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# On the Unique Headship of Christ in the Church: A Statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

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**ON THE UNIQUE HEADSHIP OF CHRIST IN THE CHURCH  
A STATEMENT OF THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

**Preamble**

We, the faculty of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, affirm that Christ is the only Head of the Church (Eph 1:22; 5:23; Col 1:18). Therefore, while there exists legitimate leadership in the Church, no other human being may rightfully claim a headship role in the Church. As Head of the Church, Christ provides the ultimate manifestation of God's love (Eph 5:23, 25), demonstrating and vindicating God's moral government of love (Rom 3:4, 25-26 5:8), and thus defeating the counterfeit government of the usurping "ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 16:11; cf. *DA* 758; *2T* 2:211).

**God's Moral Government of Love**

Christ's headship in the Church is inextricably bound up with the love of God and is itself the ultimate explication of God's love for the world (John 3:16; 15:13; Rom 5:8). As the sole "head of the church," Christ "loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:23, 25).<sup>i</sup> Christ's demonstration of divine love as Head of the Church directly reflects God's moral government of love, within which the law is a transcript of God's character and, conversely, love is itself the fulfillment of God's law (Matt 22:37-39; Rom 13:8; cf. *TMK* 366).

Since love requires moral freedom, God does not exercise His headship power or authority to coerce or determine the moral will of His created beings. God permitted rebellion, at the highest cost to Himself, because He desires willing obedience that is motivated by love rather than fear. Such voluntary obedience could not be obtained by the exercise of power or authority, but can only be freely given. In this way, God's government is based on freely bestowed mutual love wherein God does not deterministically impose His will, but does hold intelligent creatures morally accountable to His perfect law of love.

Accordingly, rather than exercising His infinite power to unilaterally prevent or overturn the rebellion by removing the freedom necessary for a genuine love relationship, God has allowed the enemy's counterfeit government to manifest itself, while actively demonstrating the nature of His moral government of love in direct and striking contrast. Whereas the enemy grasps for power and domination, Christ, who possesses all power, does not dominate, determine, or coerce but "made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant [*doulos*] . . . He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Phil 2:7-9, NKJV). In this way, Christ, the unique Head of the Church, "demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). Consequently, God's government of unselfish love is clearly and supremely manifested.

**The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan**

The Great Controversy originated with Satan's direct attack against the nature and role of Christ in heaven, seeking to displace Christ and exalt himself to be like God (Isa 14:12-14;

Ezek 28:12-19; cf. Rev 12:7-9). In the history of the Great Controversy, the usurping “ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; cf. 2 Cor 4:4), although defeated at the cross, continues his quest to exalt himself by dominating others. He attempts to replace God’s government of love with an alternative form of government that grasps for a domineering, self-seeking authority. He seeks to replace Christ as the Head (2 Thess 2:3-4), injuring both Christ, the sole Head of the true Church, and Christ’s corporate body, His Church.

From the second century onward, post-Apostolic Christianity gradually implemented a system of church government that reflected Rome’s conception of authority as the power to arbitrarily command and coerce obedience and replaced the headship of Christ with the headship of mere humans. This counterfeit system of church governance was (1) hierarchical, based on a chain of command with a monarchical bishop at the “head” of the Church, with complete and final control over its affairs; (2) sacramental, meaning that the spiritual life of believers, including their very salvation, depended on ordained clergymen; (3) elitist (i.e., sacerdotal), meaning that the rite of ordination (laying on of hands) infused the clergy with special powers; and (4) headship-oriented, meaning that those who received the rite of ordination were thereby married to their Church and thus took on “headship” roles in the Church in place of Christ the Head (“*in persona Christi Capitis*”; cf. *Vicarius Filii Dei*, “in the place of the Son of God”).

This system of government has been implemented in various forms, amounting to the usurpation of Christ’s headship in the Church by mere humans. Indeed, this very system is that of the sea beast of Revelation 13-14 that was granted power and authority by the dragon (13:2, 4), counterfeits the resurrection of Christ (13:3), accepts the world’s worship along with the dragon (13:4, 8), blasphemes against God and His sanctuary, and exercises worldwide authority to persecute God’s people (13:5-7). This antichrist power which usurps the role of Christ on earth in keeping with the ancient attempt by Satan to replace Christ in heaven, seeks to destroy the everlasting gospel and ultimately commands obedience and enforces false worship. This culminates in severe persecution of those who refuse to worship the beast and his image, the remnant who keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus, those who place no confidence in mere humans with regard to their salvation (Rev 13:6-8; 14:6-12).

