

MALE HEADSHIP IN MARRIAGE

A RED MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY CHURCH POSITION PAPER

Implementing the Bible's statements on male headship in marriage has proven to be a great challenge to Christian people over the centuries. There is no question that the concept has been warped, distorted and abused to the advantage of males. We know that evil has warped everything within God's creation and every aspect of His revelation of Himself and truth to humanity. So the distortions of this idea should not cause us to jettison it. The perversion of the truth, rather than causing the easy pendulum swing reaction, should cause us to carefully study, examine, and test it in order to discern truth from error.

The statements about the husband's headship in marriage are present throughout Scripture in words addressed to fallen people in a fallen world. It must be possible to rightly implement them in a way that marginalizes no one. As people of the Scripture we feel the responsibility to reckon with these statements and come to an understanding of what God desires in our homes.

The term and concept of male headship comes from verses like this one in Ephesians 5:22-24.

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is 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.

Our essential task is to understand verses like these and their implications in 21st century American Culture.

UNDERSTAND HOW THE WORD "HEAD" WAS USED IN SCRIPTURE

It is best to separate ourselves from what the idea of male headship has evolved into and try to begin with the basic meaning of the word "head" as it appears in verses like the one above. Altogether the word "head" appears 77 times in the New Testament. In the overwhelming majority of these verses it refers to the physical head as a part of the human body.

This plain-literal usage seems straight-forward enough. But before moving on to the metaphors that involve the word head, we must pause over this plain-literal usage momentarily. It is essential to remember how the original speakers and hearers viewed the head in terms of its role in the human body. They did not understand the head and the brain as we do today, as the seat of all thought and emotion. For example they thought of the emotions as emanating from the midriff. This understanding is reflected in the words of the Bible. And from outside the sphere of the writers of Scripture, Aristotle thought the heart, not the brain, was the location of intelligence and thought. People of the day would have seen the head as that part of the body that hosted certain physical senses and verbal powers. They knew well that if the head was severed life was lost. So our understanding of the brain as being the source of all movement and function of the body was unknown to them.

It is to readers with this mindset that the term “head” is used metaphorically in the New Testament. The most well-known instance of this is when Christ is referred to as the “head” of the Church. The community of believers are represented in this imagery by the rest of the body. To align this with their understanding of the human body they would have understood first and foremost that Christ was essential to the experience of spiritual life. If the body was severed from Him, spiritual life was lost. They would also have seen Christ as providing the hearing and seeing of things Divine. They would have understood His words as a revelation of those things. So in naming Christ as the head, there is the unmistakable idea that He is the source of spiritual life and godly direction. He is to the Church the authoritative voice.

Another metaphorical usage in the New Testament of the word head is found in the term “head of the corner” (Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7, all of which refer to Isaiah 28:16). The picture in these passages is of a stone set in a place in such a way that determines the orientation and location of the rest of the stones in the building. Thus it determines the orientation of the building itself. So here the idea of head is that from which comes the appropriate ordering of the rest. There is again the inherent idea of a source of direction and order.

At another point head is used metaphorically to describe Christ’s relationship to other authority figures. He is said to be the head of all principality and power.

...and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority (Colossians 2:10).

This is a way of saying that these powers exist only by his word or permission. He is the source of their authority.

A metaphorical usage outside of Scripture is insightful and harmonizes with these. The word “head” is used to refer to the source of a river, what we would call “its headwaters.” So the word in that case has the same general idea—that which provides the beginning to something that then grows as it progresses along on its course.

And so if we look at all these usages the common theme is that a “head” is the source by which a certain reality is shaped. That reality may be an act of the body, a building, a ministry of a church, or a political regime on the earth. In any of these cases the “head” is that by which something is initiated and that by which it gains its shape. Headship can be initially defined then as a source of influence, placed so as to shape some visible reality.

HEADSHIP IN 1 CORINTHIANS 11:3

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

Having established how the word head is used we can apply that to this central verse on headship and come to a better understanding of what male headship in marriage is and what it is not. Though this verse is not specifically about marriage, it does shed light on that relationship.

This verse states three relationships in which headship is exercised. It states this as a simple reality, apparently a matter of God's design. It names first the relationship between Christ and every man, then the relationship between man and woman, and thirdly the relationship between God and Christ. Of the three relationships, two are between equals—the relationship between God and Christ and the relationship between man and woman. The other relationship, the one between Christ and every man, is between non-equals.

First, as we think about the relationship between two equals, God and Christ, we find that the term marks not a difference in value or ability or essence, but in role. The Father is presented as the source of all authority, but He is also clearly a loving source for all that the Son needs to carry out the Father's wishes. By His nature the Father is able to exercise loving influence in such a way that the Son brings the Father's desires about.

