

# The Church as Family: Why Male Leadership in the Family Requires Male Leadership in the Church

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The Bible teaches us to call God “our Father” (Matthew 6:9). We who are redeemed by Jesus Christ are children of God (Galatians 4:1-7). These two Biblical affirmations are among many in which the Bible employs an analogy between a human family and the church. By means of this family analogy God makes some of His most precious promises to us concerning His present love, our future inheritance, and our intimate fellowship with Him (for example, Romans 8:12-17; Hebrews 12:5-11; Revelation 21:7).

The practical implications of these “family teachings” are so deep and so many-sided that we can never fully fathom them. Let us here concentrate only on one strand of implications, those for our conduct toward one another within the Christian community. The Bible invites us to use these family teachings to draw some particular inferences about the respective roles of men and women within the church. In brief, the argument runs as follows: Just as husbands and fathers ought to exercise godly leadership in their human families, so wise, mature men ought to be appointed as fatherly leaders in the church (1 Timothy 3:1-7). A particularly important role also belongs to more mature women (1 Timothy 5:9-16; Titus 2:3-5). Like wise mothers of the church, they are to train their spiritual daughters by example and word. But just as in the case of marriage (Ephesians 5:22-33), the respective functions of men and women are not reversible in all respects. Men—and not women—are called on to exercise the decisive fatherly leadership as elders.

## **New Testament Teaching Comparing the People of God to a Family**

Now let us look in detail at the steps in the argument. First, consider the variety of New Testament teachings comparing the people of God to a family.<sup>1</sup> The confession that God is our Father belongs to a most fundamental strand of New Testament teaching, beginning with Jesus’ model prayer in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:9) and continuing through the many instances where God is

called “God the Father.” The Bible never simply means that God is the Creator of all human beings. Having God as Father implies having intimate family fellowship with Him (Romans 8:14-17) and reflecting His holy character (1 Peter 1:14-17). Christ the only Son of God has God as His Father in a unique sense. In addition to Him, only Christians, that is, those who have received the Spirit of Christ, are rightly able to cry, “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15). Those outside of Christ have the devil as their father and want to carry out their father’s desires (John 8:44; cf. 1 John 5:19).

Thus, Christians are called “sons of God” and “children of God,” in pointed contrast to non-Christians, who are outside God’s family (1 John 5:1-5). To be called a child of God has many implications. We have intimate fellowship with God the Father (Romans 8:15). Jesus Christ is our elder brother (Romans 8:29). We are legally adopted out of a situation of bondage (Galatians 4:1-7). We are no longer slaves (Galatians 4:7; Romans 8:15). We are to receive the full inheritance from God as co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). We are conformed to the pattern of death and resurrection life established through Christ (Romans 8:11-13). We share in the common family Spirit, the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14-15). We are remade in God’s image (Romans 8:29). We are born from God (1 John 5:4; John 1:12-13). As obedient children, we are to imitate the good character of our Father (Ephesians 5:1; 1 Peter 1:14-17).

Because God is our Father in this intimate sense, and because Jesus Christ is our brother and our all-sufficient advocate to the Father, we do not need any other human intermediary to bring us into contact with God. In relation to God the Father, we are brothers to all other Christians. We are to be servants to one another, and no one of us is to lord it over the others (Mark 10:42-45). Hence Jesus specifically criticizes the use of honorific titles that might contradict our status as children and undermine our sense of intimacy with God:

But you are not to be called “Rabbi,” for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth “father,” for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called “teacher,” for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23:8-12)

Jesus’ own emphasis on humility and service and the larger context of Matthew 23, where Jesus is criticizing the Pharisees, indicate that Jesus is not setting forth a legalistic rule about the mere verbal use of the words “father” and “teacher.” Rather, He is criticizing an attitude of the heart. We must always recognize the fundamental character of Christian brotherhood. Our common status as brothers implies that we should submit to Christ and serve one another.

In fact, then, Jesus’ teaching is complementary to other teachings in the New Testament epistles that do assign a special role to pastors and teachers (for example, Ephesians 4:11). The most fundamental relationship is the Father-son relationship between God and Christian believers. But God’s fatherly care ought to be reflected in the care Christians exercise towards one another within the church. For example, Christ is our Teacher in a most exalted sense (Matthew 23:10; John 13:13-14). From the fullness of His wisdom and His teaching gifts, He has distributed gifts to the church and thereby makes some people into subordinate or

assistant teachers (Ephesians 4:7, 11). Christ is our Shepherd in a unique sense (John 10:11-18). He also imparts gifts to human beings who then become under-shepherds (1 Peter 5:1-4). God the Father and Christ are the ultimate models we ought to imitate (1 Peter 1:14-15; Romans 8:29). But in a subordinate sense we are supposed to imitate the good examples set by more mature believers (1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:17; 1 Timothy 4:12; Titus 2:4, 7).

