

Another area where men, like women, must repent is in misunderstandings of headship and submission. The assumptions that many Christian men make in this regard are actually antithetical to biblical teaching. One such assumption is that all men hold positions of authority over all women. The context of Ephesians 5, from which we take much of our understanding of headship and submission, however, is clearly that of the family. The reference, still touchy, is to the husband being the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church, not to all men in general being heads over all women. Regardless, we in the church too readily perpetuate the sense of any man being the natural leader in any situation.

Jack and I frequently encounter young couples in counseling who, when quizzed about their understanding of these delicate matters, will say that they think the man being head of the home means that he makes the final decision, has the final word. Jack's comment at that point is usually, "So the man always gets his way?" "No!" they respond, "but somebody has to make a decision." Their response then is generally more practical than biblical, more about who is in charge and how authority works. Christ's headship of the church is not exhibited by the making of decisions about the well-being of the bride. Rather, Christ perfectly models headship by giving up self and dying for us, making the church pure and blameless in the process. In many ways, the reference to Christ's sacrifice means that as the head, Jesus assumes an even more surrendered position than the church. In truth, submission is mutual and life-giving for Christ and the church, as well as for husbands and wives, and for all believers. This understanding of male headship not only disallows male dominance, which is as damaging to men as it is to women, but it also promotes the development of healthy partnerships of all kinds.

Closely aligned with the subject of headship and submission is an expectation we should all have that Christian men will partner in providing comfort, shelter, and protection for society's weakest members. While this value may be found in secular culture, it is central to what

God has demanded of covenant people. From the giving of the Law in the Hebrew Bible through Jesus' own teaching, Scripture is full of challenges for people of faith to take care of the poorest of the poor. And often it is women and children who are most in need of assistance and have few resources. I would call Christian men to these front lines and have them share the burden of meeting the needs of those who are in the greatest need of protection.

Several years ago, I spoke at a women's conference. During one of the small group sessions, a woman quietly asked to speak to me and confided some serious marital problems. We prayed together, and I encouraged her to seek help from her local church. About two weeks later, I received a phone call from her, and as the story unfolded it was apparent that her husband had been physically abusing her for some time. He had just beaten her up and even threatened their small child before driving off in a rage. I encouraged her to report all of these facts to the local police, but she didn't feel it would do any good—she had been down that road before. I then asked if anyone at church knew. She told me that about six months before she had confided in one of the men at church who served as an elder. He said he would talk with her husband and then encouraged her to work even harder at being a good wife, so that there would be no reason to criticize her.

I advised this woman to take their child and go to that elder's home immediately. She told me the elders, all men, were meeting at the church as we spoke. I then suggested that she go to the whole group and tell them what she had told me. She was hesitant, but I asked her to address these men with courage and conviction. "Ask them," I said, "what they would want the men of the church to do if you were their daughter, granddaughter, or sister?" This woman followed my advice, and I am so pleased at the response of this group of godly men. They immediately made all the provisions needed for this mother and child. They engaged the local police in getting a restraining order against the abusive husband.

A couple of them set up an accountability structure for him, and they enrolled the young family in therapy. When I heard from this Christian sister, almost a year later, things were still challenging, but she and her family were making progress. These godly men not only provided appropriate comfort and protection for this woman and her child, they also partnered with her and her husband in ways that were effective and meaningful.

Two other understandings of men prevalent in the world and too frequently accepted as true, even among Christians, are that the male ego and male libido are forces that are "out of their control." We must discard these ideas as faulty and un-Christian. As a young woman, I remember frequently being warned by older women not to wound a man's pride. While I understand that care and consideration should be given to the feelings of others, I have often wondered why we consider men so weak and immature that they cannot handle challenging situations and relationships without having their egos damaged. A reading of Proverbs clearly indicates that pride has no place in a humble life of faith. Just as Christian women should not put themselves down and remain unconfident and insecure, so also godly men should purge themselves of a propensity toward pride and a fragility in dealing with it.