Second, as we think of the relationship between two unequal partners, Christ and man, we find that Christ is clearly over man in terms of authority. We also find that He is a source of all things, from the world man lives in to all that sustains man's daily life. Christ is able by virtue of who He is and through love, to influence in such a way that man brings both His and the Father's desires about.

These first two inform us about the third, the relationship between man and woman. This relationship is between equals, both are of human essence, both bear the image of God, and both are equally loved by God. Except that they are fallen beings, their relationship is similar to that which exists between the Father and the Son. The clear parallel is that a husband has a God-given ability and responsibility to exercise loving influence in a way that assures a desired outcome. His responsibility is to know and aim for the outcome God desires, even as the Son knows and aims for the outcome the Father desires. To understand loving influence, a husband need only ponder how Christ leads him through sacrificial love.

There are at least six observations on headship we can make from this verse.

1. There need not be inequality for God to ordain headship.
2. Godly headship does involve authority and submission.
3. The method of godly headship is sacrificial love—the giving of all one has for the welfare of the one loved.
4. Godly headship is intensely relational as opposed to authoritarian or aloof.
5. In the case of both Jesus and husbands, their headship is carried out in a context of their own submission to their head.
6. Headship is ordained by God, integral to the design of marriage, and inherent in each marriage.

HEADSHIP IN THE CREATION ACCOUNT

The concept of male headship is evident in the detail of the creation of man and woman in Genesis 1 and 2. In Genesis 1 we see that both male and female were made in the image of God. God's stated vision was that they would rule the earth for God, meaning for His benefit and as He Himself would do it. It is important to note that the image of God, and His vision that humanity rule the earth had to do with both male and female.

We have an expanded account of how the creation of man and woman occurred in Genesis 2. There we see that God created man first, and actually began to entrust the man alone with ruling. Man was placed in the garden of Eden to “work it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). The rule was laid down to the man alone that in his ruling he did not have the freedom to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16). So before woman was created there was work man was charged with and a command he was not to violate. Also before woman was created, and likely as a preparatory act, God had Adam name the animals. God brought them all before Adam and accepted whatever name man assigned. So man was engaged by the Creator in another task of ruling creation. It was in this process that it was found by Adam that there was not a “helper fit for him.”

The conclusion that Adam lacked a helper was likely based on two things. First, even before sin, the cultivation and care of just the garden would have been a daunting task for one man alone. How much more to rule over the entire earth! Reproduction was essential to the plan of God.

There simply needed to be more humans! Man had no capacity to reproduce himself. For this he needed a helper. Second, something was lacking in the core makeup of the male alone. A lone man could not rule as God willed it. It is likely this that had led God to observe earlier that it was not good for man to be alone. It was not good for creation as God had envisioned and designed it for man to rule it alone. Man needed a complimentary being to be complete in terms of ability to rule the earth. Wives would provide a missing physical piece and the missing intellectual/emotional piece so that God’s mind for the earth could become a reality. Humanity, male and female, would be enabled through each other to rule the earth for God.

So from what we can reconstruct, it seems that God knew that by design man alone was not equipped to fulfill his stewardship of ruling earth. God created woman to help man so that this stewardship could be discharged faithfully. God likely started with man alone to inform him firsthand of his need, so that his headship would be love-driven and respectful. The creation of woman was far more than a provision of labor in the tasks of life. The intellectual, emotional and physical impress of both were essential. The whole of God’s design for ruling the earth He provided for in the man and woman together. Together their pursuit of God’s mind and heart would bring about godliness in the offspring their love produced, and these would multiply and perpetuate God’s work over the entire earth.

THE ESSENCE OF HEADSHIP IN MARRIAGE

When we speak of male headship in the home we are speaking of something organic. By the sovereign creative act of God husbands determine the shape their own homes take on. In other words, they are such by creation that who they are spills over and becomes the determining factor in the atmosphere the home takes on. Now God’s call to men is to be a source of that which their home needs to conform to God’s desire for it. But the fact is that they will shape it, whether cruelly or kindly, passively or aggressively, towards a godly or ungodly end. It will bear the fruit of who they are. This is imbedded in their maleness and it is a sobering fact.

There is no rationale for any of the perversions that have developed over the centuries of this designation of the husbands as head of the home. Evil has superimposed on God’s design demeaning and false ideas about women, implying inferiority in intellect, in emotional strength, and in potential for real contribution. These have led to many opportunities being withheld from them. It has allowed for very one-sided marriages. The fact that headship and submission are modeled within the Godhead should render all these ideas invalid.

