Paul and Women in Ephesians 5:22-24: An Analytical Discourse

By

Mercy Uwaezuoke Chukwuedo PhD.
Trinity Theological College, Umuahia
(In Afiliation with the University of Nigeria, Nsukka)
mercychukwuedo@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper is an analytical discourse on Ephesians 5:22-24. It aims at examining the text critically by analyzing key words in order to discover the intention of Paul in writing this letter. Some scholars are of the opinion that Ephesians was not written by Paul himself but by a later leader who assumes his mantle of authority. Patriarchal societies placed man in positions of authority in marriage, society and government. Often times, the Bible has been used as a weapon against women as Paul is cited to be against women in leadership positions in the Church and the society. Paul had women co-labourers who supported him in one way or the other. However, this study discovers that Paul was a man of his day, shaped by the patriarchal attitudes of Greco-Roman Jewish cultures toward women. The key to a proper role relationship of man and woman is to recognize that Christ has headship over man even as man has headship over woman. Even as Christ has a head who is God, so the woman has a man as her head. The woman is not inferior to man because she is an equal fellow-heir of the grace of God.

Keys Words: Paul, Women, Headship, Submission,

Introduction

Scholars believe that Paul accepted women as equals but that at times in his teaching he placed them in an inferior position. Generally, Christian feminists believe that Paul demonstrated a "liberationist" attitude toward women, as one who had high regard for women and valued them as fellow ministers. Biblical scholars, such as Scroggs (1972), have sought to redeem the image of the apostle from any taint of chauvinistic bias against women. In his words: "It is time, indeed past time, to say loudly and clearly that Paul is, so far from being a chauvinist, the only certain and consistent spokesman for the liberation and equality of women in the New Testament" (p.283). To be fair to Paul, some Christian feminists have tried to deny the Pauline authorship of texts viewed as "antifeminist"; others argue that Paul intended the texts to be temporary in nature, either because of the cultural dimension of the setting or because of local church problems; or to say that the apostle struggled to overcome his chauvinistic background as he strove to express the Christian ideal. Most biblical scholars agree that Ephesians was not written by Paul

himself, but by a later leader assumes his mantle of authority. Reid (2008) posits that Paul was not a systematic theologian. He never formulated a coherent theology of women. Rather, his letters are pastoral in nature, addressed to the specific needs and questions of particular communities.

However, we cannot divulge the apostle from his Jewish cultural background which subordinates women. It is not far from the truth to say that Paul was influenced by his Jewish background. Scholars are trying to restructure the scriptures in order to accommodate modern trends. It is important in this debate to resolve the alleged conflict between the biblical concepts of headship (κεφαλή) and submission (ὑποταγή).

The Text- Ephesians 5:22-24
Verse 22 αἱ γυναῖκες τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ,
Verse 23 ὅτι ἀνήρ ἐστιν κεφαλὴ τῆς γυναικὸς ὡς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς κεφαλὴ τῆς ἐκκλησίας, αὐτὸς σωτὴρ τοῦ σώματος·
Verse 24 ἀλλὰ ὡς ἡ ἐκκλησία ὑποτάσσεται τῷ Χριστῷ, οὕτως καὶ αἱ γυναῖκες τοῖς ἀνδράσιν ἐν παντί.

The English Translation
Verse 22. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.
Verse 23. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.
Verse 24**.** Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything (NIV).

a. The Meaning of κεφαλή

The word κεφαλή appears 58 times in the New Testament, of which 45 refer to the literal/physical head and 13 are figurative. Chukwuedo (2019) writes that many of the symbolic passages speak of Christ, the Head of the church (Eph 1:22; 4:15; Col 1:18; 2:10, 19). In Ephesians 5:22–24, Paul bases his call for submission on the principle of headship: "Wives, submit to your husbands as 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 Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything." In 1 Corinthians 11:1–16, the crux of the issue surfaces in verse 3: "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God". After praising the Corinthians on their response to apostolic tradition in 1

Corinthians 11:2, Paul gave them a new instruction concerning headship and submission. The teaching that the man is the head of the woman was already evident in the Old Testament but over practiced. Christ is over every man while man is over every woman, God is over Christ. Scholars see it that the headship of man over woman refers not to the essence of the individuals, since God is said to be the head of Christ, but only to function.

