

BOUNDARIES WITHOUT BONDS: HOW TO KEEP HEADSHIP FROM BEING A HARDSHIP

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It was a scene from Hell. . . an outbreak of spiritual mad cow disease.

During Sunday School a ranting woman chose the adult class ‘prayer time’ to launch a “holy war” against unspecified persons who ostensibly had wronged her husband. The situation begged for rebuke.

Instead, everybody sat in silence, some stunned, some baffled, some wondering what to do, and others incurably bored, welcoming a little carnal relief. Finally a courageous woman intervened. Diane, a devout and highly intelligent executive in her early 40’s, stood up and in calm, moral indignation said firmly:

“What is being said here is most inappropriate. I would like to ask that it please stop.”

That timely rebuke momentarily made evil blush and, at least for that time, bridled it.

Thank God for women who know when to stand up and be counted. Let their tribe increase.

A Practical Question

As strongly as I believe the Scriptures support the notion of male hegemony (i.e. that God entrusted leadership in the home and church to men rather than women), I also affirm that in Christ men and women are equal in dignity and worth before God.¹ As the husband of a very capable, prudent woman whose judgment and good sense repeatedly have saved my bacon and father of two sharp daughters, I have emotional as well as theological incentives for giving women a wide berth to exercise their generous endowments.

So how do we accomplish that within the parameters of biblical principles?

The Urgency of the Question

This question is compelling for two reasons:

¹ Galatians 3:28 - “There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

1) As God's stewards we are accountable for the use or misuse of our God-given resources.

2) As God's shepherds we face in our churches the risk of implosion if we unnecessarily aggravate gender rift.

A Matter of Stewardship

Christian women represent an enormous resource base for the Church. Any pastor with a room temperature IQ knows women just make things happen. They are as vital to the impact of a church as to the health of any home.

Like men, women come in all sorts of power packages. Some are formidably intelligent, insightful, and prudent. The average woman is probably more articulate than the average man. Many ooze with astounding creativity; some are powerfully analytical. Others are first class organizers. Over here is a brilliant scholar, over there a turbo-charged woman of action. And who has not seen that amazing gal who can tame a tiger or soothe the impossibly cranky or sell ice to an Eskimo? Among them also are the occasional Margaret Thatcher types, firm and tough-minded, able any day to hold their ground with square jawed men~ and maybe even intimidate a few.

Not to tap into that powder house of female dynamite or to suppress it for fear of them is to fail to be "good stewards of the grace of God."²

After Jesus fed the 5000 and the 4000 not a scrap of God's supernatural provision was left to litter the site.³ Therein lays a lesson. Male hegemony is never an excuse nor is it God's way to waste holy gifts and restrain legitimate 'free trade' in ministry.

The principle of male hegemony, rightly understood and wisely implemented, neither slights nor squanders 'woman power'. On the contrary, God's boundaries, if prudently maintained and applied, ingeniously shield a church body from the excesses to which each gender is prone while amplifying their inherent strengths.

Yet the reality is, able women are sometimes overlooked, under-utilized and, perhaps worst of all, under-estimated. That is not good. For the power of such ministry 'motors' to be idled in the service of Christ through a too narrow application of biblical principle or sidelined through knee-jerk traditionalism or chauvinism or envy is not only wasteful of God-given resources, but also a danger to the Church.

² 1 Peter 4:10 - "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the grace of God."

³ Matt. 14:20 "... they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces. . ." cf. 15:37 for same language.

Peace at Stake

This hazard is one we must squarely face or it will blow up in our faces. Worse it may blow up our churches if we do not negotiate the problem with grace, prudence, and charity.

Under-estimating women invites dissension in the ranks. If we leaders seem to relegate hot-wired women who are accomplished and respected players in the public arena to the back of the bus, it invites suspicion of gender bias.

Cultural Pressure Aggravates the Tension

Certain cultural wedges exacerbate the potential for gender rift in our churches.

For a long time now the culture has been undergoing a paradigm shift with respect to gender roles. We look around and see more and more women in places only men used to be.

In the public perception this shift reacts unfavorably on churches that cling to the traditional model. We appear a throwback to a time long passed. To the biblically uninitiated our position on gender roles makes us seem like a religious backwater for the culturally out-of-touch and the socially irrelevant.

Social liberals think our resistance to female pastors, for instance, is not just regressive, but downright repulsive. Secular-minded folk have no concept of biblical authority. Any appeal to it is for them as dated as pantaloons.

