

THE SUBORDINATION OF WOMEN – AN OFFENSIVE IDEA¹

The Reverend Dr Kevin Giles

We Australians like to think of ourselves as egalitarians. We believe everyone should be given a fair go. In the last forty years we have realised that ‘everyone’ includes women. In Australia today, women are equal before the law, education at every level is open to them, they are to be paid the same for the same work, the best of marriages are partnerships where decisions are made conjointly, and men do more of the housework than ever before. As a consequence, a woman can be (and has been) the Governor General and Prime Minister of our nation. Women can be judges, ministers of state, lawyers, doctors, managing directors, plumbers, carpenters, and play most elite sports. What is more, the general consensus is that we would be governed better if both the Federal and the State parliaments had equal numbers of the two sexes.

In Australia today, no one would dare to say or argue publicly that women should be subordinated to men; they are by nature not suited to leadership. For most of us Aussies, the idea that women are subordinated to men is absurd. It is like arguing that the earth is flat, or the world was created in six literal days about 8,000 years ago, or that the earth is not getting hotter. Culture must never dictate what we believe as Christians, but it is hard to believe that Jesus, whom Dorothy Sayers once called ‘the greatest friend of women,’ would not be delighted to see women flourishing today.

I am an evangelical, trained at Moore College, and so it hurts me deeply to have to admit that many evangelicals in Australia do not endorse the substantial equality of the sexes; they argue that God has subordinated women to men. This teaching is given at Moore College and is pervasive in the Diocese of Sydney. The argument is that the Bible teaches the subordination of women, giving leadership to men. Those who give this teaching can never say openly that they are arguing for the permanent subordination of women. Instead, they say men and women are “equal;” “God has simply given different roles to men and women;” “What we are insisting on is the differences between men and women.” But be assured, nevertheless, they do teach that the Bible sets the man over the woman. Leadership is male. It is for this reason that women cannot be ordained to be parish leaders. In this coded speech, it is important to note the word ‘equal’ means ‘spiritually equal;’ and the word ‘role’ is given a meaning not found in any dictionary. For them, it speaks of what differentiates men and women. Men have the ruling ‘role’; women the obeying ‘role’. The ‘roles’ cannot change as dictionary usage would indicate.

In public discourse, they also often say, again to make their position sound more reasonable, male leadership only applies in the husband–wife relationship. In marriage the man is the head/leader of his wife. This means, because churches are made up of married couples to a large degree, to have a woman ordained as a parish leader would undermine the headship of her husband. But this again is not what is actually believed and taught. The argument that God has given ‘headship’ to men rests on the belief that, in creation before the fall (Gen. 1–2), God set the man over the woman. If women’s subordination is grounded in creation then necessarily it applies in all creation: the home, the church and society. This is what all Christians believed until the 1960s. What the Bible does in fact do is ground the rule of the man over the woman in the fall (Gen. 3:16). It makes male rule over women something not pleasing to God, sinful, and as such it should be opposed by Christians.

This teaching on the permanent subordination of women upsets me deeply. I have opposed it for forty years. Let me tell you why. First, it is simply untrue. Nothing in modern life would indicate that God has given leadership abilities to men and not women; women are subordinated by nature (by a ‘role’ given by birth that can never change). When it comes to intellectual ability, closely related to leadership ability, women excel. In most Western countries about 60% of graduates are women.

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Second, this teaching upsets me greatly because it demeans women and encourages intimate partner abuse. For a man to say to a woman, “You should accept your subordinate status because it is given by God” or “It is what the Bible teaches”, is to say to women you are not my equal. If this is not demeaning of women, I do not know what is. For many years Sydney evangelicals have insisted that headship teaching does not in any way lead to the abuse of women. We now know it does, and the Archbishop of Sydney and the Synod in 2018 had to admit this. Needy, controlling men—of which there are many in our churches and also among the clergy—hear this teaching to be saying they should be obeyed.

Third, what upsets me greatly is that this teaching makes the proclamation of the Gospel much harder. To preach to modern Australians that women are the subordinate sex is offensive and an idea for most of us that makes no sense at all. Constant headship teaching from the pulpit furthermore makes for unhappy churches. It divides the body of Christ.

Now to my fourth objection. This teaching is not grounded in scripture. It is like the appeal to the Bible in support of slavery and of Apartheid once made by evangelicals, an appeal to maintain power and privilege, and an exclusion of the liberating message of scripture. A few verses can be quoted in support of the subordination of women, but the very weighty texts that exclude this teaching are ignored, and the interpretation of the few texts quoted can convince no one but the already convinced. God put first in our Bible what is of first importance:

- man and woman alike are made in the image and likeness of God (same dignity and status);
- man and woman alike are to rule over this world side by side (not one over the other);
- and the family mandate is given to both (no role differentiation) (Gen. 1:27–28).

What could be plainer?

Then we have the teaching and example of Jesus which we are called to follow and obey. In word and deed, he related to men and women as equals and NOT ONCE did he mention male ‘headship’. What is significant about the twelve apostles is that they are twelve in number, symbolising they are the nucleus of the new Israel, the church—not that they are men.

Then we have Paul, who insists that the Spirit gives all leadership gifts in the church, and he (the Spirit) gives these to men and women without distinction (1 Cor. 12: 4–28). Thus, women can be missionary apostles (Rom. 16:7) like Barnabas, Timothy and Apollos, prophets who teach the word of God in the power of the Spirit (Acts 2:17–18, 1 Cor. 11:5, Rev. 2:20, etc) and leaders of the first churches meeting in homes (Col. 4:15, etc). Just once Paul says ‘the husband is the head of the wife’ (Eph. 5:23) which exactly reflected the realities of the ancient world. But read in context, it is clear that Paul writes to subvert the idea that the man is the boss of the home who has all the privileges. In verse 21, Paul asks husbands and wives to subordinate themselves to one another, and in verse 25 onwards he asks husbands to love their wives like Christ loved the church, even to the point of giving their life for them.

These words turn traditional ideas of male headship on their head. The evangelical commentator, Professor Andrew Lincoln says in Ephesians 5:21–33 Paul makes, ‘submission and love [agape love] two sides of the same coin—selfless service of one’s marriage partner.’

In this short article I cannot say more. If you would like to read the whole story you may like to buy my new book, *What the Bible Actually Teaches on Women* (Cascade, Oregon, 2018), a book endorsed by thirteen very well-known and able evangelical scholars. It is the fruit of my 40 years of studying and debating this question. You may also like to come to the launch of this book at St James’ Hall, Level 1, 169–171 Phillip Street, Sydney at 6:00pm on 28 February.

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