

SYNERGOI

For we are GOD'S Fellow Workers... (1 Cor 3:9)

θεου' γὰρ ἐσμεν συνεργοὶ

A LETTER FOR LEADERS

**PUBLISHED BY THE DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT
OF THE EVANGELICAL MISSIONARY CHURCH
CANADA EAST DISTRICT - www.emccd.ca**



[DSeL021212] Dec 12, 2002]

Headship – Is Headship passé? [Article #5]

William Webb in his book, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, endeavours to establish the enduring validity of certain criteria for biblical interpretation. One criterion that he tends to downplay he calls “primogeniture.” His analysis, however, indicates that it is better called “primacy” since, primogeniture denotes the right of the firstborn. Primogeniture is a specific subcategory of primacy. I want to explore the primacy of principle that could also be called “the right of first place.”

In previous articles I have arguably established that the significance of male headship is found in the concept of primacy – the woman came from the man and for the man. If Webb is correct that the primacy principle is largely cultural in its force then he may be correct in moving to the position that he does. Let’s look more closely.

It is true that in the Bible, primacy is honoured and is a significant ordering principle for social relationships. It is also true as Webb observes that we are not as fastidious in applying the right of the firstborn, a specific form of the primacy principle. For example, we do not give the firstborn (usually) a greater share of the inheritance. And Webb is certainly correct in showing that the Bible sometimes gives pointed examples of “the older serving the younger” (and we’ll consider this below) but for all that we cannot agree that this somehow indicates that the primacy principle is obsolete. Let me illustrate.

I suspect that Webb would not be very happy were I to take text of his book, in whole or in part, and have it published under my name, even if I were to genuinely embrace every word of it (I “own” its content) or even to copy it out long hand. His argument before the courts would be, “It’s mine because I wrote it first!” The present owner of my wife’s stolen bike is a thief, because it was hers first. The premise is prior ownership. Now, one could sell the copyright or the bike or whatever and another principle becomes operative but it does not render obsolete the primacy principle. It is grounded more deeply than Webb allows. The right of ownership is grounded first in primacy. It may be applied differently but the primacy principle is recognized in many cultures. It is also used in establishing the supremacy of Jesus!

Other examples, standing in line for boxing day sales, waiting lists for elective surgery, possession of a seat on a city bus, the land claim of first nations because they are “first”, the argument of both the Jews and Palestinians rooting themselves in being first, and the list goes on and on and on! Primacy, the right of first place is important in every aspect and walk of life: seniority in the work place, the gold medal sprinter, etc. I think I have made my point. Now let me take up another. Not only is there a matter of order but also of balance. I will speak about this balance in terms of interactive principles. Here is an illustration.

Not too long ago, I took my mother into emergency at the North York General Hospital. The general rule is “first come, first serve” but there was also another principle applied by the triage nurse, “most urgent need, first serve.” Within two minutes of the triage nurse seeing my mother, my mother was in a bed and receiving intensive care! The right of “being first in line” was overruled by the “priority” of need. This is an example of two valid principles at work. I suggest that this has application in the matter of headship. (Without developing the thought here, the principle of Christ’s headship did not prevent him from applying the principle of divine love. In fact, Philippians 2 indicates that the principle of divine love overrode the principle of divine primacy in order to save us! Amazing love!)

Let’s also recognize that in Scripture there are many examples of “the right of firstplace” mitigated or even reversed by God. The blessing of the “firstborn” was reversed for Esau and Jacob. Indeed this reversal has a prophetic significance:

Rom. 9:12 not by works but by him who calls --she was told, "The older will serve the younger."

And for Ephraim and Manasseh:

Gen. 48:14 But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn.

These two examples are illustrative of the fact that “primogeniture” was generally observed but not absolutely inviolable and seldom applied in isolation. Other principles are brought to bear in a given situation. Joseph, not the firstborn, but the beloved of his father Jacob, dreams of a primacy that sounds like “insubordination” to his brothers but is of God. David, the youngest, the least in the order of priority, is God’s Anointed! The biblical examples do not speak of the overthrow of the principle of primacy but of the necessity of applying it in the context of other and sometimes overriding principles.

Where does this get us? This establishes two important considerations. The right of first place, primacy, continues to be a valid ordering principle in social relationships. Second, primacy (headship) is not the only and not necessarily the overriding ordering principle in social relationships, especially in the body of Christ.

Perhaps one further thought: Let’s recognize that we all function within a complex web of relationships that do not yield to a simple hierarchical ordering. There is a complex web of authorities in all of our lives. As we try to apply the principles that were given to the first couple, we need to recognize that the principles that are so plain and obvious in their application in Eden -- the only man and the only woman on the planet in relationship walking in the garden with God -- is far more complex in a world with the almost countless relationships:

I am accountable to my wife, to my children, my banker, to the law enforcement officers, the municipality, the province of Ontario, the country of Canada, Her Majesty the Queen, the EMCCED, the EMCC, my home church and so on... And to my God! Others are accountable to me and sometimes there are mutual if disparate responsibilities and authorities.

Should a man be able to queue jump and get on an overbooked flight and bump my daughter from the flight? Should a man be able to disregard a police woman giving directions at an accident? Should a woman be able to write a book on theology or any topic? Should a man read a book of instruction written by a woman? I think most of us find even the questions laughable. The point? The complexities are real and need to be faced. Applying the principle of primacy is not the only principle to apply. What were the principles involved in allowing God to appoint Deborah to lead Israel, or Priscilla to teach Apollos? Worth thinking about? To be continued... Pastor Phil

Pastor Phil