### God's Household in 1 Timothy

The theme of family relationships is particularly prominent in Paul's First Letter to Timothy. Paul repeatedly invokes the analogy of a family in order to enable Timothy better to understand the appropriate order and responsibilities within the Christian church. Paul calls Timothy his "son," expressing both his affection and the discipling relationship between them (1 Timothy 1:2, 18). He advises Timothy to treat an older man "as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters" (1 Timothy 5:1-2). If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should look after her (1 Timothy 5:4). But if the immediate family is lacking, the larger Christian family should care for her (1 Timothy 5:5, 16).

The overseers or elders ought to be respectable family men:<sup>2</sup>

Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to much wine, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) (1 Timothy 3:2-5)

The requirement concerning "managing his own family well" is particularly important, because the same wisdom and skills necessary for good family management apply also to the management of God's church.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, the Apostle Paul explicitly indicates the prominent role of the family theme in 1 Timothy 3:14-15:

Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.

In fact, these verses summarize the thrust of the whole letter. The phrase "these instructions" is most naturally understood as referring to the contents of the letter as a whole. Thus the letter as a whole has the purpose of indicating "how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household."

The reference to "God's household" could theoretically involve either of two ideas, namely, the idea of communion with God in the "house" or "temple" of God, or the idea of a household managed by God. In some contexts within the Bible, the idea of God dwelling among His people as in a temple is emphasized (1 Corinthians 3:10-17). But in the context of 1 Timothy, the idea of household order and arrangements is obviously the most prominent. The order of the church

is analogous to the order of a human household. Members of the church are to treat one another as they would members of their own family (1 Timothy 5:1-2). They are to care for one another in need (1 Timothy 5:5, 16). The overseers are to be men skillful at managing the household of God, as demonstrated by their earlier skill with their own immediate families (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

### The Use of the Household Idea as the Basis for Inferences

In 1 Timothy the fundamental household analogy is not merely confined to one or two incidental illustrations or colorful flourishes of rhetoric. Rather, it used as a basis for arguments and inferences concerning Christian responsibilities. The central role of the analogy is particularly clear in 1 Timothy 3:4-5, which concludes with the sobering question, “If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?” Paul in effect presents an argument: good family leadership *must* be one of the criteria for appointment to a position of overseer because the very same skills and competencies are required for overseeing “one’s own house” and the Christian “house.” Paul does not expect Timothy simply to take Paul’s word for the fact that such-and-such a criterion is suitable for elders. He expects Timothy to *see* the wisdom—yes, the inevitability—of this criterion on the basis of the validity of the analogy. Indirectly, Timothy is presumably even being invited to use the same argument himself, if someone else should have doubts about the matter.

Similarly, in 1 Timothy 5:1-2 we can see the beginnings of an argument. “Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.” The key comparative word *as* might possibly be interpreted as introducing mere illustrations. But all the illustrations are of exactly the same type, in that they all use the analogy between church and family. In view of the general statement about conduct in “God’s household” in 1 Timothy 3:14-15, the comparisons in 5:1-2 are to be seen as so many ways of fleshing out the implications of being a member of God’s household. We can perceive the obligatory nature of the inferences. You *must* treat the older men like fathers, the younger men like brothers, etc., not only because in some very general sense you must love them, but because you are part of the very same spiritual household. Conduct toward any other member of the household must take into account not merely sweepingly general obligations to love but the concrete distinctions introduced by differences in status within the household: treating some like fathers, others like brothers, others like mothers, others like sisters. Hence, 1 Timothy 5:1-2 presupposes the structure of an argument. The church is like a family. Therefore you must treat fellow church members like fellow family members.

The household analogy appears, then, to be one constituent element in Paul’s own approach to articulating the nature of Christian church order. In fact, it might easily be one means by which the Holy Spirit led Paul himself to grasp the teaching that he presents in the pastoral letters (1-2 Timothy and Titus). Of course, we do not know for certain. Paul received spectacular special revelations from the Lord (Acts 9:1-8; Galatians 1:16; 2 Corinthians 12:1-7). But he was also one who had “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). Through the wisdom and insight that the Holy Spirit had given to Paul, he understood the basic principles of Christianity in tremendous depth. Under the gentle superintendence of

the Spirit, he was able to give inspired teaching in his letters even on matters that his spectacular experiences had not directly addressed.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Apostle Paul wants all Christians to arrive at a deep, principal understanding of the Christian faith. The Corinthians are rebuked for being carnal, not having the mind of Christ as he does (1 Corinthians 3:1-4). In Romans 12:1-2, Paul urges upon all the necessity of growing in their grasp of the will of God, concluding, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Similarly he says, “And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:10-11).

