

'Headship' and Domestic Violence

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Pentecost + 12 – Ephesians 5.11-31

I imagine parts of the Epistle reading shocked some of us this morning. Last week, I was contacted by a year 12 student who's doing a research project on something called *headship*. Headship is a teaching emphasised in conservative and evangelical churches. It holds that in a marriage, the husband is the head of the household, and the wife should be subject to her husband in everything. This teaching is based in part on verses we heard in today's epistle reading. The lectionary gave us the option of leaving these verses out, but I thought it better to confront them head on because of how they've been misused and how they're still being misused to violate women.

The student's research question is this: *To what extent is the theology of male headship being used to justify domestic violence in marriages and against women in Christianity?* You'll notice that the question is not *if* headship is used to justify domestic violence; it's asking *to what extent* it's being used to justify it. There's no question that it's happening, and that is appalling.

I shared evidence of this with you in my weekly letter of June 18, where I included a copy of Abp Geoff's pastoral letter. He directed our attention to a report which had just then been released by the National Anglican Family Violence Project. I emailed you the summary of that report on Friday to refresh your memories, and I have copies available here this morning for anyone who's not on email.

Among the shocking findings of this report are that intimate partner violence happens more in Anglican households than in

it does in the wider Australian community, and further, that it happens more in Anglican households where householders attend church than it does in homes where their church membership is nominal.

Does this mean headship teaching is heard as allowing intimate partner violence? Yes it does. And so it should come as no surprise that the majority of Anglicans experiencing 'headship'-justified violence don't approach a church for help.

Why would they? That's where the teaching about 'headship' comes from; teaching that their abusers twist into violence. What help could they expect from a Church?

So to answer my year 12 student's question, yes, this report shows that church teaching about male headship is definitely exploited by perpetrators to justify the violent abuse of their female partners. This is absolutely horrifying.

So to anyone who has endured bad teaching from the Church which has been further twisted to violate you, I say sorry. On behalf of the Church, I apologise.

Headship is not a new teaching, and it's not confined to evangelical or conservative churches in our Anglican tradition. Looking back over the marriage vows in our prayer books, it's been there all along. In the 1662 *BCP* marriage service, the bridegroom is asked to promise that he will *love, comfort, honour, and keep* the bride. But the bride must promise to ***obey, serve, love, honour, and keep*** the groom.

So for some reason, being '*subject to the husband*' in Ephesians is interpreted in the BCP to mean *obey and serve*. The proposed 1928 revision of the *BCP* tried to make the vows equal – that each would *love, comfort, honour, cherish and keep* the other – but the Westminster parliament rejected that change.

In our 1978 *AAPB*, obey was still there in the first service, but not in the second one. In our current 1995 *APBA*, obey is finally gone altogether, but its shadow remains in the first service where the bride must honour the groom, but the groom is not asked to honour the bride. It's an awful distortion of scripture, all the way through. It reflects an attitude that there is a hierarchy in households which admits of domestic abuse – the statistics bear witness to this.

So what is the right way to understand the scripture which gets invoked as a warrant for this hierarchical reading and the abuse which proceeds from it?

Ephesians 5.22 – 6.9 is a set of instructions which we call 'household codes. This household code is one of several we find in the New Testament. They are quite similar to others we find in Roman and Greek writings of the time.

They are sets of guidelines on the conduct of relationships within a household. This one in Ephesians 5 deals with relationships between married couples, between parents and children, and between slaves and their owners.

Scholars ^(Keener 1992, Crouch 1972) believe that a major reason for the inclusion of household codes in the epistles was so church communities who were being accused of undermining the moral fabric of Roman society could show written proof that their teachings conformed to traditional Roman values. They also had the function of discouraging new believers from taking their new freedom in Christ to the point of publicly casting off all normal social constraints, and again, risking the safety of the church community – this was something which looked like happening in Corinth ^(1 Cor 5 – 7).

The household code in Ephesians 5 differs from the secular codes in a very particular way. It's headed by verse 21 – *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ*. This is the principle which governs the code that follows it. It tells

Christians to renounce any sense of priority over each other out of reverence for Christ – who emptied himself ^(Phil 2.7). So relationships between marriage partners, parents and children, slaves and owners are all to be seen in this light.

Our translations disguise the fact that in the most ancient Greek authorities, the injunction in verse 22 to wives does not contain the words *be subject* at all. So the original text works as though there is a semi-colon after verse 21 to be followed by a list. So verse 22 would then read as the first in a list of injunctions to Christians who must all respect this command ... *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ; wives, to your husbands, as to the Lord* ... with the implication that in verse 25, husbands are the second ones thus addressed. This is underlined where husbands are charged in verse 25 to treat their wives *like Christ who gave himself up for the Church*. There is NO marital hierarchy here; and NO licence to control.

All followers of Jesus are to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ Jesus, who taught that *service* is the mark of discipleship – *not dominance*.

So understood rightly, this code teaches mutual care and service. But we have to name the fact that over the centuries, their reflection of first-century Mediterranean cultural mores has seen this and the other biblical household codes used not to promote care and service, but domination and patriarchy. And that's abuse.

So what do we do with these codes now? We can reject them or ignore them, though that may sweep them under the carpet. And things under the carpet tend to pop up in unexpected and ugly ways. So instead, we can reclaim and teach a truer sense of these instructions; we can proclaim verse 21 as the key: *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ*.

Every Christian needs to reflect on how our intimate

relationships can increasingly reflect Christ's character – generous kindness, consistency, gracious forgiveness, open-hearted love.

In the meantime, we have much work to do to offer practical support and protection to victims and survivors of intimate partner violence. The Church owes these dear ones whatever is needed to break their prison bars open and release them into the true freedom of Christ.

May God give us the will and the strength to do that here – to do much better – so the true character of Christ may be seen by all – and so that every member of God's household flourishes. Amen.