

Headship in the Church (part 2)

Stephen Bauer, Ph.D.

© January, 2014 by Stephen Bauer

This essay explores the New Testament teaching on headship as related to human gender, with a *sola Scriptura* method. It will not be in story form like the previous essay. Rather it will be a more methodical study of Scripture.

To pursue the question of headship and gender in a *sola Scriptura* manner, it seems the simplest way to proceed is to look up “head” (*kephale*) by its Greek form and find any passage depicting someone (or something) as head of a woman or wife.<sup>1</sup> There are only two such passages: 1 Cor 11 and Eph 5. For me, this immediately raises a red-flag about headship arguments. Such a paucity of direct references to headship involving women does not seem sufficient to support the premise that headship in relation to women is a serious theological concern in the NT. Other themes such as Abraham, sin, salvation, and sexual morality are given much more attention. In order to try to broaden the data pertinent to this question, I observed that Eph 5 links the concept of submission to the idea of “head” through its use of the verb *hupotasso* (to submit). The husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, and as the church submits (*hupotasso*) to Christ, so the wife is to submit to her husband.

A survey of texts with the verb, *hupotasso*, reveals it is used with some variety, not all of which imply a headship relationship. For example, in 1 Cor 16:15-16 Paul commends the household of Stephanas for its devotion to and service for “the saints,” and then tells the Corinthian members to “be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer.” The verbiage of “fellow worker” and “every” is not conducive to inferring headship.<sup>2</sup> It is evident, therefore, that a passage using *Hupotasso* does not automatically imply headship.

While texts with *hupotasso* do not automatically imply headship, I did find five verses where this verb is used to call a woman (or women), to submit (*hupotasso*) to someone. Combining these five verses with the two texts using “head” gives us a total of six passages as our starting point. (Note: with Eph 5 using both words in one passage, the resulting total is six,

---

<sup>1</sup>In both Greek and Hebrew, as with many other languages, the words for “man” and “woman” do double duty as “husband” and “wife.” One must use the immediate context to determine which aspect, gender or marriage, is the better meaning for a given passage.

<sup>2</sup>Additional examples of submission not implying headship include:

- a. Rom 8:20 - creation subjected to futility
- b. Rom 10:3 - submitting to God’s righteousness
- c. 1 Cor 14:32 - spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets
- d. 1 Pet 5:5 - the new/young members submit to those who are older

not seven passages). I will start by analyzing the texts using *hupotasso*, then return to the two passages using “head” (*kephale*).

Of the five passages linking the verb *hupotasso* to women, four explicitly call for the submission of a wife to her husband in a marriage relationship (Eph 5:22-24; 1 Peter 3:1-5; Titus 2:5; Col 3:18).<sup>3</sup> Thus, 80% of the passages using *hupotasso* in reference to women are in the context of marriage, meaning that one woman is asked to submit to one particular man. My first impression, then, is that marriage, not general gender relations in society, is the context in which submission ought to be understood. The idea that the text calls for one woman to submit to one man in a marriage is reinforced by the use of a particular form of vocabulary in three of our four passages (all but Col 3:18).

Two of these three special passages, Eph 5:22 and 1 Pet 3:1, both follow a similar grammatical pattern. First, both passages render both the vocabulary of men/husbands and women/wives in plural forms. Thus, the women/wives (plural) are to submit “to their own men/husbands” (plural). Second, both passages identify the person to whom the women/wives are to submit with the exact same phrase: “*tois idiois andrasin*” (“to their own men/husbands”). *Idiois* (the dative form of *idios*) is the most important word for coming to a proper understanding of this phrase. If *idios* was NOT in that phrase, the verse would then translate: “Women/wives submit to the men/husbands.” The grammar of this reworked sentence would give us two equally valid possibilities for what Paul meant: Option 1, Paul was calling for a general submission of women to men (i.e. the female gender submits to the male gender). Option 2, Paul was calling for wives to submit husbands (an issue of marriage relations, not a general gender-relations issue). The use of *idios* eliminates option 1 (all the women submitting to all the men). The idea brought by *idios* is that each woman/wife submits to her respective husband alone, not to a man/husband not her own, nor to all men/husbands. The *text itself* limits this submission to an individual married woman submitting to one man, her own husband. Grammatically it can be no other way. Thus, these two texts do not supply an analogical basis on which one can extract a general headship of any man over any women, all men over all women, etc. It is a one-person to one-person submission only in the context of marriage.

