

## HIERARCHIST AND EGALITARIAN INCULTURATIONS

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No evangelical would deny the Biblical legitimacy of civil rights as those rights guaranteed and upheld by governmental agencies for the protection of all people. And yet the civil-rights movement was not initiated by the evangelical segment of the Church, nor was it aided to any great extent by evangelical churches. The civil-rights battle was fought in the streets and the courts. Evangelicals became sensitized to civil-rights issues *ex post facto*, as the realization of the Biblical grounding for equal treatment under the law was forced upon them by historical developments.

The analogy may justifiably be transposed to the debate that is currently taking place among evangelicals over the issue of female roles in church and family within Biblical definition. It is a documented fact that some evangelicals were already advocating an egalitarian interpretation of Scripture prior to the emergence of the feminist movement. However, other egalitarians may well acknowledge their indebtedness to secular feminism for their new awareness of Scripture. This indebtedness does not make them *ipso facto* secular, feminist or heretical. Nor does adherence to civil rights make others secular, radical or heretical. Throughout history, God has demonstrated that he may use a wide variety of resources to shock his people out of their complacencies. The attacks that were made on the Reformation because of its grounding in the Renaissance did not invalidate its necessity. Nor should accusations of feminist inculturation impugn the legitimacy of evangelical egalitarian concerns.

Of course, for this issue as any other the ultimate court of appeal for evangelical Christians is to be found in the Scriptures. The quick survey that follows presents a summary of egalitarian understandings of Scripture as they appear in an increasing number of books and periodicals. It is provided in the hope that claims of equality between men and women without role designations in church and family will receive wider acceptance as a hermeneutical option.

### I. THE CREATION ORDER

The notion that an authority structure existed between Adam and Eve prior to the fall has been called into question in recent Biblical research. It is now a generally accepted dictum that both Adam and Eve were made in the image of God. As a result they were both entrusted with dominion over the earth without any intimation of a disparity in rank between them. The Genesis account of creation is permeated with concern for hierarchical organization. Rulership had been conferred by God on both sexes over the earth and all life within it. And yet in this carefully organized hierarchy there is not the slightest indi-

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cation that a chain of command existed between Adam and Eve.

Attempts have been made to infer such a scale of authority from second-order considerations such as primogeniture rights that presumably accrued to Adam owing to his chronological precedence over the woman. This inference has been challenged on several grounds, however, since the Genesis text attaches no rulership significance to the fact that Adam has been created first. In the context of a reference to Adam's antecedence, the apostle Paul wrote a strongly worded disclaimer declaring such considerations irrelevant (1 Cor 11:11-12). In the only other reference to Adam's priority found in the Bible, there is no significance drawn from it except for the fact that Eve had been more vulnerable to deception (1 Tim 2:13-14).

Egalitarians have also examined the theory according to which Adam's naming of the woman was an exercise of authority over her. They have found that it cannot be demonstrated from Scripture that naming someone was an act denoting the exercise of authority. They have also noted that Adam named the woman, giving her the honorific name of Eve, only after the fall when he had already assumed rulership over her. And yet even at that point the text does not invest the act of naming with authority implications. Subordinationist inferences that were also drawn from the use of the word "helper" for the woman are being relinquished by even the most rigid hierarchists since it has been found that this word is used in the Bible to designate not subordinate persons but God himself in his salvific activity on behalf of humans.

The concluding statement of the creation account in Gen 2:24 provides a joyful egalitarian affirmation of the oneness of a wedded man and woman. Had it been differently, the text might have stated: "Therefore a woman leaves mother and father, and cleaves to her husband, and she becomes his obedient subordinate." However, the Genesis creation account does not present even a hint of any hierarchical relation between Adam and Eve.

## II. THE NEW COMMUNITY

It is generally agreed among Biblical scholars that neither the fall nor the conditions that ensued from it during the time of the old covenant may be considered as normative for the life of the new community. The purpose of Christ's redemptive ministry was to redress the disruptions that had been brought about by the fall and to restore the integrity of God's creational purposes.

Obviously the fall had catastrophic consequences for the relations between God and the humans he had created. When the man and the woman became alienated from God, each became dependent on his or her element of origination. The man who had been taken from the ground became subject to the ground. The woman who had been taken from man became subject to the man. The conferment of rulership to Adam over Eve after the fall indicates that he had not been Eve's ruler prior to the fall.

In establishing the new community, Christ declared his intention to redesign male/female relations in accordance with the pre-fall creation order (Matt 19:4-5, 8). He repudiated the validity of the ruler-subject model as an organizational principle among his followers (20:25-26). He viewed rulership as a

legitimate form of governance in the fallen world. But he emphatically forbade its practice among his followers and advocated a consensual, pluralistic pattern of community rule, with no mention of restraints on the basis of gender (18:16–18).

