

# Family Life as a Call to Christian Discipleship: A Study of Eph 5:21-6:4 in the Nigerian Christian Context

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## Introduction

Family is often described as the most basic unit of human society. “It forms the basic unit of social organization and it is difficult to imagine how human society could function without it.”<sup>1</sup> Natural and fundamental as the family is to human beings, it is today, more than ever, bedevilled by many threatening factors challenging its values and existence. Marriage is put on edge through pervasive rate of divorce, unnatural sexual practices like homosexuality, lesbianism, gay and same sex unions, broken families, etc. Family life is also seriously threatened by laissez faire attitude to family life especially in preparation for marriage and carefree child upbringing, ‘absentee parent’<sup>2</sup> syndrome, as well as uncritical exposure to some unwholesome scientific and technological developments. There are also natural problems of sickness, poverty and bereavement besieging the family. Some of these problems have been confronting the family for quite a long time in human history; others are of more recent development. The Church, on her part, has been intervening through various public pronouncements as well as individual input from informed and enlightened Christian conscience, on behalf of the family.

Pope Francis currently declares the year 2013-2014 the Year of the Family, followed by the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, preceding the Ordinary Synod of Bishops in the year 2015 to articulate the problems of the family in contemporary society and proffer her magisterial and maternal solution. Paul in the text of our study (Eph 5:22-6:4), presents the family as so serious a bond that it must look unto Christ as model in his relationship with the Church which is his Body and Bride for whom he lays down his life and cleanses and beautifies it. So husbands should love their wives and lay down their lives for them. Wives, on their part, should love and respect their husbands as the Church loves Christ and obeys him in all things. These are sound, sublime, culturally challenging statements; the Good news about marriage, modelled on Christ and his relationship with the Church, a Christian discipleship.

Discipleship, referring to the role of a disciple (*mathētēs* in Greek, *talmid* in Hebrew, *discipulus* in Latin), meaning a learner, a follower connotes “an apprentice, or a pupil attached to a teacher or a movement; one whose allegiance is to the instruction and commitments of the teacher or movement.”<sup>3</sup> In OT, some of the prophets had their disciples, including Elisha for Elijah, Gehazi for Elisha, and the guild of prophets for their masters and mentors. Israel as a whole was regarded as the disciple of the Lord who listens to the Lord for instruction (Isa 49). In NT, the Rabbis had their scribes and followers; John the Baptist was known to have his disciples (John 1:40-42), and Jesus had his disciples from whom he selected his apostles (Mark 3: 13-19). Christians as a whole are all disciples as they follow Jesus and learn and live by his ways. In the words of Reynolds R. Ekstrom,

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Haralambos – Robin M Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*(New Delhi: Oxford, 1980) 325

<sup>2</sup> Paulinus Ezeokafor, “The Family: Shoring up the Foundations”, *Fides*(2014) 6.

<sup>3</sup> Philip .L. Shuler, “Disciple”, Paul .J. Achtemeier (ed.), *Harpers' Bible Dictionary* (Bargalore, India, TP1, 1994) 222.

Discipleship is a way of life that must involve significant risk, hope, and a willingness to speak out in urgent self-sacrificing and counter culture ways to lift up the message and values of Jesus' good news. While this mission of evangelization was given to the original disciples, discipleship as a lifestyle and life- witness is the way's that all baptized persons are called by the Church to live in imitation of Jesus."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, though disciple or discipleship is not mentioned in St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, the injunction to imbibe, learn, and imitate Jesus, to do as he did, is a perennial call to discipleship. This relationship becomes a paradigm, a model of true family relationship in the face of various unchristian and inhuman socio- cultural family models.