The antichrist system of church government sets the stage for the climactic events of the final conflict in Revelation by, among other things: (1) asserting authority to appoint humans to Christ-replacing headship positions in the Church on earth (globally and locally), (2) thereby claiming to uniquely possess authority to interpret and teach Scripture and thus have the final word on all matters of doctrine and ecclesial practice while (3) wielding the spiritual power and authority to command and coerce obedience using both spiritual and civil tools.

This system of government stands in direct contrast to Christ’s headship and His teaching on the nature of the authority of Church leaders. Christ reflected God’s moral government of love by exemplifying service leadership (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45), including a kind of authority that does not seek to subject the wills of others or enforce obedience. Rather, it leads by the example of service and unselfish love, which draws (rather than compels)

others to willing service in love (Gal 5:13). All authority “in heaven and on earth” was given to Christ (Matt 28:18), but Christ does not remove graciously endowed free will and force His created human beings into obedience, but “loved [us] and gave Himself up for us” (Eph 5:2). The closest the Church comes to acts of enforcement is when it engages in discipline as a corporate body based on very clear teachings of Scripture. Such discipline is not the responsibility of any one person, or even a small group, but must be an action of at least the local congregation. Even then, such discipline does not result in coercion, but in restricting the individual from privileges of membership for a time in order to allow them to come to repentance and restoration (Matt 18:12-17; 1 Cor 5:5).

Church members (including but not limited to Church leaders) are called to follow Christ’s example of unselfish love [Eph 5:1]. They are to have the mind of Christ, which includes the willingness to humble oneself and take on the role of a slave (*doulos*; Phil 2:5-8), or servant (*diakonos*) of Christ (Matt 20:26), even as He humbled Himself to the point of death. Whereas the leaders in the Roman Empire of Christ’s time “lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them” (Matt 20:25), it is not to be so with God’s people but “whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant [*diakonos*], and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave [*doulos*]” (Matt 20:26-27).

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Thus, the one who would be great is the one who is the slave [*doulos*] of all (Mark 10:44), and the “greatest among you shall be your servant [*diakonos*]” (Matt 23:11; cf. 9-12). The Bible outlines essential roles of leadership and authority in the Church. However, all leadership within the Church must be servant leadership. First Peter 5:1-3, 5-7 adroitly balances the affirmation of leadership within the Church with the humility that such leadership entails: “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ . . . shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. . . . You younger men, likewise, be subject to *your* elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time” (Cf. AA 359-60; DA 817). Accordingly, Church leaders should be humble servants. At the same time they should be respected and deeply appreciated for their diligent labor (1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 5:17; cf. Heb 13:7) even as they also show proper respect to others by demonstrating the mutual love and regard for others that is to take place among all Christians (1 Pet 2:17).<sup>ii</sup>

The authority of those leading the Church is conveyed to them by the Church. This authority is delegated by Christ to His Church and implemented through its representative system. Thus appointed leaders become stewards of a power that should be exercised on behalf of Christ and for the benefit of those they lead. The functionality of authority does not negate equality among the members given to the Church by Christ. As the Spirit leads the body of Christ, not just the few in leadership, those leading out should seek to allow their decisions to be guided, insofar as possible, by the wisdom and insight of the group. As

a Church, we thus give decision-making authority not to any single president or chairperson, but to committees, where those that lead the group are seeking the wisdom and, where possible, consensus of the group.

God's remnant, then, will treasure a system of Church government, authority, and leadership that reflects (as much as is humanly possible) the ideal of God's government of love, within which moral freedom is cherished and leaders are the humble servants of all, even as Christ gave Himself up for all. This very kind of humble servant leadership, grounded in love, was perfectly modeled by Christ who, as unique "head of the church . . . loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Eph 5:23, 25), supremely exemplifying God's character and moral government of love.

### **The Unique and Non-Transferable Headship of Christ**

Scripture affirms that the Son is eternally equal with the Father and the Spirit (Col 2:9; Heb 1:3; Matt 28:19; John 1:1; 5:18; 8:58; 14:9; Phil 2:6; Rom 9:5; Col 1:15-17; *DA* 469, 530; *GC* 495; *7ABC* 437-40; *TM* 252; *TA* 209; *RH* April 5, 1906). Scripture also affirms the temporary voluntary functional subordination of Christ the Son in order to accomplish the salvation of humanity (John 5:19; 8:28, 54; 14:10, 28; 17:5; Phil 2:7-11; Col 1:18-20; Eph 1:23; Heb 1:8; 1 Cor 15:20-28; Isa 9:6-7; Dan 7:13-14; Rev 11:15; *PP* 34; *RH*, Oct 29, 1895; *RH*, June 15, 1905; *FLB* 76). The interpersonal relationships within the Trinity provide the ultimate model of love and self-sacrifice for us. As such, they do not furnish a model for a top-down governmental structure for human leadership within the Church.

