

Headship in the Church (part 1)

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For over twenty years, I have felt the arguments both for and against ordaining women as elders and pastors generally ranged from bad to abysmal. Granted, I have found the arguments in favor of ordaining women slightly less awful than those against, but I am not comfortable advocating something merely because it is less problematic. While I saw nothing terribly wrong with ordaining women, I saw nothing compellingly right about it either. I thus settled into a chronic ambivalence on this issue lasting most of the last two decades. I treated the question of ordaining women as akin to the situation in Corinth with food offered to idols (1 Cor 8-10). From this perspective, those of the libertine (pro-ordination-free to eat the food) persuasion should volunteer to refrain from exercising their liberty if it would undermine the unity and mission of the congregation. I had no strong convictions on the issue, meaning I had no personal turf to defend when I was appointed to serve on a high-level committee called to address ordination and issues of gender in ordination. Due to the experience mentioned above, when forced to engage in discussion, I focused on identifying weaknesses in arguments, not in defending a particular position, my goal being to eliminate bad arguments. In fact, I was so focused on eliminating bad arguments that one colleague in our committee challenged me, “Steve, you are a doubter!” In our January, 2014 committee meetings, things took an unexpected turn when I had an “aha!” moment.

In our deliberations, the issue of spiritual headship rose to front and center. The core of the gender exclusive (GE) argument is that God has appointed males to a position of spiritual headship and authority over females as part of the creation order prior to sin. This headship principle was reiterated in Gen 3:16 after the fall. Additionally, the offices of elder and pastor¹ involve a function of spiritual headship and authority in the Church. Therefore, the divinely ordained creation order precludes women from holding these authoritative offices, but this is only a role difference. The genders are still asserted to be ontologically equal. It seems, then, that GE view of ordination appears to invoke the power of a divine decree to support its perspective. Some of the individuals arguing along this vein used statements by Ellen White concerning Adam’s headship over the human race, leveraging that concept into Adam’s headship over Eve, and thus bolstering support for male headship over females in matters of spiritual authority. It was while reflecting on the question of Adam’s headship that I had an epiphanic experience in which the foundational biblical data on headship and submission catalyzed into a fresh perspective. [I shall set forth those foundations in the next essays. For now these foundational points will function primarily as presuppositions].

¹Some proponents of GE in ordination are willing to have non-ordained women assisting elders and associate pastors as long as they are “under the authority” of an ordained male elder or pastor.

Adam's headship is fundamentally patriarchal. In the Old Testament (OT), patriarchal headship is set in the context of being head of an extended family (a clan or a tribe). It was the headship of one man over an entire family. This means that the patriarch was head over both men and women. Both genders thus submitted to the head, not just one gender (female). I cannot honestly extract the headship of one gender over another from patriarchal headship. It violates my sense of intellectual integrity because I see no analogical basis for making a leap in logic from all genders submitting to one head to one gender submitting to the other gender. While this point is important, a more important question arises: how does one acquire patriarchal headship?

Patriarchal headship was inherited through the birthright, but why is this so? Very simply because the family heads eventually died. Through death, the patriarch's headship passed as an inheritance to the son (usually the oldest) designated to receive the birthright. This means that the heir had no headship while his father was alive. Thus, Isaac had no patriarchal headship until Abraham died, Jacob until Isaac died, etc. In summary, patriarchal headship was not based on a model of general male headship over female. Rather, both genders were under the headship of the patriarch. Second, the patriarch retains his headship over the family as long as he lives. The heir only becomes a head after the head dies. Additionally it is clear that the patriarchal head had sole headship, not shared with anyone else in the family. Thus, headship is exclusive, unique, not shared, and is only passed on through death.

What these points mean is that Adam started as the sole patriarchal head of the human family. The problem is that he sinned, and thus died, making it necessary for his headship to be passed through the birthright to Seth. But Seth also died, necessitating his headship be passed on. As sin and death have taken their toll on the human family, Adam's headship over the family tree becomes ever more branched and fragmented as multiple families form, each with their own family heads. This process of multiplication of family heads continues to this day. Had Adam had not sinned, he would not have died, and his headship would not have been passed on to others and become fragmented. Adam *should have* remained the unique and sole head of the human family to this day. And this final point led me to my epiphany.

