

IS HEADSHIP THEOLOGY BIBLICAL?

The Bible verses in the New Testament often referred to as “the headship passages” must be considered carefully and prayerfully since, as many perceptively note, the interpretations often say more about the interpreters’ biases than Scripture’s intent. We undertake this brief study seeking to understand Scripture and to live it faithfully. We are not surprised that understanding Scripture is often a challenging task. Sometimes a note written just two weeks ago by a loved one or close friend can be misunderstood and requires clarification. Phrases written almost 2,000 years ago in a language other than our own certainly require care and prayer as we seek to understand. So we proceed in humility, grateful for a God who has made us all one family. This paper will show that headship,¹ as understood with the English connotations of ruler or leader, is not present within these New Testament passages.

ROME’S THEOLOGY VS. PAUL’S THEOLOGY: “CAESAR IS RULER!” VS. “CHRIST IS LORD!”

The wonder of the literal words of Scripture is best grasped against the backdrop of the time in which they were written. Imagine a world where Caesar reigns and everyone is vulnerable to his whims. In this world power is always top-down, and all people are subject to the authority of those above them on the hierarchical ladder. Always at the top is the emperor, followed by royalty, elite Romans, Greek patrons, soldiers, merchants, tradesmen, peasants, the sick, slaves, and untouchables. In such a world,

people know their place. If not, life is cheap; such lives can easily be extinguished.

Then a letter arrives to a group of Christians who meet regularly in house churches in Ephesus. They are a small minority in such a big city, but they are trying to remain faithful to Jesus. The letter says to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21),² continuing on to show that Christ, not Caesar, must be Lord of their lives. When Caesar is replaced by Christ, new thinking is possible! Christians are called to a sense of mutual responsibility between husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves (5:22–6:9).

In another letter to the house churches in Philippi, Christians are challenged to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (2:5), and then they are reminded of Jesus’ sacrifice through words set to a hymn (2:8–11):

He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Here is the motivation and inspiration for another way of looking at the world. Caesar seeks honor and exaltation, even demanding it from his subjects. In contrast, Christ willingly became

a suffering servant, even entering the grave and forever proclaiming by his actions that humility is better than so-called “kingly power.”

Paul is so convinced of this new era ushered in by Christ that, in his declaration to the house churches of Galatia focusing on the centrality of faith in Christ, he includes: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). The Jewish men—who had regularly said the prayer at synagogue thanking God that they were not made Gentiles, slaves, or women—could no longer pray that prayer as followers of Christ. Paul’s challenge to the rite of circumcision reflects his conviction that a new creation had begun in Jesus (Galatians 6:15; Romans 8; 1 Corinthians 15) and that it included the uncircumcised.

THERE IS NO LONGER JEW OR GREEK

Paul elaborates on the first phrase, “there is no longer Jew or Greek,” in his longer letter to the Romans. “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (3:22–24). This letter to those Christians trying to be faithful in the emperor’s capital city concludes with a list of twenty-seven people to be greeted for the apostle. Some of the names are Latin, some are Greek, and some are Jewish. The list embodies a wondrous diversity, all included and remembered by Paul.

He greets Jewish women serving as deacons and as apostles (16:1, 7), a very wealthy male convert of Corinth named Erastus (16:23), Greek men who had joined the faith (16:14), two male slaves (16:22–23), and the list goes on.

THERE IS NO LONGER SLAVE OR FREE

Paul elaborates on the second phrase, “there is no longer slave or free,” in his very short letter to those worshipping at the house of Philemon and Apphia. Using the rhetorical style of a well-educated Roman, Paul pushes Philemon to change his thinking from the world of Caesar, where master is over slave, to the kingdom of God, where Onesimus is Philemon’s own brother in Christ. Although Paul could demand Philemon’s actions (vs. 8), he would rather Philemon respond on his own accord, on the basis of love (vs. 9). Would Philemon treat Onesimus as he would treat Paul’s own “child,” his “heart,” or as he would treat Paul himself (vs. 10, 12, 17)? Would Philemon see that a fellow believer must be considered “no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother” (vs. 16)?

THERE IS NO LONGER MALE AND FEMALE

Paul assumes the third phrase, “there is no longer male and female,” in several letters that are now part of the Christian Scriptures. In several places within his first letter to the house churches in Corinth, Paul suggests new ways of understanding the family. Men and women may remain single, with their

focus on the work of God, rather than following the traditional pressure to marry (7:25–40). Men and women opened their homes as places of worship (16:19), and men and women prophesied (11:4–5). Paul cautions that, due to customs and cultural norms (11:16), men should keep their heads uncovered and women should cover their hair in worship, since private homes had become public spaces. Out of respect for their first-century cultural norms, and embracing the principle of loving others more than their own freedom (8:1–13; 10:23–11:1), men should act as the other men of their day acted, and women should act distinctly as women while leading in prayer and prophesying (11:3–5). The relationship between God and Christ was to be the model for the relationship between husbands and wives (11:3).

