
Exegesis 20: Headship in Ephesians

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An examination of the meaning of *kephale* in Ephesians 5:23

The meaning of *kephale* (= head) is important to the biblical teaching concerning gender. Unfortunately the linguistic expertise required to translate this term¹ is such that some may be left wondering if a definite understanding is possible and, if not, if it is very important. I shall seek to demonstrate that the usage and function of the term in Ephesians 5:23 is such that the meaning of the term in that verse is fairly clear. The implications of this for understanding some controverted texts dealing with gender will then be briefly considered.

Hermeneutical Considerations

1. If possible, one should identify the literary genre of the unit in which a text is located.
2. One should consider whether the text itself indicates that its teaching is not universally applicable.
3. We must guard against reading our prejudices or those of past or present society into the text.
4. The doctrines of common grace and general revelation, together with the impact of Scripture on a society, will mean that some societal and cultural attitudes are more in keeping with Scripture than others and may have been influenced by Scripture. The reverse is equally true.

Text

The text to be exegeted is that found in the Nestle and Kilpatrick edition of *he kaine diatheke*². The manuscript evidence is surveyed by Lincoln³. This reading is followed by numerous commentators and expositors⁴.

Genre

Verse 23 occurs in a section which bears considerable resemblance to “Haustafeln” or household instructions. There is a range of opinion as to the precise nature of Haustafeln⁵ and whether the New Testament contains such at all⁶. However, the following observations are reasonably sustainable.

Firstly, whatever its origins⁷, there was a broadly recognisable literary genre of Haustafeln. **Secondly**, Haustafeln, whether traced back to Plato and Aristotle or Hellenistic Judaism, dealt with the duties of husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves⁸. **Thirdly**, such instructions focused “on authority and subordination within these relationships... Typical of [their] content is the notion that the man is intended by nature to rule as husband, father, and master, and that not to adhere to this proper hierarchy is detrimental not only to the household but also to the life of the state any upsetting of the traditional hierarchical order of the household could be considered a potential threat to the order of society as a whole”⁹. **Fourthly**,

“what appears to remain distinctive in Christian usage is the application of a series of exhortations to different groups within the household”¹⁰. It seems that the New Testament contains distinctively Christian Haustafeln. **Fifthly**, although there is, as we shall see, distinctively Christian content to the Haustafeln, there is a *prima facie* case - in view of the literary genre - for expecting Paul to operate within the authority/subordination framework of Haustafeln and there is therefore a burden of proof resting upon those who wish to dispute this. If we find that this burden of proof is not discharged, the following question must then be addressed: is Paul simply telling Christians to adapt to their culture or is he laying down principles which will always be universally applicable? This is a crucial question for the contemporary evangelical and is essential to proper exegesis of the verse under consideration.

Exegesis

Verse 23 begins with the causal conjunction, *hoti* (= because). Verse 23 is somewhat explanatory of verse 22. Verse 22 lacks a verb which is, therefore, supplied by the participle in verse 21, *hupotassomenoi*. *Hupotasso* is made up of the preposition, *hupo* (= under) and the verb, *tasso* (= to place in a certain order). Thayer gives the following meaning to this compound verb: “to arrange under, to subordinate; to subject, to put in subjection”¹¹. The middle voice in verse 21 means “to subject oneself, to obey”. The verb describes submission, subordination, or obedience in the following: Luke 2:51; 10:17-20; 1 Peter 2:13,18. In 1 Peter 3:1 & 5, the word describes the attitude and behaviour which a wife should display to her husband. Peter uses the term in 5:5a of the submission to be given by the younger to the elders. Some manuscripts have the term in 5:5b to define the mutual submission which each is to offer the other. Paul’s usage of the term is not dissimilar to Peter’s. He uses it in Romans 13:1 & 5 and in Titus 3:1. These examples demonstrate the weakness of the argument which seeks to drive a firm wedge between *hupotasso* and *hupakouo*. *Hupakouo* is the verb used in Ephesians 6:1 & 5 of the obedience to be rendered by a child to its parents and by a slave to his master. But the same verb is used by Peter in 1 Peter 3:6 of Sarah who “obeyed Abraham and called him her master”. Sarah is introduced in verse 6 as an example of the godly women of the past who had been referred to in verse 5 as those who “were submissive to their own husbands”. In verse 5, the verb is *hupotasso* and, in verse 6, it is *hupakouo*. *Hupotasso* had already been used in verse 1.

