

Headship with a Heart

How biblical patriarchy actually prevents abuse.

By Steven Tracy | posted 02/10/2003

In 15 years of pastoral ministry, I have heard my share of confessions, accusations, and rationalizations. One conversation stands out above the rest and haunts me to this day. A man in my congregation confided in me that years ago he had physically and sexually abused several of his children. He had been arrested and participated in court-mandated counseling but had skillfully manipulated the system. His wife tried to protect the children, but the abuse continued for some time. When I asked him why he continued to abuse the children while he was on probation, his answer took my breath away. "I guess I did it because I was the head of the family, and it was my right to do whatever I wanted to my wife and kids."

I wish this were the only time I have heard a man use *male headship* to justify abuse. Unfortunately, I have heard twisted statements like this many times over. My wife, who is a family therapist, hears horrific stories of male authority turned malignant virtually every day.

Few phrases are more explosive in our culture than male headship. Feminists claim that patriarchy (the affirmation of male authority over females) is the basis for most social pathology and for virtually all domestic violence, child abuse, and sexual assault. In their groundbreaking book on domestic violence, sociologists R. Emerson and Russell Dobash assert "the seeds of wife beating lie in the subordination of females and in their subjection to male authority and control. This relationship has been institutionalized in the structure of the patriarchal family" (*Violence Against Wives: The Case Against the Patriarchy*, Free Press, 1983). Others attack patriarchy even more virulently, calling it a "death sentence" for society (Russ Fink, *Stopping Rape: A Challenge to Men*, New Society, 1993).

Is male headship in any and all forms a death sentence? No, but a distortion of it often is. Widespread abuse of male power is both anticipated and condemned in Scripture. Genesis 3:16 sadly predicts that one effect of the Fall would be a power struggle between the sexes. "He shall rule over you" is no divine prescription, but a tragic predication of sin's effects on the human race. Scripture declares that in our fallen world, those with power (typically males) will use their power to exploit and abuse those with less power (typically females and children) (Micah 2:9; Isa. 10:1-2; Ezek. 22:6-12). Due to inborn depravity, males often need little or no training to abuse their power; it is their default setting.

When our younger daughter was in junior high, she went on a summer mission trip to Central America. Her team training included Bible studies on relationships and marriage. After hearing the leader teach on male headship, several of the boys made immediate application. They declared that male headship meant the girls had to do what the boys told them to do. This juvenile misapplication lays the foundation for subsequent abuse of power. The adult leader did not challenge the boys' brash declaration, but our daughter did. She informed the group that her parents must not believe in male headship. Her evidence? When we went out to eat as a family, I did not just go where I wanted to eat, but typically chose my wife's favorite restaurant. I was very thankful her pubescent logic did not accept male domination as an expression of biblical headship.

As someone who has devoted much of his professional life to the protection of women and children, I am deeply concerned about the way patriarchy often fuels abuse. Because I am a Christian theologian, however, Scripture tethers my response. The concept of male headship first entered the church through the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23), not through a wife-beating chauvinist. Unfortunately, much contemporary discussion of male headship has gotten bogged down in etymological controversy regarding the meaning of the Greek word *kephale*, translated "head" in English. Some argue that we should render this word "source of life" (Gilbert Bilezikian and Catherine Clark Kroeger, for example) while others maintain the traditional definition "authority over." Detailed word studies, particularly those done by Wayne Grudem, convince many of us that *kephale* was used in the first century to denote authority over (see Eph. 5:23-24; Col. 1:18). Paul appeals to the creation order itself to establish the transcultural norm of male leadership (1 Cor. 11:8; 1 Tim. 2:12-13).

But for those of us who believe in the husband's household authority, this hardly settles the question of what godly male headship really looks like. More specifically, how can we prevent male headship from turning into male domination?

Paul, who introduced this vexing phrase, is the best authority to clarify its meaning. His instructive clarification has largely been lost in the gender roles debate. Paul's clarification of male headship is succinct and poignant: the man is the head of the woman, as God [the Father] is the head of Christ (1 Cor. 11:3). If we want to clarify healthy male headship, we must transcend human models and observe how the Father relates to the Son. Let me anchor this discussion in a brief description of the Father's relationship with the Son recorded in John 5:18-24.