Continuing his calling and cautions to church members at Corinth, Paul considers the variety of spiritual gifts, noting that “all these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses” (12:11). Believers are then reminded that “in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (12:13). Why isn’t the “male or female” couplet included here? Was elitism due to ethnicity and class more of a problem than sexism when it came to seeing the distribution of gifts, thus the caution of 12:13? This entire section about spiritual gifts never distinguishes between gifts for women and gifts for men (12:1–14:25). The focus throughout the section is on the building up of the church body through gifts that the Spirit gives to all members,

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with particular emphasis on the gift of love (13:1–13).

Then why is the very specific command made that women “be silent in the churches” (14:34)? Is it because of problems with speaking in tongues and disorderly worship? This seems to be the focus of the section (14:26–40). But to what is Paul referring in verses 14:34–35? Does the request for women to ask questions of their husbands at home (14:35) suggest that there is a sense of lively (too lively) dis-

cussing and talking while at worship? After saying that “women should be silent in the churches,” why does Paul then ask the male believers: “Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?” (14:36). Is Paul actually quoting others when he includes the phrase “women should be silent in the churches”? How did the believers in Corinth understand this letter, and how did it shape their worship and church community? After all, Prisca and Aquila would continue their ministry of setting up house churches in Rome (Romans 16:3–5), Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:19) and Corinth (Acts 18). The apostle would also affirm the church in Nympha’s house (Colossians 4:15), and the one in the home of Philemon and Apphia (Philemon 1–2). The tension reflected in 1 Corinthians 14 suggests that the Christian community experienced diversity of opinion concerning the changes that come when Christ is Lord rather than Caesar.

“SOURCE-SHIP” RATHER THAN HEADSHIP

However one understands the situation at Corinth, and therefore Paul’s concerns and commands

throughout the letter, one point needs to be clearly made. The Greek word *kephalē*, translated as head in 1 Corinthians, is a play on words, with one use being the literal head of a person (11:4–7) and the other meaning best understood as life source. If Paul had meant ruler or leader, another Greek word would have been used.³ Paul is arguing that what men and women wear on their physical heads is connected to the idea of man as woman’s life source (11:3, 8–9). This argument continues with the proclamation: “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God” (11:11–12).

Here it is important to understand that word meanings are determined not only by a dictionary but by how words are used (*kephalē* is not used as ruler or leader in the New Testament) and by the context of words in a sentence and passage. The wordplay works in verse 12 only if the origin of humanity is being considered here. It seems that dress code in the Corinthian house churches was being challenged as some Jewish men adopted the cultural habit used by Gentile men, who covered their heads as a status symbol. (Roman men also covered their heads during some cultic celebrations.) In addition, some Christian women leading out in prayers and prophesying were leaving their hair uncovered, which was against Jewish synagogue norms and emulated Roman women at the time. Paul says “no” to both behaviors. Elite male Christians must not flaunt their status, and females must not flaunt their freedom. The reputation of the house churches was at stake. In his argument Paul appeals to “source-ship,” if you will. In worship they should follow the hair and dress codes that underscore maleness and femaleness, a reminder of creation and the God who created man and woman

(11:7–9), while acknowledging that hair coverings are customs (11:16). (I am reminded of Maasai women I met on a trip to Kenya in the 1980s, for whom shaving the head is the embodiment of femaleness, while males wear their hair longer.) Paul says that church members should follow dress codes in worship. When praying, men should act appropriately. When prophesying, women should embrace their femaleness as created by God. One could actually see this passage as reflecting Paul’s conviction that both men and women are needed in leading the churches. The use of this chapter in Corinthians to argue for a theology of “headship” imposes the similar English words head and headship on words and ideas that are not present in the passage.

DISCIPLESHIP, NOT DISTRACTIONS

When a group of angry men and wealthy women was causing problems in the house churches of Ephesus, the apostle uses strong language to their pastor, Timothy (1 Timothy 2:8–10). The wording throughout this letter against false teachings suggests that the message sent earlier to those living in Ephesus had been neglected by at least some members of the house churches there. The wondrous message that Christ’s flesh “has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Ephesians 2:14) had been forgotten, and instead anger and immodesty filled the church (1 Timothy 2:8–10). The community apparently had much to learn, and the traditional rabbinical way of learning, historically available only to males, was listening quietly to the master. This small letter endorses the radical idea that women could learn as male students learned, “in silence with full submission” (2:11). Women’s flaunting of wealth (2:9) did not disqualify them from their new freedom in the gospel, but they needed to learn before they could teach others (2:12). As we hear these words, we

again wonder at the events occurring in the city of Ephesus and the small minority of the population who met as Christians in house churches. Why is the church reminded of Adam and Eve and told of the order of creation (2:14)? Is this letter really saying that women are saved by bearing children and by other good works (2:15), contradicting Paul's deep conviction that salvation is through Christ alone?