How, then, do we know what sort of order is appropriate for Christian communal life? We know, in part, because Paul tells us in his letters. But how did Paul himself know? And how does he expect us to apply his teachings in circumstances slightly different from the ones he addressed in his letters? Paul had such wisdom partly because he had deeply absorbed the fundamental teaching of Christ about God being our Father and about Christ’s saving work on the cross. Christ’s work reconciled us to God and gave us intimate family communion with God, the communion of sons (Galatians 4:1-7). We are members of God’s family. That family structure of God’s church has definite implications about the specific forms of love to be exercised within the family (1 Timothy 3:1-7), the specific kind of management needed in dealing with family needs (1 Timothy 3:8-13), and so on.

In fact, almost the whole of 1 Timothy may be seen as a catalog of types of behavior and organization needed in a harmonious family. True doctrine is necessary because the family needs to know its own rules (1 Timothy 1:3-11, 18-20). Doctrine is therefore foundational for all the more specific kinds of organization and mutual relations within the family. Mercy and forgiveness bind the family together (1 Timothy 1:12-17). Protection is necessary from destructive outside interference and for the benefit of the family’s relations to the larger world (2:1-7). The men in the family must not generate strife among themselves but be united in petitions (2:8). The women must devote themselves to family service and not to frivolities (2:9-10) or to usurping authority over men (2:11-14). The family must have wise, competent overseers (3:1-7). It must have wise care for family needs (3:8-13). In every respect it must conform to divine order (3:14-16). Proper rules and examples from the leaders are most important (4:1-16). Family members must all treat one another with the respect and honor and sensitivity appropriate to their mutual status (5:1-6:2). Those in need must be cared for, preferably by those closest to them (5:3-10). Use of money must support family goals (6:6-10, 17-19).

In sum, the theme of God’s household runs through 1 Timothy and is validly used as the basis for inferences about Christian behavior, not merely as an incidental illustration.

### **Male Leadership in the Church**

The central use of the household analogy naturally points toward inferences regarding authoritative leadership in the church. The leadership within a family

is vested in the husband and father (Ephesians 5:22-6:4).<sup>5</sup> The church as God's household also needs wise and competent leadership. That leadership is to be sought among men who have already shown their abilities in the context of their immediate families (1 Timothy 3:1-7). Women, by contrast, are not to be placed in authority in the church, because such a role would not harmonize with the general relations between men and women in marriage, as established at creation (1 Timothy 2:11-14).<sup>6</sup> Thus, the differences between men and women within the context of marriage and family carry over into differences in roles that men and women may assume within the church.

Such a set of inferences is natural, once we have noticed the decisive connection between the natural family and the church as our spiritual family. But do these inferences really hold up? Let us look at the distinct steps more closely.

First, do families have a God-ordained structure of leadership and authority? Do husbands have a unique responsibility for leadership within the family? Ephesians 5:22-6:4 and Colossians 3:18-21 indicate that they do.

Second, are there irreversible relations of leadership and submission within the church? Clearly there are. The very title "overseer" used in 1 Timothy 3:1 indicates a position involving exercise of leadership. These overseers are also described as "elders" in Titus 1:5, 1 Peter 5:1-4, Acts 20:28-31. They are worthy of honor, especially when they discharge their responsibilities of leadership well (1 Timothy 5:17). Hebrews 13:17 makes it very clear that they deserve our obedience: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."

In fact, principles of submission should operate more broadly in the relations between older people and younger. Humility should characterize everyone (1 Peter 5:5b-6). But the younger men are particularly called on to be submissive to the older men (1 Peter 5:5). Paul counsels Timothy to exhort an older man "as if he were your father" (1 Timothy 5:1). Clearly, different people are to be treated differently, in accordance with the kind of people they are.

Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father.  
Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity. (1 Timothy 5:1-2)

In fundamental matters pertaining to our relation to the Lord, all of us enjoy the same privileges.<sup>7</sup> We have all been justified by faith (Romans 5:1). We have all become a kingdom of priests and share in a heavenly inheritance (1 Peter 2:9-10; Ephesians 1:3-14). We have all put on Christ and are children of Abraham (Galatians 3:27-29). We are all members of God's family or household. But these fundamental privileges enhance rather than eliminate the distinctiveness of our gifts (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). Our privileges should stimulate rather than destroy our concern to treat each person in the church with the sensitivity and respect due to that person by reason of his or her gifts, age, sex, leadership status, and personality.<sup>8</sup> Such is Paul's point in the text of 1 Timothy 5:1-2 given above. Timothy is not exhorted to treat each person in a manner mechanically identical with every other person, but to take into account the full range of personal factors that go into an intimate family relationship. Each person in God's

household is not an abstract, faceless mask to be treated according to an invariant recipe, but a full person who is to be recognized as such—as a man or a woman, an older person or younger, an adult or a child.

Must the church's leaders or overseers be men? The Apostle Paul assumes that they are to be men rather than women when he describes them as "the husband of but one wife" (1 Timothy 3:2). But could not this expression be incidental? We must consider carefully whether Paul's rule here is intended to be absolute.

According to Paul, the fundamental principles regarding the structures of the human family are to be applied to the church as God's household (1 Timothy 3:15). Our personal relations to others in God's household should take into account what kind of persons they are, whether young or old, male or female (1 Timothy 5:1-2). In particular, the structure of family leadership is to be carried over into God's household: qualified men are to be appointed as overseers, that is, fathers of the church. A woman, however capable and gifted she may be, can never become a father of a family. As a woman, she is simply not so constituted. Likewise, a woman may never become a father in God's household. She may indeed become a "mother" in God's household, and exercise the roles indicated in 1 Timothy 5:2; 3:11; 5:9-10, 14; Titus 2:3-5; 2 Timothy 1:5. The life of the church never overthrows but rather enhances the life of the family, based on God's design from creation.

Such reasoning on Paul's part is the best context for understanding Paul's teaching in 1 Timothy 2:8-15. There Paul sets out distinctive responsibilities for men (2:8) and women (2:9-15). The necessity of such distinction is best understood as flowing from the fact that men and women are not interchangeable within God's household, just as they are not within human families. Under the topic of women's responsibilities, beginning in 2:9, Paul includes the statement that a woman is not "to teach or to have authority over a man" (2:12). According to our previous arguments, this conclusion is a natural outcome of the analogy between the church and the human family, in which the wife is not to have authority over her husband (Ephesians 5:22-24). Paul then appeals to the background of the order of creation (2:13), in which the pattern for a husband's authority is initially established.<sup>9</sup> He also appeals to the fall (2:14), in which male and female roles were not identical. Paul concludes with a reminder of one of the central and proper services of women, the bearing of children (2:15). This particular distinctive service by women reminds us more broadly of the larger responsibilities that women have in rearing children within a family.<sup>10</sup> Thus the whole passage organizes itself naturally once we understand the centrality of the idea of family and the fruitfulness of using human households as a basis for discerning people's responsibilities within God's household.

In sum, Paul bases his reasoning on general principles, going back ultimately to the Biblical account in Genesis 2 and 3. Paul has an understanding of God's plans and purposes in creating marriage and the family. Paul teaches that in the church, God's household, women are not to exercise authority over men, just as in a human family they are not to exercise authority over their husbands. Paul understands the position of overseer as involving the exercise of fatherly care over God's household. Hence women are excluded from being overseers on the basis of general Biblical principles concerning the family, not on the basis of some temporary circumstances.



### The Inevitability of Inferences Concerning People's Distinctive Roles

The conclusions that we have reached concerning distinctive roles of men and women in the church will doubtless be resisted in certain quarters. Nevertheless, in my opinion, church life in line with such conclusions inevitably results from the robust practice of Christian obedience and love within the body of Christ. Only temporary circumstances and difficulties within the body of Christ and within the surrounding society make genuinely Biblical practices seem less inevitable or even counterintuitive. Let us see how the process works.

Robust Christianity begins with fervent faith in Christ. When in faith we behold Christ in His true beauty and love, we begin to respond with vigorous love for Him. Love for Christ is in turn expressed and reflected in love for fellow Christians (1 John 4:20-21).

