

Biblical Headship

marriage as God intended



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For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

Ephesians 5:23

I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, 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 and assume that “head” simply means leader. However, while that is certainly true, that jump will land us at a misleading conclusion, because the primary biblical thought is the one skipped: 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 of headship as 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 social forms of leadership we have experienced in our families, the government, business or the military. In other words, we will confuse the biblical notion of headship with the sort of government and rule that is common in the world.

To understand this, first consider that in the Genesis account of Creation, the only rule given to mankind was the rule of the planet, and this dominion was shared by all human beings.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Genesis 1:26-28

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. Of course, "all mankind" consisted of the only human being in existence at the time: Adam. To Adam, God promised life in exchange for obedience, and gave mankind the charge to develop the entire planet, using Eden as a prototype.



God then observed that one man could not rule the globe all by himself. Adam was told to first consider the various animals as partners, and appreciate that they could not share in the work of dominion because they were all under human dominion. Dominion could only be shared by other human beings.

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 clearly states that mankind, male and female, would rule together in a world without sin.

There is a difference between subordination and source. Adam was not superior to other human beings, but he was the source of all other human beings. This fact was highlighted when Eve was created from his flesh, rather than from the dust of the earth.

From a biblical perspective, the fact that there was one individual source for humanity is profoundly significant. As the Apostle Paul would later stress in the New Testament, it pleases the Lord to establish his covenants with individual mediators. That is, God does not establish his relationships with each human being directly. Rather, he establishes his relationship with one person, and then includes others in that relationship, or covenant, by linking them with that mediator. That's the pattern you see throughout the Old Testament, and is the basis for salvation through faith in the one mediator, Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5; Romans 5:12-21).

God was pleased to include the rest of humanity in the covenant he made with Adam, starting with Eve. That created the need to welcome and orient others in the covenant God established. To use New Testament language, there was a need to introduce others to faith in the covenant (an easy task, with no sin to contend with).

The need was for a shepherd, not a governor. Without sin, there was no need to govern in any coercive fashion. Adam was not called to rule over other human beings as a master – God was the one who ruled, and God alone was Master. But every subsequent human being needed to be introduced to this covenant relationship and led in joyful, willing obedience to God.

This obligation and authority to lead his family to God is what became known as headship.



The nature of Adam’s headship 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 covenant with Adam when there was no one else, not even Eve. Adam’s leadership task was to tell Eve what God had established, model 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 choice, Adam chose to define good and evil – his purpose, values and goals – for himself, as if he had created himself, or had no Creator. The covenant specifying God’s rule over us was shattered, earning God’s curse of death upon all mankind.

Immediately, God instituted a new covenant with “the woman’s seed” which suspended that curse to the extent 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 (1 Corinthians 5:22). Humanity became spiritually separated from God, and lost the benefits that flow from living under his rule.

Genesis 3 reveals 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 surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.”

Genesis 3:16

Becoming severed from God’s blessing brought both pain and domination into marriage. The word for “rule” in this verse is different from the more stewardship-oriented term for “dominion” used in the creation account. This word means to govern, control or master. In Eden, God was the only master. After Eden, husbands typically filled that role, requiring obedience to themselves in a relationship women desired because of their dependence and vulnerability.

Biblical headship was left behind in Eden, replaced in our age by patriarchy (the rule of men). Biblical headship and patriarchy are not the same thing. Headship strives for God’s



rule. Patriarchy strives for male rule. Genesis 3 describes pain and patriarchy as the default condition of the family in our broken and fallen world. Some husbands are benevolent and godly in this role, some are harsh taskmasters, and most fall somewhere in between. However it may be exercised, the imposition of a husband's will is now the default condition of marriage, to which women must adapt for better or worse ...

Except that Christ came to replace Adam for a new humanity that believes in him. God established a new relationship with mankind, a new covenant through Christ that provides forgiveness of sin 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 in his humanity demonstrated everything Adam's headship was designed to be. Jesus is the mediatorial Head, Leader, and King of a restored kingdom whose citizens willingly obey the Lord God alone. Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth, but it is the authority of a Head, not a Patriarch. He does not focus on his own will, but only on the will of God, his Father.