Titus 2:5 is grammatically very similar to the previous two texts, but instead of the usual word for “women/wives,” Paul simply uses the feminine plural form of “young” (vs 4), which our texts rightly translate as “young women.” These young women are called to “love their children and husbands” (vs 4), and to submit (vs 5) “*tois idiois andrasin*” (to their own husbands)—the same identical phrase I just discussed as Eph 5 and 1 Pet 3. Thus, the grammar involving *idios* applies here as well, restricting our interpretational options to one woman being called to submit to one man in their marriage relationship. As with Eph 5 and 1 Pet 3, I am left with no basis to find a legitimate analogical basis to make the logical leap to general headship of

---

<sup>3</sup>1 Tim 2:11 does not use the verb, *hupotasso*, but does use the adjective from the same linguistic root, *hupotage*. This is the only other NT text with some kind of submissiveness assigned to a woman/wife. I shall examine this text in a separate essay.

male over female and its various expressions.

The three texts controlled by *idios* follow a pattern which I observe in Gen 3:16. Here Eve is told “your desire will be for your man/husband.” In the Hebrew texts, the term for “man/husband” is singular. Thus, Eve is called to desire only ONE man. She is not submitted to MEN but only to ONE man. Furthermore, this one man whom she is to desire is not just any man. Her desire is to be for HER man, which is marital language: her husband. Thus, the grammatical structure of Gen 3:16 submits Eve (one women) to her husband (one man) in a marriage relationship. In the three texts examined so far, Paul and Peter duplicate this Gen 3:16 pattern of having one woman submitting to one man in a marriage relationship. The simple reading of these texts, without attempting to infer implications and innuendos, casts women’s submission in the context of a marriage relationship, one woman to one man. These statements make no reference to gender relations in a societal context with a general headship of one gender over another. In my view, to attempt to extract a societal pattern of general gender relations based on a general headship of male over female and corresponding submission of female to male forces a concept onto these texts that is not inherently there. Marital relations are not analogous to societal norms for general gender relations.

We turn now to Col 3:18. This verse is identical to Eph 5 and 1 Peter 3 except for the absence of *idios*. Paul just calls the wives/women are to submit to their husbands/men. However, with the other three texts just examined restricted by *idios* into the marriage context, Col 3:18, we have good reason to suspect Paul’s intended focus is marriage relationships, not norms for gender relations in the church. This point is reinforced by the fact that Col 3 shares the same topical structure to Eph 5-6, with each giving instructions on household relations in the same threefold order (marriage, parent-child, and master-slave relationships). This strong parallelism between Eph and Col reinforces the view that Col 3:18 is to be understood in the same fashion as Eph 5, submission in a marriage relationship. Thus we can confidently say that Col 3:18 is intended to be understood as a call for one individual woman to submit to one man in a marriage relationship like the other three texts.

Another interesting observation is that three of these four marriage-submission texts offer no theological basis to justify the submission of the wife to her husband. One simply finds the bald command for the wife to submit. Only Eph 5 offers a grounding rationale for this submission, and it is based on the Christ-church relationship, not in any creation order. Peter only gives a pragmatic reason for submission, namely that the submissive wife will more easily win her non-believing husband to Christ. It is significant that none of these four submission texts openly appeal to any kind of “creation order,” as the basis of the wife’s submission, especially so in Eph 5 since Paul gives a rationale there. IF the husband’s headship and wife’s submission is rooted in a creation order, why ground it in the Christ-church relationship without citing the creation order? The silence concerning any creation basis for the wife’s submission is deafening. We are left with the impression that a theology of creation order is not the basis of the submission concept, especially in Eph 5.

