

Excursus: Applying Paul's Principles of Headship

As with every issue, Paul addressed the matter of male-female roles in the Church in terms of the larger governing principles of the kingdom of God and the new creation in Christ. For Christ's saints to live out their new lives in Him – whether in the Church or in the world – they first need to understand who they are; Christians are called to be in their *practice* who they are in their *persons*, and this demands that they grasp what it means for them to be “in Christ.” And so, while Paul wasn't unconcerned with the particular matters raised by the Corinthians, he recognized that addressing those particulars required him to first establish the general principles that alone enabled the particulars to be rightly discerned and so properly addressed. Short of that, any instruction he might bring to bear would amount to nothing but an incentive to mechanical compliance devoid of understanding, and therefore devoid of authentic obedience.

So it was with the issue of male-female distinctions and their place in the life of the Church. Paul approached the matter in terms of principles, but in doing so he didn't leave the specifics unanswered; he did instruct the Corinthians concerning the way women are to function in the assembly's worship and ministration. The present context provides part of that instruction, but it must be filled out from the sum of Paul's teaching – some of which deals with the topic directly (so, for instance 14:34-36 and 1 Timothy 2:9-15), some indirectly (ref. 14:1-33; Romans 16:1-4; Philippians 4:3; 1 Timothy 3:11; Titus 2:3-4; etc.), and some by contributing to Paul's doctrine of the Church (so 12:1ff; Galatians 3:28; etc.).

1. Headship in the Church

This arena of male headship is the appropriate starting point in this excursus since it is the specific concern in Paul's instruction. And the place to begin the consideration of this topic is where Paul did, namely with the relationship between the Father and Son. As noted previously, the Father-Son relationship best demonstrates the principle of headship within the Godhead, *but this doesn't mean that it differs in an essential way from the relationship which exists among all three persons of the Trinity.*

- The inter-trinitarian relationship is perichoretic, with the Father, Son, and Spirit each mutually and exhaustively interpenetrating and indwelling one another in a uniform relationship of mutual love, submission and glorification.
- The implication is that the headship of the Father with respect to the Son must be defined and understood in terms of this fundamental perichoretic relationship, and so it is with the headship of man over woman.

This is not to say that the male-female relationship is perichoretic in the inter-trinitarian sense, but it is to affirm that this relationship, too, is defined by the principles of mutual submission, mutual service and mutual devotion. *The reason is that love requires it to be so:* In its very essence love is submissive – it yields to the other and devotedly serves the other for the sake of the other's good. Where there is no submission there is no love; there is only the exploitation of advantage that defines the “procedure of the king.” This is as true of male headship as it is of the Father's headship over the Son.

With this framework in place, the next thing to consider is the way male headship functions in the Church. Paul recognized two dimensions to it. The first pertains to *leadership* in the Church; the second to *male-female functionality* in the Church.

- a. With respect to the former, male headship means that men are to hold the positions of authority in the Church. The New Testament specifies that men are to be elders (alternately referred to as overseers or pastors) (cf. Acts 20:17-28 with 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) and nowhere implies or suggests that women can hold this office. There is debate as to whether the office of deacon has a female counterpart (“deaconess” – ref. Romans 16:1-2), but even where that view is held it is still maintained that deaconesses serve under the headship of the male elders.
- b. The second arena of male headship in the Church has to do with functionality rather than authority or leadership. Here, too, Christians disagree with one another, but a careful, unbiased reading of Paul’s instruction would seem to indicate that he believed women are to function in every arena of the Church’s ministration, *but always in a way that adorns the gospel by manifesting order in the body and upholding male-female (and other) distinctions*. So, for instance, gifted and mature women are permitted to teach, but not autonomously or in a way that sets them alongside, confuses them with, or otherwise contradicts the elders as the teaching authority in the assembly of believers (cf. 11:26-36 with 1 Timothy 2:11-15). Women are to teach in submission to the authority and oversight of the church’s elders, acting effectively as an extension of the elders’ ministry of the word (as is the case also with their male counterparts). In that way order, unity and harmony are preserved in the body and the gospel is exalted in the Church and in the sight of the world. Each member complements and brings order and fullness to the whole body without confusing or altering the inherent distinctions between each member, including the distinctions of male and female.