## 1. The Ephesians Context

Biblical scholars have divergent views on the Letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians.<sup>5</sup> Though Ephesians is among the prison letters of St. Paul (Eph 3:7; 4:9), and regarded in some circles as one of his pseudonymous or deuterocanonical letters,<sup>6</sup> it retains essential Pauline theological outlook; its soteriology, Christology, eschatology and ecclesiology, etc. it expounds the theology of human salvation designed by God in Christ for both Jews and gentiles who are privileged with the same salvation and eternal inheritance as God's chosen people and members of his household (Eph 1-3). It is also characterized as Paul's most ecclesiological letter and most apt for ecumenical initiatives of the Church (Eph 1-4:16). In the words of Margaret Y. MacDonald, "the various sections of Ephesians are held together by common theme of unity."<sup>7</sup> Ephesians is also deeply liturgical featuring blessing (1:3-14), thanksgiving and intercession (1:15-23)<sup>8</sup>. It could pass for prayer and exhortation seasoned with deep theological insight revealing God's loving design for human salvation in Christ, hidden from the foundation of the world, and revealed now to the saints (Eph 1:3-23; 3:1-6). Thus its two broad divisions; the theoretical (1-4:24), and the practical (4:25-6:24) are interlaced with prayers (1:3-14, 17-23; 3:14-20) and exhortations (2-3:13; 4-6).

For Judith M. Gundry-Volf, "the primary purpose and occasion of Ephesians is to further the readers' understanding of, and rooting in Paul's gospel, given their lack of personal acquaintance with him."<sup>9</sup> The letter is written to Gentile Christians who have already been evangelized and are thus incorporated into the new unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, but they have not been evangelized or taught by Paul.

## 2. Text of Ephesians 5: 21-6:4

For a deeper understanding of the text the following issues are discernible

- (I) Call to Christian family discipleship (Eph 5:21)
- (II) Christian family discipleship of wives (Eph 5:22-24)
- (III) Christian family discipleship of husbands (5:25-31)

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<sup>4</sup> Reynolds. R. Ekstrom, *The New Concise Catholic Dictionary* (Mimban: St. Paul's', 2002) 99.

<sup>5</sup> John Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Continuum, 2001) 2-54.

<sup>6</sup> Paul J. Kobelski, "The Letter to the Ephesians, " in Raymond E. Brown et al(eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*(London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1995) 884.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Ephesians", William R. Farmer et al(eds.), *The International Bible Commentary: An Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century* (Bangalore: TP1, 2004) 1745.

<sup>8</sup> Sebastian Kizhakkeyil, 221.

<sup>9</sup> Judith M. Gundry-Volf, "Letter to the Ephesians", in David Noel Freedman et al (eds.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WMB Eerdmans, 2000) 412.

- (IV) Implication and conclusion (Eph 5:32-33)
- (V) Christian family discipleship of children (Eph 6:1-3)
- (VI) Christian family discipleship of fathers (Parents) (Eph 6:4).

### **I. Call To Christian Family Discipleship (Eph 5:21)**

*Hypotassamenoi allelois en phobo Christou*". (Be subject to one another in the fear (out of reverence)\* of Christ". Two issues are presented here, namely, "mutual submission or subjection of husband and wife to one another. "Be subject (*hypotassamanoi* – 2<sup>nd</sup> person you (pl) be subject) *allelois* to one another (dative pl). This teaching already confronts and counters the androgynous and patriarchal culture prevalent then, even till today in many nations, of wives alone being subject to their husbands. This is an evangelization unto restoration of the original natural equality of man and woman in respect of their human dignity as recorded in Gen 1:26, 2:18-24. Man and woman are created of equal and the same human nature, gender or sex differentiation notwithstanding. They are also equal in their love affirmation to each other that establishes the marriage bond between them through mutual consent. If any of the spouses withdraws his/her consent, the marriage relationship will not hold. The equality calls for complementary roles of the sexes for the one family or marriage project. As St. John Paul II puts it, "equality between man and woman is in fact asserted from the first page of the bible in the stupendous narrative of creation. The book of Genesis says "God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created them (Gen 1:27). This original biblical message is fully expressed in Jesus' words and deeds. In his time women were weighed down by inherited mentality in which they were deeply discriminated. The Lord's attitude was a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of woman".<sup>10</sup>

The second aspect of the verse spells out the Christian family discipleship. This natural subjection is out of reverence (in fear- *en phobo*) of Christ. The natural provision and design of God for humanity is given another base or foundation, another *raison d'être*, namely, reverence for Christ. Since the Christian is so constituted through baptism into the body of Christ, all his actions, including the marriage bond and its requisite mutual submission must be mirrored on Christ and done out reverence( out of fear) of Christ. Christian discipleship becomes the reason or accentuated reason for this mutual submission because a disciple must follow the design, dictates and injunctions of the master. Yet this mutual common submission has distinct patterns and role definitions for each of the spouses.

