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### What's the Truth about Christian Headship and Submission?

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# Memory, Meaning & Faith

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January 14, 2011

## What's the Truth about Christian Headship and Submission?

By Martin Hanna (SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University)



Many sincere Christians engage in vigorous debate about headship and submission and relations between men and women. This blog seeks to clarify selected issues involved in this debate by surveying some insights on this subject from the Bible and Ellen White's writings.

### What the Bible says

What does the Bible say? Literally translated, Paul writes about "submitting to one another in the fear of God; wives, to your own husbands as to the Lord" ([Eph. 5:21-22](#)). The submission of a wife to one husband is grounded in the headship modeled by Christ who is the one head of the church. "The husband is head of the wife as also Christ is head of the church and he is the Savior of the body. . . . Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her" ([5:22-23](#), [25-26](#)).

Christ's example of servant headship is to be followed in the home as well as in the Church. The "rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and . . . exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" ([Mk. 10:42-45](#)).

Christian headship is grounded in the headship of God because "the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" ([1 Cor. 11:3](#)). In addition, true headship facilitates unity. Jesus said: "I and my Father are one" ([Jn. 10:30](#)); and he prayed, concerning the church, "that they also may be one in Us" ([17:21](#)). Christian marriage is a special symbol of this unity. "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church" ([Eph. 5:31-32](#)).

The biblical model of headship also involves a sharing of authority between the Father and the Son and between men and women. Jesus said, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and earth” ([Matt. 28:18](#)). Similarly, in Christian marriage there is a sharing of authority. “The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does” ([1 Cor. 7:4](#)).

This sharing of authority includes public ministry. Paul refers to “every man” and “every woman who prays or prophesies” ([1 Cor 11:4-5](#)). This shared ministry is grounded in God’s creation order. “For man . . . is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man is not from woman; but the woman from man. Nor was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. For this reason the woman ought to have authority . . . Neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God” ([11:7-12](#)).

### **What Ellen White says**

What does Ellen White say? She comments that “when husbands require the complete subjection of their wives, declaring that women have no voice or will in the family, but must render entire submission [unilateral rather than mutual], they place their wives in a position contrary to the Scripture. In interpreting the Scripture in this way, they do violence to the design of the marriage institution. This interpretation is made simply that they may exercise arbitrary rule, which is not their prerogative” ([Adventist Home](#), 116).

White teaches that, according to Scripture, “in the creation, God had made her [Eve] the equal of Adam. Had they remained obedient to God--in harmony with His great law of love--they would ever have been in harmony with each other; but sin had brought discord, and now their union could be maintained and harmony preserved only by submission on the part of the one or the other” ([Adventist Home](#), 115). “Like restless modern Eves, she was flattered with the hope of entering a higher sphere than that which God had assigned her. In attempting to rise above her original position [equality with her husband], she fell far below it” (115).

Nevertheless, husbands and wives should aim for God’s original ideal of mutual submission. “The spirit that Christ manifests toward His church is the spirit that the husband and wife are to manifest toward each other” ([Adventist Home](#), 95). “Neither husband nor wife is to make a plea for rulership. The Lord has laid down the principle that is to guide in this matter. The husband is to cherish his wife as Christ cherishes the church. And the wife is to respect and love her husband. Both are to cultivate the spirit of kindness, being determined never to grieve or injure the other” (106-107).

In addition, “do not try to compel each other to do as you wish. You cannot do this and retain each other's love. Manifestations of self-will destroy the peace and happiness of the home. Let not your married life be one of contention. If you do, you will both be unhappy. Be kind in speech and gentle in action, giving up your own wishes. Watch well your words, for they have a powerful influence for good or for ill. Allow no sharpness to come into your voices. Bring into your united life the fragrance of Christlikeness” ([Adventist Home](#), 107).

With regard to the church family, “Christ is the only Head of the church” ([Manuscript Releases](#), 21:274). “We are to grow up into Christ, our living head, until we reach the full stature of men and women in Christ” ([Signs of the Times](#), [May 13, 1889](#)). This includes a growing up in public ministry. “In the mind of God, the ministry of men and women existed before the world was created. He determined that His ministers should have a perfect exemplification of Himself and His purposes” ([Manuscript Releases](#), 18:380). “The Holy Spirit . . . prepares . . . both men and women, to become pastors to the flock of God” ([Testimonies](#), 6:322).

