

What do the Trinity and marriage have to do with male headship in the church?:

Reflections on arguments from 1 Cor 11 and Eph 5

1 Introduction

- 1.1 In debates about male headship, the ordering of the church and the divinely ordained limits on women's ministry, those defending headship and restrictions sometimes appeal to the doctrine of Trinity and to biblical teaching on marriage.
- 1.2 These appeals presuppose the conservative reading of biblical texts relating to women and church order – where those are read differently then the argument for male headship in the church would unlikely convince on the basis of these appeals to Trinity and marriage alone. As such, their force is significantly diminished for those of us who do not see Genesis chapter 2, 1 Timothy 2 etc teaching male headship and consequently permanent limits on women's ministry.
- 1.3 Many of us not working in the "headship"-authority-hierarchy paradigm struggle to see the force of appeals to the doctrine of the Trinity and biblical teaching about marriage. What follows outlines four reasons for this which represent challenges that need to be addressed in any argument about gender creating limits within church order based on such appeals.

2 What is being argued?

- 2.1 The **first** challenge is the need for greater clarity about what exactly is being argued in this area. There could be a weak form of this argument or a strong form of the argument (and probably a range of views on a spectrum between these).
- 2.2 The *weak* form appeals to the Trinity and marriage in order to rebut critics of male headship in the church who argue that in relation to men and women in the church the claim of equality but differentiation of role based on authority/hierarchy is incoherent. Here the argument would appear to be "The Bible teaches a similar combination of equality but distinct roles involving structures of authority in relation to both Father and Son within the triune life of God and husband and wife in relation to marriage. It therefore is perfectly coherent to extend that pattern to the relationship and roles of men and women within the ordering of the church". This weak form clearly adds no further support to the argument for male headship within the church than that gained from biblical texts addressing this subject. It simply defends that conclusion reached on other grounds against a serious challenge by pointing to analogous patterns.
- 2.3 The *strong* form of the argument appeals to the Trinity and marriage in order to strengthen the arguments for male headship in the church. It does by claiming that those arguments in relation to the church are related to these other areas of biblical teaching. Here the argument would appear to be "The Bible teaches distinct roles involving structures of authority in relation to both Father and Son within the triune life of God and husband and wife in relation to marriage. It also teaches that, because of this, similar patterns are to be

displayed in the life of the church in the structuring of male-female relationships, hence the restrictions placed on women's ministry".

3 Is there a biblical basis for making such connections?

- 3.1 The **second** challenge, crucial for evangelicals, is the question whether Scripture itself teaches or points to any strong connection between order in the Trinity, in marriage and in the church. This is the first major hurdle for any evangelical articulation of this argument, particularly in its strong form.
- 3.2 The most obvious places to look are the two passages we are focussing on – 1 Cor 11 in relation to the Trinity and church order and Ephesians 5 in relation to marriage and church order. Do either of these (or some other passages) make such connections?
- 3.3 In *1 Corinthians 11* there is clearly some connection made between the God-Christ relationship as one of 'head' and the man-woman (or husband-wife) relationship. However, as noted in the paper I prepared for the last conversation, there are a number of problems in appealing to these verses in relation to restrictions on women's roles but only in the church. In particular, the passage does not itself place any limitations on women's ministry in the church compared to men's ministry. 1 Cor 11 simply seeks to mark gender differentiation through some form of head covering.
- 3.4 In addition, understanding the meaning of 'the head' is not only a matter of major dispute but its scope is either narrower than that of church order (ie husband and wife) or does embrace that but goes much wider (ie male and female generally).
- 3.5 Furthermore, as discussed further below, the fact that the language used is that of God-Christ (not, for example, Father-Son) and that the language of 'head' is not used elsewhere to describe this relationship must lead to caution – however we understand 'head' – in drawing wide-ranging conclusions from this text in the belief that it is revealing something fundamental about the inner triune life of God.
- 3.6 Finally, although other texts in Scripture discuss the relationship between men and women there is no other text in Scripture which relates the pattern of relationships within the Trinity to any pattern of relationships between men and women.
- 3.7 In short, although there is in 1 Cor 11 potential for a connection to be made between teaching on the Trinity and teaching on women's role in church, the link between these two is not strong here and this is the only place in Scripture it could be found.
- 3.8 In *Ephesians 5* there is again clearly some link being made through the language of "head" between two different relationships. Here, though, it is the relationship between Christ and the church (rather than between God and Christ) and the relationship between husband and wife.
- 3.9 At no point in Ephesians 5 is any reference made to the respective roles of men and women in the church or more generally. Although there is obviously reference to the church –

indeed to all Christians as members of the body of Christ (v30) – at no point is there any suggestion that what Paul says (about the relation of Christ to the church as its head or the relation of husband as head to his wife) has implications for ordering the relationships between men and women in the authority structures of the body of Christ.