Because the first four submission texts I have examined restrict female submission to marriage in the same style as Gen 3:16, I cannot honestly use them to derive a general submission of female to male, nor to extract a creation-order basis for that submission from any of these four texts. The submission of one woman to one man in a marriage is not depicted in a manner analogous to a general headship of the male gender over the female. I cannot maintain intellectual integrity if I forcefully extract from these texts, concepts that are absent and fail to be analogous to what the text describes. If a submission text openly based on a creation order is to be found among of the submission texts using the verb *hupotasso*, and which specifies a general submission of female to male instead of focusing on marriage, our last hope rests in the final *hupotasso* text, 1 Cor 14.

1 Cor 14:33b-34 reads, “As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says” (ESV). I first observe that Paul is appealing to a universal church policy, expecting the practice at Corinth to conform to what is done “in all the churches.” This raises the question, “Is the submission policy of the previous four verses a universal policy being appealed to in 1 Cor 14 or is 1 Cor 14 about something else?”

To answer that question, we need to look at the context of 1 Cor 14 (in good, *sola Scriptura* fashion) to see what problem or situation the policy in vs 34 is addressing. In 1 Cor 14:1-25, Paul addresses the problem of a disorderly, chaotic public worship service. There is extensive discussion of the proper and improper use of speaking in tongues during the worship service, and the proper exercise of the gift of prophecy in the same worship service. Additionally, Paul explicates the role of both activities in the church’s ministry and evangelistic outreach.

In verse 26, Paul begins the final assault against the tumultuous nature of their public worship by introducing rules of order. Verse 26 begins a section in which there are three calls for silence and two commands for submission (*hupotasso*).

When people speak in tongues (14:27), at most two or three are to speak at a time, each taking turns, and only if there is an interpreter (14:28) so that all may benefit. More critically, if no one is able to interpret, or while waiting their turn to speak, the speaker of tongues is to “keep silent.” This is the first of the three commands to be silent in this passage, in this case being given to those speaking in tongues, meaning they yield the floor to another speaker. In the context, this is not a call to absolute silence, but is a call to be quiet when it is not your turn to be talking.

The second call to silence occurs in the admonition to those who prophecy in the worship service (14:29-31). Like the speakers of tongues, the prophets are admonished to take turns with no more than two or three participating at a time. If a new revelation is made to one, the current speaker is to be silent (14:30) and yield the floor to the new prophet. The underlying reason for commanding this silence is given in verse 32: “the spirits of the prophets are subject (*hupotasso*)

to the prophets.” In other words, the prophets currently speaking are to submit (*hupotasso*—the first of the two uses in this passage) to their fellow prophets by being quiet and yielding the floor when a new revelation from God is received. The submitting prophet, ultimately, is not just submitting to his/her<sup>4</sup> fellow prophet but is also submitting to the rules of order for the worship service by taking turns and being silent in the same way as the tongues-speakers. Paul now moves to a third group of talkers who are disrupting the dignity of the worship service: the women.

Like the other two groups, these talking women are commanded to be silent (the third use) and to submit (*hupotasso*, second use). To whom or what these women are to submit is not overtly stated. The preceding context (and the ties to the previous language on silence and submission) suggests they would be submitting to the church order in the same way the first two groups submit: They are to be silent and yield the floor to the speaker (regardless of gender). This point is reinforced by the fact that Paul concludes the section with “let all be done decently and in order” (14:40). Hence we find no inkling of any concept of a submission of the female gender to the male. But we have not finished our analysis because we must now ask, “to whom were these women talking and why were they talking?”