### **II. Christian Discipleship of Wives (Eph 5:22-24)**

"The wives should respect their husbands as to the Lord". The word "*hypotessethessan* (they should obey, or *hypotassesthe* (imperative) recommends and commands obedience or submission of wives to the husbands, as to the Lord. The reason for this command is "that because the husband is head of his wife, just as Christ is the head of the church, the savior of His body but just as the church is obedient to Christ, so ( ) the wives to their husbands in all things. Here the allegory is fully exposed and the lesson properly and completely posed.

The body image given earlier (Eph 2:16) of the church being the body of Christ is referred to again and brought into full relief and operation. Often the Christian is made of the complementary unity of a human body and the Lord, which together with other members of the

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<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*(15), quoted by Luigi Accattoli, *When a Pope Asks Forgiveness: The Mea Culpa of John Paul II*, Boston, Paulists, 1998) 109.

body form the complete human person. The head is known to have a controlling and organizing function for the body, controlling the whole nervous system and its operations in the whole body. So also is Jesus Christ in relation to the church, which is his body. Christ has the co-ordinating and ruling role over or in-relation to the church. He is its saviour and Lord. The church on her part is obedient, subject to Christ in all things so shall wives be to their husbands in all things. But this role is complementary, guided by the first statement.

This verse appears so significant as a turning point on culture by the gospel. It has become the point of the church's socio-cultural revolution of St. Pope John Paul II in his *Mulieris Dignitatem* (9:24) "The author knows that this way of speaking so profoundly rooted in the customs and religious tradition of the time is to be understood and carried out in a new way; as a mutual subjection out of reverence for Christ (Eph 5:21), In relation to the old, this is evidently something new! It is an innovation of the Gospel, the awareness that in marriage there is mutual subjection of the spouses out of reverence for Christ and not just that of the wife to the husband which must gradually establish itself in hearts, consciences, behaviours and customs. This is a call which from that time onward, does not cease to challenge succeeding generations. It is a call which people have to accept ever new. All the suggestions in favour of the subjection of woman to man in marriage must be understood in the sense of a mutual subjection of both out of reverence for Christ".<sup>11</sup>

### **III. Christian Discipleship of Husbands (Eph 5:25-31)**

Husbands are required to love their wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he may sanctify her with water in the word so that he may present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of that kind. But that she may be holy and blameless. In that way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one hates his own body but feeds it and cares for it, just as Christ for the church. For we are his body. "For this, a man leaves his father and his mother, and will cling to his wife and the two becomes one body".

Paul or the Ephesians author sets the martial code for the husband, having finished that of the wife. Husbands have to love their wives as Christ loves the church. Christ's relationship with the church is the model for the husband. As Jesus Christ loves the church and gave himself for her, so should husbands love their wives even unto death as Jesus did (John 15:13) "No greater love has a man than to lay down his life for his friends". Husbands are to do exactly likewise should the occasion present itself. Christian love is not merely contractual but intimate and covenantal. It is a relationship of love unto death. It is a very serious and demanding commitment unlike the conventional custom of master/slave relationship that often denigrates the dignity of women. Husbands should love their wives as Christ loves the church, his body and bride; as the church is the bride of Christ and Christ the groom, so husbands and wives stand in relationship of groom and bride and the roles are spelt out, modelled on the relationship of Christ and the church. Here again the image of the church that had been given earlier is brought out and its implication now relayed, namely, the body of Christ (Eph 2:16). The bride is also the body and Christ is the head. There is intimate union between different parts of human body all making up a unity; an organic and undivided unity. The intimacy and care and feeding that are imperative are asserted. No one hates his own body and it is not different or isolated from the person. That also corroborates the original divine plan for marriage (Gen 2:24) re-echoed by the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 19:6, Mark

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<sup>11</sup>Accattoli, *When a Pope Asks Forgiveness*, 107-108.

16:1-12). Thus the Christian theology of marriage is set in full relief. Since husband and wife are one body (*kai esontai hoi duo eis sarka mian*-and the two become one body) there is no room for divorce or any division “For no one ever hates his own body”. Instead, he feeds it and cares for it, “Just as Christ takes care of the Church.