We do not know why some of the men meeting in the house churches of Ephesus were angry and perhaps even violent (2:8). We also do not know why some women worshipers were extremely wealthy. Were they converts? Were they considering converting? What is very clear from the apostle's description in 1 Timothy 2:9–10 is that they were letting others know of their status (braiding one's hair with gold was a status symbol and only available to the extremely wealthy). Were they formerly part of the cult at the temple of Artemis (Diana) in their large city? This famous cult had only women priests, who often encouraged other women to take control of their lives by living celibately. For some members of the cult of Artemis, child bearing was a burden and was unavoidable in the first-century world unless they refused to have sexual relations with their husbands. Is this the background to these new worshipers? What were they suggesting to other members of the congregations?

It is ironic and distressing that one of the most liberating passages in the New Testament for women has been typically used to suppress them: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission" (2:11). Learning "in silence and with full submission" was understood as the way students or disciples learned from a teacher or rabbi in that day. The phrase "sitting at the feet" refers to the student's position before the teacher; and it is a sign of respect and submission. Paul was this kind of a disciple to Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). In the first century, the opportunity to

study was available to very few men—and certainly no women. It was this very challenge to social convention that bothered Martha about her "sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying" (Luke 10:39). How could her sister assume such a traditionally male position (Luke 10:38–42)? It was just not right. Yet, Jesus affirmed Mary and reassured Martha.

Even as women were now allowed to learn, 1 Timothy 2 goes on to say: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (2:12). Does this mean always and in every situation? Or only in church services (which would seem to contradict 1 Corinthians 11)? Or does this mean specifically while listening to the teacher, in order to be a good disciple (2:11)? Is this a command to the new believers who had only recently left the Artemis cult? Some translate "teach or to have authority" as having a sense of "trying to dictate" to men or "seizing control" over others. What exactly was going on at Ephesus? We do not know. But it sounds like this letter of concern about false teaching (1:4, 6–7; 4:1, 7, 16; 6:3, 20) also conveys concern that women not be deceived like Eve (2:13–14) but learn what is right and wrong, including that child bearing is not an evil thing, but a wondrous gift (2:15).

SOME CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The above interpretations suggest that headship theology is not present in these passages. In fact, the New Testament view of the Christian family contrasts with the typical assumptions about headship as rulership. A top-down understanding of power and authority is not an adequate reflection of the meaning of particular words in these New Testament passages, nor of first-century house churches and the gifted men and women who led out in them.

In the context of the first-century Roman

Empire, where Caesar was worshiped as savior, believers living in major cities as minority communities were trying to be faithful to Jesus Christ. They struggled, as we do, with the intersection of Christ and culture. To what degree should they continue the Jewish culture that birthed Christianity? To what degree could they maintain parts of the Greco-Roman world in which they lived? To what degree did the call of Christ mean a radical departure from their cultural norms? Like all humans, the first-century church members messed up, posed challenging questions, acted contrary to the gospel, and had blind spots. But one of the wonders of Scripture is that 2,000 years later we can read the words written from inspired apostles who were trying to help these congregations, guiding them into greater understanding and more faithful living.

The language of headship is a cultural construct that we impose on the texts. It is a way to discuss certain New Testament passages from a particular perspective. While Scripture uses language that says “the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church” (Ephesians 5:23), most Christians today would not say that the husband is the savior of the woman’s body, even though the metaphor continues in just that way: “the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior.” To interpret the metaphor as denoting authority, power, or rulership would be to impose a personal perspective that ascribes to the Caesar model. It is an imposition of the modern concept of headship onto the term head, which is not part of the Greek meaning. If the Caesar model is actually being challenged in the New Testament, and Christ is the new model for the believing community, head then connotes humility, self-sacrifice, and being “obedient” to others (Philippians 2:8).

