

The Biblical exegesis of headship: a challenge to Patriarchal understanding that impinges on women's rights in the church and society

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ABSTRACT

The biblical exegesis of headship: a challenge to patriarchal understanding that impinges on women's rights in the church and society

The aim of this paper is to try and find out the real meaning of man's (male) headship of women, since that can help us to define the deep meaning of gender equality. A brief historical background will be followed by exegetical remarks on Ephesians 5:21-22 which is one of the texts that explains something about the concept of "headship of man". Secondly, the meaning will help us to shape our understanding as to how we should handle the issue of women's rights and gender equality in African Christian churches and families. The challenges that are faced by women because of the misunderstanding of the concept of headship will also be discussed. The movement of feminist theology and other movements are becoming vocal in African countries, because women feel that it is the church and the Bible which promote the subjection of women. Fiorenza (1986:67) says that oppression of women in society is a result of Christian male sexist theology.

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2004 we celebrated a decade of democracy in South Africa, a democracy which completely denounces any form of discrimination, including the abuse of women. The most worrying issue is that even though the country is trying its best to integrate women in our society, some African churches and Christian males are still dominating women, using some biblical passages to defend their actions. It is within the very same democratic society where we have men who see women as their subjects to an extent that they still

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humiliate and abuse them. I was also moved by the man who said earlier this year:

“I do not understand why I am arrested for beating my own wife, because she must submit herself to me since I paid lobolo for her” (City Press, 18 Feb, 2007).

We need to understand that the main reason for the abuse is that the man believes that traditionally the woman’s duty is to submit herself blindly to the man. The word “submit”, which is not foreign to the scriptures, is misused to justify men abusing women.

It is well-known that different churches have their own constitutions and laws, but what must be done if the same scripture is abused by the very people who should be defending it?

2 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In order to understand why women are oppressed, we need to find out how African men traditionally understood concepts like submission, obedience and headship. There are many Biblical passages that have been misused to make people believe that women are inferior creatures to men and they should, as such, be subjected to abuse. For instance, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 has been used to bar women from active participation in the public church worship. Another passage which, according to Gundry (1977:71) has been interpreted to mean that wives must do whatever their husbands require, regardless of its propriety or moral significance, is Ephesians 5:22-24. Because of these misunderstandings and misinterpretations, the church and the traditional African community helped each other to put women under unconditional subordination. Therefore the church has become instrumental in subjecting women to abuse and creating in the woman an inferiority complex to an extent that when the constitution of our country (South Africa) speaks about the rights of women, it becomes a serious problem to those who adopted the misunderstandings of the Bible passages.

This was learned from Jewish men, who could not allow women even to be counted. That is one of the reasons why Matthew (alone amongst the Gospels) mentioned in 14:21 that women were not counted when 5000 people were fed. Let us note that the statement: “Not counting the women and children” appears only in Matthew, while the story was recorded in all four Gospels. One may ask why only Matthew mentioned this. Matthew was a Jew and as

such he did not abandon his Jewish culture about the women when writing his Gospel. This statement also justifies the Jewish prayer which Rabbi Yehuda taught every man (male) to pray daily which says:

“Praise is to you, God, that you have not created me a heathen, a woman and not a slave” (De Bruyn, 1998:1).

A woman, according to Jewish custom is on the level of a slave or heathen and sometimes she is treated as a child. None of the other Gospels mentioned the statement on women. African women are also treated the same way.

In the Old Testament the incidents, laws and stories depict the treatment of women in Hebrew culture as less than human. That is why Hinga (2000:146) says:

“The commoditisation of women in the Old Testament culture is also evident in their stories of military exploits. During their wars with neighboring communities, women could be taken as booty, along with sheep and goats”.

Likewise, African people, including some Christians, are still of the view that women must not be allowed to take leadership roles in the church and community.

“Some women have identified the church as one of the key factors in promoting violence against women. The Biblical teaching asks women to be submissive to their husbands. This Biblical teaching has been misused to the disadvantage of women” (Hinga, 2000:124).

Very few of the African mainline churches ordain women as elders and ministers because of that. The issue becomes worse when incapable males are ordained while active women are denied ordination. Today there are many women who are moving from churches that oppress them to the churches which admire their contribution and allow them to take leadership roles in accordance with their gifts. Denying women to preach, for instance, is not in line with the Scriptures, although they are allowed to teach in Sunday School and Confirmation classes. The reason is that even those verses which are used to forbid them, like 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, have traditionally been misunderstood. That is why the author personally agrees with Bennet (1974:182) when he says:

“The message of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 was based on the Jewish ordinance which stated that women were not permitted to teach in assemblies, or even to ask questions”.