This general cultural landslide toward egalitarianism will eventually, irreversibly and perhaps irresistibly alter expectations about women's roles in the churches. Especially so among younger women now long accustomed to the egalitarian ways of the modern workplace.

Making matters worse is the capitulation to this cultural surge on the part of many evangelical theologians, church leaders, denominations and para-church organizations.

Tangential Questions

The scenario we face raises two practical questions tangential and relevant to our original one:

- 1) How do we defuse this internal danger we highlighted above?

2) How do we dislodge the cultural misperceptions of our spirit and intent while we hold the line on biblical principle?

We'll deal with the first question shortly.

To the second my answer is this: If our hope is to convince the general public the biblical principle of male hegemony is good for the home, good for the church and good for society in general, forget it.

Truth, the sum of God's Word,⁴ inevitably runs against the human grain.

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."⁵

God's ways are always counter-cultural. Misunderstanding and defamation inevitably dog our heels. This burden goes with the territory. Wisdom is vindicated by all her children,⁶ not her step children.

Perhaps we can take some cold comfort in this historical axiom: time is often truth's familiar friend. For time has a stubborn way of exposing cultural excess and catalyzing a reaction (though usually in the form of an over-correction) in the opposite direction.

That's just another way of saying, bills come due. "Be sure your sin will find you out."⁷ Once the price of the feminization of our homes and institutions takes its yet-unforeseen toll, the pendulum may yet swing the other way.

Until then the best response is to take our lumps and stick to our guns. Eventually, if the Lord tarries, some may yet rise up and call us ahead of our time.

For now we face a cultural perception we cannot dispel. To smoke our wheels trying to spin our way free is an exercise in futility. My advice is to concentrate on the part of the problem we can manage.

The Delicacy of the Challenge

The delicacy of the challenge for church leaders is akin to the tightrope parents walk in setting limits on their teenagers. However loving and caring they may be, to convince kids

⁴ John 17:17 - "... Thy Word is truth."

⁵ Isaiah 55:8-9

⁶ Luke 7:35

⁷ Numbers 32:23

their boundaries are proper ones rather than dumb barriers erected by silly adults who refuse to let them grow up and have a life is a tough sell.

This analogy in no way suggests women resemble immature teenagers, but simply that any male-imposed fetters may be as irksome to them as parental restrictions to teenagers. It isn't easy to persuade some women the boundaries are God's, not ours, and in no way reflect on them or their worth or abilities.

How do we avoid overstepping biblical boundaries on the one hand and stifling women's precious gifts on the other?

First, we need to cinch up our convictions about where God's lines are with respect to gender roles. If we are too muddled on this point or too insecure in our convictions about it, meltdown is inevitable.

Confirm the principle of male hegemony.

Others have ably and forcefully made the biblical case for the principle of male hegemony.⁸ Even though some⁹ egalitarians think the Apostle Paul was all wet, they at least concede his hierarchical viewpoint. Such concessions render even more dubious the exegetical conclusions of evangelical egalitarians to the contrary.

Some of the evidence that persuades me of the validity of this position is as follows:

First, throughout the Bible, almost without exception, we see male hegemony in all divine institutions. The few anomalies, however accounted for, accentuate the rule.

Secondly, though barely a prophetic footnote, the implications of Isaiah's cry in 3:12 seem inescapable:

“O my people! Their oppressors are children and women rule over them.”

Isaiah foresaw an impending disaster including among its woes a total loss of national dignity symbolized in the loss of manly leadership. This lament is hardly the voice of an egalitarian.

Thirdly, Jesus chose 12 *men* as His original disciples.¹⁰

⁸ A fine exegetical treatment of 1 Tim. 2:8-15 can be found in William D. Mounce's commentary on the Pastoral Epistles in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 46, pp. 102-52. In addition to his thorough exegetical treatment of this crux text, and interaction with other interpretive viewpoints, Mounce also provides an extensive bibliography of relevant literature on the gender issues, pro and con, in pp. 94-102.

⁹ E.g. Paul Jewett, Man as Male and Female

¹⁰ Had the egalitarian message been one Jesus wanted to send to the Church, He passed up a golden opportunity. Females like Mary and Martha were among His intimate friends. Had it been appropriate for church to feature gender-mixed leadership, they probably would have made the list.

This choice cannot be explained away in cultural terms. Never did the Lord allow cultural customs to stand in the way of righteous habits.¹¹

Fourth, the leadership of the New Testament church was a male bastion from Jerusalem to Corinth to Ephesus.

True, women ministered, but men led. Nowhere does a female elder ever appear. And in laying down the qualifications for elders, males are the only candidates in view.¹²

Fifth, contrary to popular egalitarian myth, Galatians 3:28¹³ does not support its conclusions.

