

Marriage Is Not a Dictatorship

✖ *Confusion over the real meaning of “headship” often leads to marital conflict, but the Bible doesn’t give husbands the right to be tyrants.*

As a Bible-believing Christian, Mike* was the spiritual leader of his home. He believed that in order to be a faithful man of God he must always “be in charge.” His wife, Jill*, and their four children graciously submitted to his authority.

Mike insisted on controlling every aspect of home life. Jill was not allowed to handle any aspect of the family finances.

Jill felt God wouldn’t be pleased if she didn’t respect Mike’s headship, so she eventually became numb to her husband’s demands. Mike was never physically abusive, but his constant criticism made Jill feel like a worthless spiritual zombie.

It all erupted one day when their 5-year-old son, Tyler*, got the flu. Usually Mike and Jill tried natural remedies before seeing a doctor, but in this instance Tyler didn’t seem to be responding to the natural products. After he’d had a high fever for several days, Jill took the boy to the doctor, who told her Tyler had a respiratory infection that required antibiotics.

Jill had a prescription filled and intended to give a dose to Tyler immediately. But when Mike learned about the doctor’s report, he told Jill not to give Tyler the medicine.

No matter how much Jill pleaded, he refused—saying that the antibiotics might have negative side effects. Jill was so concerned for her son’s safety that she threatened to give the medicine to Tyler anyway. Mike then shot back: “I am the head of this house! You have to do what I say!”

Jill felt she'd been pushed into a corner by her husband's ironclad demands. Finally she placed the matter in God's hands.

The next morning Tyler was so sick he couldn't get up to the table to eat. Jill was desperate and dared to express her concerns. "Is it right to withhold something from him that you know will alleviate his symptoms and help him get well?" she asked.

Mike finally gave in. Within 24 hours Tyler had improved, and in only a few days he was well.

Mike and Jill, meanwhile, were nursing the wounds that had resulted from this quarrel. Mike's pride was hurt because he felt his leadership had been challenged.

Jill felt exhausted from having to push so hard to help her son. Their marriage was frayed in the process—and they eventually had to seek counseling.

These kinds of disagreements occur in Christian homes every day. In many cases, husbands and wives who argue over an issue agree to sit down, listen to each other, try to understand the other spouse's perspective and then decide on a resolution. That's the way conflict management is supposed to work.

But domestic strife can't be resolved if the husband believes: (1) that he is always right; (2) that it is wrong for him to defer to his wife; or (3) that his masculinity is weakened if he admits a mistake. If he believes all three of these fallacies, he qualifies as a first-degree tyrant.

Patriarchs Don't Live Here Anymore

When I preach about gender equality in the church, many women come to me and say, "But I have been taught that my husband is the priest of the home." I challenge them to look up that phrase in the Bible. Show me one scripture that says husbands should serve as priests for their wives!

Many Christian traditionalists maintain that women should live in the background and allow their husbands to represent them to the church and to God. They also teach that the husband is responsible for the wife's behavior, as if she were some kind of puppet on a string whom he must manipulate.

They have the audacity to use this unbiblical concept of the priestly husband to justify abusive, authoritarian behavior. This is emotionally crippling to women—and it is heresy!

The Bible tells us that under the old covenant, before the redemptive work of Christ and the advent of the Holy Spirit, God dealt with men through priests. But now that Jesus has secured our access into the presence of God, we all have been qualified to be priests unto God.

Peter says we are part of a "royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9, NKJV). He does not say that this priesthood is exclusively male or that it refers to husbands. There is no reference to gender because "there is neither male nor Christ" (Gal. 3:28).

Women have been clothed with the priestly garments of holiness, and they have been commissioned to exercise His authority. No husband has the biblical right to stand in his wife's way, and no wife should use "male headship" to excuse herself from fulfilling God's call on her life.

"Headship" is another popular word thrown around in conservative religious circles. Many Christian men believe their spirituality is measured by the level of control they exert over their wives through "male headship."

These guys think they are being "real men of God" if they refuse to listen to their wives' counsel. Where did we get the idea that an authoritarian style of leadership is even remotely Christlike?