In particular, Christian love transforms the family. Husbands and wives begin to practice the Word of God in Ephesians 5:22-33 and begin to imitate the love that Christ has for the church and the submission that the church ought to practice to Christ. Christian love at its best and most intense is not merely a general, vague sentiment of love or an undefined impulse to do good. It is love in union with Christ. Our love ought to be enlivened by the supreme example of Christ, empowered by the resurrection of Christ, embodied in the practice of following Christ. In the family, such love will never find itself able to dispense with the power generated by the Christological analogy of Ephesians 5:22-33 and the Old Testament discourses about God as husband to Israel (for example, Hosea 2; Ezekiel 16; Isaiah 54:5-6). According to Ephesians 5:22-23, husbands have responsibilities like those of Christ, while wives have responsibilities like those of the church. The responsibilities are not simply interchangeable, any more than the roles of Christ and the church are interchangeable. The Bible thus moves us away from any pure identity in the roles of husbands and wives. The husbands grow in imitation of the love of Christ and the wives grow in imitation of the submission of the church. The roles of husband and wife are not reversible. The Bible contradicts radical egalitarian philosophy, that is, a philosophy that says that men and women are in virtually all respects interchangeable and that their roles ought to have no relation to their sexual constitution.

Of course there is *some* degree of overlap in the ways in which we may describe the responsibilities of husbands and wives. Though Ephesians 5 does not put it this way, it is nevertheless true that husbands ought to minister to the needs of their wives just as Christ serves the needs of the church, and wives ought to love their husbands as the church loves Christ. But the duties and practices of husbands and wives are not purely identical and interchangeable, precisely because they are modeled even more deeply on the irreversible Biblical patterns given once for all in the accomplishment of redemption through Jesus Christ.

Thus Christian marital practice gradually moves beyond the pure egalitarianism of some people and the immature domineering of others. Different Christian marriages may still have many differences, corresponding to the different gifts and different personalities of the two partners. But, as Christ transforms a marriage, a responsibility of overall family leadership and “headship”<sup>11</sup> begins to be practiced by husbands in distinction from wives.

Christian love also binds together all the members of the universal church. Since God is our Father, we really are in a fundamental sense one family. The



Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the family gives us yearnings toward our fellow family members. In the long run, Christians cannot be satisfied with nothing more than a large, anonymous meeting once or twice a week. The ties of love demand more frequent and more intimate relations, perhaps alongside a Sunday morning meeting with a very large group.

As Christians meet with one another and know one another more intimately, their sense of being one family grows. They begin to treat one another in the way Paul counsels: the older men as fathers, the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, the younger women as sisters (1 Timothy 5:1-2). People are no longer faceless masks, but real people, bound together by family ties. The same logic operative in natural families begins then to play itself out in the church as God's household. In the intimacy of this spiritual family, people find that they are treating one another in a manner that respects differences of age, sex, and personality.

The presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit in God's household, as well as God's own Fatherhood, demands the observance of household order. Quarrels, heresies, and various kinds of immaturity must be looked after rather than simply ignored or viewed with indifference. The intimacy of the spiritual family itself calls for loving involvement when there are sins and difficulties, not merely withdrawal or soupy tolerance.

In such situations, the "fathers" of the church stand out. Mature, sober, sound, godly men with exemplary family lives are the natural leaders in this extended family. First, the whole church naturally treats them as fathers and perceives the leadership abilities they exercise in their own immediate families. Second, church leadership in a situation of family intimacy is like family leadership—a matter not primarily of laying down formal rules but of setting a good example that naturally engenders admiration and that people attempt to emulate. Paul himself functions as an example in subordination to Christ, who is the example *par excellence* (1 Corinthians 11:1). Timothy is exhorted to set a good example (1 Timothy 4:12). The general godliness of overseers, and not merely their doctrinal orthodoxy or speaking ability, is important to Paul for the same reason. Of course mature men and women should both function as examples in a general way (Titus 2:2, 3-5). But in the particular case of overseers, we are dealing with people who must be an example specifically in their *family leadership*, both leadership in God's household and leadership in their own household. That natural qualification points the church away from looking for women and towards looking for men as overseers.

Finally, note that in situations of face-to-face intimacy, the church is largely made up of whole families who as a family come to the church meetings. The church is quite likely to meet regularly in small groups in members' homes, and the home atmosphere extends to the whole meeting. In the church meetings themselves, the fathers continue to exercise authority over their families. In Titus 1:6, Paul indicates that the elders should be men "whose children believe," in which case the whole family would regularly come to meetings and the obedience or disobedience of children to their father would be manifest at the meeting itself (see Titus 1:6; 1 Timothy 3:4). In fact, at a church gathering the lines between family and church are not very clearly drawn, because the family comes to the meeting as a family and not merely as isolated individuals. Family worship at home and

family worship with a larger group might seem very like one another, except that the larger group is the extended family—that is, God’s household.

