

Male Leadership in the church

(Part 3)

The Fall

It is clear from the Genesis account of creation that it was God's plan for men and women to find fulfilment in complementary and paired roles (Part 2). Their relationship was intended to be a mutually supportive and beneficial partnership between equals, each with distinct capacities and responsibilities.

Sadly, history and present-day reality also make clear that, because humanity has misused God-given free will, relationships between the sexes have too often been marked by bitter rivalry, exploitation, and resentment. Countless vulnerable women have been mistreated and abused by men whose role was to protect them. Too many husbands, like Nabal (1 Sam 25), fail to recognise and appreciate the "Abigail" in their lives, leaving many women disillusioned with marriage and family life. This was not God's plan.

Nor was it God's plan for "second-wave" feminism (1960s–1980s) to declare war on traditional marriage, gender-specific roles, and male leadership in the church. It is difficult to exaggerate the impact of the explosion of women-centred university studies, feminist journals, and conferences in the United States during the 1970s. *Time* magazine named "American Women" its 1975 Person of the Year, and by the end of the decade, feminist ideology had come to influence virtually every medium of communication. Unfortunately, like every popular movement, it has also impacted many religious institutions that claim to be grounded in biblical principles.

Third-wave feminism (c. 1990s–2010s) has continued this assault, with its emphasis on egalitarian theology, intersectionality, and the denial of gender-specific roles.

To understand this disruption and distortion of the divine plan for the sexes, we must look beyond the creation event to the tragedy that followed and the consequences that continue today. Of course, we are speaking of the Fall.

The Fall (Genesis 3)

Genesis 3 begins:

3:1) Now the serpent was more crafty than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden'?"

The serpent is the “devil and Satan” (Rev 12:9), and the suddenness of his appearance—with no explanation of his presence in a universe God had declared “very good”—presents some challenges. However, that is not our present focus. Various translations convey slightly different nuances to the serpent’s words, but the main point is this: “Satan was so subtle. He did not directly deny God’s word but introduced the assumption that God’s word is subject to our judgment. Such a thought had never been verbalized before. It was enticing” (R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*).

We recall that God had given instructions concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to Adam, and it is evident that the woman knew of the prohibition (Gen. 3:2–3). Presumably Adam had passed on these instructions to Eve, and it is likely that Adam was not present when Satan appeared (1 Tim. 2:14). I think Leupold makes a good point:

Eve’s reply should have been an emphatic disavowal of the suspicion that God had been withholding good from man. Instead, it becomes a ... partial refutation, but at the same time a statement that allows room for the suspicion that perhaps God has not been as entirely good and gracious as they had hitherto supposed.

(Some suggest that Eve added the words “you may not touch it” to make God’s command seem more restrictive and that she weakened the threat of punishment with “lest you die.” I’m not sure about this point.)

The event that plunged the whole of creation into darkness is described simply and without drama: “She took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Gen. 3:6). In a perverse way the serpent was right: their eyes were opened—but they were opened to fear, shame, and remorse. Eve had taken the lead, Adam had responded with passivity, and the result was a tragedy of unimaginable proportions.

Significantly, the Lord called to **the man** as he and his wife hid themselves. Challenged by his Creator to answer for his rebellion, Adam says weakly, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate.” Earlier he had rejoiced over Eve—“This is now bone of my bone ...” (Gen. 2:23)—but now he tries to mitigate his guilt by implicating her. Is he also attempting to deflect blame by alluding to the fact that God had given the woman to him?

God’s curses on the serpent (Gen. 3:14–15), the woman (Gen. 3:16), and the man (Gen. 3:17–19) contain deeply significant theological doctrines, but our focus here is on the deleterious effects of the Fall upon the male-female relationship and the headship principle. In this context, the implications of the Lord’s judgment upon the woman must be explored and explained. The text reads:

*To the woman He said,
“I will greatly multiply
Your pain in childbirth,
In pain you will bring forth children;
Yet your desire will be for your husband,
And he will rule over you.” (Gen 3:16)*

We recall that at creation the woman had been given the twofold blessing of childbearing (Gen. 1:28) and marriage (Gen. 2:18, 21–25). Now, when judgment is pronounced upon her following the Fall (Gen. 3:16), it relates to these two areas. First, the Lord says, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.” Thus, the joy of bringing new life into the world (John 16:21) will be accompanied by a constant reminder of rebellion against God. Next, the Lord says, “Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16b). It is this second aspect of the judgment upon the woman that bears directly upon the headship question.

Understandably, Genesis 3:16 is a much-debated verse, but I believe that its meaning is clear. In 1975, when second-wave feminism was in full stride, Bible scholar Susan T. Foh wrote an article in *Westminster Theological Journal* in which she explains that, apart from person and gender details, the structure of Genesis 3:16b is the same as that of Genesis 4:7b. In this verse the Lord says to Cain, “(sin’s) desire is for you, but you must master it.” Foh maintains, with good reason, that this parallel between Genesis 3:16b and 4:7b helps us to understand the meaning of the former. In her widely quoted comment on Genesis 3:16b, she says:

The woman has the same sort of desire for her husband that sin has for Cain, a desire to possess or control him. This desire disputes the headship of the husband. As the Lord tells Cain what he should do, that is master or rule sin, the Lord also states what the husband should do, that is rule his wife.... These words mark the beginning of the battle of the sexes. As a result of the fall, man no longer rules easily; he must fight for his headship. Sin has corrupted both the willing submission of the wife and the loving headship of the husband.

In my view, this is the best explanation of this challenging verse (Gen 3:16b). It is because of the Fall that some men abuse their God-given authority while others abdicate it, and it is because of the Fall that many of the daughters of Eve struggle with the principle of female subordination.

Adam’s rebuke begins with the accusation that he had listened to his wife rather than to God (Gen. 3:17), who had made the prohibition known to him before Eve’s creation. It was Adam who functioned as the representative head of humanity (e.g., Rom. 5:12–21).

Conclusion

In modern Western democracies, individual freedom and the right to self-expression have come to be seen as the ultimate good, and in many cases this has bred a distaste for God’s headship arrangement. Assault after assault has been launched on those passages of Scripture that clearly set forth the doctrine of male leadership in the church. New and radical interpretations of these passages have appeared, and long, meandering arguments have been constructed from scattered biblical references in an attempt to prove that women functioned as apostles, elders, and leaders in the church.

Proponents of egalitarian theology often assert that female subordination is a consequence of the Fall rather than part of the creation order (see Part 2). Some insist that subordination is eliminated in Christ, where “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor ... male and female” (Gal 3:28). We will argue, to the contrary, that male leadership in the church is grounded in the creation order.

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