The positive responsibility in marriage of the husband towards the wife as his own body means he must always seek for the good of the wife as his own very body, which he gives medicare when sick, feeds when hungry and thirsty, clothes, etc. When such intimate love and care exist between husband and wife, one for the other in mutual relationship and not one at the expense of the other, marriage lasts and succeeds, built on Christian principles. As Thierry Maertens surmises “These new values of mutual submission, of reciprocal love and of authority through service are the essential ingredients of marriage “in the Lord”; such a marriage is totally different from that describe in Gen 2-3 which the essential values are not love but covetousness, not mutual submission but woman’s inferiority, not the authority through service but an imaginary supremacy”<sup>12</sup>

#### **IV. Implications and conclusion (Eph 5:32-33)**

Paul returns to his point of departure namely, the mystery of human salvation and unity in the church in Christ Jesus according the will of God from the foundation of the world (Eph 1:3-14, 2-3). He clarifies that he has used this admonition as an illustration of the relationship between Christ and the church, his body and bride; the latter serving as model for the former. In the words of Victor Onwukeme: “In Eph 5:21-33, Paul makes it clear that the new relationship between wife and husband is to be modelled on the relationship between the church and Christ. Paul has presented the church as Christ’s body (Eph 1: 23; 4:16), and a holy temple (Eph 2: 21-25). Now he sees the church as bride, emphasizing the personal relationship the church has with Christ”<sup>13</sup>. For Helen Doohan, “Ephesians deliberately develops parallels between the marriage relationships and Christ and the church. However, the church is only inferred to be the bride of Christ. The explicit connection remains for the book of Revelation. Here the quality of love, its mutuality, tenderness, sacrificial dimensions, and marital union speak eloquently, despite the strong cultural influence of the household code”.<sup>14</sup>

The relationship between Christ and the church is given its proper context, namely, a mystery; the mystery of Gods grand design for human salvation accomplished in and through Christ in the church, where the church is now the body of Christ its head and saviour. This mystical relationship of husband and wife is no longer on ethical level only but also spiritual or sacramental level as it not only derives from God in Gen 1:27, 2:24, but also is modelled on the relationship of Christ and the Church. The full realization of its effects is in the life of the Christian couples as members of the church, thus constituted through Christ’s redemptive death on the cross which saving effects are appropriated through baptism (Eph 2:4-7). New life required of this saving event in Christ brings about unity among believers at various levels ranging from conversion from pagan lifestyle to a Christ –centred life, a Christian discipleship even in family life. In the words of George Kaitholil, “For Christians who on account of their baptism have become temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), Marriage has a special beauty and meaning. See what Paul says about the loving union of man and woman in holy matrimony:

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<sup>12</sup> Thierry Maertens, *The Advancing Dignity of Woman in the Bible* (Wisconsin, St. Norbert Abbey, 1969) 171.

<sup>13</sup> Victor Onwukeme, *Being All Things to All People* (Abuja, Sir Kuf 2007) 369.

<sup>14</sup> Helen Doohan, *Paul’s Vision of Church* (Wilmington, Delaware; Michael Glazier, 1989) 206.

“This mystery has great significance, but I am applying it to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:32). The mystery here is the divine plan of salvation for all in Christ (Eph 3:3-6).<sup>15</sup>

As Victor Onwukeme explains: “while wives are called to be subject to their husbands, husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loved the church. We know how Christ loved the church, he loved the church in such a way that he gave himself for her. Thus, the love being spoken of here is not *eros* (sensual love) nor *philia* (Friendship) but Agape (selfless and self-giving love). It is sacrificial love to which Paul exhorts all the faithful (4:2, 15-16; 5: 2)”<sup>16</sup>. Further he writes “in the context of marriage, the husband has the opportunity to actualize Christian love that is Christ’s love. Marriage becomes a sacrament of Christ’s love a sacrament where Christ’s love is seen to be effective and actual. It is a true sign, which expresses the love between Christ and the church. The Christian marriage is a tangible sign of Christ’s love for the church and the world.<sup>17</sup> Family life becomes a sacrament and discipleship of Christ’s love for the church and the world. That constitutes the natural conclusion of the discourse with an inclusion. Thus each one of you must love his wife as himself and the wife must, should fear (respect) the husband. The ethical household code is restated as conclusive, given a new meaning, dimension and platform in Christ namely, “as” Christ did.

