no Gabbatha, no Golgotha. He gave up his own best interest and experienced the agony of Gethsemane, the agony of mistreatment at the time of his trial, and the agony of the cross. This is to be the standard by which a man judges his love for his wife.29

A foreign way

The earliest disciples of Jesus were called people of the Way even before they were called “Christians” (Acts 9:2). The metaphor, common in Greek and Hebrew Scriptures, was used frequently of the people who walked in “God’s way” or in the “way of the Lord.” Jesus presented himself as “the Way” (John 14:6) and once spoke of the broad way that leads to destruction and the narrow way that leads to life (Matt. 7:13–14).

“The Way” refers both to the destination of the journey and to the manner of travel. “To walk in the ‘Way’ involves a moral style so intimately related to the destination itself that to wander from ‘the Way’ is to miss the goal (a righteous life in a community faithful to God).”30

Into a society of vicious immorality where wealth was worshiped, life was cheap, and purity and chastity were vanishing came a new way—a way foreign to the first-century culture. The ethical lifestyle of the first followers of “the Way” is described in the second-century Epistle to Diognetus:

Every foreign land is for them a fatherland and every fatherland a foreign land. They marry like the rest of men and beget children, but they do not abandon the babies that are born. They share a common board, but not a common bed.31

In Ephesians, Paul challenges the Christian family to live by the principle of mutual yieldedness in love based upon the family’s acceptance of Christ as Lord of the home. The apostle’s counsel is radically countercultural, for the Christian way “is more than a matter of a new understanding. Christianity is an invitation to be part of an alien people who make a difference because they see something that cannot otherwise be seen without Christ.32

The Roman culture required a woman to accept the authority of her husband, but Paul gives a new interpretation to authority and a new attitude about the marriage relationship. Christian marriage involves a mutual submission of husband and wife to each other (5:21), based on agape love (5:25). The analogy is that of the body. Husbands and wives are to be “one flesh” (5:31); and just as Christ loved his body (the church), so the husband in loving his wife loves himself, for she is his body (5:28). Three times Paul invokes the example of Christ to illustrate what he means. Christ put the welfare of the church over his own, even to the point of death. Christian love will make any sacrifice for the welfare of the beloved.

The unity of husband and wife is so complete that they no longer exist as separate selves, but as one (5:28–31). The Christian husband is not to act in a harsh, uncaring way toward his wife, but with tender, loving support and care. The Christian wife is to show strong respect for her husband (5:33). Through love, on the one hand, and honor on the other, husband and wife are to mirror the great mystery itself, the union between Christ and his church (5:32).

Children in the Christian household also live under the lordship of Christ and are called upon to obey their parents “in the Lord” (6:1). To “honor father and mother” was the first commandment given with a promise, as well as the first commandment each child was taught (6:2).

Addressing parents, Paul warns fathers against creating anger in children that leads to lasting bitterness and resentment (6:4a), an injunction he repeated to the Colossians, adding “lest they become discouraged” (Col. 3:21). Christian parenting is based upon “the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (6:4b); in attitude and content it reflects God’s will.

Against the terrible background of slavery in the Roman
Empire, Paul writes astounding advice to the Christian household. The command to “obey your earthly masters” (6:5) contains nothing new; the unique element is in the slave’s attitude. Slaves should offer their slavery to the true Lord as service to him.

With “fear and trembling” before the Lord, the slave should serve “with singleness of heart” (6:5b). The Christian servant is to have no mixed motives, serving wholeheartedly with enthusiasm and consistency, as unto the Lord (6:6–7). The slave’s ultimate confidence rests in God’s justice and not in possible rewards from earthly masters (6:8).33

Christian slaveholders are counseled “to do the same” (6:9), to relate to their slaves in the same spirit and with the same attitude. “Threatening” (6:9) has no place in the household of a Christian master, for as the slave must render wholehearted service, so the master’s response should be kindness. The owners of slaves also should be aware that their relationship to their slaves is temporary; their concern should be about their relationship to Christ, before whom both slave and master stand on level ground, for with God there is “no partiality” (6:9).

**Conclusion**

Although Paul did not visualize an imminent change in cultural structures, the ethical principles he applied to the Christian home transformed existing social relationships. Seeds also were planted that led to the eventual abolition of slavery and that continue to affect marriage and family relationships to this day. Just as we cannot use Paul’s teachings to justify slavery, so we must not use Paul’s words to justify a hierarchical view of marriage that relegates the wife to an inferior position.

The most constructive way to build a Christian home is for each member of the family to work at surpassing the other in love and voluntary submission. Some ask, “But when differences arise, who is the head of the house?” The answer is simple. The head of the Christian home is Christ. Christian marriage is not a struggle over power, but a covenant commitment in which “two become one” through mutual love and consideration.

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**Endnotes**

10. Ibid., 210.
12. Cited in Barclay, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 208
14. Some translations use “submit.”
15. Beck, “Is There a Head of the House in the Home?,” 61–62. He noted that one of the earliest manuscripts (Vaticanus) marks 5:15 to 6:9 as one paragraph, but other manuscripts mark shorter paragraphs from 5:3 to 5:21 and another from 5:22 to 6:9.
16. Ibid., 63.
21. Berkeley Mickelsen and Alvera Mickelsen, “The ‘Head’ of the Epistles,” *Christianity Today*, February 20, 1981, 20. The comprehensive lexicon of the Greek language compiled by Liddell, Scott, Jones, and McKenzie lists nearly twenty-five possible meanings of kephele (head) but does not include our common English usage of “authority over,” “leader,” “director,” or “superior.” The commonly used lexicon of Arndt and Gingrich also gives little or no support for such a meaning.
28. Barth, *Ephesians* 4-6, 700.
33. Tolbert, *Ephesians*, 125.

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Hi, do we say “Jake is in the house” or “Jake is at home”? What is the difference between these two sentences? Thanks. I just want you to tell me which one of the following is correct. If all of them are correct to you, then which ones are more common? Which ones are correct and which ones are wrong? Which one are more common? Thank you. hey presto. Senior Member. Should the husband be considered the leader/head of the home, or should both husband and wife be considered equals? Who is in charge of the family expenses, the husband or the wife? What do you define the role of a house wife? Is she to be a servant to her husband at his request? When does she deserve a break? Jim Fossett, former Professor of Public Admin at University at Albany (1991-2017). Answered 1 year ago. Author has 1.5K answers and 159.9K answer views. That was a few of years ago these days its the normal in our house shes got a price list and she increases rates every year also charges a small penis tax which also has been going up annually. She keeps a record of everything we do and on pay day i get a bill from her and i transfer the money into her account. A housing unit is a house, an apartment, a mobile home, a group of rooms, or a single room that is occupied (or if vacant, is intended for occupancy) as separate living quarters. Separate living quarters are those in which the occupants live and eat separately from any other persons in the building and which have direct access from the outside of the building or through a common hall. In sociology, household work strategy (a term coined by Ray Pahl in his 1984 book, Divisions of Labour)[13][14] is the division of labour among members of a household. Household work strategies vary over the life cycle as household members age, or with the economic environment; they may be imposed by one person, or be decided collectively.[15].