According to Scripture, Christ is the only Head of the Church and the human members of Christ's Church collectively (male and female) make up the body of Christ (Eph 1:22-23; 5:23; Col 1:18; 2:19; cf. 1 Cor 11:3; Col 2:10). Likewise, Ellen White counsels: "Christ, not the minister, is the head of the church" (*ST* Jan. 27, 1890), and "Christ is the only Head of the church" (*21MR* 274; cf. *DA* 817, *GC* 51). Neither Scripture nor the writings of Ellen White apply the language of headship in the Church to anyone other than Christ. Further, neither Scripture nor the writings of Ellen White endorse any transfer of the role of head in the home to roles within the Church body.

Since Christ is the only Head of the Church, no other can be head of the Church. That is, headship in the Church is unique to Christ and is non-transferable. All those who would follow Christ's method of ministry cannot do so by taking on His role of headship in the Church but by serving others in accordance with the "mind of Christ" (cf. Phil 2:5) and God's moral government of love. Deviation from the unique headship of Christ in the Church follows the enemy's practice of domination and counterfeit government, which directly contradicts and opposes God's moral government of love.

Accordingly, the role of "head" in the home (Eph 5:23) is not transferable to the realm of the Church. Indeed, the idea that the role of "head" in the home would or should transfer to other realms is a fallacious *non sequitur* (that is, the transfer from one realm to another does not follow logically). For example, one's role in the home obviously does not translate into a similar or analogous role in one's workplace.

Beyond the logical problems inherent in the move from head of the home to headship in the Church, two demonstrably biblical rationales exclude such a transfer. First, as already noted, Christ is the *only* Head of the Church. Any attempt at proliferation of “heads” in the Church is thus unacceptable for it is a step toward usurping the unique headship role of Christ, who is the only mediator between God and humans. It is unscriptural to speak of any kind of headship in the Church apart from that of Christ.

No inspired writer teaches the headship of man over woman at the Creation. Rather, Genesis 1 teaches us that male and female participate equally in the image of God, with no hint of pre-fall subordination of one to the other (Gen 1:27). Genesis 2 reinforces Genesis 1 in this regard. Eve’s creation from Adam’s side shows that she is “to stand by his side as an equal” (Gen 2:21-22; *PP* 46). Although various interpretations of Gen 3:16 have recognized some kind of post-Fall disruption of this pre-Fall egalitarian ideal, the Bible consistently calls us back to God’s original plan for full equality without hierarchy (Song 7:10; Isa 65:17, 25; cf. Gen 1:29-30). Paul’s writings, though often misunderstood (2 Pet 3:16), maintain this Eden model (Eph 5:21-23), affirming with the rest of Scripture the Gospel ideal of the ultimate restoration of the Eden model (cf. Matt 19:8; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 3:28). Ellen White also underlines this redemptive paradigm: “Woman should fill the position which God originally designed for her, as her husband’s equal” (*AH* 231). “The Lord desires His ministering servants to occupy a place worthy of the highest consideration. In the mind of God, the ministry of men and women existed before the world was created” (*18MR* 380). “Infinite wisdom devised the plan of redemption, which places the race on a second probation by giving them another trial” (*3T* 484; cf. *PP* 58-59, and *1T* 307-308).

Second, every member of the Church is part of the body of Christ, who is the One Head. Since each member of the Church (male or female) is a part of the body of Christ, a member cannot at the same time exercise headship in the Church. In the same way, since Christ is the unique Husband of the Church (Christ’s metaphorical bride), the members of the Church cannot themselves be husbands of the Church but collectively, men and women together, are the bride of Christ. That the Church as family of God is analogous to human families only serves to suggest that humans should manifest the love of God in their family relationships even as Christ does in relationship to His bride.