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise."

John 5:19

"I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me."

John 5:30

"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."

John 6:38

"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."

John 15:10

The goal of Jesus' lordship is to lead men and women to affirm God's sole right as the Creator to determine good and evil. Through the gift of faith, Jesus untwists the deformities



of sin. God's people begin to breathe a bit of Eden's atmosphere, superimposing God's design over the default conditions of the Fall. In terms of our relationships with each other, Jesus' single-minded exaltation of God's authority gradually untangles sinful patterns of racial domination, economic domination and gender domination. As Paul said,

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:27-28

Until Christ returns, the default conditions of the Fall remain. To secure stability and prosperity, God authorizes various rulers who focus on their own power. In marriage, the default condition remains the rule of husbands over wives.

However, in Christian fellowship believers begin to learn a new way (which is really the old way established at Creation). They stop lording it over one another. Instead, Christians acknowledge one Master, one Father (Matthew 23:8-10), and treat each another with equal respect as God's children and co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:16-17).

This new model of authority is a headship patterned after Christ. It is explicitly practiced in the church, where ecclesiastical authority is considered ministerial and declarative. That is, the real governing authority in the church is God alone, mediated through Christ, his Spirit and his Word. Church leaders do have genuine spiritual authority, but it follows the God-centered headship of Adam in Eden. Church leaders have authority to teach God's Word, model God's will, and lead God's people in obedience. Their authority is not coercive. They have the authority to lead as shepherds, not drive others as masters.

In Christian marriage, the new and old forms of authority mingle in transition. To the extent that God's will is subordinated to a couple's will, the fallen struggle for dominance continues, with patriarchy the typical result. To the extent that personal will is subordinated to God's will, there is no need for domination



since husband and wife are both following the same Lord. All that is needed is to bring the Lordship of Christ visibly to the marriage. That is why the Lord designed headship for the Christian home.

Faith transforms the Christian husband's leadership from an imposition of his rule over his wife, into a calling to lead and 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 alongside him.

The default, or "fallen," mode of authority was so distasteful to Jesus that he forbade his apostles from exercising it (Mark 10:42-44). He stressed the nature of what we are calling biblical headship many times, teaching that godly human leadership is the role of a faithful steward who manages the true master's household according to the master's expressed desires. The good steward never imposes his personal whim as if he were the owner. Later, church elders 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).

Note that in the Mark text (quoted above) and elsewhere, Jesus did not forbid any role of authority; he forbade the worldly model of it. It is still possible and admirable to be "great" in the kingdom. Jesus did not eliminate authority in his kingdom; he redefined it. To be great properly means to be a servant. That made his own authority absolute, because Jesus became God's slave for all, giving his life as a ransom for many.

It is hard for us to understand how service can be a valid mode of authority. But it is Christ's teaching. It is Christ's example. It is, therefore, the key to understanding headship.

Service is the mode of authority Paul demonstrated in 1 Corinthians 11. When Paul called others to "follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ," he demonstrated biblical headship. He did not set himself up as the church's Lord, but rather as a model of following the church's Lord. He had the authority of a



steward, which obligated other Christians to willingly imitate him in his service to Christ.

That same spirit guided his comments later in the same chapter when he said that “the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man.” This certainly wasn’t a reference to the patriarchy established upon God’s curse! Rather, Paul encouraged Christian husbands to rediscover the same kind of stewardship he had just demonstrated a few verses earlier.

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

For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.
Ephesians 5:23

For the husband:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

Ephesians 5:25-27

There is nothing whatsoever here about Genesis 3 patriarchy, a husband’s rule over his wife. While patriarchy is still the norm in our fallen world, it is conspicuous by its absence in Paul’s description of a Christian husband’s role.

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.

For the wife:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.



Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Ephesians 5:22-24

Note that wives are called to submit to their husbands in the same way the church submits to Christ. If it is the same way the church submits to Christ, then it cannot have anything to do with patriarchal domination. The very notion that Christ would enforce his will as something distinct from his Father's will would be blasphemous (1 Corinthians 15:20-28). Moreover, the only ones ever forced to bow before Christ are those who face judgment at his return. If Christ's redeemed people are compelled to obey him, they are compelled through love alone.