The next verse (14:35) provides the answer: “If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” It is universally agreed that the early church worshiped in gender-segregated seating, following the style of the Jewish synagogue. The problem Paul is addressing is that women wanting to learn (something Paul commends in other places) were calling out questions to their husbands across the room while the tongues-speakers are talking and the prophets were prophesying. The result was that these chatty women were multiplying the bedlam by attempting to converse with their husbands across the room. In the chaos of many speaking at once, they would likely have to call loudly to get their husband’s attention, thus magnifying the problem even more. Paul’s solution: A policy prohibiting a woman speaking out loud to her husband across the room during the worship service. Thus, the women/wife was to submit to the same rules of order as the prophets (14.32) and be quiet in the same manner as Paul prescribed to the tongues speakers and prophets. This means she should be quiet during the worship service and save her questions to ask her husband at home where no one would be disturbed.

In the light of the context of this passage, then, there is no sense of a general male-female gender headship being invoked. Rather, men and women who prophecy (1 Cor 11), who speak in tongues (1 Cor 14), and women seeking educational help from their husbands during the worship service are all to be quiet, and to submit to the rules of order for the church service. For me, the context leaves no room to honestly extract a general gender submission principle, particularly when we know from 1 Cor 11 that men and women prayed and prophesied equally without gender restriction.

---

<sup>4</sup>In 1 Cor 11, Paul speaks with approval of both genders prophesying during the worship service.

Additionally, we may have a subtle marriage element here as well. The women are to ask their OWN husbands (*idios*, just like the discussion above), at home (which reinforces the marital flavor). They are not called to ask their questions of just any man. Certainly, having each woman ask her own husband, instead of any male who happened to be handy, is not helpful for establishing that Paul is invoking a general male headship over women in spiritual things. Vs. 35 forces us to lean some towards viewing the submission issue at least partially through the marriage lens, to the exclusion of the lens of general gender relations.

Paul says the women are to be quiet and submissive, “as the Law commands.” I cannot find any law in the Old Testament (OT) commanding women to any kind of silence. I have looked up all the words for silence and find no corresponding link to any duty for women. A good number of scholars cite Gen 3:16 as the “Law” in question. This may well be so, but I would point out, as I did above, that the language and syntax of Gen 3:16 does not make the female gender subject to the male gender. Gen 3:16 submitted one woman to one man, to whom she was married. If Paul is alluding to Gen 3:16, it may reveal that Paul has a double concern. First, disorder in the church service and second, loud women undermining their husbands’ reputation as a good head of house because the church sees these men have disorderly wives. So the conduct of these ladies might be seen as thus threatening the Gen 3:16 prescription for the submission wife in a marriage, and Paul nips this potential weakening of the divine marital prescription in the bud. Thus, it may be argued that this public silence is a form of submitting to her husband. Frankly, however, while I think Gen 3:16 is likely what Paul had in mind, I must admit he does not specify what law he had in mind so we cannot be dogmatic that he is appealing to Gen 3:16. That is our best guess. If he is, however, referencing Gen 3:16, Paul does so in a way not conducive for supporting the gender-exclusive view of spiritual headship.

To this point, then, the textual data has not been favorable for extracting a headship principle in which the female gender is placed under the headship of the male gender in a submission orientation. Rather, the first four of the submission passages examined place the woman’s act of submitting in the framework of a marriage, one woman submitting to one man, her husband, leaving no analogical basis to move from the marriage context to one female being under the headship of any male. This headship principle cannot be found in these four texts. Additionally, 1 Cor 14 lends minimal to no support for the gender-headship cause. Thus, the submission texts involving women do not provide sufficient basis on which to build a meaningful gender-headship doctrine. If we are to find gender headship of male over female, we will find it only in Eph 5 or 1 Cor 11.

I have already looked briefly at Eph 5. It casts the headship-submission relationship (for men to women) in the context of marriage. One wife submits to her own husband and one husband is head of his own wife. Additionally, whatever the husband’s headship means, it occurs in the context of Paul calling for mutual submission, not a one-way submission. Eph 5:22 is traditionally translated, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord” (ESV). In the Greek text, however, there is no verb or any other form of “submit” (*hupotasso*). So why is the verse translated like this?