This pattern of distinction in the context of equality is best demonstrated by *spiritual gifts* and the way they function in the life of the Church. The Spirit gives every believer – female and male – spiritual endowments that uniquely equip him or her to serve the good and edification of the rest of the body. In this way, all believers are *one* while yet remaining individually *distinct* (12:4-25). No gift is better or more needful, and every gift is given to serve the common good. Thus a right understanding and right use of spiritual gifts nurtures unity and well-being in the body, not disorder and disunity. And because the Scripture nowhere indicates that the Spirit distributes His gifts along male-female lines, it follows that all arenas of ministry in the Church are open to women as well as men. *Gifts, not gender as such, determines how a person is to serve the body. At the same time, gender – being itself an endowment of the Spirit – plays its own role in the use of spiritual gifts*. So, for instance, the Spirit endows some women with gifts consistent with leadership (i.e., gifts of administration, discernment, teaching, exhortation, etc.) and they are obligated to employ those gifts. But they must do so in truth, which means in accordance with their distinction as females. Among other things, that means exercising their leadership gifts, not so as to assume leadership status (whether official or otherwise), but in such a way that they serve and advance the leadership of the elders.

Female or male, Christians are obliged to honor and uphold *all* that distinguishes them – their gifts as well as their gender. And so, a woman who denies or refuses to employ her teaching (or other leadership-oriented) gift because she's a female dishonors Christ and disfigures His body just as much as she does by denying her femaleness and trying to function as a leader in the Church. In the same way, male leadership which denies or suppresses the giftedness of the women in the body is guilty of grieving and quenching the Spirit and usurping its own obligation to submit to Christ as Head of His Church.

The principle of mutual submission (and Paul's instruction, especially in 12:1-25) teaches that no gifting of the Spirit – let alone any individual believer – is superior or more necessary to Christ's Church than any other. Like every other member of Christ's body, leaders are merely exercising their gifts on behalf of the edification of the whole. They lead, but as servants; they enjoy a kind of authority as shepherds, but as care-givers and stewards who devote themselves to Christ's sheep for His sake and under His authority. Leaders are as accountable to the saints they lead and oversee as the saints are to them.

Paul was unequivocal that headship in the Church exists in the context of the mutual submission and mutual ministration of all the saints, and the truth of his conviction has been born out in the Church's life ever since. Where a congregation's male leadership fails to recognize the egalitarian nature of Christ's body and the obligation and absolute necessity of mutual submission among its members, local churches are reduced to a counterfeit, worldly facsimile of what the Church actually is; they become just another social entity operating in conformity to the patterns of natural human societal structures.

Undoubtedly, the emergence of an institutional clergy-laity distinction has played a huge role in this perversion, and the Church's life and witness have greatly suffered for it:

- This distinction has given birth to a *hierarchy* in the Church (implied if not overt) which sets leadership in a place of effective superiority. This distinction is poignantly displayed in Roman Catholicism, in which priests, through the power of transubstantiation conferred upon them by the sacrament of ordination, stand as mediators between God and men. The priests' spiritual superiority is such that their ministration is absolutely essential to men's final salvation: God's saving grace is conveyed through the Eucharist, and there is no Eucharist – and no administration of it – without the priests and their powers of transubstantiation.

Protestantism rejected the priesthood and transubstantiation, but, not surprisingly given human nature, retained Rome's fundamental clergy/laity distinction. The Church's leaders were still distinguished by *ordination*, but one reflecting and giving voice to formal theological training in the academy rather than a mystical sacrament conveying the power to transubstantiate the cup and host. Prior to and throughout the medieval period, clergy were among the few literate persons in European societies, and this afforded them great advantage in the Church: They alone could read the Scripture, and this enabled them to assume the place and authority of God's word in relation to men. Having sole control over the Scripture, the clergy had absolute power over the community of adherents.

Literacy increased during and after the Reformation, but clergy power respecting the Scriptures continued on: The issue was no longer the ability to read; it was the ability to interact with the Scripture with the expertise afforded by the academy. The Renaissance saw educational institutions in Europe becoming more widespread and accessible, and this trend wasn't lost on the Protestant Church. Formal theological training quickly became a core criterion for church leadership, and this academic distinction between the clergy and the laity insured the continuance of the Church's hierarchical structure and ministry pattern.

- The result is a long-standing tradition of viewing (and treating) church leaders as *separate* from the rest of the body. This separation is perhaps most obvious in the unilateral orientation of the Church's instruction: Church leaders – especially the vocational pastors/elders with formal theological training – do the instructing and the congregation does the imbibing. The pastor is the teacher and the congregants are the students. This pattern is so entrenched that few notice that the Scripture assumes *every believer* is a teacher (i.e., one who communicates the truths of the faith to others), and church leaders are not exempt from such teaching. The mutual ministration of Christ's body is without bounds, and this means instruction is *multi-lateral*, not unilateral (cf. Ephesians 5:18-21 with Hebrews 5:11-12).