#### **V. Discipleship of Children to Parents (Eph 6:1-3)**

The Ephesians author now goes on to admonish children on respect or obedience towards their parents some documents omit in Christ, namely Sinaiticus and Bezae and other less weighty documents, the prepositional particle could have been added to align it with the previous admonition to husband and wife and to maintain the same Christological and Christocentric outlook of the text. It serves to emphasize that this family or household ethical code, already known and enjoined in the Decalogue is now given new and fresh impetus by this particle, in Christ. It is no longer merely because the Law enjoins it but as Christ came not to abolish the law (Matt 5:17) but to fulfil it, children now keep this law in Christ because the Lord commands and approves it. The Ephesians author presents the statement of this Law in full with its promises, and notes that it is the only Law with its promise attached to it. Children, obey your parents in Christ, for this is right; fear (respect your father and your mother; for this is the first commandment with promises, so that you will live long and be happy or prosper on earth. This is the fourth commandment of the Decalogue, now restated as household code for children towards their parents. By adding “in Christ,” a discipleship is evinced. It is given the new force of not just the law, but the new law of Christ, so that both the parents and children are caught up with the spirit of discipleship in the Christian family.

#### **VI. Parents’ Christian Discipleship towards the Children (Eph 6:4)**

Fathers, representing the parents as the embodiment of parental authority, without necessarily relegating the mothers recognized in the commandment are not to annoy (*me parorgizate ta tekna hymon*) - do not annoy or provoke your children to anger. Do not exasperate your children. Instead they should provide for them, feed them and bring them up in the discipline of the Lord. Christian family should be a domestic church. They should imbibe Christian values and discipleship and transmit them to their children. They should not wear them out or misunderstand them or ignore them, neglecting the necessary material provision or moral and

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<sup>15</sup> George Kaitholil, *Paul, Guide to Christian Living* (Bombay, St. Paul’s, 1995) 161.

<sup>16</sup>Onwukeme, *Being All Things to All People*, 370

<sup>17</sup>Onwukeme, *Being All Things to All People*, 370

spiritual upbringing due to the children. Parental responsibility towards the upbringing of their children is part of Christian discipleship of the family. This is not to be neglected as it is enjoined from the Old Testament times in the Decalogue and other human cultures, and reinforced in the New Testament as Jesus parents cared for him (Matt 1-2, Luke 1-3) and as Jesus forbade his disciples driving the children away from him or preventing them from coming close to him (Matt 19:13-15, Mark 10:13-16, Luke 18:15-17). We purposely skip the injunction on slaves to remain obedient to their master and masters to treat the slaves with some dignity, all in and because of the Lord as this no longer obtain today. In a word, Christian family life has to be renewed and transformed with the reception of new life and new status in Christ through baptism. Newness of life in Christ should permeate the whole vision, endeavour and outlook of the Christian.

### **3. The Nigerian Christian Context**

Family life thrives in Nigeria, Africa, developing or third world continents and nations and yet not more without challenges. In the global village that the world has become, the challenges to family life spreads like wild fire in the whole world, Nigeria not excluded. As Valerian Okeke articulates, “in general, the situation of family life in Nigeria is very commendable”. The family is still a very stable institution among us. The rate of divorce though increasing is comparatively low. Children are still take well care of and provided opportunity to prepare for their adult life. The extended family comes to help where the primary family finds it difficult to fulfill the basic obligations. Among Nigerian Christians, sacramental marriage is still taken very seriously and importantly regarded as a binding covenant of life. Someone once remarked that only two institutions work in Africa: *The family and the Church*. The state of the family among us amply justifies this assertion. However, we should not close our eyes to the trials and many problems besieging the family in Nigeria and through the family the entire human life<sup>18</sup>. Among them are the following selfishness, lack of supportiveness in time of need, acts against human life (abortion sterilization, artificial contraception, and euthanasia), divorce, irresponsible parenthood, unfaithfulness in marriage and sexual licentiousness, inordinate quest for wealth, bad examples, irreligion, fear and superstition dishonestly, family dictatorship.<sup>19</sup>

No doubt, the family is deeply besieged by a barrage of problems. The list could be extended. Anthony Gbuji locates the source of the problems in the socio-political, cultural and economic challenges prevalent in the whole world. For him, new situations are emerging from the profound transformations which the society in which we live is undergoing. “Every man and woman and every family feels that today’s political, economic, social and cultural changes and transformations have an influence on their ways of thinking and acting. The family, as the primary vital cell of society and the church, is one of the institutions most threatened and as such it has to be on its guard and to be properly understood in order to assume its responsibility and re-discover the new ways that have to be taken”.<sup>20</sup> The family needs urgent pastoral attention for the well being of the individual and the society, including the church, and re-evaluating the nature of marriage as a Christian discipleship, as presented in the letter to the Ephesians will be a great help.

