

The Headship of Jesus in a Biblical Eldership

by David A. Huston

This paper is presented to show how the Headship of Jesus interacts with a local assembly through the elders of the church.

*And He is the head of the body, the church...
that in all things He may have the preeminence.*
Colossians 1:18

*So when they had appointed elders in every church,
and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord
in whom they had believed.*
Acts 14:23

THE APOSTOLIC PATTERN IS CLEAR: in the New Testament, the apostles placed each of the local assemblies they founded under the oversight of a team of pastoral elders. But why a team? Why not a single individual? There are several perspectives from which we might answer this question, but this article will focus on the connection between the work of elders and the Headship of Jesus Christ. Since the structure of anything is dependent upon its purpose, to understand *why* God established this structure of leadership we must first examine the purpose of an eldership.

Within the context of this article, the Headship of Jesus pertains to His leadership over a local body of believers as a corporate entity. Headship pertains to individual members only relative to their relationships and ministries within the body. In this context, the purpose of an eldership is to provide a local assembly with a *transparent interface* through which Jesus can fulfill His role as the Head of the Church. The elders, as a group, reflect the Headship of Jesus to the assembly as a whole the way a husband, as an individual, reflects the Headship of Jesus to His family. This is not to say that the elders are the only means by which Jesus reveals and exercises His Headship in a local assembly, but they are a key means and one that needs to be understood by God's people.

A Transparent Interface

An *interface* is a point of connection, a place where interaction and communication take place. Jesus may fill all space, but this does not mean He interacts and communicates in every place. In today's world He has chosen the Church to be His interface with lost mankind. As Paul wrote, God has chosen by the message preached to save those who believe (1 Corinthians 1:21). In this case, the one preaching is an interface between God and man. Within a local assembly, the elders are a highly important interface, in particular when the body as a whole is concerned. It is through the elders and those with equipping gifts that Jesus connects with and directs each local body. This does not mean direction can never come from outside the local assembly or that elders should pay no attention to the ideas and messages of non-elders. It only means that the eldership is a principal interface, but certainly not the exclusive one.

Elders must not see themselves as just a point of connection, but as a *transparent* point. This is a vital component in the manifesting of Jesus to His people. The word *transparent* means having the property of transmitting light without appreciable scattering so that bodies lying beyond are entirely visible. The elders are there primarily to make Jesus entirely visible. This was Paul's intent when he wrote, Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). The idea is that Jesus become clearly visible as the Head of the Church.

The word *transparent* also means free from pretense or deceit; clear. This means that the faith and love of the elders must be pure, untarnished by carnal thinking or selfish motives. Their purpose is to accurately communicate the character, purposes, and ministries of Jesus Christ, not their own programs and agendas. The idea is that Jesus be provided with a free-flowing channel through which He can feed, lead, protect, care for, equip, and make Himself known to His people without being diminished, exaggerated, or distorted in any way.

The Nature of Headship

The only way we can understand the biblical concept of headship is to examine the purposes and ministry of Jesus: He is our example. Colossians 2:19 speaks of those who are holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. The term *holding fast* means that we must lay hold of Him and refuse to let go. Just as a body must stay connected to its head, so must the body of Christ, including each member individually, stay connected to Jesus. Therefore, the biblical concept of headship involves **connectedness**.

As it pertains to an eldership, there must be a connectedness between the members of a local assembly and the elders overseeing the assembly. In other words, the elders cannot oversee from a distance any more than a head can communicate movements to a body if it is severed from it. Hence, Peter addressed his comments to the elders who are *among you...* (1 Peter 5:1). This phrasing indicates that Peter considered the elders to be in adult-to-adult relationship with all the members of the assembly. The fact that Jesus has revealed Himself as the Head testifies to the necessity of eye-level connectedness between elders and the believers they are leading.