The answer is that we get the submission concept in Eph 5:22 from the verb (a participial form of *hupotasso*) in 5:21. Verses 21-22 constitute a single grammatical unit in which Paul calls for the church members to “submit to one another out of [reverential] fear (*phobos*) of Christ.” The language of “one another” makes this unequivocally a command to mutual submission. But who are the reciprocating parties who are to submit to “one another?” Verse 22 gives begins to answer that question. As a single grammatical unit, then, these two verses literally translate, “submitting to one another out of the fear of Christ, the wife to the husband as to the Lord.” The wife is thus the first half of the mutual submission pairing, therefore, the husband is the second half. The key is that they are called to submit to each other in differing ways. She submits to her husband by submitting (*hupotasso*) as the church does to Christ. The husband submits to his wife with self-emptying, self-sacrificing love like Christ demonstrated to His church. He submits by putting her needs and well-being ahead of his desires, tastes, convenience and safety.<sup>5</sup> The mutual submission of verse 21, combined with the clear marriage context of one woman submitting to one man as her head in marriage, fits the dominant NT theme on submission, namely that, male headship and female submission are solely in the context of marriage, between husband and wife. In Eph 5, the headship motif is not applied to general gender relations. At the human level, it is only applied to the marriage relationship. Again we fall short of an analogical basis to extract more than marital submission from the text.

That leaves us with 1 Cor 11. 1 Cor 11 is widely recognized as a very difficult passage to interpret. Perhaps this is one of those Pauline texts Peter complained was hard to understand. This difficulty alone should make one cautious about making dogmatic interpretations and inferences from this text. For this reason, I shall save my discussion of 1 Cor 11 for a separate essay [to follow after this one]. If we are to interpret this passage using the principle that scripture informs and interprets scripture, then the texts already studied provide little hope for suspecting 1 Cor 11 is teaching a gender-headship principle instead of marriage headship. If 1 Cor 11 does teach the submission of one gender to another, it would stand alone from the other passages which use the same vocabulary. While this is not impossible, one would need very good reasons to justify arguing that it proclaims a unique perspective.

For me, then, at this point, the data from the majority of texts on headship and submission involving women is not suitable to honestly move from the model of one woman submitted to the headship of one man in a marriage relation to a model in which those of the male gender are given general headship over those of the female gender. I cannot honestly make that leap without feeling that I am forcing concepts onto the text that simply are not there.

This, then is part of the data that led me towards two conclusions about headship in the Bible. First, the only headship between humans that I can find is the husband-wife. Paul, writing

---

<sup>5</sup>Remember, Christ preferred not to die on the cross if some other option was available, praying three times to be excused from that path. But in the end, he submitted to his bride (and his Father) by yielding His desire to avoid horrible suffering, putting the bride’s needs ahead of his tastes, comfort, and convenience.

two to three decades after Christ's death, seems to uphold the Gen 3:16 ideal of the wife submitting to the husband as still in effect post-Calvary. He casts it, however, as submission to a husband who is self-sacrificial like Christ. Thus, the husband needs to study how to be a Christlike husband, not how to be a wife. Too many men study how to be a wife – so they can tell their wives how to submit properly – and the result is we have a bunch of men more qualified to be a wife than a husband! Let the women study how to be a wife! While the Gospel should soften the sense of distinction between husband and wife in this matter, Paul offers no option for eliminating this headship in the Christian's life. I am not convinced the Eph 5 marriage dynamic is overturned by the Gospel.

Second, while not explicitly studied in this essay, the only linkage of "head" to Church life is the repeated claim that Christ is the head of the body, head of the church, etc. There is no other headship in the church. It was the convergence of these two points that positioned me to be follow the data of the two Adam's theology as explored in the previous essay.

There is, however, one other submission text I wish to address before digging into 1 Cor 11. We have looked at five submission texts using the grammatical form of the verb. One submission remains using submission in the form of a noun (and thus was not included in the study on submission as a *verb*). That verse is 1 Tim 2:11. 1 Tim 2:11-15 will also provide a vivid illustration of how I believe the headship view touted to exclude women from spiritual leadership forces ideas onto and into the text that are not there. I shall thus explore 1 Tim 2 in my next essay, and after that essay, then move on to 1 Cor 11.