### **4. Christian Family Life in Nigeria in the Context of Eph 5:22-6:4**

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<sup>18</sup> Valerian Okeke, *The Family and Human life* (Enugu: SNAAP, 2008) 5.

<sup>19</sup> Okeke, *The Family and Human life*, 6

<sup>20</sup> Anthony O.Gbuji, *The Pastoral Care of Marriage and Family life* (Nigeria Ibadan: St. Paul’s 2006) 15-16.

With the situation presented above of the problems and challenges to family life in Nigeria, the text of Eph 5:22-6-4 come in hand in the following ways: (i) Strengthening and preserving marital bond and unity through mutual subjection. (ii) Gazing upon Jesus Christ by husband and wife. (iii) Holistic upbringing of children.

(i) *Strengthening and Preserving Marital Bond through Mutual Subjection*

Explaining the unity in the church predicated upon one faith, one hope, one baptism, one Spirit, one Lord, one Father who is all in all (Eph 4:4-6), the Ephesians author appealed to the congregation to preserve the spirit of unity in the bond of peace (Eph 4-3) with all humility and gentleness and patience, bearing with one another in love (Eph 4:2). This plea is extended to couples in Ch. 5 with the backing of loving as Jesus loved and in reverence to him. Husband and wife cannot preserve the unity and peace between them and tame the monster of selfishness and dictatorship in family life and eventual divorce or separation if they do not subject themselves one to the other in love out of reverence for the Lord. Their reverence for the Lord strengthens and guides their love, making their family life a discipleship to the Lord. Their mutual subjection will depict their gentleness, humility and readiness to bear patiently with each other. Thus their marital bond will be preserved and strengthened as they defer to each other in love and in reverence for the Lord.

(ii) *Gazing upon the Face of Jesus<sup>21</sup> by Husband and Wife*

Pope Francis and the current Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family used this expression, which could be understood as imitating Jesus. The text used the words pointing to this by using “just as, “of the Lord or in the Lord.” The text divided roles for the husband and wife assigning roles of groom and bride as Christ and the church respectively. Mutual subjection is given relief in different roles for the husband and wife as Christ relates with the church. Couples should imbibe those roles as Christ and the church do. The desire and preoccupation of the husband should be the well-being of his wife (1Cor 7) that he sought after initially in love. This love should be daily nurtured and preserved by self-giving.

The wife reciprocates the self-giving of the husband by her loving obedience and respect not only as culture stipulates, but now, more so as a form of discipleship to the Lord. She respects the husband as to, and because of the Lord, out of reverence for the Lord. Aware and ever conscious of her status as a Christian in which she is married, her natural love for her husband is deepened and strengthened by the love and reverence for the Lord. It is not servitude as understood in feminist circles and some traditions but something freely and joyfully given as a reciprocation of the husband’s sacrificial love for the good of their family. As Margaret Y. Macdonald observes: “the marriage metaphor should never be taken, however, as a statement of male impunity in the face of female fallibility. Such interpretations are in fact precluded in the text of Ephesians itself not only by the call for mutual submission in Eph 5:21, but also by the simple fact that both husbands and wives are part of the church and ultimately subject to Christ”<sup>22</sup>. The mutual submission removes servitude from the sacrificial love given by the couple to each other. This fulfils the new commandment “I give you a new commandment that you love one another as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35,).