In addition to connectedness, headship also speaks of **origination**. As the Head of the Church, Jesus is said to be the beginning (Colossians 1:18). In other words, Jesus is the One who took the initiative in getting the Church started. He is the author of our faith. He is also the One out of whom the Church comes forth. Headship therefore involves **taking the initiative**. And just as the head of a river, being its source, gives water to the river, so it is that Jesus is said to have loved us and given Himself for us. This is to be the attitude of every team of pastoring elders. They must not lead passively or reactively, but must actively and proactively love the members of the assembly, being willing to very gladly spend and be spent for them (2 Corinthians 12:15). Like the Good Shepherd, they must lay down their lives for the sheep (John 10:15). This means that headship is founded in **love** and is preeminently something that is **given**.

When the Bible speaks of Jesus being the Head of His Church, it is not describing something He has taken upon Himself. It is describing something He **gives** to us. Headship has nothing to do with bossing or controlling people; it has everything to do with **giving**. God so loved the world that He gave.... (John 3:16). As the Head, Jesus not only gives us saving grace, but He also gives us direction as a local assembly and the resources to fulfill His purpose. This is a great gift to us, since we do not know the future and are often unaware of our greatest needs. But Jesus knows all things and is able to make all things work together for our good.

We can see that in the example of Jesus Christ, headship involves...

1. The elders functioning in close and intimate relationships with the members of the assembly.
2. The elders rejecting passivity and taking the initiative in shepherding the flock.
3. The elders actively loving and freely giving of themselves to the people.

What are the dynamics and responsibilities of the elders as they provide Jesus with a transparent interface for His functions as the Head? The book of Ephesians describes three aspects of headship.

Headship as Oversight

Ephesians 1:22-23 says, "And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. As the Head, Jesus is over all things to His body. From this perspective, He is the **Overseer** of the Church. As the interface for the Headship of Jesus, the elders are responsible for watching over the well-being of the people and seeing that they are properly cared for.

In order to fulfill their oversight responsibilities, Jesus invests the elders with certain authority. This authority is not exercised by lording it over people, however, but through serving in love. Like Jesus, oversight authority is never exercised harshly or forcibly, but lovingly and for the benefit and blessing of the ones being overseen.

How did Jesus qualify to be raised up to the throne of heaven where He could sit as the Head and exercise authority over all things to the Church? Philippians 2:7-9 tells us that He made Himself of no reputation, taking on the form of a bondservant, and humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. This is why God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name. It is important for us to recognize that Jesus qualified to oversee our lives by laying down His life. This means that **humility** and **giving in love** are prerequisites of headship.

Paul, whose own life was modeled after the life of Jesus, wrote in Philippians 4:9, "The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you. One of the responsibilities of oversight is providing an example to the ones who are being overseen. Peter instructed the elders to shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:2-3). As a transparent interface for the Headship of Jesus, elders must provide the local assembly with an accurate and consistent example of what it means to be a truly spiritual person.

Overseers watch over the growth and life activities of the assembly. But they don't do this passively or reactively. In other words, when something is not right, they step forward and deal with it. Elders are to be strong and courageous leaders,

challenging their assemblies to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present age. They must declare the truth boldly, pull down strongholds, and strip away all excuses for spiritual failure; yet they must always do so with gentleness, patience, and kindness, not brute force. This is what headship oversight and authority is all about.

Headship as Support

Ephesians 2:20 says, **H**aving been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone..... And 1 Corinthians 3:11 says, **F**or no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. **A**s the Head of the Church, Jesus is also the foundational Cornerstone of the Church. This means that He is the One upon whom the Church rests and depends. He supports the Church. This shows us the second responsibility of headship, **support**.

The word **s**upport has several definitions including: to endure bravely or quietly; to promote the interests of someone; to uphold or defend as being valid or right; to assist; to help; to pay the costs of someone; to keep from losing courage; to keep something going.

As a transparent interface for the Headship of Jesus, elders must be there for the people —to sustain them and hold them up. People need to feel that they can rely on their elders during difficult times when they may feel like giving up. Elders must be able to guide them in finding hope and strength in Jesus by helping them to understand the spiritual dynamics of their trial.

Elders must understand that God sees His people as being like sheep: weak and vulnerable. This means that elders need to courageously bear the brunt of the challenges the local assembly is facing. Paul admonished the elders of Ephesus, **T**herefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). The Church is valuable to God; He paid a high price to purchase it. And He is not willing to let it fall apart. Therefore, the elders are to uphold and sustain the people they are watching over just as a shepherd does his sheep.