All these factors, then, add up to generate a firm impulse to see the mature fathers in the church as the natural people to become fathers in a more extended and official sense, namely, fathers of the church as an extended spiritual family. If church life is as robust and intimate as it should be—if it is normal *family* life—the church will find itself recognizing male overseers even if hypothetically it did not have the specific instructions from the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9.

### **The Temporary Character of Modern Doubts**

Of course, large sections of the church today have doubts about these matters, and some go so far as openly to oppose Biblical principles. But the doubts and oppositions arise, as I see it, from temporary aberrations and weaknesses in the life of the church and the larger society, rather than from the force of truth.

First, the Western church is deeply infected by theological modernism or liberalism. When the Bible is no longer acknowledged to be the Word of God, it is no longer clear that there is a divine standard for the church to obey, and love for Christ (if present at all) grows cold.

Second, the pace of technological and social change within post-industrial societies has made us reserved about the answers of previous generations, and our questioning extends to every aspect of society and church life. In addition, various changes in women’s education, the nature of housework, and the involvement of women in work outside the home have raised many new and difficult questions about the nature of men’s and women’s roles in both family and church.

Third, radical philosophical and political egalitarianism, coupled with sin and envy, has generated hatred of all differences and differentiations among human beings. Many today think that the rich, the powerful, the gifted, and the possessors of official authority must be brought down to the level of the mediocrity of the mass, whether or not they have obtained their situation and function through righteous means. Such egalitarianism, when extended to the family and the church, refuses to acknowledge any differences between men and women.

Fourth, many people have become sincerely concerned about past and present oppression of women and unnecessary strictures on the use of women’s gifts. Such evils do exist and should be opposed, but they do not justify radical egalitarian conclusions.

Finally, many evangelical churches today are seen primarily as lecture halls or preaching stations. People identify the church with its building, in contrast to the Biblical emphasis that those united to Christ are the real church. Moreover, the building is viewed merely as a place for hearing a sermon or enjoying religious entertainment. Such a view impoverishes our communal life as Christians. Certainly monologue sermons are important, since they are one means of bringing God’s Word to bear on the church. But God intends the church to be much more. If we think only of sermons, we have lost sight of the riches expressed in the fact that the church is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). Each member of the church is to exercise gifts for the benefit of the rest. We are all supposed to exhort and encourage one another, based on the love of Christ (Colossians 3:12-17). We are to be tender to one another as beloved children of God

(Ephesians 4:32-5:1). Christian fellowship is not supposed to mean merely a superficial social time, but sharing based on our relation to God the Father and to Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3-4). We are to express intimacy and care for one another as we would towards members of our own family, since we are in fact all members of God's family or God's household.

But in too many evangelical churches, people have little experience of the Biblical practice of common family life. There may also be no regard for the necessity of church discipline. The church leaders are nothing more than gifted speakers or counselors (paid ministers), or else managers of church property and/or programs (whether these people are called trustees or elders or deacons). Such "leaders" are just people whose useful gifts have brought them into prominence. In such situations, it is understandable that some people may fail to see why appropriately qualified women may not exercise the key functions they associate with leadership. In fact, Christians will not fully understand the logic leading to male overseers until they come to grips with what the church should really be as God's household.

### **Household Management Contrasted with Simple Communication**

The analogy between family and church also helps to make clear what distinguishes the office of overseer from other roles in the church. Consider the situation within a natural family. Within a family we may find a variety of skills, abilities, and gifts. A wise husband and father will encourage the full development and use of these abilities. His leadership, properly understood, is enhanced rather than threatened by the full flourishing of the family as a whole.

For example, in a healthy situation family conversation involves rich communion, including give and take among all the members of the family. Even the children participate actively. As they learn from God and from outside sources at school or play, they may sometimes communicate to their parents things the parents did not know. The wife, as a mature person, is in an even better position to cause her husband to learn and grow through things she communicates to him. Thus the leadership belonging to the husband does not contradict many-sided communication among all the family members.

Similarly, all the family members have, in some broad sense, responsibilities for management. Even the youngest child may help to "manage" setting the table or doing dishes or caring for the cat. Wives exercise authority over their children, but they also may have very extensive projects in which they exercise management not only over the physical domain of the household but also over transactions with the surrounding society (Proverbs 31:10-31; cf. 1 Timothy 5:14). Thus management in a broad sense is everyone's responsibility. The father nevertheless exercises an overall authority over the household as a whole.