The Gospel of John gives rich detail regarding the relationship between the Father and the Son. This passage begins with Jesus' scandalous claim of sonship to the Father (5:18). *Father* is a radical proclamation of equality with the Father. In fact, throughout this passage, which describes the Father's relationship with the Son, equality is repeatedly highlighted. This is an important starting place as we reflect on the nature of male headship, for feminists claim that male headship is predicated on assumptions of male superiority. John teaches that headship is based on equality. The Father's headship over the Son is specifically reflected in loving intimacy, sharing authority, honoring and protecting.

Loving Intimacy

In John 5:19-20 we see that while the Son does not act independently of the Father ("the Son can do nothing of himself"), this is not based on the Son's inferiority but on the intimate relationship he has with the Father. "For whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner" (v. 19) indicates an uninterrupted intimacy between the Father and the Son that is so intense that the Son not only will not but cannot act independently of the Father. This is further clarified in verse 20, which says "the Father loves [literally 'keeps on loving'] the Son and shows him all things that he himself is doing." The Father's headship over the Son is thus expressed in unbroken intimacy in which the Father continually loves and delights in the Son, and reveals his will to the Son he delights in. *In short, the work of the Father and the Son is the collaboration of intimate equals.* In this reading of biblical headship, submission is not a matter of mere duty, but a delightful response from a woman who is loved, partnered with, and trusted as an equal.

The importance of defining male headship in terms of loving equality between the man and the woman cannot be overemphasized. Physical and sexual abuse by men is shockingly prevalent in our culture. Domestic violence perpetrated by males accounts for more adult female emergency room visits than traffic accidents, muggings, and rapes combined. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, it is the greatest single cause of injury to American women. Abusive men often cite male headship/female submissiveness to justify their abuse. Ultimately, this is based on a perverted assumption of male superiority. Based on John's description of the Father and the Son, human male headship, defined as harsh authoritarian domination of an inferior, is destructive heresy.

Sharing Authority

In John 5:21-24 we find startling statements about the manner in which the Father shares authority with the Son. Jesus echoes the ancient Jewish belief that the Father has authority over life and death by asserting that "the Father raises the dead and gives them life." But Jesus then issues a completely unexpected declaration—"even so the Son gives life to whom he wishes" (v. 21). The assertion that the Messiah would have the authority to raise the dead was unknown in ancient Judaism. Jesus further demolishes the Jewish understanding of the Messiah's authority (v. 22) by declaring that "not even the Father judges anyone, but he has given all judgment to the Son." In the Old Testament, the Lord God is said to be the ultimate judge, but since Christ is one with the Father, he is given the full authority to judge.

We clearly see here that the Father's headship over the Son does not preclude the Son's having great power and authority. In fact, since the Father and the Son are equals and in intimate relationship, we

should not be surprised to find the Father sharing his authority with the Son (cf. Luke 10:22). Sometimes those who affirm male leadership seem to believe that male headship is compromised unless husbands and male elders absolutely wield all authority in the home and in the church. This is not what the headship of the Father over the Son teaches. In fact, the balance of authority within the Trinity should challenge us to exercise biblical headship by giving women authority in various spheres of life and ministry. Feminists have long argued that male headship necessarily denotes inequality. Christian men who insist on maintaining a monopoly on all domestic and ecclesiastical authority validate this misconception, and distort the example of headship within the Trinity.

Does this Trinitarian model militate against males having final decision-making authority and females responding to male leadership? Not necessarily. To me it merely clarifies male headship. Christ was responsive to the Father's leadership during his incarnation. Repeatedly we read in John's gospel that Christ did the will of the Father and was responsive to the Father's authority (4:34; 6:38; 8:28). Even after Christ's earthly incarnation, he is still submissive to the Father's headship, for at the end of the age "the Son himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to him" (1 Cor. 15:28). At the same time, Christ's submission to the Father was based on equality and shared authority.

While it goes beyond the scope of this article to flesh out the full extent of female authority, we should note that in Scripture godly women have authority to proclaim the gospel (Acts 1:8; Phil. 4:2-3), prophesy (Isa. 8:3; Acts 2:17-18; 21:8-9), run a household (Prov. 31:10-31), manage commercial enterprises (Prov. 31:10-31), hold men accountable (1 Sam. 25:18-38; Luke 18:1-8; Acts 18:26), and serve as co-laborers with men in ministry (Judges 4; Rom. 16:1-6; Phil. 4:2-3).