It must also be said that evil is what makes the idea of headship difficult for humanity to reckon with. As we have seen, headship is present within the Godhead without abuse. It is present within the ranks of angels without abuse. God has ordained it in the Church, so it cannot be evil in and of itself if it is of him. But in the hearts of humanity evil helps us invent ways of gaining advantage over others. This is what has happened in marriage.

The role of being head is a call to husbands to turn away from self-determination and toward submission to Jesus Christ. He becomes the leader and the model of all actions. It is a call away from self-centeredness and into sacrificial love. It is a call away from an authoritarian style and into an intensely relational style of leadership. It is a call to model and establish an atmosphere of truth and truthfulness. From a practical point of view, three essential things must happen if a man is to head his home in the way God wishes. He must know, he must initiate, and he must love.

- **So first**, a man must know his Creator in a relational sense. He must know how Yahweh, this personal God, generally works and His general will for human conduct on the planet. He must commit himself to truth and truthfulness. He must be convinced that God has a specific plan for his life and that of his family. He must know that his wife, by God's design, is one of his greatest assets in learning these things, and the two should have an ongoing, uninterrupted conversation about them.
- **Second**, a man must initiate. Being a source for others means being there first. A man will, by virtue of his maleness, initiate a certain atmosphere in the home. He must present himself as the equal of all others—mutually dependent on Yahweh. He must show himself teachable, humble, transparent, and in pursuit of godliness. In doing so he will initiate an atmosphere of safety and trust. He will establish an atmosphere that is spiritual instead of fleshly. A husband initiates and protects a process of ongoing corroboration with his wife whereby they establish and define the mind of the Lord in all matters. The woman is not man's helper in the sense that she just follows orders after her husband has determined God's will. Neither is she just a helper in terms of the tasks of the home. She is a helper in terms of setting and maintaining the vision for the home. A husband heads his home by initiating the atmosphere that fosters this ongoing conversation between husband and wife.
- **Third**, a man must love. This means he must be the first to extend mercy, kindness, forgiveness, and affirmation along with firmness. He must initiate self-sacrifice. He is wise to confess fault first. He is wise to initiate conversation over misunderstanding. He must model submission to the Lord. He must mimic the sacrificial love of Christ.

Headship of husbands can only occur where there is submission of wives. Headship cannot occur without submission. This is true in the Godhead. It is also true in the relationship between Christ and His Church. Furthermore, for there to be true headship, submission must be volunteered. If it is coerced it is tyranny. Voluntary submission is what wives are persistently called to in Scripture. There is nothing inherent in submission that is demeaning or risky. Christ is not inferior, and He is not less significant by His act of submission to the Father. A husband by submitting to Christ is not at risk to be unloved, to be abused, or to be made insignificant. There is risk in submitting to her husband for the wife, due to sin in humanity. There is also great potential for health and strength. It requires trust in both Yahweh and in the husband to submit.

Submission is voluntary only where there is respect. So a wife must respect her husband.

However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband (Ephesians 5:33).

The difficulty of this is that our natural behavior is to respect those who are respectable. So how does a wife respect a flawed, perhaps even less capable person than her? The key to this dilemma is for a wife to approach the issue of respect with three words in mind. The words are capacity, realism, and compliment.

- **First**, a wife will be helped to respect her husband by focusing on his capacity, not his performance. By the design carried out in creation the husband is ordained to be a spiritual head and this capacity is conferred on him by God in marriage. Whether or not he does so in a spiritual way does not change the fact that this is his role and that he is given by God capacity to actually be a spiritual man. Every husband has an inherent capacity to fill this needed role in the life of the wife God places him with and in the home they form. Just the fact that God has raised him up and made him husband deposits in him that which is respectable. So a wife can respect her husband's calling and capacity even if his performance is lacking.
- **Second**, a wife will be helped to respect her husband through realism not idealism. It is absolutely certain that every husband is a sinful man. It is equally true that no husband will ever get over this! So if it is believed that sin in a husband makes him untrustable and unsafe and so allows respect to be withdrawn, then it is a fore drawn conclusion that no husband can ever be the head of his home. Realistically, every husband's sin and faults will be encountered. Realism looks for confession and repentance. If a husband admits sin and repents of it, he distinguishes himself from the overwhelming majority of humanity. There is in that action much that is respectable.
- A wife will be helped to respect her husband if she seeks in him that which is complimentary to her, not similar to her. The human tendency is to respect those that agree with us and who do as we do. It is a shallow respect that is only conveyed to those who are like us. There is every reason to expect that God would place people together in marriage that compensate for each other's weaknesses. We must respect our spouses for what they bring to us. Our respect must not be given on the basis of how they agree with and mimic us. Their way of showing love, of dealing with emotion, and handling of money should be seen as needed influences.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