Advocates of women overseers are quick to observe that Christian women have many of the gifts and skills necessary for good communication and good management. If they have such gifts, they should exercise them for the benefit of the body of Christ (1 Peter 4:10). These observations are basically correct, but they are in fact just as relevant and useful to Christian families as they are to the church as an extended family. In both cases, wise leaders should encourage the use of gifts. But in neither case does the existence of gifts overthrow the legitimacy of investing unique leadership in the father. Quite the opposite: the comparison

with the family shows that gifts, in and of themselves, can never be a sound reason for displacing an order grounded in other factors from creation.

Since management is crucial to the argument, let us become more specific about various kinds of management. The picture in Proverbs 31:10-31 illustrates several significant types of management: management of clothing, food, money, fields, charitable gifts, purchases, and sales. All these types of management ought to be treated as instances of stewardship, since the whole world belongs to God. We are never absolute owners, but only stewards who have been temporarily entrusted with some of God's property. In addition, management of other people should always respect the fact that people are created in God's image. Authority over them necessarily has a character different from authority over the subhuman creation.

Men and women may vary considerably in their skills in these various areas. Skills related to wisdom and general Christian maturity help in all types of management, but some people are still more skillful in some areas than in others. Moreover, people may improve their skills as they develop maturity and experience.

Within a family, the diversity of skills naturally results in division of labor. The husband, the wife, and the children may all have some specific areas of responsibility delegated to them. If grandchildren or other relatives are living together, they are naturally included as well. In addition, consultation and imitation help family members learn from one another. Some areas of management may work out best if they are the responsibility of the whole family rather than delegated to one person.

Ephesians 5:22-6:4 and other passages about the family clearly leave open a great many possibilities for the exact form of managerial arrangements. In these matters, a wise leader attempts to work out arrangements that best use and enhance the gifts of each family member. But Ephesians 5:22-6:4 does nevertheless draw some clear boundary lines. Children should submit to their parents, and conversely the parents have responsibility for managing their children. Wives should submit to their husbands, and husbands have managerial responsibility with respect to their wives, as well as for the rest of the household. These managerial responsibilities are fixed by God. Responsibilities can be delegated to other family members in accordance with their maturity and skills. In particular, they may all engage in various types of management of the subhuman creation. But there is still a leader where the buck stops. The roles of men and women in marriage are at this point irreversible, not interchangeable.

In sum, a wise husband leads his household using the fullest consultation and conversation, and he delegates authority. In all these practices, he is simply imitating Christ's care for the church. Christ involves us in two-way conversation and delegates responsibilities to us. Christ is nevertheless the ultimate authority in all of life; husbands, subject to Christ's authority, have been assigned as heads of their households.

When Paul's instructions are abused and husbands use their authority as an excuse for selfish and domineering behavior, a reaction sets in. Many people in our day deplore the oppression of women and the foolishness involving in refusing to encourage them to test and use their gifts. If people do not have proper godly models before them, it is understandable that they should think a pattern of completely interchangeable responsibilities is the only reasonable alternative

consistent with the freedom given us in Christ. Yet the actual goal of Scripture is richer.

The analogy between the natural family and God's household therefore suggests the same procedures for God's household. Responsibilities for management may, in a broad sense, be delegated and distributed throughout God's household. But the overseers, as fathers in the household, possess more ultimate authority. The overseers ought to be men, in analogy with the fact that the father and not the mother of a family possesses higher authority.

Advocates of women overseers also appeal to the good that has been accomplished in the past by Christian women—in particular, by women who have exercised leadership. In evaluating this appeal, several factors must be borne in mind. First, Proverbs 31:10-31 shows that some types of leadership and management by women harmonize with a husband's more ultimate leadership (Proverbs 31:23). Second, bold but humble communication of the truth by wives to their husbands need not undermine their husbands' authority, any more than Paul intended to undermine general state authority by his criticisms of the actions of particular state authorities (see Acts 16:37; 22:25; 23:3-5; 25:10-11). Third, family cases involving widows, divorcées, and absent fathers show that sometimes women must exercise authority in the absence of any better alternatives; but such situations are far from ideal. Fourth, family cases involving domineering wives show that by the grace of God some good can be accomplished even through people and actions contaminated by sin.

All of these cases illumine by analogy what may happen within the church as God's household. None of these cases negates the principal point that ideally fathers are to exercise overall authority in both family and church.

In particular, we must avoid confusing leadership with ability to understand the Bible and ability to communicate its teaching to others. Such abilities are valuable within the body of Christ. But when they are present in women they obviously do not imply any lessening of their responsibilities to submit to their husbands in the Lord. Husbands on their part should encourage the full use of their wives' abilities, and they themselves may benefit greatly; but the husbands do not thereby relinquish their own responsibilities. The same holds for the overseers in God's household.