Christ is the second Adam (Rom 5) and this makes him the patriarchal head of the new household of God which is called the church (Eph 2:19). If one looks at all the New Testament (NT) references to headship in the church, the NT authors only declare Christ as the head of the church.² By contrast, no NT text connects the terminology of "head" to the church elder or

²Acts 4:11 and 1 Pet 2:7 each apply Psa 118:22 to Christ. He is the stone who became the "head of the corner." Peter applies Psa 118 to the salvific primacy of Christ as the only means of salvation in both Acts and his epistle. In the epistle, he makes explicit comparison of believers to being a temple to God (1 Peter 2:5), thus Christ is the head of believers. Paul picks on the "foundation" language in 1 Cor 3, where he also uses temple imagery of the church (1 Cor 3:10-17). The remaining references of Christ's headship in the church, or over the cosmos, are found in Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18; 2:10, 19.

pastor.³ This point is illustrated in the model set forth in Eph 5. Here, Paul frames headship in the family as based on an analogy between the headship of the husband to his wife and the headship of Christ to the church. Paul makes no analogical connection between the husband-wife relationship and the elder-church relationship. The elder is bride to Christ with the rest of the church, not a co-husband of the bride with Christ. The simple point, then, is that in the NT, Christ is the sole and unique head of the church.

The concept of Christ as the sole and unique possessor of headship for the church is reinforced by Paul's metaphor of the church as a human body (1 Cor 12:12,ff). The body has a single head, Christ (Col 1:18). Paul states "Now you are the body of Christ and *individually* members of it (1 Corinthians 12:27). In this case the "you" is plural – you all. The elder is part of the "you all," and is thus a member of the body, not its head. Additionally, Paul's masterful depiction of how all the body parts are needed and cannot function without each other, mitigate against the elder having headship. The elder is a member of the body, dependent on the same head as all the other members. (We must not confuse headship and leadership. One can be a leader appointed by the family head, without having headship. Hence, the elder is a leader but not a head). A body with multiple heads will never function correctly. Thus, the church, as the body of Christ, must have only one, unique head, who is Christ.

The uniqueness of Christ's headship is reinforced by the motif of the church as the household of God (Eph 2:19). In this metaphor, the second-Adam theology of Paul (Rom 5) reminds us that Christ is the sole, unique patriarchal head, not only of the "household of God" but of the whole cosmos (Col 2:10). Believers are incorporated into the new cosmic household through adoption, when they believe in Jesus (Rom 8:15; Eph 1:5; Gal 3:26; 4:5). Thus, all believers are all siblings – brothers and sisters – through adoption into one family, under one head and one Father (Eph 4).⁴ Elders, church leaders, and the members-at-large are thus adopted children like the rest of their siblings. This means siblings under a living head have no headship over each other since there is no inheritance of headship available for distribution.

Additionally, when the head of the family calls a child to perform a leadership task in the family, no headship is transferred or conferred. One can be a leader without having headship. The head retains the right to oversee, evaluate, and intervene in a child's execution of their leadership duties. Furthermore, any leadership role comes by appointment from the family head, not through any inherent right possessed by the child. In addition, children – adoptive or natural – have no right to argue with the family head over his appointments of siblings to leadership responsibilities in the family. The child has no more right to dispute an appointment made by the head of the family than the clay has the right to challenge the potter on why he assigned X function to the clay in vessel Y.

³Besides Christ's headship to the church and cosmos, the only other "heads" in the NT are husband to wife (Eph 5) and the hotly debated set of 3 heads in 1 Cor 11:3 (Christ to every man, the man to the woman, and God to Christ). None of these texts depict heads in the church.

⁴It is interesting that Isa 9:6 names Christ the "Everlasting Father." Hence he can head the new household of God.