In Ephesians 5: 21, the participle from *hupotasso* describes the mutual submission which believers are to show to each other in place of insisting on their own rights [cf 4:2 & 3]. This is incumbent on all Christians. This last point notwithstanding, Paul then specifies certain relationships where submission is required of one party within the relationship. These are wives to husbands [v 22], children to parents [6:1-3], and slaves to masters [6:5-8].

A number of considerations put beyond all dispute the fact that the wife is to submit to the husband *in a way that the husband is not to submit to the wife*. **Firstly**, while it is true that fathers and masters are to treat their children and slaves, respectively, with the respect and consideration implied by the submission enjoined in 5:21, children and slaves are commanded to obey their parents and masters but the parents and masters are not commanded to obey their children and slaves but to guard against abusing the subordinate position of the children and slaves. Similarly, the wife is specifically commanded to submit to her husband but he is not specifically commanded to submit to her. It may be

objected that the wife is not specifically commanded to love her husband. The absence of this command in the present passage should not negate this duty on the wife. Thus, it may be argued, the absence of a specific command to the husband to submit to his wife does not negate such a duty, which is entailed by verse 21. Thus, Paul is concerned with mutual submission and, in that context, addresses the specific sins to which husband and wife are respectively vulnerable. For a number of reasons this analysis of the passage cannot be sustained nor, therefore, is an objection sustainable to the exegesis thus far. To begin with, the kind of submission required of the wife is, as we shall see, a loving submission. Love is implied in the command to submit. Secondly, the analysis I am rejecting proves too much: if the command of verse 21 negates the possibility of a specific kind of submission on the part of the wife, it will necessarily negate any other kind of specific submission. What will this do to Romans 13:1 & 5, not to mention Ephesians 6:1-3 and 5-8?

The second consideration which clearly demonstrates that Paul is enjoining a specific submission on the part of the wife is supplied in verse 24. This verse has an "as ... so" formulation: *hos ... houtos*.

Hypotassetai describes the submission which the Church gives to Christ. That word, used in the first clause, must be supplied in the second clause. The wife is to submit to her husband in the same way that the Church submits to Christ. The submission of the Church is a loving submission, not a servile affair. Space forbids a treatment of the nature of this submission. Lincoln has an excellent treatment of the Church's submission as a pattern of the wife's submission¹².

A third consideration should be noted, which reinforces the arguments in favour of the interpretation which has been offered. The specific mention of *idiois* (= their own) in verse 22 indicates that the wife is to submit to her husband in a way in which she is not required to submit to everyone else.

The force of the causal conjunction, *hoti*, at the beginning of verse 23 can now be appreciated. Verse 23 gives the reason for the command of verse 22 and forms the base for the elaboration of this command in verse 24. Verse 23 is thus an indicative foundation for the imperatives of verses 22 and 24. Since those imperatives focus on a kind of subordination, it is impossible to exclude a connotation of authority from the term, *kephale*. While it is certainly true that the husband is not commanded to rule his wife and that the analogy, as concerns the husband's duty, is worked out in terms of care and concern for one's body, this fact must not be allowed to obscure the clear fact that the function of the concept of *kephale* in verse 23 is to ground the basis for the wife's duty of submission. The concept functions in that way since it is an objective reality. Both husband and wife need to recognise this objective reality precisely because it is an objective reality. This objective reality is compared with the reality of Christ's headship of His Church [v 23]. This reality functions in verse 24 as the basis of the Church's submission to Christ. Therefore, inherent in the concept of Christ's headship of His Church is the notion of authority. This does not exhaust the concept of Christ's headship, since His headship of His Church is a particular kind of headship which, at certain points, is necessarily, different from His headship over all [1: 22]. But while the notion of authority does not exhaust the meaning of Christ's headship of His Church, it cannot be excluded from 5:23, without seriously skewing the obligations of wife and Church referred to in verses 22 and 24.

The exegesis offered must now be tested against the interpretation which denies that

kephale, in this passage, implies a specific, corresponding submission. Such an interpretation views the term as referring to “source”. The question must be asked, how is a husband the source of his wife? To this we now turn.