### **Evil Effects Arising from Disrupting the Order of God's Household**

Maintaining male leadership in the church is not a matter of indifference. Evil effects inevitably arise when we deviate from God's pattern. Such effects are largely the reverse side of the picture that we have been drawing. Because of the close relation between family and church, godly family life stimulates appreciation of God as our heavenly Father, and appreciation of God stimulates godly family life. Both are enhanced by the example of mature, fatherly leaders within the church. Conversely, disintegration of household order within the church adversely affects both our consciousness of being in God's family and the quality of love within Christian families.

To begin with, absence of godly, fatherly leadership within the church makes the affirmation of the Fatherhood of God closer to an abstraction. God's Fatherhood is, of course, illustrated preeminently in the great deeds of the history of redemption that embody His fatherly rule, care, and discipline. But we are

richer in our understanding of God because most of us have enjoyed having a human father, and we are richer still if we can see the fatherly care and the rule of God embodied at a practical level in the older men of the church (Titus 2:2) and especially in the overseers.

Church order can deviate from the ideal either by lacking overseers, by having unqualified overseers, by appointing women overseers, or by redefining the office of overseer. Any of these moves tends to make more vague people's experience of the church as a family. The lack of genuine practical correspondence between the church and Biblically-based natural families suppresses people's ability to see the analogy. Hence they lose some of their grip on the importance of family-like intimacy and support within the church. Moreover, they cease to understand that God's Fatherhood is expressed in His rule over us and that His rule is exercised in part through mature, father-like overseers.

In particular, radical egalitarian philosophy, which says that we are to treat all people exactly the same, hinders Christians from having the kind of sensitivity toward the age, sex, and position of others that Paul enjoins (1 Timothy 5:1-2, 17). Relations become more impersonal, and the realities of membership in one family of God recede out of Christians' consciousness and their practice.

The practice of Christian family life is also adversely affected. Most people learn far better from example, and from teaching closely related to their leaders' examples, than they do from teaching in the abstract. So how do they properly assimilate teaching about family life? Ideally, they imitate the family lives of their church leaders. But this imitation is most effective if they can actually see something of the family life of their leaders. For example, in a smaller group meeting in a home, they see the way the leader conducts himself with respect to the other family members present for worship. Christian worship in smaller groups becomes something very like family worship, which ought to be the heartbeat of life for each particular family. This whole process becomes confused when the distinctions between men and women, fathers and mothers, are overlooked. Ordinary families then have no direct models to build on.

Ostensibly, the feminist movement aims at freeing women from oppression. But such freedom in the true sense can come only through the divine powers of liberation and love contained in Jesus Christ. True freedom is found in obedience to Christ; anything else only constitutes some form of slavery to sin.

The family more than any other single institution in modern society desperately needs freedom and renewal through the love of Christ. That freedom comes most effectively when we are able, under God, to harness the full, rich resources that He provides. We are to teach people above all to embody in their families the model of Christ set forth in Ephesians 5:22-23. And we are to teach them by examples that we set forth in the family-like life of the church, including the godly example of mature spiritual fathers, the overseers. Hence we hinder true liberation if we deviate from the pattern of male overseers. It would be ironic if a sincere desire for women's liberation should be corrupted in practice into its opposite, a hindrance to the liberating power of God that is at work in His household.

## **Conclusion**

Some Christian people think Christian marriage ideally should express a radically egalitarian pattern: a husband and wife should in every respect be able to func-

tion interchangeably. If they were right, the analogy between family and church would suggest that men and women could in every respect have interchangeable roles within the church.

But they are not right. Ephesians 5:22-23 resists them, as do the other passages comparing the relation of God and His people to marriage.<sup>12</sup> In time, we may hope that the Holy Spirit will use the power of these Biblical passages to generate godly marriages and so prevail over abstract egalitarian sentiments. If, as I believe, these Biblical passages do provide a warrant for assigning specific leadership responsibility to husbands and fathers, we need also to recognize the same pattern within the church. Mature men and not women are to be appointed overseers. But blind obedience to a formal rule is not sufficient. We must work towards more richly embodying in our churches the realities of our common life. We are children of God, members of one divinely ruled family. Only a full-orbed expression of Christ's love in the Christian community will bring to realization the freedom, power, and beauty derived from the manifestation of the glory of God in His household (Ephesians 3:10).