Yes, it does indeed say men and women are equal in Christ in terms of essential dignity and worth. But here's the leap. From *essential* equality they infer *functional* parity, believing the former logically entails the latter.

This fallacy is exposed by nature of the Trinity itself. Among evangelical Christians it is a theological axiom that the members of the Godhead--Father, Son and Holy Spirit--are equal in essence. Role subordination is also a stipulated fact. Given these conceded realities, it is obvious that essential equality can and does co-exist within the framework of functional subordination.

Sixth, the male headship principle sticks out in Paul's remarks in 1 Corinthians 11, especially verse 9.

Although the apostle affirms a complementary relationship between male and female (v. 11), he also asserts "man was not created for the woman's sake, but the woman for the man's sake."

Some women apparently were shedding their head coverings as a symbolic gesture of their independence. That was the wrong message. As a cultural symbol the head covering may have been disposable *per se*. However its symbolic meaning (reinforced by their natural God-given covering of long hair) was not. For that reason Paul counsels women to affirm the underlying message. Not just for the sake of that society, but for a trans-cultural reason. Angels, their invisible ministers and guardians, were looking on. So let them not scandalize the holy presences sent to help them by unseemly resistance to the divine order of things.

¹¹ He overturned the tables of the money changers in the Temple area, time and again violated rabbinic Sabbath laws, kept company with publicans and sinners, traveled through Samaria, a territory and a people all Jews avoided and on the way even engaged a disreputable woman in private dialogue at a public well.

¹² 1 Tim. 3:1-7 speaks in terms of males. Male pronouns, "husband of one wife . . . who manages his own household well. . ." Also worth noting is the overlap between domestic headship and church leadership in verses 4-5. Good domestic management is an essential qualification for church leadership.

¹³ "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Seventh, 1 Timothy 2:11-14, I believe, is explicit about male hegemony in the church.

“But let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression.”

Without Scripture twisting, it is impossible, in my opinion, to wrench out of this text a culturally relative explanation for this example of female subordination in church leadership. His rationale is straight forwardly historical and trans-cultural.

Eighth, it would be more than strange if it took the Holy Spirit the better part of 2000 years to enlighten the Church on this issue. The Church’s view on this matter has been, to my knowledge, near unanimous.

Once we are reassured of the principle itself, we move to the next step.

Adhere to the biblical boundaries.

These, in my opinion, are fairly clear.

If I interpret 1 Timothy 2:12 (and its context) correctly, it boils down to this: *Women are not permitted to be or to function as church elders.* The two functions that Paul restricts are the heart and soul of elder work. That’s where the apostolic line seems drawn.

In 2 Timothy 2:2 Paul instructed Timothy “to entrust to faithful men [the things which you have heard from me] who will be able to teach others also.”

In transmitting the faith, that’s the key play in God’s playbook: a man teaching men. In an *official* public setting it’s a man’s work. In an informal venue, sure, a well-taught Priscilla may help mentor.¹⁴ Otherwise the role belongs to men.

Elders are also the church’s theological gatekeepers, responsible to “retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me. . . to guard through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.”¹⁵ Also, when necessary, it was their task to direct and correct Christ’s flock and to maintain church order and discipline. All this comes under the heading of exercising religious authority.¹⁶ From this elder function women are excluded.

Paul’s ban should probably extend to any *official* church activity or venue where men are being spiritually mentored or religious authority is being exercised. Ambiguous situations do arise. In the absence of clarity I myself favor liberty.

¹⁴ Acts 18:26

¹⁵ 2 Tim. 1:13, 14

¹⁶ Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:4-5; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-3

Still, this restriction of women's roles in the local church evokes some cognitive dissonance.

Earlier I noted modern women have broken through the so-called 'glass ceilings' in our society and proved they could play on the same field with the big boys. They are CEOs, university presidents, members of Congress and state legislatures, doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers, scientists, high ranking military and police officers and so on.

With all that horse power, I grant it seems strange *on the face of it* to put any kind of a ceiling on women's ministry in the local church. However what troubles at first glance makes more sense on second thought. Consider these things:

1) God calls and uniquely calibrates men for church leadership just as He appointed and equipped men for domestic headship.

A woman can put on the suit but she never fills it because it wasn't tailored for her.

This is not to say a woman cannot accomplish any good when she tries to fill a shepherd's shoes. But when she hijacks a prophet's mantle, she is not playing within her game.

