

Biblical Headship

Marriage as God intended

The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Ephesians 5:23

I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. 1 Corinthians 11:3

The Bible teaches that a husband has a built-in role in marriage. He is the head of his wife. What does this mean? What kind of leadership is involved? Why is this leadership given to husbands? Why use the word “head” for leader?

The English word “head” can have three meanings. It can literally mean the part of the body from the neck up. It can figuratively refer to the source of something (the way we use the term “headwaters” today). And it can figuratively describe leadership (think of a “department head” or “heading up a project”). Which meaning parallels the biblical use in the context of “headship”?

The first meaning is obviously not relevant. And in a day when we are taught human origin in terms of evolution, it is natural to skip immediately to the third meaning when we think of a husband as being the head of his wife – that he is her leader. While that is certainly true, that jump will nonetheless land us at a wrong conclusion, because the primary biblical thought is the one we missed: the notion of source. When Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 11 that “the head of the woman is man,” he explained what he meant by saying, “for man did not come from woman, but woman from man.” (vs. 8).

The biblical notion of headship comes from the Garden of Eden, when the first woman literally came from the first man. Adam was Eve’s source, or “head.” This fundamental biblical teaching about creation defines the kind of leadership that is called “headship.” If we think that headship is nothing more than just another synonym for leadership, without factoring in the biblical notion of Adam as the source of Eve, then we will confuse headship with whatever worldly forms of leadership we have experienced in our families, the government, business or the military. In other words, we

will confuse headship with the sort of government and rule that is practiced by the fallen world.

To understand this, first consider that at the beginning, the only rule given to human beings was the rule of the planet, and that dominion was shared by all humanity together.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Genesis 1:26-28

Note that dominion over the earth was given to all mankind together. There is nothing here about people ruling over other people. (Remember: this is before sin entered the world.) There was no police and no army because there was no crime and no war.

In Genesis 2, the human rule of this planet was paired with God's rule over mankind in what might be called a covenant - a sort of contract established between God and all mankind through the only human being alive at the time: Adam. God promised life in exchange for obedience, and gave mankind the charge to develop the entire planet, using Eden as a prototype.

This relationship involved all humanity, but so far humanity consisted only of one man. God then observed that one man could not rule the globe all by himself. Adam considered the various animals as partners, but they could not share in the work of dominion because they were all under human dominion. Adam needed another human being with whom to share his rule, and with whom the rest of mankind could be born to share it, as well. So Eve was taken from his side. The fact that Eve was made to help Adam with his rule did not subordinate her to him any more than Adam's sons and daughters would be subordinated. Genesis 1 made it clear that they would all rule together in a world without sin.

However, with Eve's creation there arose a need for leadership, the need to welcome and integrate others in the covenant God established through Adam. Adam was not called to rule over other human beings - God is the one who would rule, and God alone. But every subsequent human being would have to be introduced to this covenant relationship and be led in joyful, willing obedience to God.

Now, the unique role of headship becomes evident. The nature of Adam's leadership stemmed from one simple fact: not that he was superior, not that he was male, but simply that he was ... first. He was the source. God established his relationship with all mankind with Adam, when there was no one else, not even Eve. Therefore, Adam's leadership task was obvious: tell Eve what God had established, demonstrate the joyful obedience required of us, and help Eve respond in kind. Adam was not called to rule over Eve, but to lead her in submitting to God's rule.

The entrance of human sin changed everything. Following Eve's example, Adam chose to determine good and evil for himself. The covenant specifying God's rule over us was shattered, earning God's curse of death upon all mankind. This curse was suspended so that each generation could bear children and all the people God originally intended would be born. But with Adam's sin, every human being was condemned to death (Romans 5:12-19). Humanity became spiritually separated from God, and lost the benefits that flow from living under his rule.

In Genesis 3, we see that sin changed the nature of leadership in the home as our first parents were cast out of Eden.