(iii) *Holistic Upbringing of Children.*

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<sup>21</sup> Pope Francis, “Synod on the Family: Mid Term Report”, *Fides* Oct 19 – 25 (2014) 6

<sup>22</sup> MacDonald, “Ephesians,” 1759

Ephesians 6:1-3 counsels' children to obey their parents for that is just to do and gives the promise attached to it in the Decalogue "that you may live long and be happy in the land"! It also counsels the fathers not to annoy the children, but provide them with training and discipline of the Lord (6, 4). Attention to holistic upbringing of children cannot be over emphasized. They have to be taught the laws of the Lord, religious knowledge, as well as secular, cultural and moral education. Investing in the education of children and maintaining reasonable size of the family are marks of responsible parenthood. Unity and love between husband and wife would be a conducive atmosphere and a prerequisite for sound and holistic education of offspring.

The emotional education of the child has also to be given attention. Children need not be pampered to irresponsibility nor do they have to be subjected to fear and unhealthy growing environment. They have to be guided, counselled, loved, cherished, cared and provided for, and reassured in the family so as to turn out responsible human beings. With good Christian family background children will imbibe proper Christian and socio-cultural values for healthy membership of the church and society. Therefore divisive tendencies in family life must be avoided as well as various forms of child abuse and neglect. Christian discipleship of the family requires Christian and holistic upbringing of the children.

## **5. Recommendations**

The text of Ephesians 5:22-6:4 is described by M.Y. MacDonald as "The most important text in the NT on the sanctity of marriage and should play a part in discussions on topics ranging from Christian commitments to the values placed on family life in both church and society".<sup>23</sup> Some aspects of the text have been delineated and juxtaposed with the situation of the family among Nigerian Christians and elsewhere. With the problems ranging from unhealthy husband and wife relationship, to that of their children dictated by various religious, socio-cultural and political norms, the family needs to be re-evaluated against the picture of Christian discipleship of the family as presented in the Letter to the Ephesians. In the light of the text, we proffer the following solutions to the problems outlined earlier.

### **1. Further study of Biblical texts on the family.**

This text needs to be studied further and the aspect of discipleship emphasized to Christian families and intending ones. This will replace or at least seriously reduce the much secularist orientation of many modern families that reduces much religious influence in marriage despite external forms like Christian wedlock. It will also reduce divorce and induce mutual tolerance and genuine Christian love in the family life

### **2. Government Intervention.**

Husbands and wives should be made to understand, against patriarchal domination, that marriages are established on reverential equality of man and woman with respect to their human dignity. Government legal intervention can complement the church's teaching on these issues. Human rights of husband and wife have to be stated and upheld more effectively.

### **3. More Time for Family Issues in Pastoral plan.**

Marriage issues should be given more time in the pastoral plan in the parishes. It could be assigned to a specific Sunday of the month: either every first or second or third or fourth Sunday to discuss its various aspects. Dioceses could device and draw up a pastoral plan in this direction.

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<sup>23</sup> MacDonald, "Ephesians," 1759

Seminars and marriage counseling activities should be available and active to guide both pre marital and post marital lives of couples and families.

#### 4. Return of Schools to Religious Proprietors.

Schools returned to original religious proprietors in some states should be replicated in all the states of the federation for more religious education, with emphasis on Christian family ethics, preparation and values.

### **Conclusion**

The text of Eph 5:22-6:4 is the high point of the admonition on unity in the church and in the family. The unity is given its theological base in the saving event of the Lord Jesus Christ according to the will of God from the foundation of the world. Jews and pagans are given one eternal inheritance as members of God's household and his holy temple through one baptism into one faith, one hope, in one Lord Jesus Christ, one Spirit, and one Father of all. This unity and new status call for newness of life, a change of life style to Christian discipleship. Marriage and family life which typify Christ's relationship with the church have to be learnt from and modelled on this relationship, becoming a mystery of God's love, in Christ in the church. The text calls for its constant revisiting in order to position family relationship properly as a Christian discipleship for the human society and the church, making the family a domestic church. In the words of George Kaitholil, "As the family is the locus where life is lived in all its humanity and genuineness, the context in which one practices the life of faith, the school where one learns the rudiments of spirituality, the principal influence on one's attitude and activities, the existential horizon, that fundamental community in which the whole network of social relations is grounded (Letter to Families from John Paul II, 1994, Nov, 2), authentic Christian living cannot be understood without taking the family into account. All that Paul teaches about faith, love and every other Christian virtue have to find its place, above all, in the family which is the basic unit of society."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Kaitholil, *Paul, Guide to Christian Living*, 161