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. 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? If you assume a fallen mode of authority, then the term "submit" would refer to the husband's rule. But Paul says nothing about the husband's rule, because he is referring to a different mode of authority. Headship is the authority to serve God by leading others to his blessing. And it is the authority to sacrifice oneself in so doing. Headship is the authority to love.

What does it mean to submit to the authority to love?

Jesus answered that question during his illustration of what authority meant to him. It was an enacted parable that demonstrates the nature of Christian submission perfectly.

[Jesus] rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the



disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. John 13:4-5

Jesus explicitly taught on that occasion that performing the servant's role of washing feet captured the nature of his lordship, and those who follow him 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 others.

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 a love we do not deserve.

Jesus' footwashing reveals how he fulfilled the intended headship of Adam. From Jesus' actions, we 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 offer his 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 out of love. Jesus had the God-given authority to sacrifice himself for us out of love. 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 called to submit herself to. Her husband is called to love her as Christ loved the church. She is called to affirm her husband's authority to sacrifice himself to demonstrate God's love for her. She is then called to follow him in holiness as he follows Christ.

It is hard to offer that kind of sacrifice. But Peter's struggle reminds us that it is also hard to submit to it. Yet 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.



Headship is a component of marriage, which models God's covenant of grace. As a model of the covenant instituted by God and representing the gospel, marriage has much in common with the sacraments. It might be considered a sacrament, except that it is not commanded of all believers and thus does not function as a seal of God's promises. It is, however, explicitly described as a representation of the gospel (Ephesians 5:32).

Therefore, headship is ceremonial in nature in the sense that it models in every Christian family the role of Adam and Christ. It is an authority ritually tied to a role and not a person (a man would not be the Head of the same woman if she were not his wife).

Headship gives husbands the responsibility to imitate Christ in their marriage. Giving that role to the husband best commemorates God's original design in history to establish his covenant through a mediator. Of course, both husband and wife are called as Christians to imitate Christ (Ephesians 5:21), but what every Christian is called to do personally, Christian leaders in the home (and in the church) are called to bear as an official duty.

This responsibility to bear the role of Christ in a marriage is accompanied by genuine spiritual authority. Wives are called to model the role of the church, and submit – not to their husband's rule – but to his Christ-like love. That submission takes the form of following their husbands in honoring and obeying Christ.

Thus, headship is a ceremonial relationship designed to help every Christian marriage practice the Lordship of Christ. When headship is embraced, neither the husband nor the wife rule over the other. Neither do they find a compromise between their personal desires. Instead, they find unity in submitting themselves to the will of God.

That is the Christian ideal.

In practice, sanctification is imperfect and progressive. 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 incorrectly understands his role as Head as a call to rule and uses that role as an excuse to dominate. They stumble when a wife takes advantage of her godly husband's



graciousness. Of course, they also stumble when one partner is not a believer. (Headship could have no meaning for a couple if neither partner is a believer.)

Whenever self-will trumps faithful obedience to Christ, marriage defaults to some better-or-worse form of the patriarchal struggle that has been our lot since God's curse. A patriarch may or may not be interested in submitting himself to Christ. His wife may or may not be able to distinguish obeying Christ from obeying him.

Headship is hard. It is the marital practice of mutually submitting to Christ (Ephesians 5:21).

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 untethered 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 societies. Just as medicine reduces the pain of childbirth, some societies limit excessive forms of tyranny in marriage. And Christian faith certainly brings a redemptive influence to patriarchy.

The point is that God is not interested in improving a Christian husband's rule. Neither is he interested in helping a Christian couple share the rule of their family equally. God is only interested in restoring his rule. As God's kingdom matures in a marriage, husbands move from being "king of the castle" to a steward with authority to inspire his wife and children to "follow me, as I follow Christ!" – bringing a taste of unspoiled Eden and future Paradise into their home.



Notes:

All Scripture references are taken from the English Standard Version.





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