To the woman [God] said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

Genesis 3:16

Becoming severed from God's blessing brought pain and domination into marriage. The word for "rule" in this verse is different from the somewhat more stewardship-oriented term we looked at in the creation account. This word means to govern, control or master. In Eden, God was the only master; now husbands typically fill that role in a marriage, requiring obedience to themselves.

Biblical headship was left in Eden, replaced in this age by patriarchy (the rule of men). Headship and patriarchy are not the same thing. Headship strives for God's rule. Patriarchy strives for male rule. Men's rule over women has become the default condition in our broken and fallen world. Some husbands are benevolent and even godly in this role, some are harsh taskmasters, and most fall somewhere in the middle. However it may be exercised, patriarchy is now the default condition, to which women must adapt for better or worse ...

Except that Christ came to replace Adam, for those who believe in him. God established a new relationship, or new covenant, with mankind through Christ in which we find forgiveness of our sins and hope of Paradise reborn at Christ's return. Headship was a responsibility entrusted to Adam, and he failed that trust. But as the new source of eternal life, Jesus demonstrates everything Adam's headship was designed to be.

Consequently, Jesus begins in this life to transform our souls, untwisting the deformities of sin and restoring God's original design. God's people begin to breathe a bit of Eden's atmosphere, as sinful patterns of racial domination, economic domination and gender domination gradually untangle. As Paul said,

All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:27-28

In essence, wherever Christ is exalted as Lord, people stop trying to be lord over one another. We once again acknowledge one Master, one Father (Matthew 23:8-10), and treat one another with equal respect as God's children and co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:16-17).

Christians are called to embrace this ideal in marriage, particularly. There is still the need for leadership and authority in marriage, but faith transforms the nature of that authority from the world's patriarchy into the headship recovered in Jesus.

That is to say, Christian faith transforms the husband's leadership from an imposition of his rule over his wife, into a calling to win his wife's obedience to God. This, in turn, gives the Christian wife a third choice. No longer must she choose between submitting to her husband's rule or resisting it; now she can choose to follow her godly husband's example by obeying the Lord God.

The same change in the nature of authority can be seen in faithful church leaders. Indeed, the default worldly concept of authority was so distasteful to Jesus that he once actually forbade his apostles from exercising authority at all (Mark 10:42-44). Clearly, however, despite his literal and striking language, he meant that the apostles were not to exercise authority in the way fallen mankind exercises it. He made the same point many times, stressing that godly human leadership is the role of a faithful steward who manages the true master's household according to his expressed desires - never imposing personal whim as if the steward were the owner. The apostles were expressly forbidden to lord it over the flock as if the church belonged to them, and were instead charged to lead by instruction and example (1 Peter 5:1-3).

This seems to be the kind of leadership Paul had in mind in 1 Corinthians 11. When Paul called others to "follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ," he demonstrated godly leadership in the church. He did not set himself up as the church's Lord, but rather as a model of following the church's Lord.

That is the spirit that guided his comments later in the very same chapter when he said that "the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man." This wasn't a reference to the patriarchy established upon God's curse, but rather to the the headship recovered in Christ's

blessing. Paul encouraged Christian husbands to adopt the same kind of leadership he had just demonstrated.

Paul spelled out marital headship in detail in the book of Ephesians.

The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Ephesians 5:23

For the husband:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. Ephesians 5:25-27

Note that there is nothing whatsoever here about Genesis 3 patriarchy - the rule of a wife by her husband. While patriarchy is still the norm in our fallen world, none of that is mentioned here.

Jesus exercised headship by doing what Adam should have done. Jesus submitted himself 100% to his divine Father and called those who follow him to do likewise. With Christ as their model, husbands are charged to imitate that role as the head of their wives. Such headship demands that they imitate Christ's obedience to God, and call their wives to join them in submitting to God in pure holiness.