- 3.10 Here, then, in Ephesians 5 the connection being proposed is textually even weaker than it was in relation to the Trinity in 1 Cor 11. There may, however, be some connections made by implication. For example, if the husband as head is understood to have some particular authority over his wife then any wife exercising authority in the church over other men or over her own husband may be argued to be incompatible with the teaching of Ephesians 5. Outside of Ephesians, the use of the household metaphor for the church in, for example, 1 Timothy 3:15 may provide some basis for connecting household codes to church order but this link is not particularly developed within the New Testament itself. It may also be the fact that appeals to Adam and Eve in relation to church order (in 1 Tim 2) and the fact they are also the original husband and wife provide some connection between the two areas but again this is not explicit.
- 3.11 It would appear then that a plain reading of Scripture – particularly these two chapters in Paul – does not give strong support to deriving teaching about the role of women in the church from either the Trinity or the husband-wife relationship in marriage. The sole possible basis for making such a connection is a theology of headship understood in terms of authority developed out of Scripture. The paradox here is that none of the texts limiting women's roles in church do so by an appeal to her having to be under a male "head". Indeed the only places which may give a basis for such a view are the two passages just discussed as I noted in my paper for our first meeting:

It is important to note that Scripture nowhere speaks of 'headship' as a concept. That is not, of course, to say that such a doctrine cannot be in any sense 'biblical' (the terminology of 'Trinity' or 'substitutionary atonement' is similarly lacking within the biblical text) but, given the strong claims sometimes made in relation to the biblical basis of these beliefs, it is important to remember this basic fact. The language of 'head' does not of course appear in Genesis 1-3 in discussion of the original creation and it is used metaphorically only seven times in the New Testament, in three Pauline letters (1 Cor 11.3; Eph 1.22, 4.15, 5.23; Col 1.18, 2.10,14.). Only two of these (1 Cor 11.3 and Eph 5.23) relate to the relationship of men and women and the latter certainly and the former possibly refers to husband and wife rather than men and women generally. What The Danvers Statement calls 'the principle of male headship' therefore has very little to work with if it is to be tied to the biblical use of the language of 'head'.

4 What do 1 Cor 11 and Eph 5 teach?

- 4.1 The **third** challenge is what these passages teach in relation to Trinity and marriage that may provide a basis for some link to be made to male headship in the church. The major task here is the exegetical one and in particular how "head" is to be understood and what,

consequently, is taught in these chapters. As these issues are explored in the papers by Rosie and Lis they will not be discussed here but clearly the conclusions play a vitally important role.

5 Evangelical teaching on the Trinity and marriage – a basis for male headship in the church?

- 5.1 The **fourth** challenge is the broader theological/dogmatic task of articulating an evangelical understanding of the Trinity and of marriage and showing how – whether in the weak or strong form – this provides support for the argument concerning restrictions on women’s ministry in the church.
- 5.2 The focus of any such understanding will be an interpretation of ‘head’ in terms of authority, hierarchy and subordination. This is understood to be taught in Scripture as functioning in a similar manner within the Godhead, the marriage relationship as God intended and the ordained roles of men and women within the body of Christ.
- 5.3 Already it has been shown that there are at least three major challenges to this argument and, in relation to the third of these, if ‘head’ is understood to lack the meaning of “having authority over” then the argument clearly does not get off the ground. Although personally I am not convinced that “head” language is to be understood in these terms, here it will be assumed that such a case can be made exegetically. If that is granted then the challenge is to articulate a theology of authority and hierarchy, based on 1 Cor 11 and Ephesians 5, that explains such “headship” in relation to the Trinity, marriage and gender roles in the church and shows how the first two support the third.

Authority

- 5.4 It is important to consider what it means to say that A has authority over B. The language of authority can of course be used in a wide range of contexts. We might, for example, speak of someone as an authority on 16th century Italian art meaning that they are an expert in this area. When expressed in relational terms, A has authority over B when they have the right to make decisions of some form in relation to B including the right to command or direct B’s actions. When under A’s authority B – whatever their own personal judgment on the matter – has a responsibility to obey the commands and follow the directions that A gives. It is therefore vital to be clear as to in what circumstances and over what areas A has authority over B. My employer in a theological college has authority to tell me that I need to mark student assignments by a certain day, he does not have authority to tell me to become a vegetarian! This also means of course that A may have authority over B at the same time that B has authority over A. This is witnessed to in what is the only verse where Paul uses the normal authority language of exousia in relation to men and women – 1 Cor 7.4 -where the husband has authority over his wife’s body but she – significantly – also has authority over his body.
- 5.5 If “head” is understood to refer to some sort of authority relationship in relation to the inner life of the Trinity and marriage then it is necessary to clarify the nature of this authority in

each case and how these then map onto authority based on gender within the church. Here there are major questions.