Blass, Debruner and Funk (1961) posit that the significance of verse 3 lies in the word κεφαλή ("head"). The verse revolves around the concept of how God, Christ and man are κεφαλή. Its meaning especially in Ephesians 5: 23 has been much disputed. Many New Testament scholars and feminists dispute that the word means source and not boss. Barth and Bedale (1954) posit that κεφαλή refers to source. The general argument of biblical feminism in these passages is that headship (κεφαλή) refers to "source," not "authority." They demonstrate that κεφαλή has two senses: a literal meaning referring to the anatomy, and a metaphorical sense of "priority". In this latter usage two ideas are present: (1) a chronological priority including the notion of "source" and "origin," and (2) a resulting positional priority including the notion of "chief among" or "head over." Concerning this enlarged and metaphorical use of the term, Barth and Bedale (1954) further reason that;

> This idea of 'authority' would seem to be connected, not with the controlling influence of the head over the limbs [a scientific deduction anachronistic for Paul] but with the idea of priority…. A chieftain's authority in social relationships is largely dependent upon his 'seniority,' or 'priority,' in the order of being". Thus κεφαλή is a metaphorical equivalent of ἀρχή, "first," "ruler" (p.213).

Paul is using κεφαλή in this metaphorical sense to set forth the hierarchical, social structure in God's economy. Blass and Funk (1961) posit that Christ, then, is the "head" of every man because "through him are all things, and we exist through him" (1 Cor 8:6; cf. Col 1:16); and man is the head of the woman because "man does not originate from woman, but woman from man" (1 Cor 11:8; cf. Eph 5:23); and of course, God is the head of all because "all things originate from God" (1 Cor 11:12; cf. 1 Cor 8:6). Thus because of the order in the process of creation there is both a unity and a hierarchy of social relationships that may be outlined as follows according to Kaiser (1976):

God
Christ
Man
Woman

Concerning this hierarchy, however, Kaiser (1976) cautions, "Such a ranking speaks not of their relative dignity or worth (Is Christ any less than God? Or is woman any less created in the image of God than man?), but only of their job relationships, responsibilities to each other and ultimately to God" (p.12).

Williams (1977) states that according to Ephesians 5:23ff, Christ is the head of the church because as her Savior he *brings it into existence*. Christ as the head nourishes his body as it grows up into him. Since the head is the *source of 1ife*, when Paul writes that "the head of every man is Christ," he means that man lives in dependence upon Christ strengthened and sustained by him. So Christ also lives in dependence upon God and so the wife also lives in dependence upon her husband. Christ establishes his headship by giving himself, not by taking or possessing. He exercises his headship by saving us, this is his glory and this is the model for the headship of husbands to their wives. William's interpretation of the text above is basically on Christ as "source," ignoring every reference to his "authority" over the Church." Christ made plain to the Eleven that He is indeed the Head of the church; He is in control. Foh (1980) considers the various options of 1 Corinthians 11:1–16 and emphasizes that the focus of Paul's teaching in these difficult verses is on worshiping God in a way that is glorifying to Him. She concludes that headship must be understood within that context.

Perhaps in one sense the statement "the head of the woman is the man" (1 Cor 11:3) could be taken literally. Perhaps man is called the head of woman because of the position to which God appointed him in marriage and in the church. In a general sense man's "headship" would be something like an honorary title, says Foh (1980) certainly not to be understood as placing every woman under the authority of any particular man, whether father, brother, or pastor.