This is also supported by De Haan (1970:121) when explaining that even 1 Corinthians 11:4-5, which speaks about a woman covering her head, does not forbid her to speak or teach in public assembly. He says: “It is clearly implied in this passage that the woman is permitted to speak, teach or pray, *but only* on condition that her head is covered.” It is very important to note that Paul was addressing these people on the basis of Jewish customs, hence he says:

“As in all the churches of God’s people, the woman should keep quiet. They are not allowed to speak, *as the Jewish law* says they must not be in charge” (1 Cor 14:33-34).

This is clearly a Jewish law, not God’s law, and as such it cannot apply to all people. When we take this into consideration, it becomes easier for us to understand that the traditions of Jews and the Biblical message do not always give the same meaning, hence we need to be cautious.

Therefore, because of all of the above, it is important to make a study that in the end will give us a true meaning of those biblical passages which are used to stop women from serving God. The author therefore chose one of the common verses to be used for this purpose: Ephesians 5:21-22.

3 EXEGETICAL REMARKS ON EPHESIANS 5:21-22

3.1 Translation

The original Greek reads verse 21 as: “Submit yourselves to one another, because of your reverence to Christ”. Verse 22 reads: “Wives, to your own husbands as to the Lord....”.

The New International Version (NIV) puts it this way: “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, of which He is the Savior” (Eph 5:21-22).

The logic here is that the submission being spoken about must, in the first place, be nothing less than to follow the example of Christ who obeys His Father. The other thing to remember is that we

must not throw away the main thought which is read from verse 21, which instructs every person to submit to others, regardless of gender and age.

3.2 Comments

Since the original Greek did not have the verb “submit” in verse 22, we must agree with Gaebelin (1978:75) who says that it might have been grammatically attached. This view is supported by Robertson (1931:544) when he says that “*Be in subjection*” was not in the Greek text. Also Jerome knew of no manuscript with it. Gundry (1977:71) also says: “Bible teachers leap at the word *submit* in verse 22 and chisel it into stone as eternal law, yet the word is not even in the original language. One must go back to verse 21 to understand the meaning”.

Therefore the “submit” of verse 21 does not specifically refer to women, but to all people mentioned in the relationships that are described in those verses, men included. That is why the author is supporting Gundry (1977:72) when saying:

“The rule as here lay down in general, binding on every member of the church, regardless of sex – men as well as women, husbands as well as wives. No room for preferential rights”.

This becomes clear in a parallel verse like 1 Peter 3:1 which says:

“Wives in the same way, be submissive to your husbands, so that if any of them do not believe in the word, they may be won over without words by behavior of their wives”.

In order to emphasise Gundry’s point one must take the phrase “*in the same way*” into consideration. This phrase places the responsibilities on both husbands and wives. In other words, the wives are to copy the same thing that is being done by other people, hence the phrase “*in the same way*” is applied here.

Then it means that we cannot use this “*submit*” to qualify the subordination of women by African men, both in the church and at home. That is why the author strongly agrees with Wiersbe (2002:76-77) when he says that submission must not be confused with subjugation or slavery. He emphasises that: “We are not talking about bondage, we are talking about freedom. In both the local

church and the home, there is no place for bondage because we have been called into gracious liberty that belongs to God's children".

According to Gundry the verb "*hypotithemai*" meaning "submit" is in the future active middle and according to Greek grammar, if any verb is in this form, it is not a compulsion, but an impulsion, not external pressure, but internal prompting. That is why Gundry (1972:72) says that it is not a yielding under constraint, but with ready mind.

There is also a word "*idios*" which, according to Vine (1981:142), means "one's own or private or peculiar to oneself." This word was omitted in the parallel passage in Collosians 3:18 and is something more than a simple possessive. According to Robertson (1931:365), it always conveys the idea of what is special and gives a certain note of emphasis or intensity, but does not mean that the husband is a lord and master. Although Blomberg (1994:208) supports the meaning of "head" in Corinthians as either source or authority, Lenski (1963:433) says that the omission of the article indicates that the headship of a man over his wife in this passage must not be understood as equal to headship of Christ to His church.

According to Hodge (1997:214), the "as" (Greek *ows*) in verse 22 does not express similarity, as though the submission of the wife to her husband was to be as devout and as unconditional as that which she is bound to render to the Lord.

The Bible also carries on to say that the man is *the head* of the woman. The meaning of head in Greek is simply "that which is uppermost or top". According to Thieme (1970:3) it can best be translated without an article because the article refers to man in his noble sense while by interpretation it refers to Adam who was noble before he sinned. To add on that, Lenski (1963:433) says that the omission of the article indicates that the headship of a man must not be understood as equal to the headship of Christ to His church.