Headship as Comfort

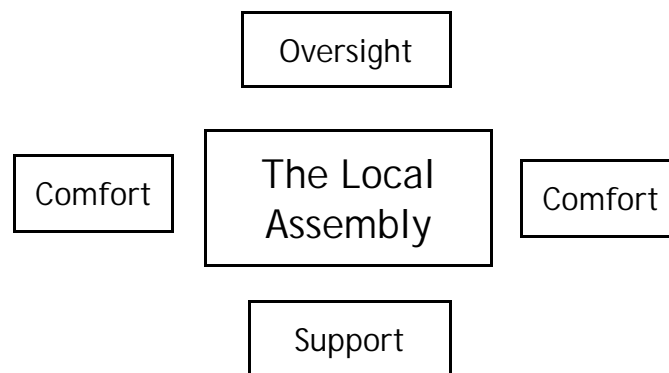
Ephesians 5:25-29 says, **H**usbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the

washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.

As the Overseer of the Church, Jesus is **over** His bride, watching over her and providing for her. As the Cornerstone of the Church, Jesus is **under** His bride, supporting her and holding her up. But as the loving Husband of the Church, Jesus is **close by her side**, loving her, comforting her, and caring for her. In fact, the Spirit of Jesus is called the Comforter, *parakletos*, which means “one who comes along side.” This means that **comfort** is the third responsibility of headship.

To comfort means to be near for nourishing and cherishing. The word “nourish” means to feed, strengthen, or promote the growth of someone. The word “cherish” means literally to warm someone. It also means to brood over, to hold dear, to show affection, to cultivate with care and affection, or to harbor in the mind deeply and resolutely.

While oversight means watching over what the assembly is doing, comfort means doing things together. Today, many leaders are unwilling to relate laterally to the members of local assemblies, believing that such a relationship would diminish their authority or erode the people’s respect. As a New Testament model, however, we see no such behavior in the ministry of Paul. Instead we see him meeting in an upper room into the wee hours of the night, teaching the Word of God to the people (Acts 20:7-9). In the last chapter of the book of Acts, we see him inviting whoever was willing to come into his house to learn about Jesus. No, Paul was not aloft and aloof, but rather a willing participant in the life of the body right alongside the people, as an equal member of the assembly. He continually demonstrated by his actions his love and deep concern for the well-being of the people.



Paul wrote to the Philippians telling them, Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern (Philippians 3:17). The people of God need more than teaching to be transformed into the image of Christ. They must also have spiritual people around them who can provide a pattern of spiritual life. Hebrews 13:7 instructs, Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow. The word follow literally means imitate or imitate. Like it or not, for good or for ill, the elders serve as the most conspicuous pattern for the members of a local assembly to imitate.

A Gift of Love

How did Jesus love the Church? By giving Himself for her on the cross —not because He wanted to suffer, but because He wanted the Church! Similarly, elders gain the respect and cooperation of the people they oversee by genuinely loving them and giving themselves for them.

Concerning the purpose and work of elders, we are **NOT** saying...

1. That elders should be closed and unreceptive to input from other members of the body.
2. That elders should micro-manage the lives of God's people.
3. That all aspects of body ministry must originate with the elders.
4. That those who are not elders cannot take any initiative.

The purpose of an eldership is not to control or dominate the people of God; it is not to form a new kind of clergy or erect an unbiblical wall of separation between the leaders and the led. It is rather to express the heart and character of Jesus to the people for the purpose of overseeing the spiritual life of the body, supporting the people in their trials and distresses, and comforting them in their spiritual development. These purposes are achieved by feeding, leading, protecting, and equipping the saints for the work of ministry. The ultimate aim of the work of elders is that all believers be conformed to the image of Jesus and be responsive at all times to the leading of God's Spirit in ministry and body life. An eldership does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of the body. It is a gift of love.

Note to the reader:

If you would like to comment on the contents of this paper, please contact the authors via email. Jim McKinley can be contacted at Jim@GloriousChurch.com and David Huston at DAHuston@aol.com. Or we can both be contacted through our website at www.GloriousChurch.com. We welcome and appreciate all honest comments, questions, and criticisms.

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