And therein lies a problem. Male or female, any time we venture outside God's lines, no matter how good our intentions, whether in the home, the church or society, somewhere down the line the chickens come home to roost. Eventually whatever good is done will be undone. That is, the positive effects will be outweighed by subtle penalties and deferred harm we never wanted or envisioned. It never pays to be wiser than God.

Consider this, for example:

2) It is a virtual law that the feminization of church leadership tends to emasculate or depopulate the male population of a congregation.

Whenever women take over, most men will either roll over or check out. They will do in a church approximately what they do in a home when the wife takes over--little or nothing or everything she doesn't want them to.

Strong men in a church ruled by strong women are scarcer than bones in jello. When women take the wheel, men typically take a hike.

This is a huge problem in black churches. It accounts, I think, in part for the appeal of Islam to black men. This attraction is an instinctive, if extreme, reaction to social inversion. Eventually the same dynamic will occur in any church, perhaps in any society, where women take over.

3) Are we even sure that the breakup of male hegemony in the secular world is socially progressive?

I grant the proven prowess of women. Even so, what makes us so sure this egalitarian paradigm that encourages women to act more like men, men to act more like women and both to neglect their children (not to mention one another) is a social advance over the biblical model that encourages women (married ones at least) to make the home their castle and the rearing of children their glory and strategic priority?

Do we really believe our society is happier and healthier since mothers became moguls? Materially, yes, it may be richer. But spiritually it is more barren, emotionally more discontent and functionally than unstable than ever.

4) For all their remarkable attributes, the Bible suggests females are inherently more susceptible to spiritual deception than males.

This conclusion always stirs a hornet's nest, but the quarrel is not with me.

The Apostle Paul cites Eve as the archetypal female who in her seduction exemplified this vulnerability. That fact in itself is an all-sufficient reason to disqualify women as church leaders inasmuch as doctrinal integrity is crucial to the preservation of the faith.

Was it by accident the cunning Serpent approached Eve rather than Adam? Did not Paul say Adam himself was not deceived (he simply rebelled) but Eve indeed was?¹⁷

Does this susceptibility presuppose some original imperfection in the female makeup? Hardly. Rather, it illustrates God never intended one size to fit all.

In life the qualities that suit us for one role are often the very traits that disqualify us for another. That phenomenon is not a manufacturing defect; that is just a design difference. An 18-wheeler may be terrific for cargo transport but it is terrible as the family 'car'.

So what can women do? Anything except two official things. In empowering women, my personal rule is just

Follow domestic protocol

That is, I follow the same 'rules' in the church as I follow in the home.

My wife and I maintain *a symbiotic partnership*. She is my invaluable complement. The last thing I want to do is fetter her. I want to free her to fill in all my blanks and augment any of my strengths. So I give her all the latitude 'the law' allows.

Just because God made me the head of the house doesn't mean He made me the brains of the house. If she can do it better, I don't get bitter. I get smarter. Let her go. Delegation is not abdication, it is multiplication.

¹⁷ His verbal form (exapatetheisa) with ek- intensified ("completely deceived") for emphasis. Cf. Chas. J. Ellicott, A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles.

Instead of fretting about how we can keep strong, aggressive women at bay, it seems smarter to turn them loose to make hay.

In these gender tensions we may get so polarized we resort to a **negative strategy of defensive containment**.

We would be much ahead to substitute a **positive strategy of creative enlargement** for all those great women with truly servant hearts who only aspire to serve Christ to the full extent their gifts and capacities allow.

That way we create an atmosphere of boundaries without bonds.

Let's go back to male headship in the home.

God is not big on management-by-committee. Like all bad ideas, such unrealistic notions of leadership are eventually weighed in the critical balances of human experience, found wanting and dumped in the trash bin of failed experiments.

God always puts somebody on the point. No organization ever will thrive for long where nobody is in charge--including the home.

But management-by-consultation is a different matter.

Here my wife is invaluable to me. Her wisdom, common sense, cool level-headedness, strength of character, heart for people, and steel trap logic constantly help me.

With a partner like her, I would be dumber than a post if I failed to consult with her. Not only does she bring the benefit of a female perspective, but she balances me, improves me, and restrains some of my excesses.

I carry that same mentality into the church. Show me a wise woman and she has my attention.

David one time was on the cusp of a tragic blunder. His blood was up and he set off to take out a total fool the world would never miss. But he was wrong. Enroute he encounters the sagacious Abigail.¹⁸ She spoke, he listened. And by doing so, her tact and profound wisdom deflected him from a course that would have haunted his conscience and plagued his rule to his dying day. We need to lend ears to our Abigails. Male counselors are fine, but women are no slouches.