In keeping with Christ's mandate, the Church of the apostles declared the male/female distinction as irrelevant to the new community as the race distinction between Jew and Gentile and as the class distinction between slave and free (Gal 3:28). Accordingly, women assumed roles of leadership in the NT Church at the highest levels. For instance, they participated by prophesying in public worship, thus exercising a function second only to that of the apostles and superior to that of the teachers within the Church community (1 Cor 11:5; 12:28).

### III. THE MEANING OF *KEPHALĒ*

Significant exegetical studies that have been conducted on the meaning of "head" in the Greek language have raised questions about the uncritical equation of the English word "head" meaning "authority" with *kephalē*.

Several scholars have examined the claims according to which *kephalē* was used with the meaning of "ruler or person of superior authority or rank" in ancient Greek texts. One such survey led to this categorical conclusion: "There is no instance in profane Greek literature where a ruler or a hierarch is referred to as 'head,' such as 'Alexander was the head of the Greek armies'."<sup>1</sup> Numerous instances have been found, however, where "head" denotes a function of origination, provider or servanthood such as a "person or thing from which something else is derived or obtained."

This reluctance of the Greek language to render "head" as "authority" finds its most cogent illustration in the LXX. The MT presents about 180 instances where *rō's* has unmistakably the meaning of "authority." One would expect that for each of those 180 occurrences of *rō's* the LXX would have naturally and effortlessly translated it as *kephalē*. However, this was not the case. Some 170 times the translators of the LXX searched the Greek vocabulary for equivalents other than *kephalē* to *rō's*/ "authority." Only in thirteen out of some 180 cases is *rō's*/ "authority" translated as *kephalē* in the LXX. Either the manuscript evidence or the context provides an explanation for the exceptional use of *kephalē* for each of those thirteen cases. Several of these offer alternative variants to *kephalē*, thus confirming again LXX aversion for the use of *kephalē* as authority. The few remaining references are accompanied in the MT with built-in explanations for the meaning of *rō's* as "authority" that soften the Semitism. In other words, despite the phenomenal proclivity of the LXX for Semitisms, its translators show a massive resistance to the use of *kephalē* for "authority." The burden of proof rests upon those who insist that *kephalē* meant "authority" in ancient Greek. They need to provide an explanation for each of the 170 instances where *rō's*/ "authority" was translated by a Greek word other than *kephalē* in the LXX.

<sup>1</sup>Cf. G. Bilezikian, "A Critique of Wayne Grudem's Treatment of *Kephalē* in Ancient Greek Texts" (ETS 0025; Theological Research Exchange Network, 1987) 20.

Egalitarian exegetes claim that the data provided by those ancient texts are consistent with the use of *kephalē* in the NT. Careful examination has shown that, in those instances where "head" is used metaphorically in connection with the Church in Paul's epistles, there is none where Christ's headship to the Church refers to a relationship of authority. Without exception they emphasize Christ's servant roles as Savior and provider of fullness, or to his function as fountainhead of life, growth and cohesion.

Likewise Christ's authority is never cited as a model for husbands in the pages of the NT, nor are husbands ever charged to wield authority over their wives. The only NT passage where the word "authority" (*exousia*) is used in connection with husband-and-wife relations militates against a hierarchical view of it (1 Cor 7:3-4). According to this text, both husband and wife hold the same right of authority over each other and are therefore equally obligated to the practice of mutual subjection.

Finally, it should also be noted that, in the metaphor system of the NT, the controlling organ of the body is not the head but the heart (not *kephalē* but *kardia*). The head serves the body by giving it life, nurture and growth. But the heart is the seat of the will, of action and of authority.

Thus it appears that the meaning of the head/body duality is not authority but reciprocity. Because Christ is the fountainhead of the Church's life and provides her with fullness and growth, in return the Church serves him in loving dependency and in recognition of him as the source of her life. In a similar manner the head/body metaphor applied to the husband/wife relation serves to emphasize their oneness deriving from creation. Because man, as the fountainhead of woman's existence, was originally used to supply her with her very life and because he continues to love his wife sacrificially and in servanthood as his own body, in return a Christian wife binds herself in a similar relationship of servant submission that completes their oneness. Egalitarians believe that the imposition of an authority structure upon this exquisite balance of reciprocity would distort the marriage relationship and render the Christ/Church, head/body paradigms irrelevant to it.

