

Perspectives: Church headship looks beautiful to me



In the second of our two-part feature on Christianity, the Church and women - **Susie Leafe** argues that the concept of headship (male responsibility for the spiritual well being of the family and Church) is based on theology and is not incompatible with feminism.

At the heart of Christianity is a cross. A cross on which [Jesus Christ](#), the son of God, sacrificed his life as a ransom for many so that all who believe may have eternal life. Our confidence in the efficacy of this sacrifice comes from the empty tomb and the hundreds of witnesses, both male and female, to the resurrection. At the heart of the theology of headship is that same cross and empty tomb and the two cannot and must not be separated. On the cross Jesus took responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the family of God and on the cross Jesus submitted to the will of his Father.

Equal but different

Both men and women are called to become more like Jesus. The Bible teaches us that we are to do this in different and complementary ways. In the family and the Church, men are to model his sacrificial responsibility and women are to model his sacrificial submission. This is at the heart of the theology of headship. As we seek to understand how best to order the Church it is important that we look to the Bible and not business manuals. The Church is after all not a workplace but the gathering of the family of God. It is in this context that the apostle Paul says to the Church in Ephesus: "I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man."

He looks not to his culture but the teaching of Genesis to justify his decision. Clearly women were active participants in the New Testament Church and in his first letter to Corinth, where Paul again picks up the headship idea, he encourages women to pray and prophesy - as long as they recognise that God created gender. Applying this view of headship in the Church today suggests that whilst there may be many men and women working alongside one another in a church setting, the person with overall responsibility - the vicar or bishop - should be male. It also means that the spiritual direction of the Church should primarily be in the hands of men.

This view of headship does not mean women's gifts of teaching and leadership cannot be used in our churches. The opportunities for teaching ministry amongst women and children are many and varied (and to say that this is less valuable than teaching men is the ultimate misogyny). The Church also needs women with gifts of management, strategic thinking, prayer, theological insight and the like but this does not mean they have to be the person with overall responsibility.

Submission and sacrifice

In the domestic family Paul tells the Ephesian Church: "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour."

But he continues: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word."

The wife is called to submit to her husband but he is commanded to follow the pattern of the cross and love her sacrificially. Headship does not lead to domestic abuse or cowering women. A Christian husband's responsibility is to ensure that the whole family flourishes, putting their needs before his own. A Christian wife is called to submit to him and actively help him take that responsibility. With Christ as their model neither can be passive and neither can be tyrannical. Headship does not mean women cannot work outside the home or be the CEO of a company. These commands are for the Christian family, domestic and ecclesiastic, they are not designed to govern relationships in the secular workplace. Women are not called to submit in all things to all men, just to their husbands.

[Vicky Beeching argues](#) in her article that "true feminism is simply a belief in the total equality, dignity and value of women", I could not agree more, though I would want to add that I also believe in the total equality, dignity and value of men. I believe that true headship allows men and women to flourish in the family and in the Church as we value and respect our God-given differences. The traditional structures in our churches can make this difficult to implement. Our society's desire for titles and pay scales can make it difficult to comprehend but at the foot of the cross, where all are equal, headship looks beautiful to me.