

“Headship” -- Thoughts from One Woman’s Perspective

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Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. –1Cor. 11:3

It’s hard to know where to begin a discussion about the roles of men and women in the church. Everyone has an opinion about it, and everyone leans into different portions of Scripture to support their opinion. Who’s “right”? Remember the old song with the words, “It only takes a spark to get a fire going”? Well, we could apply those lyrics to the above verse from 1 Corinthians (along with a few other verses), and there we have a couple of millennia of controversy and disagreement about headship and the roles of men and women in the church.

The very word “headship” is, when you break it down into its parts, a goofy word, isn’t it? And yet it has become a word that is increasingly loaded in Christian circles, being flown like a banner over the gender wars. This article attempts small things, and it amounts to nothing more than a fractionally small examination of the debate itself. But hopefully, it will help us see a bigger picture of God’s heart for unity and grace within the body of Christ.

Along with the debate over the roles of men and women in ministry, there is an associated vocabulary. Specifically, we have two camps: complementarians and egalitarians. Big titles for simple concepts.

Complementarians believe that certain ministry roles (pastor, preacher, elder) are reserved for men. They believe that the church benefits from the service of women and that they can serve in many capacities, as long as they do not preach, or teach men. Author John Piper is a well-known complementarian, having co-founded the “Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.” He also co-edited a rather large volume entitled, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.

Egalitarians, on the other hand, believe that women should be allowed to fill all ministry roles in the church, provided that such roles fall within their gifting. Author Gordon Fee is a well-known egalitarian. Egalitarians have organized themselves in a group called “Christians for Biblical Equality.”

Both groups are comprised of men and women. Both believe in the authority of Scripture. Both groups are conservative Protestants for the most part. And both groups, not surprisingly, are caricatured by the other. For instance, complementarians are portrayed as rigid, attentive only to the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law and, at worst, misogynistic. Egalitarians are accused by complementarians as playing fast and loose with Scripture by being too lax with the letter of the law, and are frequently labeled as “feminists.”

Both camps believe passionately that they have the correct Biblical perspective.

Obviously, this article will not be bringing an end to the debate. I have a book-version in my head of the few paragraphs written here, but this is, after all, a *Community News* article, and I'll spare you the expanded version. I am purposely not going to pull out the controversial verses from Scripture that everyone debates, primarily because that is a subject best left to those with better theological credentials. (For a more thorough evaluation of our position at SBCC on women in leadership, read the excellent paper written by Reed Jolley, available on the front table at church.) I will say this: I love Jesus and I love being a woman. I also know the joy (and sometimes the challenges), of being a woman serving alongside men in ministry.

Personally, I stand outside both camps of complementarianism and egalitarianism. The reason? In a nutshell, I believe complementarianism to be internally inconsistent. To assert that women are equally saved, equally loved by God, and equally gifted by Him, but then to say that there are areas where they are not allowed to use these gifts? It simply doesn't look like the Scripture I read or the Jesus I know. I also cannot square the idea of a "biblical manhood and womanhood" with the imbalance of responsibility being placed on women to make that "recovery" happen. There is too much blame on women for its loss, and too much responsibility on women to make it come back. Is biblical manhood really so dependent on women for its recovery? I think too highly of the godly men I know to agree with that.

Egalitarianism also doesn't sit right in my soul, for much different—and perhaps more subtle—reasons. The operative concept in egalitarianism seems to be "rights." (Eg., Women have every "right" to hold all the offices in the church that men do.) The Scripture I read and the Jesus I know upholds *mutual submission and servanthood*, with the ultimate purpose of being unified together in Christ. This does not mean that we live lives where we "put up or shut up," but it also does not mean that we clamor after equality for equality's sake.

So what is "headship" anyway? In Scripture we see the term "headship" applied primarily to marriage. In reference to the church, however, there is only one head, Jesus Christ. I hesitate to even venture my own definition of the word, as Scripture doesn't define it specifically either. John Stott believes that headship is not about authority, but rather about responsibility. As a woman, all I can say to that is "Amen!" Most "biblical women" that I know are not seeking authority over men, but *are* perplexed about how to use their gifts with the authority that the Holy Spirit gives them. That's an authority that Scripture tells us Jesus imparts when we are saved. Romans 11:29 says that *the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable*. Autobiographically speaking, I can tell you the year, the time of day, and the place where I was sitting when I experienced God's "calling." It was specific, it was clear, and it came through a time of prayer, in the venue of a Scripture passage. It has never left me. "Headship" under my fellow brothers in Christ was not a consideration as I was awash in what God was pointing me towards. I looked only to Christ for what to do and where to go next.

Jill Briscoe, when interviewed by “Christianity Today,” offered her own opinion about headship. She said, *I accept headship as a biblical concept. I also accept equality as another biblical concept. And just as I cannot bring predestination and free will together, I cannot bring headship and equality together, but I embrace them both. And sometimes I model submission to my husband as head, and sometimes I model equality with my husband. Just as sometimes, if I’m in trouble, I’m a Calvinist. And if I’m talking to someone on the plane, I’m an Arminian, because I’m going to lead him to Christ, and I believe he’s got a free will. At that moment, I cannot reconcile both predestination and free will. And so my husband, in his headship makes sure I’m equal, but it’s no less headship for that.*

I resonate absolutely. For me, the notion of headship in Scripture is a mystery to be embraced and not a problem to be solved. We are simple creatures, we humans. We want black and white answers; we don’t want mysteries. But here it is, a conundrum we cannot solve, and a tension we are asked to not only live with, but to negotiate with humility. And so, although I don’t want to appear flippant by oversimplifying, I would like to humbly propose a third way. I would like to call this third way “tightrope-arianism”. The title will never take hold in academic circles, but I think it fits. This is simply the way of grace – both sides conceding that we may not know the real answers until we see God face to face and that, in the meantime, we live in the tension of submitting to the greater gifts of those around us, regardless of gender. It also means that sometimes we submit to the *headship* of others, regardless of giftedness! This obviously requires humility, submission and, sometimes, assertiveness. Most of all, it requires an ongoing *prayerfulness* that God would show us, step by step, how to maintain this balance as we follow him, and love each other.

At the end of the day, I am so thankful that I am part of a church family that is willing to walk this tightrope together. Rather than seeking “biblical manhood” or “biblical womanhood,” we find in Scripture the command to be transformed into the image of Christ – a much more challenging proposition I’d say. In doing so, men and women learn to truly be men and women. --Plain and simple on the face of it – a lifetime of grace and hard work in reality.