In her own view, Kroeger in an unpublished paper entitled "*The Classical Concept of 'Head' as 'Source'* " sees in the word (origo) evidence for the idea of "source". However, this reference "the beginning (origo) of the body's stature," speaks of the head not as the body but as the extremity of the body: the head is the top extremity and the feet, it follows, are the bottom extremities. Since Paul wrote that man comes from woman, headship as source does not seem appropriate, for the woman would also be the head or source of man, which is contrary to Paul's point. The key to a proper role relationship of man and woman is to recognize that Christ has headship over man even as man has headship over woman. Even as Christ has a head who is God, so the woman has a head, namely, man.

b. Headship and Submission

The woman as subordinate to man does not mean inferiority. Knight (1977) is of the opinion that the ontological relationship analogous to that between man and woman according to Paul is that between father and son. That Christ submits as son and as incarnate does not reduce his deity or makes Him inferior to the father". Just as no inferiority may be asserted or assumed for in His submission, so also no inferiority may be asserted or assumed for woman. Paul substantiates his comments in a relationship more basic than the creation account, namely, the economic aspect of the Trinity. The Son is God as the Father is God ontologically. However, economically (in function) the Son's redemptive work involved a volitionally subordinate position or rank. Knight (1977) however, further explains that more support is derived from the creation account itself. "Man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake; but woman for the man's sake" (1 Cor. 11:8, 9; cf. 1 Tim 2:13). The time and purpose of the woman's creation is significant in Genesis 2. She was created as a co-laborer to share in the mandates of creation. To Knight, from the very first, however, the woman was to participate as a subordinate in rank.

On several significant occasions, the New Testament recognizes or refers directly to Genesis 2:18ff as supporting a role distinction between the male and female. First, Paul asserts that man is the head (κεφαλή) over the woman in 1 Corinthians 11:3. Bruce (1971) posits, "The meaning of "head" in v 3 is indicative of man's "rank "over the woman rather than "source" or 'origin' " (p.103). His statement is not ascribing a deficiency in intellect or ability of the woman, but is designating her to a subordinate position in function. At the same time, Bruce (1971) says that Paul establishes a role relationship, he is careful to include a caution, lest men pervert their designated leadership into spiritual superiority and functional snobbery (1 Corinthians 11:11). Spiritually, man and woman remain equal before God. The Apostle may also have in mind the role distinctions manifested in various functions between the sexes. Stitzinger (2002) says that a woman can and often does assist men in advice, counsel, and guidance in the home, church, and society. However, she is never to take on the role of a leader over men. "In the Lord" she will retain her subordinate role as she shares in these responsibilities. A man must as well remember that he is not independent of the woman just because he is higher in rank (1 Corinthians 11:12). He needs her help even to gain existence in this life. Thus, God has established a mutual dependency to coincide with the headship that man continues to exercise over the woman.

Secondly, the apostle makes use of the term "to be subject" (ὑποτάσσω) to describe the relationship of the female to the male both in and outside the context of marriage. The term "to be subject" from the verb τάσσω has a background in military usage, namely, that

soldiers were appointed or placed in positions under others. "Ὑποτάσσω carries the meaning "to place under," "to affix under" or "to subordinate oneself to the control of another". However, this word in no way implies that the subordinate is an inferior, except in position. Boyer (1971) says, "a woman may be superior to a man in ability, personality and even spirituality, but because of the divine order of creation, she recognizes the superior rank of the man and 'ranks herself under man'" (p.104). This principle is to demonstrate itself both in the marriage relationship, and/or outside of marriage to various extents. In all of these texts, Paul alludes in principle, if not in actuality, to the creation account to substantiate his claims.

A final support for a role distinction according to Boyer (1971) is expressed in 1 Peter 3:1, 5–7. Concurring with Paul, Peter uses the term "submission" to describe the position of a wife towards her husband. While he does not refer to creation, he does use the example of Sarah's relationship to Abraham. It is fairly certain that her relationship to Abraham stems from the divine order of creation in Genesis 2:18–24. Furthermore, while Peter discloses the wife as the "weaker vessel" in rank, he also maintains that she is spiritually an equal "fellow-heir of the grace of life," (1 Pet 3:7).

Conclusion

Women are restricted from many leadership roles in the organized Church but the majority of 'Pentecostal' and 'charismatic Churches' now hold an egalitarian view regarding the ordination of women. In the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, only men may serve as priests, elders or deacons. The Methodist church in Nigeria has embraced women ordination. Evangelicals posit that females may function in normally male roles if they are under the authority of males in the congregation. Paul's relationship with some women in the Bible whom he called co labourers is an attestation that Paul recognizes women and walked with them. This is an encouragement to women and an insight on how to resist efforts toward patriarchy.

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