Authority, headship and the Trinity

- 5.6 *In relation to the Trinity* the argument has first to face the challenge as to whether 1 Cor 11 can be read as teaching about the eternal relationship between God the Father and God the Son given it refers to God and Christ/the Messiah. Personally, I think that to take the teaching here about God as head of Christ and derive from it an account of the eternal relational Trinitarian dynamic of Father and Son *ad intra* is highly questionable.
- 5.7 There has, nevertheless, been the development in recent years of a Trinitarian theology that describes the relationship of Father and Son in terms that enable it to be used to justify a “male headship” view of the relationship between men and women.
- 5.8 The fundamental problem is how to understand and speak of eternal relationships of authority and subordination between the persons of the Trinity. This creates major difficulties with then upholding the unity of the one God and the co-equality and mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity. It is not clear that it is possible to construct such a Trinitarian theology that is consonant with traditional expressions of orthodox Christian confession. It certainly cannot simply be derived from this single verse in 1 Corinthians 11 as providing a doctrine of the Father’s “headship” within the Godhead.
- 5.9 The nature of the Father’s authority over the Son needs to be carefully explained. Certainly the Son is described as obedient to the Father – though whether this obedience of the incarnate Son can be in some sense related to an eternal pre-incarnate obedience is an important question. As we are also told that if we ask the Father for anything in the Son’s name then the Father will give it this suggests that the sort of reciprocity noted in 1 Cor 7 is also evident among the persons of the Trinity.
- 5.10 For the “strong” link between headship in the godhead and headship in the church, there needs to be some clear explanation as to how the relationships of authority in these two contexts are in some sense analogous and connected. It is very hard to see how – either textually or doctrinally – any understanding of the Father’s authority over the Son (where in the Godhead there are not multiple potentially conflicting wills which need ordering by a structure of authority) can help define the proper forms and limits of male authority over women in the church.
- 5.11 Even the “weak” link – which would argue that authority is compatible with equality within the Trinity so male headship in the church is compatible with the equality of men and women – is difficult to substantiate. Here the problem is that the Father and the Son are persons within the being of the one God who do not have distinct and potentially incompatible wills. In contrast, “male” and “female” are generic categories for literally millions of different human beings each with their own independent wills. Yet it is being said that all those in one category – female – can never legitimately exercise certain forms of authority over anyone in the other category – male – but must rather be under the authority

of someone in that category. The fundamental ontological differences that exist between these two situations make it, I believe, impossible to compare them and argue that because “authority with equality” may be seen in one, it can also be seen in the other.

Authority, headship and marriage

- 5.12 Although there is debate as to what “head” means, in Eph 5 there is no debate that the husband is the head of the wife. Working on the assumption (which I do not share, 4.3 above) that this has some element of authority within it, the first question becomes the nature and scope of that authority (4.4). As already noted, Paul is quite happy to use the language of authority mutually or reciprocally (1 Cor 7) so the question is what is the particular and non-reciprocal form of the husband’s authority in marriage.
- 5.13 There can be little doubt that Christian patterns of “male headship” in marriage have changed and are quite varied in different times and places. In some societies the authority of the husband is (at least potentially, if he decides to exercise it) very wide-ranging and would also be expressed over his children (as “head of the house”). Even in the limited scope of contemporary Western marriages of evangelicals who believe in the husband’s headship there will be a range of different ways of articulating and living this out in practice.
- 5.14 The difficulty is that Ephesians 5 gives no explicit framework in which to define the boundaries. Or rather, if one-sided submission to divinely-ordained authority structures based on gender rather than mutual submission (as in v21) is understood to be its concern, the comparison with Christ and the church and the wording of v24 – “as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” – would point to an in principle unlimited authority of husband over wife (though that should, of course, be exercised in a loving not abusive manner given v25ff).
- 5.15 In practice, probably the most common way of expressing the authority and headship of the husband among contemporary evangelicals supportive of this approach is the claim that, ultimately, if husband and wife cannot reach a common mind through discussion, negotiation and compromise, the husband must decide on the course of action and the wife should accept that decision as part of her submission to him as her head (even if she is in fact more skilled and competent to make the decision than he is). That is, of course, not an understanding taught by the passage but a cultural construct (and one which does not sit easily with the Christ-church analogy and is potentially in tension with the mutual total self-giving - so that the language of “belonging” to each other occurs - in 1 Cor 7).
- 5.16 For the “strong” link between headship in marriage and headship in the church, there needs to be some clear explanation as to how the relationships of authority in these two contexts are in some sense analogous and connected. This is easier than with regard to the Trinity as we are dealing with either two or more human beings involved in a shared enterprise (whether marriage or direction of a church community). However, textually the link is from the Christ-church relationship to the husband-wife relationship in marriage, not from the husband-wife relationship to the male-female relationship in church offices and functions and so the link is difficult (see 3.8, 9). If the link is made from marriage to church order then

it comes very close to saying men relate to women in the church as Christ relates to the Church. This would in turn mean women need to be fully submissive to men's direction. Such a mindset explains why historically every attempt to give women more authority (eg as church wardens, Synod members) has been opposed by some as unbiblical and an eroding of male headship.