Within the body of Christ, the only Head of the Church, every member of the Church body receives spiritual gifts: the Spirit gives to “each one [*hekastos*] individually just as He wills” (1 Cor 12:11). The Holy Spirit is given to all believers at the time of the end: “And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28-30 NIV). Within this very context, Scripture emphatically excludes the notion of elitism within the Church body of Christ, proclaiming that “we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many” (1 Cor 12:13-14; cf. Gal 3:28). Thus, no member of the body is “any the less *a part of the body*” regardless of one’s role (1 Cor 12:15-16) and, indeed, those that are deemed “less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor” (1 Cor 12:23).

In all this, every gift and ministry is nothing without love, for “the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13; cf. all of chapter 13; cf. Rom 12:3-10; Eph 4:11-16). Here again, the unselfish love that is central to God’s moral government should be reflected in humble service to one another within Christ’s body and bride, the Church.

This is reflected in Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief No. 14, “Unity in the Body of Christ,” which reads in part: “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.”

There is no third category between the Head and body of Christ, or between the corresponding bridegroom (Christ) and bride (the Church). The minister is not to be separate from the body of Christ, but is likewise a member of Christ’s body and thus plays a non-elitist role in service to and alongside the other members that corresponds to the individual’s Spirit-bestowed gifts and accords with the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:5-9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; cf. Ex 19:5-6). Because it is the Spirit who gives gifts to each one (male and female) as He wills (1 Cor 12:11; cf. 12, 18, 19, 27-31; Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:18; Rom 12:4-8; Eph 4:11-12; 1 Pet 4:10), the Church confers no spiritual powers or gifts on anyone but merely recognizes the gifts that God has granted and facilitates corresponding opportunities for ministry within the body of Christ. Leadership ministries within the Church are facilitated by the Church body as a recognition of the particular Spirit-given gifts and characteristics of servant leadership that reflect God’s moral government of unselfish love (cf. Phil 2:5-8). In this way, both individually and collectively the Church is to complete its mission of proclaiming the Three Angels’ Messages and revealing God’s character of love, the last revelation of God’s mercy to the world (COL 415).

In sum, any form of headship claimed by a mere human, whether male or female, usurps the sole headship of Christ over the Church. Christian service, including Church leadership, is to reflect but never usurp Christ’s leadership. Thus, while Christ’s *manner of* leadership is to be reflected by believers, Christ’s *particular role of* leadership is unique and not to be encroached upon by any mere human. Christ alone is the Head of the Church body, of which all Christians are members and submitted to Him.

No human leader, then, may rightfully assume a headship role within the Church; the highest level to which any leaders can “ascend” corresponds directly to the depths to which they are willing to descend in loving and humble service, giving themselves for Christ’s body even as Christ gave himself for his body and bride, his beloved Church, the object of “His supreme regard” (2SAT 215).

### **Affirmations and Denials**

1. We affirm that there is only one Head of the Church, Christ, and this headship in the Church is non-transferable and inimitable. Thus, Christ’s particular role of

leadership is unique.

2. We deny that any human can rightly assume a headship role within the Church.
3. We affirm that leadership in the Church should be modeled after Christ's servant leadership and grounded in love, with the recognition that Christ's manner of leadership is to be reflected by Christian leaders.
4. We deny any Church government that results in sacramental, elitist, and headship-oriented leadership, which are counterfeits of Christ's moral government of love and usurp His unique role and authority as Head of the Church (His body) and husband of the Church (His wife).
5. We affirm that Church leaders possess stewardship responsibilities of the affairs of the Church, carrying out the decisions of the Church made in committee and business sessions.
6. We deny that any mere human is invested with final decision-making authority in regards to Church teaching, ritual, or doctrine.
7. We affirm the priesthood of all believers along with the high priesthood of Christ and that no other mediator is needed between God and humans.
8. We deny any elevation of Church leaders as mediators between God and humans or as head of or in the Church.

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<sup>i</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, the biblical text is quoted from the *New American Standard Bible* (1995).

<sup>ii</sup> It is worth noting that some statements that refer to leadership roles within the Church use language that many English versions translate as "rule." For example, 1 Tim 5:17 states: "The elders who rule [*proestōtes* from the root *proistemi*] well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (cf. the similar use of this root in Rom 12:8; 1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 3:4-5, 12). The root *proistemi*, here translated "rule," literally refers to those who "stand before," beneficially leading and ministering to the community, and should not be confused with some kind of monarchical rulership or sovereignty. In the LXX it refers to the household "ministry" of a servant of the prince (2 Sam 13:17; cf. 1 Tim 3:4-5, 12) and the noun form of this root, *prostatis*, refers to Phoebe's ministry as *diakonos* (Rom 16:1-2).