In raising our son, Jack and I frequently reminded him that we do not buy into the perspectives that "boys will be boys," that he needed "to sow his wild oats," or that there was anything in his life that he could not, with God's help, control. Granted, I do not know what it is like to be male, but I know that Jesus Christ came in the form of a man, and he managed not only to live a life that was pure and sinless, but he also called others to the same standard. Do we dare ask less of our Christian men and boys? Yes, sexual urges are strong, but when placed under the lordship of Christ and held in accountability by the community of faith, they are not uncontrollable. I applaud the efforts by many churches to form men's groups to call Christian brothers to repent of sexual sin and

reclaim godly lives. I pray that we as Christian sisters may make the journey with them in faithful partnership.

Men must also acknowledge and repent of their hesitancy to confront believing women who struggle with sins of all kinds. Just as women need to journey with their faltering Christian brothers, so the men must reciprocate and hold women to the standard of image-bearers of God and new creations in Christ. Failure to be able "to speak the truth in love" means that all of us are hindered in becoming the mature and holy community desired by God. In such instances, we are held hostage by our lowest impulses instead of raised by our highest ones. Just as men can often hear a message most clearly from a woman, so I think a woman sometimes can best hear what is needed from a man, who can speak helpfully from an outside perspective. Yet we rarely engage one another at these levels of confrontation, communication, and confession.

The final areas where repentance may be needed have to do with strength, control, and dominance. I would first challenge Christian men to abandon any negativity about dealing with strong women. Strength in and of itself is a quality to be desired by both genders as it is surrendered to and fueled by a relationship with the Lord. Yet a woman in the church who is strong must frequently use care not to appear "too strong." I have watched numerous situations in which a woman expressed her opinion with passion and conviction or her anger at some injustice and the men all either backed off, clammed up, or ignored her concerns completely. A common suspicion seems to be that a strong woman naturally wants to control. If she does, of course, these negative tendencies should certainly be addressed forthrightly, but why would we automatically associate confidence and boldness with a desire to dominate?

Many reasons may exist for men to avoid relating with strong women—including the sense that such confrontation may be more harmful than helpful to all involved, a hesitation to engage in a verbal contest with little hope of resolution, or anxiety about possible miscommunication

because of social gender expectations—but these feelings need not become barriers that hinder men from reaching out to women who need godly male perspectives and presences in their lives as part of their belonging to the community of faith.

Recently in one of my classes at ACU, a male student said, “I would rather tangle with your husband any day than with you.” Many in the room laughed. I was curious, so I asked him to explain. He said he felt intimidated by my intensity; he had a preconceived idea of what I must be like even though we’ve had little contact with each other, and he was afraid that a confrontation would somehow demean his masculine identity. I was grateful for the classroom conversation. It cleared up some obvious tensions that I could sense between myself and my male students, and it also opened new doors of discovery for all of us about ourselves and our relationship.

In the world, and unfortunately sometimes in the church, men have historically wielded the most power. Strength for men is a virtue; cultivating that strength leads to high power and position. Dominance and control have sometimes been viewed not only as male gender norms but even as attributes to be valued. Exercising these qualities is the way to get ahead. But I am confident that any one of us could tell a number of stories of leaders who misused their power and abused individuals in their care with devastating results for all concerned. Power is intrinsically neither good nor bad, and neither gender is automatically better at holding power. Both women and men must choose to use power responsibly, for the benefit of all.

Christian men have nothing to fear in embracing the God-empowered, gifted, and called leadership of women. Accepting that a faithful woman can be used by God for good purposes should do nothing to undermine male leadership. It is time for us to move beyond acknowledgment of the problems in this area and find solutions to address them. It is time for Christian men who believe these truths to speak out and

to act upon them. It is time for us to join together in godly partnership. The home, the church, and the world are in need of our working together in the Kingdom as we join God in all that God is doing in the world.

Bound & Determined, by Jeanene Reese
Christian Men and Women in Partnership

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