- 5.17 For the “weak” link – which would argue that authority is compatible with equality within marriage so male headship in the church is compatible with the equality of men and women – problems also arise. Marriage in Christian understanding is a freely chosen pattern of life in which one person commits themselves to another person. The nature of their relationship is something they will need to work out for themselves (and, as noted, Scripture does not give much detail on this). If it is held to involve the woman placing herself under the authority of her husband then that is something that is personally embraced by her in choosing to be married (as is, for example, the giving of her body to her husband such that she cannot have sexual relationships with anyone else) and in choosing to be married to this particular man she places herself under his authority. It is therefore something that is not required of any woman and if it is accepted then it is within certain limited parameters, the nature of which are chosen and worked out, with her involvement, in a loving relationship. It is also something which the woman can bring to an end by means of separation or divorce should, for example, her husband be abusive in his exercise of that authority. Such an understanding is – though not without some challenges, especially in the present day – probably able to be presented as combining fundamental equality with differentiation of authority. However, the analogous situation being argued for in the church is quite different. Here it is being said that any woman in choosing to commit herself to Christ is also choosing to place herself under the authority of male leaders within his body. Furthermore, if she is to be a faithful follower of Christ, she is required to refrain from exercising certain offices or functions solely because she is a woman, irrespective of her gifts or sense of calling or the desire of others in the body of Christ to recognise that calling and to use those gifts.

Conclusions

- 5.18 In relation to the “weaker” argument about equality and hierarchy, there therefore remains – despite the appeals to the Trinity and marriage – a significant problem. Clearly A can be fundamentally equal to B while under B's authority (or else equality would entail rejection of all authority) but the examples of the Trinity and marriage (even if accepted as valid) do not provide an answer to the question I raised in my previous paper:

Is it coherent to speak of gender equality while defending gender hierarchy?

Clearly nobody is denying men and women are equally precious to God, have equal access to salvation in Christ etc but the language of equality cannot be simply limited to the ‘spiritual’ divine-human relationship with no implications for human-human relationships. Here it is important to realise how the language of ‘equal’ functions. If person A is better able than person B to perform a task or fulfil a role but person A is prevented from doing it solely because they have a fixed characteristic (X), over which they have no control, which person B lacks, then it is generally held that person A (and the wider

class of persons with fixed characteristic X) is not being viewed as or treated as equal to person B (and the class of persons lacking fixed characteristic X). Of course, appeal could be made to the restriction nevertheless being right due to God forbidding those with characteristic X from performing a task or fulfilling a role. However, to continue to assert equality between A and B in such circumstances is to stretch the meaning of the term far outside its normal usage.

- 5.19 In relation to the “stronger” argument, the flaws of the “weaker” argument remain. There is, in addition, a further problem: the differences between the Trinity (the eternal self-giving love of the three persons who are one God), marriage (a voluntary covenant between one man and one woman) and the church (the body of Christ comprising all who believe in him) are so great that even were there to be a clear ordering in one or both of the first two, it is not possible to derive from that a clear ordering in relation to gender hierarchy in the church. In addition, the biblical basis for drawing connections between church order in terms of male headship and order in the Trinity or in marriage is either non-existent or so limited that it is impossible to say with any confidence, “Because of order in the Trinity/between husband and wife, a man can do X in the church but a woman cannot”.

6 Conclusion

- 6.1 I believe the way through evangelical disagreements over the role of women in the church is through careful exegesis of particular texts and a biblical theology of gender leading to a theological anthropology that articulates what it means for women and men to be made in God’s image.
- 6.2 It is sometimes argued that a particular model of male headship relationships in church order is more deeply based on the doctrine of the Trinity or a biblical understanding of marriage. This paper has sketched the outline of why I find such claims unconvincing: they lack clarity as to what is being claimed, the links are not biblically authorised, the exegetical basis is weak and the theological move from one sphere (the Trinity or marriage) to another (gender and church order) is both based on questionable theology in the original sphere and unable to provide sufficient illumination and guidance to defend restricting women’s ministries.