The demographics we are accustomed to in the

United States today would have been unthinkable in the New Testament. In the United States, 102 million adults (44.1 percent of the population) are unmarried. Of these, 53 percent are women, 47 percent are men, and 62 percent have never been married. In 2011, 33 million Americans lived alone (28 percent of all households). In addition, 10 million unmarried mothers live alone with children, and 1.7 million fathers are unmarried. In the United States today, male headship has little logic or relevance to people living alone, and it could be confounding to single mothers and their children.⁴

Included in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is a call to respect and love others in one’s faith community more than one’s own freedom (8:1–13; 10:23–11:1). This must guide our discussion of the question of the ordination of women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This is why we are not asking for the ordination of women as a global policy, even though we are convinced that such a policy is biblically and morally right. Rather, we are asking that in those places in our world where not treating men and women equally is not respecting cultural norms and is hindering the mission of the church we love, that we be allowed to follow the mandate of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians and respect culture even as we proclaim the gospel.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This approach to interpreting Scripture is also reflected in the Principles of Interpretation listed for the proponents of the ordination of women in Ján Barna’s work, *Ordination of Women in Seventh-day Adventist Theology*.⁵ This book is extremely helpful for understanding the two major hermeneutical positions of Adventists who are opponents and proponents of the ordination of women. It is clear from Barna’s study that both sides are deeply committed to Scripture and, while embracing significantly

different presuppositions, have much more in common than is sometimes understood (see especially pages 253–318).

In his chapter in *Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspectives*, Richard M. Davidson concludes that equality was the ideal, but that after the Fall, “the husband was given a servant headship role to preserve the harmony of the home, while at the same time the model of equal partnership was still set forth as the ideal.”⁶ This male headship is limited to the relationship between a husband and a wife and does not apply to society as a whole.⁷

In a paper commissioned by the Biblical Research Committee for the 1973 Mohaven meetings, Madelynn Haldeman challenges the church to be careful not to endorse pagan societal norms rather than the way of the New Testament, which she believes proclaims that all women “have been called by Christ and some of them to the pulpit.”⁸

Sheryl Prinz-McMillan in *The Welcome Table: Setting a Place for Ordained Women* concludes that when New Testament passages are taken in their historical context, “there is no such thing as biblical ‘headship,’”⁹ at least not understood in terms of hierarchy. Discussion of Ephesians 5 in light of the Roman household codes shows Paul leaving out the command for husbands to “rule” their wives and rather to “love” them (Ephesians 5:25–33).¹⁰

Peter M. Van Bemmelen shows that in Ellen White’s writing the focus of redemption is on the restoration of God’s ideal for man and woman.¹¹ He

writes, “Equality and companionship are key concepts for Ellen White in connection with the marriage relationship.”¹² And in regard to the church: “Never does Ellen White quote biblical ‘headship’ language in reference to the human leadership of the church; neither is there any evidence in her writings that she referred to ordained ministers in terms of headship.”¹³

**Adventist Fundamental Belief #14,
Unity in the Body of Christ:**

The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope, and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children. (Romans 12:4, 5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–14; Matthew 28:19, 20; Psalm 133:1; 2 Corinthians 5:16, 17; Acts 17:26, 27; Galatians 3:27, 29; Colossians 3:10–15; Ephesians 4:14–16; 4:1–6; John 17:20–23.) ■



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- 1 The word *headship* itself is a relatively recent word, first used in 1582. The word *leadership* is even more recent.
- 2 Unless otherwise specified, the New Revised Standard Version is used.
- 3 The Greek word *archon* (ruler or leader) is used in the New Testament for Jewish leaders, of Roman officials, of the forces of evil, and of Christ, but never of Christian ministers.
- 4 In addition, what does male headship mean to the 22 nations currently led by female prime ministers or presidents and to the 13 commonwealth countries with women serving as governors general? Additionally, in the United States women make up 49 percent of currently enrolled medical students, 51 percent of law students, 47 percent of dental students, and 60.8 percent of pharmacy students.
- 5 Ján Barna, *Ordination of Women in Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Serbia: Euro Dream, 2012), 242–243.
- 6 Richard M. Davidson, “Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture,” *Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), 284.
- 7 Davidson, 259–295.
- 8 Madelynn Haldeman, “The Role of Women in the Early Christian Church,” *Mohaven Papers* (September 1973), 52; available online at <http://www.adventistarchives.org/1973-5-mohaven#.UaEvRdimXl8>.
- 9 Sheryl Prinz-McMillan, “Who’s in Charge of the Family?” *The Welcome Table: Setting a Place for Ordained Women*, ed. Patricia A. Habada and Rebecca Frost Brillhart (Langley Park, MD: TEAM Press, 1995), 216.
- 10 Prinz-McMillan, 197–221.
- 11 Peter M. Van Bemmelen, “Equality, Headship, and Submission in the Writings of Ellen G. White,” *Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspectives*, Nancy Vyhmeister, ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), 297–311.
- 12 Van Bemmelen, 305.
- 13 Van Bemmelen, 306.