How this headship principle is applied, that is, the spirit behind it, makes all the difference.

¹⁸ 1 Samuel 25:23-31

I personally have never encountered a *godly* female who *in principle* had any problem with considerate, sensible male leadership. In fact Christian women cry out for spiritual leadership from their husbands. But headship and dictatorship are two different things. Male headship is not male tyranny; it has everything to do with responsibility for others and accountability to God.

In a user-friendly environment female creativity will spontaneously combust into legitimate opportunity without breaking down God's fences. Women don't need a road map; they just need a supportive mentality.

Here's what I mean by that creative impulse.

Like my oldest, my youngest daughter is a natural, almost irrepressible teacher. This showed up as early as 8 or 9 years old. Even at that tender age, her little gift found spontaneous expression. In her child-like zeal, Juli would round up neighborhood kids, seat them on the front steps and teach them Bible stories.

Before long one of those little kids started attending church with us. Not long afterward he received Christ. Today he is still walking with the Lord. That's not all. It wasn't too long before his parents walked over to our house one day and asked if they could go to church with us! Later they trusted Christ themselves.

The great John A. Broadus,¹⁹ accounting for the unexpected effectiveness of some untrained preachers, explained that passion has a way of finding its own order. Similarly God's gifts have an uncanny way of finding their own showcase.

God not only pays for what He orders, but He prompts what He produces. A woman's giftedness will create a suitable place for her.²⁰ God will see to it—if she does not run ahead and force things.

To optimize woman power, it needs to be re-deployed in the place of greatest strategic potential for both Christ and the world. Somehow we have to help women

Catch the vision of shaping the future.

Does a woman want “to kick a dent in history?” No platform is more ideal or strategic than the home.

Some say women desert the home because they are more ambitious than others. Actually it's more likely they are just oblivious to its potential. They're short sighted.

¹⁹ (On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons)

²⁰ This observation probably fits within the spirit of Prov. 18.16 - “A man's gift makes room for him. . .”

House flight is not about thinking bigger, but thinking too small. It's usually about *me* and *now*. . . about proving something that ultimately doesn't matter. . . about finding out who we are (as if most people care). . . spending ourselves to buy things that won't last. . . or just escaping the kids who are our best bet to leave our mark on the world.

If a woman is determined to make a mark and leave an enduring legacy, the very best move in that direction is to re-deploy her enormous energies and invest her sharp mind and ingenuity in nurturing and shaping the next generation.

No woman will ever make any contribution more valuable nor render any service to Christ more strategic than raising gifted, godly children who will carry the torch of faith into the next generation.

No job on earth is more challenging, no achievement is more commendable, and no benefit more lasting than shaping our families to make Christ known and loved around the world.

Christian women need re-vision. If men get the best opportunities to shape the world today, women have the best opportunity to shape the world tomorrow.

There is no question, I believe, God intended this as woman's *primary* arena. That, I think, is what that obscure verse in 1 Tim. 2:15²¹ is all about. Here's my understanding of it:

Through Eve blew it, Paul offers hope. He assures all her progeny their future is not forfeited by their Mother's failure. However the primary venue in which they experience the joy and benefits of salvation²² is not leading the church but through bearing and rearing a family.²³ A blessing however that applies not to Eve's progeny universally, but only to those who are walking with God.

This is not to say a woman's place is in the home and ne'er from there should she roam. Some women will never marry, never want to and others are never meant to. But for those who do, serving Christ through the home will be by far the most strategic and fruitful investment of their woman-power.

If only Christian women would just recapture that vision! That would end wrangling about who is running the church. Through the home they could change the world!

Conclusion

²¹ "But she shall be preserved through the bearing of children if the women continue in faith and love and sanctity with self restraint."

²² The regular Greek verb for 'to save' and better translated "shall be saved."

²³ A metonym perhaps for all involved in bringing children into the world and keeping them from the world.

“Women who seek to be equal with men lack ambition.”

So cracked the late Timothy Leary, erstwhile Harvard professor of psychology and acid head-in-chief of the 70's counterculture scene.

Leary was heroically foolish, but here he was inadvertently right.

If we would just make conformity to Christ our mastering ambition, godly instinct would have us tripping over one another to serve each other and preferring one another in honor. We'd be looking for towels instead of titles.

Role equality is not a 'right' worth fighting for at the expense of peace in our churches. Better that life be unfair than sheepfolds get unhinged and flocks be scattered to the wolves. God's still, small voice will over time expose our excesses and work its corrective effects much better than 'house fires' and seismic disturbances.