It might be argued that Christ’s headship in Ephesians 5:23 must be tied back to His headship in 4:15. The dominant feature of the head/body imagery of 4:4-16 is Christ’s loving provision for His Church which allows her to grow and mature. Thus her life derives from Him and is sustained by Him. In this case, the husband’s headship means that he is lovingly to care for his wife and that she will truly express herself and develop as he thus cares for her. In this sense, Christ is the source of the Church and the husband is the source of his wife. This interpretation is excellent in what it affirms but is inadequate because of what it omits and what it may implicitly deny.

Ephesians 4, while emphasising Christ’s provision for His Church also emphasises His authority. Thus, verse 8 having referred to Christ’s triumphal ascension, verse 11 stresses the gifts and order which Christ gave to His Church. Verse 11 stresses not only that gifts were given by Christ but also that it was He who gave them. Thus, His gifts were an expression of both His generosity and His authority. Indeed, the very gifts mentioned in Ephesians 4:11, while equipping God’s people for the service by which the Church grows and matures [vv 12-15], also express Christ’s authority over His Church. For example, the gift of apostles was the gift of those who exercised a very real authority in the Church, an authority which derived from Christ Himself [cf 1 Cor 14:37; Gal 1:11ff; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Thess 3:6-15]. That Christ provides for His Church’s life does not negate the fact of His headship over His Church; nor does the fact that the husband is to care for his wife negate the fact that his headship involves subordination on his wife’s part. However, even if one could exclude elements of authority from Christ’s headship in Ephesians 4, which one cannot, the problem would remain that the term functions in 5:23 as the reason why the wife is to submit. If one confined the semantic equivalent of *kephale* to “source”, one would have to say that the referent in the verse carries authority/subordination connotations because it functions as the basis of the wife’s subordination.

It remains to consider whether Paul’s teaching is to be “culturally confined”. The essential point is that the objective reality of headship undergirds the wife’s duty. It is this fact which demonstrates that Paul is not simply telling Christian women not to be subversive. If they were tending that way because of a misunderstanding of their freedom in Christ, he explains that submission is always normative. If he is merely reinforcing, with certain refinements, the prevailing *Haustafeln*, he is giving a theological basis to customs recognised even by those outside the pale of special revelation. In other words, whatever the “*Sitz im Leben*” which we reconstruct as the background to Ephesians, Paul goes out of his way to stress the universality of what he says.

Wider Concerns

The exegesis offered in this study may have relevance to other passages if we bear in mind the following points:

1. Ephesians 5:22-24 does not provide as many exegetical difficulties as 1 Corinthians 11:3-16; 14: 33-36; 1 Tim 2:11-15. Conclusions reached in exegeting clearer texts may assist in exegeting more problematic texts.
2. Some exegetes are hermeneutically controlled in their exegesis of the controverted texts referred to in 1. above by “egalitarian” texts, such as Genesis 1:26-30 and

Galatians 3:28. Foundational to their hermeneutic is the conviction that subordination is inconsistent with the equality specified in these texts and, therefore, the controverted texts cannot express a universally applicable subordinationism. This is how evangelicals equally committed to Scripture's authority can so widely differ in their interpretation. However, once it is grasped that a relatively straightforward passage of Scripture which deals with gender differences within marriage specifically links headship to subordination, the legitimacy of the control factors in the "egalitarian hermeneutic" becomes questionable.

This is not to foreclose exegesis of the controverted texts, nor to say that the exegesis offered in this study *demand*s that the other texts be made to yield a "subordinationist" meaning. It is saying that where similar terms and ideas are found in other texts as are found in Ephesians 5, there will not be a compelling reason from "outside" those texts for resisting subordinationism, particularly where the exegesis would be consistent with the subordinationism found in Ephesians 5.