The rigid view of the Christian family says that men have been placed in the God-ordained role of full-time boss. The

husband's role, according to the conservative religious model, is to lead and protect his wife, while her role is to trust him and submit to his authority at all times without question. Since he is supposedly smarter, stronger and more spiritually capable, the woman has no option but to accept this arrangement.

This view has been derived by misreading the words of Paul in Ephesians 5:23–24: “For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.”

We must remember that at the time Paul penned these words (probably A.D. 60), women had no rights and were viewed as the property of either their fathers or their husbands. In Ephesus during New Testament times, a man's idea of “ruling the family” was to keep his wife shut away in the house to do backbreaking chores, tend the family farm, provide sexual gratification and bear as many children as possible.

If she died in childbirth, he found another wife. If she didn't please him in bed, he paid a younger woman outside the home to meet his sexual needs. If his wife shamed him, he beat her.

Historian Ruth Tucker notes that in ancient Greek society, most men considered their homebound wives boring—so they typically sought the companionship of *heterae*, or professional female escorts. Yet when Paul introduced the Christian message to the Ephesians, he came with a radically new model of family that went to the very core of what was wrong with the world: “Husbands, love your wives” (Eph. 5:25).

Perhaps we don't realize what a revolutionary concept these four words were in the first century! It was even more radical when Paul told the men of Ephesus to love their wives “as their own bodies” (v. 28).

This meant that men and women were equals. It meant that Christian men would have to break out of their pagan Middle Eastern mind-set and stop looking down on the wives as if they were brainless, inferior animals. Paul's simple words shattered gender prejudice at its core.

And when Paul told the men to love their wives "as Christ also loved the church" (v. 25), he implied something even more revolutionary: Women are just as deserving of the grace of God as men are. We find in these tender verses the bedrock foundation for the Christian idea of gender equality.

Two Kinds of Christian Husbands

Paul's words to the Ephesians blatantly contradicted the worldly philosophy of the ancient world, which taught that men and women live in two different social strata. In the kingdom of God, Paul declared, men don't beat their wives, rule their homes like despots or threaten divorce as a means to manipulate or control. In God's kingdom, husbands treat their wives with respect—yes, even as equals.

Paul was declaring in this passage that men are no longer "over" women. Husbands can no longer dominate their wives or treat them like chattel.

Now that Jesus Christ has come, the curse of male domination over females that began in the Garden of Eden has been broken. Women have been restored to a place of respect and dignity! This was good news for the women of Ephesus; it is good news for all women today.

But if this is true, then why does Paul still say the husband should function as the "head" of his wife? (See Eph. 5:23.) Does this not give him the right to dominate her? That depends on whether we want a Christian model of leadership or a worldly one.

The husband does function as a leader. But the gospel of Jesus Christ—who was the ultimate example of the compassionate

“servant leader”—does not allow men to impose leadership in an authoritarian way, nor can men view their role as “head” as part of a God-sanctioned hierarchy that places them over their wives to domineer them or to deny their rights.

Ephesians 5 is not about hierarchy; it is about equality. But if we read Paul’s words through a warped lens, it’s easy to impose our own misconceptions about male-female relationships on the text. That’s why we need the Holy Spirit to help us when we read the Scriptures.

Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, in her book, *Good News for Women* (Baker), explains that there are really two kinds of male headship from which to choose. One is what she calls “life-giving headship,” which was instituted by God in the Garden of Eden when He took Eve out of Adam’s side.

The opposing model is what she refers to as “ruling headship,” which began with the fall, when man and woman came under the curse of sin. Christian men today often view ruling headship as the godly way to lead a family—but it is the wrong model.

Writes Groothuis: “The biblical headship of the husband described in Ephesians 5 is redemptive, in that it mitigates the effect of the fall which places the woman under male rule, and it helps to reinstate woman in her creational place of cultural responsibility alongside man. In life-giving headship, the social privilege and power of maleness is shared by the husband with the wife, and utilized by him according to the terms of love rather than of male conquest and demand.”

Some Christian husbands have made a lifestyle out of being benevolent dictators—and they quote portions of Ephesians 5 to defend their behavior. Tragically, many women have embraced the idea of being Christian doormats, and they have made their subservience such a part of their identity as women that it has become a place of security for them that they cannot abandon.

I pray you will not let a false concept of “male headship” stop you from fulfilling your high calling in Christ.

**Not their real names*

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