This brief survey of the Bible and Ellen White is only an introductory exploration of the subject of headship and submission in relation to men and women. I would appreciate feedback from those who read this blog. What are your thoughts on the questions listed below?

## Questions

- Is headship compatible with mutual submission and shared authority in the home and in church?
- How does Ellen White's view of the creation order compare with the biblical perspective?

Posted by [Angelika Kaiser](#) on January 14, 2011 in [Biblical Backgrounds](#), [Church and Society](#), [Missions and Ministry](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Not only is headship and mutual submission compatible, they are the same. If we understand headship, inspired by the Holy Spirit, as the Gospel we may also understand mutual submission in the same light.

The headship of Christ is the coordination and inspiration of His Church. The Holy Spirit works through the Church revealing the testimony of the Gospel. As Christ revealed to His disciples that this is not a relationship as the world defines but one that reveals that there is no master and servant, no slave and owner. When we surrender to God, even our very will, we are not subjecting ourselves to Him, we are being indwelt by Him. It is no longer we who live but He who lives in us. There is therefore not a disparate will or a conflict of wills inside us but One.

If a husband is surrendered to God then it is not the man who loves his wife, nor the man who reveals God to her. It is God who loves the wife through the husband and God who reveals Himself through the husband. Like the Church, it is not the wife who is beneath her husband but who, when receiving the Gospel and the Spirit of God into her, becomes the vessel that is utilized by the Spirit to reveal God to the world. That being said, who is more blessed? The hearers of the word receiving from the lips of the wife? The wife who is the vessel of the Word revealed by her husband? Or the husband who is witness to the miracle of the work of God in the woman he loves? All of which I witnessed this day.

Ellen White reveals the harmony of the creation that Christ revealed in His life, death and resurrection: A surrendered life that although may be extinguished by the apparent powers of this world inherits an indestructible life.

Posted by: David de la Vega | [January 15, 2011 at 10:23 PM](#)

So true david. It is good to respect each other and bow to each others wishes and seek to promote each other. I believe many good men are missing out because they do not realize what their misconceptions are calling them. My husband has often taken flak for consulting my opinion but as my sister said many years ago, "a man who is a man doesn't have to prove it."

Posted by: -Shining | [January 17, 2011 at 03:40 PM](#)

A very nice selection of quotes, Martin, and a reminder that submission is not a one way street. We all need to submit on various things and various areas, and we are really not qualified to accept submission, if we don't know how to gracefully give it. This holds true in both marriage and in our workplaces. Knowing the limits of true submission, the principles that prevent conditionless submission to abusive authority, will make one also a better leader and authority figure, not making unreasonable, arbitrary or harsh demands.

Still, I think your selection of quotes is a bit one-sided. I notice that you have, for the most part, avoided any quotes which suggest a special role of oversight or authority for the man either in his family or the church. It is hard to ignore that while mutual submission is called for, there is an emphasis on the special role that a husband plays in providing leadership for the family unit. Paul calls, in Ephesians 5, for wives to "submit" to their husbands as the church to Christ. Of course, this is in the context of Christ's love for the church, and not a call for unconditional submission of either mind, body, or soul. Yet, I don't think we can understand this comparison without recognizing that Christ has an authority within the church that the church does not have over Christ.

Similarly, in 1 Timothy 2, Paul makes a clear distinction between the kind of authority he will give men and women in the church. Now what this means and how it plays out requires reflection and thought, especially in light of the texts that emphasize equality and mutuality. But I don't think that overlooking these rather obvious statements will provide for the proper, balanced final outcome.

This is not a call for a return to the traditional, hierarchical, patriarchal centered church and home of yesteryear. If we do go backwards, it needs to be beyond the patriarchal fundamentalism of the 40s and 50s, and back to our pioneers who allowed for much greater leadership roles for women in ministry and in the church. But it is a call to be Biblically faithful as we move forward, understanding that the lines of what constitute submission may differ depending on one's gender. The installation of spiritual equality does not erase all offices and roles in the church or the family, though this is something that our culture presses us to do on a daily basis.

I welcome your call to carefully consider the Biblical evidence as we seek to move faithfully forward in our understandings.

Posted by: Nicholas Miller | [January 30, 2011 at 12:11 PM](#)

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