Honoring and Protecting

Jesus scandalized the Jewish leaders in John 5:23 by declaring that the Father has given all judgment to the Son "in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father." As is true with the previous two aspects of headship within the Trinity, this third element is also based on complete equality between the Father and the Son. The Greek word translated "even as" means "just as, to the same degree." John is saying that the Father gives the Son authority to judge so that the Son would be honored to the same extent the Father is honored. The boldness of this statement is seen through Isaiah's declaration that God does not share honor with anyone else. "I am the Lord, that is my name; I will not give my glory to another" (Isa. 42:8). The Father's headship over Christ is not diminished when Christ receives honor. In fact, this is how his headship is lived out. Other Scripture passages such as Hebrews 2:9 and Philipians 2:9-11 develop the same theme.

How does this principle apply to relationships between husbands and wives? Jesus himself gives us one of the clearest examples of male headship reflected in honoring women. He risked the wrath of the Jewish religious community by lovingly allowing a sinful woman to touch him (Luke 7:36-50), engaging in respectful, public dialogue with the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-27), providentially choosing women to be the first witnesses of his resurrection (Matt. 28:1-8), including women among his traveling disciples (Luke 8:1-3), and allowing women to sit at his feet and be taught (Luke 10:38-42). Jesus did these things in a Palestinian Jewish culture in which women were not to go out into public, men were not to speak to women in public, women could not give testimony in court, women could not inherit their husband's property, the birth of a daughter was considered a loss, and girls could not be formally educated. Jesus' example challenges our traditional understanding of biblical headship. It's not a matter of maintaining a monopoly on power but of strategizing how to give women greater honor.

One way men honor their wives is by protecting them. While protection is not explicitly noted in John 5:18-24, it is a logical application of loving and honoring. Furthermore, in the context of the final judgment, the Father does empower and protect the Son. This is particularly seen in Psalms 2 and 110, which speak of the Father's empowerment of the Son to triumph over his enemies. Is the protection of women explicitly linked to male headship in Scripture? Absolutely, for this is a dominant biblical theme. Men are particularly called to protect and care for women and children (Deut. 25:5-10; Isa. 1:15-17; Jer. 22:2-3), for this is how God himself exercises his power and authority (Deut. 10:17-19).

Unfortunately, secular society and even the Christian church consistently fail to protect women, and often blame women for physical or sexual violence perpetrated upon them. World Health Organization research indicates that at least one in five of the world's females has been physically or sexually abused by a man or men at some time in her life. Violence against women is as serious a cause of death and incapacity among women of reproductive age as cancer. In North America, more than one in four women experiences a violent outburst from her partner during her lifetime, and 30 percent of all women murdered are killed by their husbands, ex-husbands, or boyfriends. Former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop called domestic violence "the greatest health threat in America."

In spite of these appalling statistics, James and Phyllis Alsdurf's survey of more than 5,000 Protestant pastors shows that pastors fail to take the husband's violence seriously and simply encourage wives to be submissive (*Battered into Submission*, Wipf and Stock, 1998). It would be difficult for a man to imagine how vulnerable women often feel in our culture. A woman who has been repeatedly treated with contempt and abused becomes emotionally numb. Typically she will underreport the violence. Therefore, a pastor must focus on confronting male abuses of power and protecting vulnerable women. Churches must begin to aggressively confront abusers, pursue all means possible to protect vulnerable women, and teach that male headship means protection, not domination.

Some Radical Implications

While feminists are correct to highlight the widespread abuses of male power, many of us believe the best solution is not to reject male headship but to clarify it. For us, 1 Corinthians 11:3 provides the best imaginable corrective to distortions of male authority by defining human male headship in terms of the Father's headship over the Son.

The radical implications of this text should not be overlooked. Based on 1 Corinthians 11:3, we should consider it just as heretical to imply male superiority over women as we consider it heretical to say that Christ is inferior to the Father. We should consider it utterly unbiblical for men to dishonor women, as we consider it utterly unbiblical to deny worship to Christ. Just as we would be offended by and oppose the teaching of anyone who would deny that the Father raised Christ from the dead and will empower him to have final victory over his enemies, so we should be deeply offended by and oppose anyone who fails to honor and protect women. The most instructive model for sex roles is the headship of the Father over the Son.

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