#### IV. MUTUAL SUBMISSION

The NT enjoins all believers to be servants (literally, "slaves") to one another without making distinctions of rank, status or sex (Gal 5:13). This ideal of reciprocal servanthood is similar to the call for mutual subjection among believers (Eph 5:21). Plain subjection implies a vertical relation between ruler and subject. The NT principle of mutual subjection suggests horizontal lines of relationship among equals. Accordingly there is no confirmation in the NT of Adam's rulership mandate over the woman, and there is no command for husbands to rule their wives. Instead there is the abrogation of the principle of rulership by Jesus (Matt 20:25-28) and the command to mutual subjection by Paul (Eph 5:21).

In the three domestic codes found in the epistles, both husbands and wives are enjoined to practice reciprocal servanthood. Wives are to submit to their husbands. Their submission is never mentioned in the context of a response to male authority. It is a voluntary offering of oneself in servanthood. A similar

attitude of selfless and voluntary servanthood is required of husbands toward their wives, with the additional obligation of forfeiting their lives for their wives' sakes as Christ gave up his life for the Church when he took the nature of a servant for her sake (Ephesians 5; Colossians 3; 1 Peter 3).

The full meaning of mutual subjection may best be drawn from the reading of the Ephesian domestic code in the light of its opening sentence and with the meaning of "head" as "servant" fresh in mind from the previous section:

. . . being subject to one another [servant role] out of reverence for Christ [servant role], wives to your husbands [servant role] as to the Lord [servant role]. For the husband is the head of the wife [servant role] as Christ is the head of the church, his body [servant role], and is himself its Savior [servant role]. As the church is subject to Christ [servant role], so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands [servant role]. Husbands, love your wives [servant role] as Christ loved the church [servant role] and gave himself up for her [servant role] that he might sanctify her [servant role], having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word [servant role], that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing [servant role], that she might be holy and without blemish [servant role]. Even so, husbands should love their wives [servant role] as their own bodies [servant role]. He who loves his wife [servant role] loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh but nourishes [servant role] and cherishes it [servant role] as Christ does the church [servant role], because we are members of his body [servant role].

Egalitarian exegetes would claim that the superimposition on this portion of Scripture of an authority structure controlled by hierarchical presuppositions would be extraneous to it and would destroy the Christologically-based thematic coherence that permeates and infuses it with compelling power and beauty.

## V. DEBATED PROHIBITIONS

Against the evidence surveyed above, the NT contains two negative references relative to female participation in church life. In 1 Cor 14:33–35 women were enjoined not to speak in church and to keep absolute silence even if they wanted to ask questions as learners. According to 1 Tim 2:11–15 women were not permitted to teach or to *authentain* (?) men.

Hierarchists cite these texts to restrict, in varying degrees, women's participation in the ministries of the present-day Church. Egalitarians point to the singularity and the dissonance of these prohibitions against the context of the teaching of the NT on the newness of the Christian community in terms of inclusiveness, nondiscrimination, universal priesthood predicated on salvation rather than sex, and ministries distributed according to gifts rather than gender. They also note that these two texts stand in sharp contradiction with the Pauline affirmations acknowledging the right of women to lead in worship visibly and audibly (1 Cor 11:5), encouraging believers without restrictions on the basis of sex to teach (same verb as in 1 Tim 2:12) one another as a spontaneous and participatory ministry (Col 3:16), and consigning leadership ministries in each enumeration of the spiritual gifts without any hint of female exclusion (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4).

Consequently, egalitarians generally consider those debated texts as having

had an interim and parochial applicability to church circumstances that were unique and specific. They advise against capitalizing on hapaxic texts that clash with well-attested teachings of the NT. They advocate approaching those texts in the same manner as present-day churches treat Paul's ordinances for women to keep their hair long and unbraided as their pride and covering (1 Cor 11:15; 1 Tim 2:9) and to wear a veil over their heads during public worship (1 Cor 11:5-6). And if the application of the prohibition verses is to be universalized, egalitarians would appeal for consistency and plead that the same enthusiasm be expanded in enforcing the observance of explicit NT imperatives such as the definitely nonhapaxic commands for believers to greet each other with a holy kiss (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Pet 5:14) and the exhortation to limit personal property to food and clothing (1 Tim 6:6-8).

Only a very general overview of the most critical areas of egalitarian exegesis could be conducted in this limited space. Full-length and thoughtful studies reflecting such positions continue to appear in the evangelical press. Their message is being heard. It constitutes a challenge for the Church to reexamine its traditional beliefs and practices in the light of a holistic understanding of Scripture and in full awareness of the ever-present danger of Christian inculturation to the forces in history that sanction the fall and repudiate redemption.