The punch-line, then, is this. In the NT, Christ, as the second Adam, has sole and unique headship over the church as the household of God. All members of his body are thus siblings under a single head. No member of Christ's body has headship over another for all are siblings under a single, living head, Christ. Since Christ never dies, his headship is never passed on to a successor by birthright. In OT terms, Christ does not give his glory to another (Isa 42:8).⁵ Thus, theologically speaking, elders cannot be viewed as having headship in the church for we have a single, unique head – Jesus Christ, who has no successors. Elders are, therefore, siblings under the same head as their other siblings, but who were assigned by the family head to particular leadership functions. But these leadership assignments are given in a context where siblings under a living head do not have headship over each other. The headship principle I find in the Scriptures is not that of male gender over female. Rather, it is the sole and unique headship of Christ to the whole church, mirrored in the family by the headship of husband to wife in a marriage relationship.

The spiritual implications of this NT view of headship are staggering. To assign some kind of transfer of headship from Christ to an elder dilutes Christ's sole and unique headship, subverting it through fragmentation. This redistribution gives undue authority to the elder, elevating him (I am using male-gender language on purpose), treating him as no longer a fellow sibling in the church family but as an additional head in the church alongside Christ. (In my estimation, it was the act of investing headship authority to the elder and clergy that allowed for the unbiblical power of the clergy in Rome as "representatives of Christ" through their male gender). Furthermore, to limit the leadership office of elder to males subverts Christ's sovereignty as the head by telling Christ which of HIS children He can appoint to particular tasks in His family, and which children He cannot appoint. Who are we to determine the criteria Christ ought to use for appointing responsibilities? The pot has no right to tell the potter how to fashion another vessel, let alone itself.

I cannot agree with the headship arguments used to support male-only elders for they subvert the sovereignty and headship of Christ. I must support His right to appoint any of my siblings-in-Christ to any position of His choosing because He alone is our family head. Ordaining women is simply recognizing that the sole head of the church called one of our siblings to do a particular job. Thus, I contend that ordaining women as pastors and elders does not violate the headship principle found in the NT. This is because having women in leadership is not a subversion of Christ's headship as long as we have evidences that He called them to that position and work. Rather, the church upholds the NT headship principle when it recognizes that

⁵Isaiah 42:8 (ESV) "I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols." For Paul, worshipping idols is "worshipping the creature instead of the creator." Thus, God does not give his glory and praise to any creature, including the elder and pastor.

our head Christ has called a fellow sibling (male or female) to lead in the church. (Humans always lead IN the church but Christ LEADS the church). In so doing the church submits to the headship of the chief of pottery production, conceding He can fashion *any vessel* - male or female - for *any purpose* He desires.

To assert a spiritual headship for the elder and pastor and then to argue over which genders are permitted to exercise that headship, treats the headship of Christ as if He has died and left his headship as a bequest. This casts His children into a sibling rivalry over who gets what portions of the bequeathed headship. In this way, Christ is no longer treated as living head, with sole possession of the church's headship, but as a dead head, whose headship is up for grabs. But Christ has not died! He has not left his headship to another! His headship is not a bequest to be argued over, sub-divided and distributed to others. To argue over an inheritance that does not exist is silly and irrational. There is no birthright on which to base a dispute because the head of our family ever lives!

In my estimation, the current debate asks the wrong question: "Who has headship in the church and can women share in this headship?" Faulty questions always produce faulty answers. The question for the SDA church is not "do elders have headship in the church?" That question has already been settled in the NT: Christ *alone* has headship in the church. The relevant question, in my view, is this: Is Christ the living head of the SDA church? Is Christ free to be a sovereign head appointing His children (our siblings) to whatever task He, the sole head wishes? Or will we treat Him as a dead head and seek to fragment and distribute His headship as if it were a disputed bequest?

There is, however, an even more critical question. Is Christ *MY* living head? Do *I* (not the church body) *live* like He is *my* living head, or do I steal His headship from Him in various areas of *my* life? Do *I* treat Christ as a living head or as a dead head? Only when the majority of the members of the His body have a living-head relationship with Christ, will the body function healthily and achieve the mission to which it is called by our sole and unique head, Jesus Christ.