One cannot ignore the following facts. Paul's use of the body analogy in Ephesians 5 traces the analogy back to Genesis 2 and is in terms of the husband being the head. In 1 Cor 11:3-16, Paul similarly refers to Christ's headship, the man's headship, and goes back to Genesis 2 as the basis of gender distinctions. In 1 Cor 14:33-36, gender differences within the Church are discussed in the context of spiritual gifts. Paul calls for *hupotassethosan* (= submission, coming from the *hupotasso* word group) of the women and goes on to speak of their relation with their husbands. In 1 Timothy 2:11-15, Paul's call for the woman's *hupotage* (= submission) is tied not primarily to the woman's sin but to Adam's primogeniture. It is impossible not to see the connecting links (head, submission, the creation account in Genesis 2) between these passages and Ephesians 5. The connecting links are far more tightly meshed with Ephesians 5 than with Galatians 3 and, as has been demonstrated, Ephesians 5:22 is not culturally confined in its application.

3. Verbal identity, as noted in 2 above, does not always entail semantic equivalence and care must be taken to avoid simplistic comparisons. Thus, Paul is able to use the "one flesh" language of Genesis 2 in a markedly different way in 1 Cor 6:16 from the way in which he uses it in Ephesians 5. Similarly, in 1 Cor 11:3, Christ is expressed to be the head of the man in a way in which He is not expressed to be the head of the woman. In Eph 5, His headship over the Church includes men and women. Account must be taken of the nuanced way in which Paul uses terms to distinguish things that differ. However, this observation may tighten the connecting links between Eph 5 and 1 Cor 11, since Christ's headship over all His Church, male and female, in Eph 5 does not preclude the headship of the husband with respect to his wife.

References

- 1 See, for example, Gordon D Fee 1 CORINTHIANS, Eerdmans 1987, p 502, n 42
- 2 British and Foreign Bible Society, London, 1958
- 3 Andrew T Lincoln, EPHESIANS, 1990, Dallas, Texas, p 351
- 4 e.g. Lincoln, op cit; William Hendriksen, EPHESIANS, London, 1972; D M Lloyd-Jones, LIFE IN THE SPIRIT, 1973, Edinburgh
- 5 On Haustafeln, see E G Selwyn, THE FIRST EPISTLE OF ST PETER, London, Macmillan, 1947, pp 419 - 439; J P Sampley, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH, Cambridge, 1971, pp 17 - 25; Lincoln, op cit, 356 - 361

- 6 Wayne Grudem, 1 PETER, 1988, Leicester, p 42; N T Wright, COLOSSIANS & PHILEMON, 986, Leicester, pp 146 & 147
 - 7 On origin of Haustafeln, see Lincoln, op cit, pp 357 - 359
 - 8 ibid, pp 357 - 360
 - 9 ibid, p. 358
 - 10 ibid, p. 361
 - 11 THE NEW THAYER'S GREEK - ENGLISH LEXICON, Jay P Green, 1981
 - 12 Lincoln, op cit, p 372
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Stimulating the ministries of women

During the discussion at the 1995 BEC Study Conference, *The Ministry of Women*, Pastor Mike Daly gave the following examples of how women are encouraged to contribute to the life and fellowship of Great Whyte Baptist Church, Ramsey, Cambridgeshire.

1. A group of mature women meet to discuss the application of Titus 2:3-5 under the chairmanship of the pastor. They compile a list of issues which are better not handled in a mixed congregation, e.g. women in evangelism, in-vitro fertilisation, etc. They write papers on these subjects, discuss them with the pastor and hold 'seminars' to discuss them with younger women in the congregation.
 2. They are encouraged to use their musical gifts in the church.
 3. A list of 'diaconal' (=non-eldership) tasks is made. All women are asked, '*Would you like to do something for the Lord?*' All women in the church are asked; it is not limited to those with an office and no-one subsequently filling such a role becomes a 'deacon' for life.
 4. Some are involved in visiting believers for pastoral fellowship. If a disciplinary visit is made by the pastor to a lady, he usually takes with him an older lady or a married couple. They are encouraged to do 'sick visiting' of women and families with children.
 5. Suitably gifted women conduct Discipleship or Baptismal Classes for younger women. Women teach children in the Mothers & Toddlers context and in Sunday School.
 6. Women are asked to show hospitality at home for fellowship and evangelism.
 7. Some are assisting in the local Christian Bookshop.
 8. Women are welcome to attend and participate in Church Members' meetings.
 9. Some mature women are consulted over matters which the pastor initiates.
 10. All are expected to exercise a ministry of prayer, privately and corporately.
 11. They are urged to correspond with missionaries, to promote the support of women missionaries and to liaise with them.
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