God's leading in husbands and wives works towards all the things discussed above. As a man and a woman come together in spiritual, emotional and physical unity, they are enabled and resourced to engage fully in carrying out God's rule on earth. By His design, husbands are charged and equipped to initiate and maintain an atmosphere that fosters knowledge of and relationship to God. By God's design a wife's respect spurs the husband along in that work. She gains the right to influence in profound ways his direction. In sacrificially loving his wife a husband will find in her great resource in knowing the Creator.

It is important to remember that headship and submission need not be defined in American culture by tasks, such as who cooks, who makes the most money, who manages the money. They need not be symbolized with veils, as they were in the cultures of the Bible and in many cultures today. We have great freedom in these matters. That freedom allows these things to be fleshed out a little differently in each marriage. It is hard to imagine anything more ideal. In such an environment we must be certain not to leave the principle of headship behind as we abandon the trappings. We must remember that the proper rule of the planet depends on healthy marriage, which itself depends on this principle.

SOME RELATED “WHAT-IF?” SCENARIOS

There are some very relevant and important questions that arise as headship plays out in real life. Three of the more common ones are treated below.

If the husband is not a Christian, should his Christian wife submit to him? There are deep and important complications that come into marriage when it is not centered in Christ. In the early Church being married to an unbelieving husband was a very common scenario. Peter wrote specifically about it. His words are:

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they will be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct (1 Peter 3:1-2).

God has no alternate design for marriage. Peter’s words affirm the principle of the husband’s headship, even in the case of a mixed faith marriage. In fact, submission of the wife is presented as an avenue by which the husband may come to faith in the gospel.

So though there are complications to the marriage relationship when either or both spouses are apart from the Lord, the design of marriage remains constant. The headship of the husband is the design of God for marriage.

1 Corinthians 7:12-16 addresses mixed faith marriages as well. Paul speaks to the idea that God’s special care extends to such homes and marriages because of the faith of the believing spouse. So a believing spouse need not worry about losing God’s blessing on their home due to the lack of faith in their spouse.

In these verses Paul also speaks to what the obligation of a believer is to an unbelieving spouse. He clearly states that the believer should not seek divorce. On the contrary, they should seek to bring their spouse to faith. But if the unbeliever chooses to end the marriage, then that is the end of the marriage. Paul says that in such a case the believer is not bound to that person—held responsible to somehow make the marriage work.

What if the husband is abusive? Physical abuse is against the laws of our land. There is no requirement on wives to submit to such a thing. We are not advocating divorce in this situation. We are advocating immediate separation for the sake of safety. We are advocating protection through legal means. We are advocating a firm statement made by the local Church to the particular husband.

Verbal and emotional abuse is a complex matter. It is virtually certain that any and all who have ever been married, male and female, could be construed to have been abused in these ways by their spouse. Our self-centeredness virtually guarantees that abusive speech is a part of our make-up. So rather than governing situations where there is verbal and emotional abuse by rule or policy, the church leadership must become involved in the individual cases. They must lend advice and help, and then monitor progress. They must demand change. If conditions persist, they must render a decision on what the appropriate course of action is for the wife.

Should a wife submit to her husband if he is advocating that she sin? In the name of submission wives have been led into immorality, the worship of false gods, lying, theft, and the like by their husbands. This is an unfortunate reality in marriage in a fallen world. It is a wife's roll and duty to call such behavior into question. She is wise to adopt a proper tone in doing so. She is wise to discern the end which the husband is seeking to achieve and suggest alternatives. In the end her decision must be made as carefully and prayerfully as time allows. There are times to stand on principle and not submit. There are times to warn, submit, and remember that the head will bear the responsibility for that which he initiates and requires.

Should this situation arise there should not be an aftermath of distrust on the wife's part toward her husband. Sarah is held up as a model of submission (1 Peter 3:6), and we know that Abraham did ask her to lie (Genesis 12:11-16). That she submitted to this does not prove that it is God's desire for wives to submit to sinful requests. It does show that a husband who does such a thing is still worthy of respect.

We must face the reality of this matter squarely. Headship is not based on the idea that husbands are morally superior, much less pure! In fact, it is a stewardship husbands are charged with. They shoulder the responsibility with regard to the direction they take the family in matters where there is no obvious moral principle at stake. That is why a critical part of headship is healthy dialogue with one's wife whom God has given to help a husband discern Godly direction.