For the wife:

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord ... Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Ephesians 5:22,24

Note that wives are called to submit to their husbands in the same way the church submits to Christ. This, of course, has nothing to do with patriarchal domination. The only ones ever forced to bow before Christ are those who face judgment at his return. Christ's redeemed people are indeed compelled to obey him, but they are compelled through love alone.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that

those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

If wives are called to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ, then they are called to voluntarily respond to their husband's love and self-sacrifice by giving themselves wholly to the Christ he models.

Why are wives instructed to submit to such love? The term "submit" seems to suggest to our ears subordination to another's rule, not to another's love. Yet, Paul only speaks of a husband's love, not his rule.

The answer becomes clear when we consider Jesus' chief illustration of his lordship - an enacted parable that demonstrates the nature of Christian submission perfectly.

The evening meal was being served ... so [Jesus] got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. John 13:2-5

Jesus explicitly taught on that occasion that footwashing captured the nature of his lordship, and those who follow him (especially leaders, like the apostles) were required to exercise this kind of authority. They had the authority to wash feet. They had a servant's authority to sacrifice themselves to bring God's grace to those who need it.

If it seems strange to speak of such service as "authority," consider Jesus' interaction with Simon Peter that night. Simon was not prepared to receive sacrificial service from his Lord. Jesus, however, required him to submit to being washed, if Peter was to indeed know him as Lord.

It is of the essence of Christian faith that the church must submit to being loved by God through the sacrificial love of Christ. Faith is a submission of our pride, an opening of our heart to the love of God we do not deserve.

This completes our understanding of headship. It reveals how Jesus comprehensively fulfilled the headship of Adam. From Jesus' actions, we now see that Adam not only had the responsibility to win Eve's heart to

obey the good God who created them, but Adam also had the authority to suffer death on her behalf when she sinned, trusting in God to raise him back from the dead. Adam had the God-given authority to sacrifice himself for Eve in that way. Jesus had the God-given authority to sacrifice himself for us in that way. Receiving Christ as our Lord and Head requires us to submit to that authority.

That is exactly the kind of headship a Christian wife is clearly called to submit to in Ephesians 5. She must affirm her husband's authority to love her as Christ loved the church - washing and refreshing her with God's revealed truth, and sacrificing himself for her welfare - especially when she fails to obey God.

It is hard to offer that kind of sacrifice to a spiritually wayward wife (just think of Hosea). Peter's struggle reminds us that it is also hard to submit to it. But doing so makes way for God's transforming grace. It encourages a wife to lay aside her will as her husband has laid aside his, so both can serve Christ together. When headship is embraced, neither the husband nor the wife rule over the other, and neither do they find a compromise between their personal desires. Instead, they find unity in submitting themselves to the will of God

That is what headship in the home is all about.

Real-world couples stumble whenever husband or wife, or both, care more about imposing their own will than about submitting to Christ. They stumble when a husband claims his right to be "head of the home" as a mere excuse to dominate, or when a wife takes advantage of her godly husband's graciousness. God's design is also stymied when a husband is ignorant of what God has revealed, or confuses it with popular notions from the surrounding culture. Whenever these things happen, marriage defaults to some better-or-worse form of the patriarchal struggle that has been our lot since God's curse.

People can thrive under patriarchy, of course. Patriarchy is not sinful in itself. Like the pains of childbirth, it is simply the result of living in a world un-tethered to God. And like the military and civilian rule that also arose out of the Fall, it is made good or evil in practice by the actions of leaders and the customs of our various societies. In fact, just as medicine works to

alleviate the pains of childbirth, some societies have done much to limit excessive forms of tyranny in marriage.

The point is that God is not interested in improving a husband's rule as much as the Lord wishes to restore His rule. As God's kingdom matures in a marriage, husbands move from being "king of the castle" to the one who inspires his wife and children to "follow me, as I follow Christ!" - bringing a taste of unspoiled Eden and future Paradise into their home.

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