

Metaphor in Scripture

Introduction

Many people who profess to be Christians hold vastly different beliefs about the Bible. Some regard it as allegorical; some view it as a collection of useful yet flawed stories with a grain of truth; some claim to regard it as fully and literally true. However, a fully literal reading of the Bible—without analogies, metaphors, or any other figures of speech—would result in doctrines that few (if any) Christians truly hold to. Because so much of the text, especially in the New Testament, addresses matters beyond the observable world, the various writers had to resort to metaphors so that the readers would be better able to understand. Even Jesus Himself was renowned for speaking in parables, which often played out as extended metaphors.

Being a Christian myself, I find it fascinating to closely examine the Bible's use of language and to attempt to sort out what it all means. It's often no easy task, but I've always found it well worth the effort. In a book revered by hundreds of millions of people worldwide, the meaning of even the smallest word can have global ramifications, so breaking down and studying the metaphors in the Bible can shed a great deal of light on why some things are as they are in society. In this essay, I seek to illuminate how the apostle Paul's use of metaphor in Ephesians 5:22–33 focuses the Christian worldview in regards to the institution of marriage. This use of metaphor is unique in that it simultaneously uses an extremely common human institution—marriage—to explain a theological concept, while also using that theological concept to shape the way people think about and treat marriage.

Description of the Artifact

The apostle Paul wrote the book of Ephesians as a letter to the Christian church in Ephesus, which, judging by how he addressed them, was primarily composed of Gentiles (that is, people not of Jewish ancestry). At the time, there was a long-standing stigma toward Gentiles—the Jewish people believed they themselves were God's only chosen people, and so they tended to regard Gentiles with contempt. It was only recently that a new sect of the Jewish faith (which became Christianity) declared salvation to be available to Jew and Gentile alike, and many of the Jews were resistant to the change.

Throughout his letter to the Ephesian church, Paul encourages them to be strong in their faith and instructs them in various aspects of righteous behavior. In all his encouragement and instruction, the focus consistently returns to the ideas of obedience to Jesus and spiritual unity with Him. Near the end of his letter, Paul addresses the

topic of marriage, comparing it with the spiritual union of Jesus and the church ("the church," in this case, meaning all Christians, not a particular church). In Paul's eyes, this comparison makes the roles of husbands and wives quite clear: he insists that a wife ought to be "subject" to her husband, while a husband ought to give himself for his wife as Christ gave Himself for the church (i.e., even to death if need be).

Method—Metaphor Criticism

Metaphors are all around us, often so deeply ingrained in our way of thinking and speaking that we don't even realize they're there. A metaphor criticism seeks not only to examine and understand a given instance of metaphor, but also to consider what kind of worldview that metaphor creates. Broadly speaking, a metaphor explains an often-difficult idea by comparing it with another idea, usually one more relatable to the audience. Metaphors are primarily examined in respect to their two parts: the *tenor* (what is being explained) and the *vehicle* (what is used to explain the tenor). Sonja Foss provides an excellent example to illustrate how metaphors can influence our worldview: the metaphor that "argument is war." As Foss points out, even the expressions we use to talk about arguments reflect this metaphor—"He *attacked* my argument,' 'I *demolished* her argument,' 'I *won* the argument,' and 'He *shot down* all of my arguments'" (269). Even without realizing it, we use metaphors to structure our very perception of reality, so a metaphor criticism explores the particular ways in which we do that.

Analytical Findings

From the very beginning of this passage in Ephesians, starting at chapter 5, verse 22, Paul uses metaphor to explain how he believes marriage ought to look, saying, "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord." He then furthers the comparison in verse 23, saying, "For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church." An explicit metaphor here is "the husband is as Christ," as "the husband" and "Christ" are both the subjects in the sentence, but the identical structure of the two clauses also creates the metaphor "the wife is as the church." Paul reinforces this second metaphor in verse 24, saying "just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything."