Biblical meanings of *head* are many, according to Van der Walt (1988:35), but in this passage it means the man is a head in the sense of being in the office of responsibility: "The man, as the office bearer, is responsible to God as to whether the marriage answers to the divine norms. In his office as head he should guide his wife – and himself, as the man – in accordance with God's criterion for marriage towards the true purpose of marriage. This does not mean that he should decide about all sorts of petty details".

In other words, the headship meant here is that of a leadership by love and example like the example of Christ when He washed His disciples' feet. This passage therefore cannot be used as a proof to support the idea that women must be treated as minors or inferior beings by men. That is why the author strongly supports Moore (2006:573) when he says:

“The evangelicals do not seem to speak often of male headship in terms of authority, but usually in terms of a servant leadership defined as watching out for the best interests of one's family”.

When coming to the concept of *authority*, Jesus forbade the pagan fashion of exercising authority to His male and female disciples in Luke 22:24-27. The word *authority* (*exousia*), which occurs more than hundred times in the New Testament, is very seldom used (just twice) in terms of marriage relationships. It is used in 1 Corinthians 11:10 where it is expected of the woman to have a sign over her head to signify her husband's authority – for the sake of angels.

Secondly, in 1 Corinthians 7:4 it is used to indicate that both man and woman have equal authority over each other in marriage (Van der Walt, 1988:36). Keeping in mind that it is a traditional belief that man is the carrier of authority, it becomes a serious surprise to learn that this view does not have grounds in the scriptures. The African view of authority is hierarchical, centralised and according to seniority or status, but the Biblical authority is always reciprocal, in which two or more people demonstrate loyalty to each other (Van der Walt, 1995:8).

3.3 Conclusions

According to Tenny (1975:319), the epistle was not directed to novices of Christian faith, but to those who, having achieved some maturity in spiritual experience, wished to gain fuller knowledge and life. The fact that Paul uses Christ and the Church as his illustrations is evidence that he has a Christian home in mind (Wiersbe, 1989:50). Another important thing to remember is that many of the church gatherings of those times took place in the houses of believers. That is why Osiek, Macdonald and Tullock (2007:131) say:

“This may seem not remarkable in and of itself, but when we consider that the venue for meetings was the house church; an implicit recognition of the role of the mother in the household

codes may have fairly significant consequences for the running of the community”.

Another important matter to take into consideration is that the Greek language does not have different words to refer either to a married woman (wife) or a woman in general, but it uses one word “gune” to refer to both. Therefore it means that the true meaning will be derived from the context in which the word is used. This also teaches us that we must be careful not to confuse the two when we apply the scriptures. For instance, 1 Timothy 2:8-15 speaks about women in general (in the context of the church of that time), while Colossians 3:18-19 is addressing women in marriage.

4 HOW MUST WE VIEW WOMEN TODAY?

It is correct to apply scriptures in our present life, but it is not correct to ignore the situation and the circumstances of the original readers before we apply the passages in our life. If the situation of the Ephesian church in the time of Paul was different from ours, it means we must be careful not to pretend as if we are presently in the same situation as Palestine. The fact is that if Paul, because of the situation, forbade women to teach, it does not mean that he forbade them in every situation, but only in that specific situation. In actual fact, we do not have it as a Biblical rule that women must not teach, because if that is the case, the Bible will be contradicting itself when we read about women like Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), whose duty was to proclaim the message of God in front of all people, including men.

Another matter is to understand that the verses above do not teach us that submission is expected from women alone, but from all Christians, regardless of gender. That is why we cannot expect one to fulfil this command without looking at the exemplary submission by Jesus Christ. Kempis (1979:90) says that true submission can only be learnt from the way Jesus submitted Himself to His Father. That is what Hodge (1997:212) means when he says:

“The only motive of this submission is a regard to the Lord. The command must be read in line with 1 Pet. 5:5 which says: ‘Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another’ in order to emphasise that men is not isolated individuals, but live in dependence to other beings”.

The other thing is that submission and subjugating must be clearly differentiated. The dictionary meaning of submission is: “Always *willing* to obey someone”, while subjugating means: “To defeat a person or a group and make them obey you” (Longman 2001:1439). The former implies a voluntary action whilst the latter says that someone *makes* another to obey. There must be a force to make them obey, not their own willingness.

Since the Greek has one word which means married women and women in general, we must not use these verses to oppress married women. For instance, 1 Timothy 2:8-12 refers to all women, including married and unmarried.

Submission in this context has no connection with slavery, but is voluntary submission in which men and women are equal before God. According to the laws of society, they differ and they have varying functions and responsibilities, and they differ, yet they work together to accomplish a common goal (Kimathi 1994:30).

That is why Van Rensburg (1990:108) says:

“In case of husband and wife, submission towards the other partner is part of submission to the Lord. That is why this submission is exemplified by Christ and His church”.