This is not to deny teaching gifts (cf. 12:28-29; Ephesians 4:11) or the teaching authority which Christ has given to those who serve as elders in the churches (cf. 11:29-32; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:5-9); *it is, however, to affirm and insist that such individuals are themselves in need of instruction, exhortation, admonition, and encouragement in the word.* The Church's shepherds are undershepherds; they, too, are sheep within Christ's flock who are in need of shepherding. Those who lead in the Church in submission to the Spirit's call (as opposed to their own designs) are simply employing their gifts in the body as the Spirit intends. But precisely because no gift is greater than another and all gifts work synergistically for the good of the body, leaders are just as dependent upon – and must be just as receptive to – the ministration of others as others are dependent upon them.

The hierarchical and ministerial separation of church leaders is evident in the teaching function, but also in the arena of intimacy and accountability. The more that pastoral qualification is associated with specialized academic training, the more congregations and leaders alike are inclined to afford a unique status and standing to those who hold leadership positions. Theological and scriptural acumen are readily confused with maturity and godliness, so that it often doesn't occur to congregations – or to those who lead them – that leaders must themselves be vitally and intimately connected with and accountable to the body they serve.

Thus male headship in the Church is the servanthood of submission and self-sacrifice – submission to the *female* saints and their good as much as to the male ones. As with the Son and Father, so with God's children: Where the truth of headship is understood and honored, equality and distinction intertwine in a divinely-ordained dance of mutual love, submission and care. And where that occurs, the gospel is proclaimed in all its glory.

2. Headship in Marriage

Though Paul's instruction in this context pertains to the assembly of the saints, it can be extended to the relationship of husband and wife. However, this application must itself conform to the principles Paul has established. With that in mind, the starting point is again the relationship that exists within the Godhead, for it is the paradigm for all relationships, whether between human beings or between human beings and God. If one would discern the truth of authentic relationship (whether that of husband and wife or any other relationship), he must discern the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit.

Thus headship in the home parallels headship in the Church: The perichoretic relationship within the Godhead shows that the husband-wife relationship is also to be one of mutual love, submission, and deference for the sake of the other's genuine good. But this truth is further highlighted by the fact that God designed the marital relationship to represent and portray the relationship He has with His people – the relationship that has now come to its fulfillment and ultimacy in the spiritual “marital” union between Jesus Christ and His Church (cf. Isaiah 50:1-3 with 54:1-8; cf. also Jeremiah 31:31-32; Ezekiel 16 and 23; Hosea 1-2 with John 3:25-29 and Ephesians 5:22-33).

Headship in the home is *husbandry*, and true husbandry is defined by and authentically expressed in the divine-human relationship which, according to divine design, has its full and most explicit manifestation in the relationship between Jesus Christ and His saints. Jesus is the full revelation of the Father, and so the full revelation of the Father's husbandry of His people. In the incarnate Son, the divine husbandry has attained its consummate realization and expression, and the focal point of Jesus' husbandry is His submissive and sacrificial self-giving for the sake of His bride. The implication is clear: *As a form of authority, headship – like lordship itself – defies and contradicts the natural human paradigm that is the “procedure of the king.”* The Father, Son and Spirit exercise their divine sovereignty as self-sacrificing servants for the sake of love's triumph and glory, and so it is to be with human headship – whether in the Church or in the home.

The husband-wife relationship is to be one of *mutual submission* in which male-female and husband-wife distinctions are allowed to function in a complementary way for the sake of mutual edification (Ephesians 5:18-21). Where husbands love their wives in this way – employing the mind of Christ in giving themselves for the sake of their good (Ephesians 5:25-27), wives will gladly yield to their husbands, *even as the husband's headship manifests Christ's headship*: Wives submit to their husbands *as to the Lord* (Ephesians 5:22), not to their husbands as *also* to the Lord (i.e., two “lords” over them). They submit to their husbands as one expression of their entire submission to Christ.

At bottom, male-female distinctions, like all human distinctions, are designed by God and are crucial to His purposes for His creation. Indeed, man cannot be image-bearer without them, for the triune God is characterized by distinctions – *distinctions without which love cannot exist*. A unitary God could not be love (1 John 4:8-16), and man cannot be image-son – a creature defined by love – without human distinctions. Distinctions serve the cause of love; every deviation from this, in whatever form, lies against the truth.