Many people in many cultures in the past two millennia seem to have used these verses to justify the oppression and abuse of women by their husbands, but such people have failed to grasp the weight of the following verse: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her." Ostensibly, this

verse and the comparison of *husband* with *Christ* simply mean that a man should be willing to give his own life for the sake of his wife, but understood in the context of the Gospel, it puts much greater responsibility on a husband. According to the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, He certainly did lead and instruct His followers, but He did so as a servant. In the book of John, chapter 13, He even goes so far as to wash their feet, a task considered extremely lowly at the time. Jesus also says in Matthew 20:28, "the Son of Man [referring to Himself] did not come to be served, but to serve." Understood in this context, Paul's instruction for husbands to "love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church" means that husbands ought to be as servants to their wives. To use a metaphor of my own, Paul creates a picture of marriage wherein husband and wife are in a constant game of backwards leap-frog—both continually humbling themselves underneath each other, the wife by submission and the husband by servitude.

A second metaphor Paul uses is that of marriage being like a human body, as he says in verse 23, "the husband is the *head* of the wife," and in verse 28, "husbands ought to love their own wives as their own *bodies*" (emphasis added). In these passages, Paul portrays marriage as one complete person, with the husband as the head and the wife as the body. This further reinforces what he thinks marriage ought to be like, as a body must submit to the will of the head, and a head must guide the body and serve it by fulfilling its physical needs. Neither a human head nor a human body can survive without the other, and this seems to be how Paul sees a husband and wife: both equally reliant on one another for the marriage to function.

While in much of this passage Paul's intent seems to be to lay out the roles of husbands and wives in marriage, he reveals in verses 30–32 that he's also using marriage itself as a metaphor to explain the spiritual union between Christ and the church:

³⁰For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. ³¹*"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."* ³²This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

The quoted portion, in verse 31, is taken directly from the first book of the Bible—out of the account of creation in Genesis, specifically Genesis 2:24. Verse 30, where Paul writes that we are "of His flesh and of His bones," is also a reference to Genesis. According to the Genesis account, God made the first man, Adam, from the dust of the earth, but there was no suitable companion for him. Therefore, while Adam slept, God removed one of his ribs and from it formed the first woman, Eve. When Adam first saw Eve in Genesis 2:23, he said "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." These passages from Genesis are often regarded by Christians as God's first command

regarding the institution of marriage—and the Christians in Ephesus would no-doubt have recognized it as such—but Paul uses it here to describe the spiritual union of Christ and the church. By making this comparison, Paul is saying that everything he had just explained about the ideal marriage was also an explanation of the church's unity with Christ. Such a lofty theological concept would have likely been difficult for the Ephesians to understand without metaphor, so Paul explained it using the institution of marriage itself—an idea with which almost everyone is familiar.

There is one final point I would like to make about the metaphors Paul uses: while he never directly addresses homosexuality in this passage, it seems plain that, at least in his personal opinion, there is no room for it in marriage. The metaphors he uses to describe marriage—that of Christ and the church and that of the human body—depend on marriage involving a man and a woman. Christ cannot serve Christ, nor can the church submit to the church; similarly, a head cannot lead a head, nor can a body follow a body. This is not to say, of course, that Paul's use of metaphor necessarily is correct or should be followed, simply that it results in a worldview that leaves no room for homosexual marriage.

Conclusion

While it's certainly not the only passage in the Bible that talks about marriage, the effects of Paul's metaphor in Ephesians 5:22–33 can be seen throughout the Christian church: many firmly hold to Paul's prescribed roles for the husband and the wife; many talk about the church as the "bride of Christ"; and many are adamantly against homosexual marriage. It truly is remarkable that even now, almost 2,000 years after Paul wrote this letter, the words he chose and the metaphors he used continue to shape the worldviews and ideologies of millions of people. Even some of the common phrases we use in English, such as referring to a husband as the "head of the household," seem based on that same worldview. Metaphors are not merely colorful language. They truly do become ingrained in our way of thinking, molding and shaping our very perception of the world around us.

Works Cited

Foss, Sonja K. "Metaphor Criticism." *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. 4th ed. Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland, 2009. Print.

Appendix

²²Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. ²⁴Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, ²⁶that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. ²⁸So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. ³⁰For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. ³¹*“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”* ³²This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. ³³Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (*New King James Version*, Eph. 5:22–33)