The fact that Paul denied women to teach in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 cannot be used as an argument in favour to abuse women. The reason he forbade them was that men used divine services to further their own quarrels and that women wished to make themselves heard in an offensive fashion. Today it will be also correct to forbid them if they continue with this forceful tendency, but not for the wrong reasons.

If we divorce submission from love, we make a serious mistake, because the submission which God expects us to have, is practised together with love. That is why it is not really possible to apply obedience, submission and headship without true love. These are the principles that must be guided by love. These Christian concepts always accompany each other, hence it is not possible to apply one and omit the other. Wiersbe (2002:79) says:

“Where these commandments are obeyed and the principle of loving submission is followed the home and the church will experience the blessing of God. The

submission of Christ was seen in His sacrificial love on the Cross”.

The author shares the opinion of Henry (1997:1572) when he says:

“All the duties of marriage and family relationships are included in unity and love”.

In other words, love must be a measure stick through which this submission can be understood.

It is also interesting that the NIV uses “weaker partner” instead of the common “weaker vessels” in 1 Peter 3:7. This indicates that the woman is a partner in equal companionship and not a less important person.

The church must be the first institution to condemn the abuse and subordination of women, hence it should teach and give the right interpretation of concepts like submission, headship, obedience and others. The reading of verses that forbade women to preach like I Timothy 2:12 must not be read out of their context. In other words, the circumstances and situation of the original audience of Paul must be understood clearly without undermining it, so as to apply it to the people of today. The submission of Ephesians 5:21-22 must also be read in light of other verses like Romans 12:1-2 which say:

“Therefore I urge you brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice....”.

This verse indicates that true submission begins with submission to the Lord, for the church submits to Christ. Another important parallel verse is 1 Peter 5:5, especially the phrase that says:

“All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another”.

This phrase indicates that the intention of the verse is to urge everyone to be submissive to one another. No one is above others, but all are equal before God.

5 WHAT CAN WOMEN DO IN THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY?

5.1 Judges and military - Deborah and Jael

Traditionally, all matters that involve judging and fighting were for men only, since ancient times. But what is amazing is that the Bible has a record of women who participated in those responsibilities.

This proves to us that the culture and traditions of the people did not change God's intentions with his people. Deborah's words of judgment in Judges 4:14 are prophetic words, just like other prophets and judges who proclaimed God's wrath to his people. From this background there is no reason why we should stop women from making decisions and judgments in matters that pertain to both our households and the church. They must be allowed to be part of decision-making for the progress of the churches in Africa.

Equally important is that, just like in the case of Deborah, there are warnings and teachings which can be better presented by women in the church. Some women are gifted to an extent that they see things which are still to come and can advise the church and community on that note.

5.2 Diplomats - wise women of Tekoa mentioned in 2 Samuel 14:2

Abigail is another example. Although she was married to a boorish fool, Nabal (in 1 Sam 25), this woman used wisdom from God to stop David from invading her family because of his dispute with Nabal. Esther is known for her beauty and charm. She was also a person of courage and diplomatic ability, who risked her life to save her people. The African churches that forbid the leadership of women often lack people with these characteristics.

The author has had an experience that indicates the need of women to save the church from conflict at times. The author remembers when his congregation was in serious financial trouble, to an extent that the church account was in overdraft, women stood up to make plans for fundraising and sold products in the market to resolve the situation. Men were present, but they did nothing until women took action.

When conflicts became serious in the church, women stood up to pray and to advise the pastor. There was a strong division within the church council because some elders wanted the pastor out of the congregation. Yet some women became like Abigail and stood in between until the situation changed. They had to work at this outside the church council, because they were not allowed to attend council meetings due to the fact that they were not ordained.

6 CONCLUSION

It is mainly the duty of the pastors and church leaders to understand that submission from the biblical point of view does not imply that women must be seen as inferior people in the church and homes. Submission is not a bad concept, but traditional people are the ones who misuse it to make other people inferior. This concept must not be applied without love and willingness from the heart. Headship is also a concept that the Bible gives us, but it becomes dangerous if it is applied without proper understanding of its biblical meaning. In his “Patriarchal narratives in the book of Samuel” Rudman (2004:219) is correct when he says:

“If patriarchy is used to abuse others, like when Abimelech used it to acquire other men’s wives, it is wrong”.

According to the Bible, men must be taught to understand that being the head does not mean that they are lords. Never should they be allowed to be lord over women, but they must lead them in the fear of the Lord. Let me also point out that the church must use the gifts of all people equally, regardless of gender, because that is how the Bible views us all. Because of all of the above, it is not biblically fair to command submission from the females alone, but both genders must submit to each other. Another important fact is that authority, according to Randal (1972:80), is given by Christ and no one must assume authority above Him.

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