

Just Checking In

“But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.” (1 Corinthians 11:3, KJV)

Just checking in. Does the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, over a quarter of the way into the 21st century, still maintain the teaching of male headship? Well, I tend to answer every such question with a question: “Have the words of the Bible changed?” If not, then the answer is “yes,” we still adhere to the Biblical teaching on male headship. This being said, the importance of continual catechesis in the church justifies reviewing this (and any other) Biblical doctrine. And before I begin, I’m letting you know that I will be extensively quoting the professor who taught me Greek at seminary. I will be quoting from his commentary on First Corinthians from the *Concordia Commentary* series – quoting from *Concordia Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, by the Reverend Dr. Gregory J. Lockwood, Concordia Publishing House, Copyright 2000. After citing each quote, I will put in parentheses the commentator’s name and the page(s) on which the quote is found in his commentary.

To start, when it comes to gender roles and identity, I don’t think that it is any secret that over the past 50-75 years there have been massive changes in Western culture (which includes American culture). It can be seen in numerous areas of life – from the workplace, to the family structure, to even fashion. And in denominations that seek to reflect or follow culture, a shift away from the Biblical understanding of this subject has been clearly apparent in their congregational life (even among some who identify themselves as “Lutheran”). For it is certainly true that *“the meaning of headship has been much debated, especially since the 1960’s”* (Lockwood, p. 364).

See, while the Bible hasn’t changed, this doesn’t mean that there isn’t wrong understanding when it comes to how people interpret what the Bible teaches about headship. And this is as true today as it has been in the past. And to help demonstrate how wrong thinking can invade the Biblical text, I chose a passage from Scripture that has been misinterpreted to justify false teaching. For some have contended that the Apostle Paul’s words, ***“the head of Christ is God,”*** tell us that Jesus is inferior to God the Father (which contradicts Biblical and historic trinitarian teaching). *“But this charge fails to take into account the distinction between essence and role. A person may be essentially equal to another, but have a different role within a structure or relationship. When Paul says that ‘the head of Christ is God’ (1 Cor 11:3), he is not denying the full divinity of Christ, nor is he saying that God the Son is in any way inferior to God the Father because the Son willingly submitted himself to the Father’s plan (Phil 2:5-11)”* (Lockwood, p. 365).

See, as Paul’s words could be misconstrued to mean something false about the relationship between the Father and His Son, so too could his words ***“the head of the woman is the man”*** be misunderstood. In fact, these words have been misinterpreted. For some have denied that these words say that in the church and family men have been Divinely placed into leadership. This denial is wrong because Holy Scripture clearly says that men have been given headship. Others have looked at these same words spoken by St. Paul, and based upon reason, emotion, bias, or whatever, drawn different but equally false conclusions about headship – conclusions that are also outside of what the Bible says.

For example, “... Paul never conceives of the man’s authority in terms of a harsh subjugation of the woman to his will. The apostle is not granting to men the authority to wield autocratic power, but the responsibility for loving, self-sacrificing service. As soon as he has laid down in Ephesians that wives should be subject to their husbands, he adds that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up to death for her (Eph 5:25). This is consistent with the whole NT witness concerning the exercise of authority among Christians. Unlike the Gentiles, they are not to lord it over one another but be servants (Lk 22:24-27). Likewise, pastors are not to lord it over the flock, but be examples (1 Pet 5:3). When Christian headship is exercised in a spirit of loving service, those Christians subject to such authority will not chafe under it or feel demeaned. Following the pattern of the apostle’s argument, it must be conceded that it is no more demeaning for a woman to be subject to a man than it is for the man to be subject to Christ, and for Christ to be subject to God the Father. The argument must be taken as a whole. The parallel statements about Christ and God the Father also require this headship to be within a Christian context; Paul’s words do not necessarily pertain to secular institutions or issues” (Lockwood, pp. 364-65). Dr. Lockwood also points out in a footnote: “For example, Paul’s words about the role of women in church do not necessarily apply to the role of women in business or politics, which involve other authority structures” (Lockwood, Footnote 23, p. 365).

My friends, God assigns roles and vocations (callings) as He knows to be best for us while we live in this world. And when God’s structure has been challenged or rebelled against in the home and in the church, it has resulted in disruption and turmoil. Oh, it cannot be denied that life according to God’s structure often works out imperfectly in this world. But it’s not because there is a flaw in God’s ordering of His creation. Rather, it’s because we are sinners who place our individual lives and our individual desires first instead of placing God and neighbor before self. Sin is the cause of abuse, disrespect, neglect, dissension, violence, hatred, and conflict. But rejecting God’s plan of headship, or seeking to tweak or even replace it, is not the cure. Our artificial solutions create as many problems as they try to solve – and, of course, they also displease God because they reject and rebel against what He tells us. And looking at the disturbing examples of the dysphoria that has resulted in many homes, congregations, and individual lives when God’s structure, His vocations, His assigned gender, and His given roles have been ignored or reinvented, shows how much society suffers when God’s plans are disregarded – especially when opposition to God’s created order goes to its logical extreme.

My fellow Christian, whether you are a leader or a follower in the various vocations that God places you in life, your tasks are challenging. And many people are leaders in some vocations while at the same time being followers in other vocations. For many times an individual is simultaneously called to be a leader in one role and a follower in another role. Yet, whether leading or following, every one of us is a servant of God. And every one of us falls far short of what God expects of us – be it leading or following. We sin. And when we do, we ought to take our transgressions to our Creator who took our flesh to serve us. For our Maker and Savior obediently kept the Ten Commandments in our place and obediently went to the cross to suffer all the punishment that our rebellion deserves. For God’s Son has saved us. And not only is His example of perfect love, service, and obedience the best example for us to imitate, but our crucified and risen God and Savior even sanctifies us in this life to serve our neighbor in love.

So, let us ***“give thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, being submissive to one another in the fear of God”*** (Ephesians 5:20-21, **Modern English Version**). For the Lord would have us see Him as Master, confess our sins when we fall short and trust in His Son’s forgiveness, and love our neighbor (either by leading or following). Being faithful to God’s Word and to His callings & roles for our lives is the best way to live in this world because it is how the Creator has ordered our lives and wants us to live. For He knows us better than we know ourselves (a true statement that makes our rebellious sinful nature bristle). But living the Christian life serves as a wonderful example to those around us who seek normalcy, certainty, meaning, and purpose in a world which seems more and more mixed up all the time. And who knows, maybe our neighbors who witness us living the Christian life may ask us why we believe and behave as we do. What a wonderful opportunity for witness.

Just checking in. See you at worship.
Pastor