

Head Over Heels: A Theology of Leadership in Christian Marriage

ELAINE A. HEATH

A personal note of thanks to CBE

I have been a member of Christians for Biblical Equality for nearly two decades, and I am honored to write this article to help celebrate the twentieth anniversary of *Priscilla Papers*. I am an example of a woman whose life has been profoundly shaped by the ministries of CBE, from the time I first perceived my call to ministry, up until now.

The first step that led me to CBE was reading Aída Besançon Spencer's book, *Beyond the Curse*.¹ It was my introduction to an egalitarian hermeneutic of Scripture, my first taste of scholarship that was liberating for women and men while upholding evangelical commitments to Scripture. At the time I read this book I knew God had called me to ordained ministry and academic ministry, but with only a high school diploma and membership in a church that forbade women from serving on the church board, the obstacles seemed insurmountable. Yet the call came to me again and again. I finally said yes to God.

Not long afterward, I wrote to Dr. Spencer to ask her about my dilemma, mailing my letter to the publisher. After several weeks, to my great joy a letter arrived, hand written and filled with loving encouragement. Among other gems of wisdom, Dr. Spencer encouraged me to join CBE, for I would find many resources there to assist in my journey into ministry. She was right.

With the books, articles, tapes, and conferences offered by CBE, I increasingly gained the understanding I needed, as well as the beginning of a supportive network, so that I could answer the call to ministry. I went on to complete three degrees, culminating in a Ph.D. in systematic theology. Today I am an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church, and I am a professor at Perkins School of Theology. CBE has been an integral part of my journey every step of the way.

The following article expresses my theology of leadership in Christian marriage. I write as a Christian theologian, an ordained clergywoman, a wife, and a mother. I write from my social location as an Anglo, middle-aged, middle-class, American woman. I write as someone who has endured much in order to answer God's call, no small amount of it coming from those who would silence and subjugate women in the name of God. (I would gladly do it again, for God's sake.) I write with gratitude for the faithfulness of God who calls us and equips us to bring love into this hurting world. More than anything, I write because I love the One who is Love.

Head over heels

Everyone who has been in love knows what it means to be "head over heels." This old saying originated in 14th century England, where it started out as "heels over head," meaning a cartwheel or somersault. To be head over heels is to love without reserve, to give

oneself to one's beloved with joyous abandon. It is to somersault, again and again, circling with trust, respect, honor, and appreciation, with mirth. Somersaults are playful, childlike, undignified. One cannot do a somersault while worrying about being in charge or telling others what to do. Nor can one imagine somersaults in the context of fear, intimidation, or diminishment. Somersaults are acts of freedom.

With a bit of imagination these images of "head over heels love" can be seen in the circular shape of wedding rings, and the meanings associated with them. The wedding vows in the United Methodist tradition, for example, include a section called the Blessing of the Rings. During this part of the ceremony the bride and groom each say, while placing the ring on the other's finger, "With all that I have and all that I am, I honor you, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."² In other words, the circle of the ring represents the gift of oneself, and the ring is given in the name of the God whose Three-in-One-ness has been imaged since antiquity as *perichoresis*, a circle dance of mutual love and self-giving.³ That is, the exchange of rings signifies an ongoing circle-dance of love between a man and woman, equal, one, yet distinct from one another.⁴ The rings are a continuous commitment to love in the image of the Trinity. The real "head" of this kind of "head over heels" marriage is God.

There are objections, of course, to this free-wheeling interpretation of marital love. These objections have to do with a particular interpretation of a few texts in the epistles.⁵ While these objections are important and must be considered, more fundamental and pervasive biblical themes must guide our reading. These are the triune nature of the God in whose image we love; the revelation of God's nature in the actual practice of Jesus, and the reality of the indwelling Holy Spirit in every believer. These three issues inform how we interpret the epistolary texts.

What we see in Jesus is servanthood, a core commitment to serve the best interests of others, even to the point of death. "I have not come to be served but to serve," Jesus says to his disciples (Matt. 20:28). Jesus impresses upon his followers then and now, the necessity of taking up a cross daily, of dying to oneself daily in order to find life (Matt. 16:24–25). The overwhelming testimony of the Gospels is that Jesus embodies and teaches a relational ethos of martyrdom, of dying for love's sake so that others might have life.⁶ This is what Jesus has in mind not just for those who follow, but especially for those who *lead* in the kingdom of God.



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Becoming the good gift

The preparation of catechumens in the early church was a preparation for martyrdom. (The word “witness” in Greek is *marturia*.) In the early years of the church, literal martyrdom was a real possibility for many Christians, thus language about the preparation for potential martyrdom was no mere rhetorical device to emphasize commitment. The expectation of Christian discipleship today, as a laying down of one’s life for the sake of the Gospel, is reflected in our baptismal vows and practices. To be baptized is to have left behind, to have died to the old life of sin, control, and self-interest, and to have embraced the new life of holiness, “Christ in us, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). Our witness is in living the baptized life.

In addition to baptism, the sacrament (or in some denominations, the ordinance) of Holy Communion holds special meaning for our relationships as Christians as well. To be a disciple is to live what Henri Nouwen calls a eucharistic life, a life lived for others because of the gift of self-giving love one has received from Christ.⁷

(The word “eucharist” comes from Greek words meaning “to give thanks,” and is related to the words for “gift” and “grace.”)

The celebration of Holy Communion is a thankful celebration of the “good gift” of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, as well as his promise to come again. This celebration does not end with sharing at the Lord’s table, however. It continues as we ourselves become “good gifts” of God in our relationships with one another. The expression of our many gifts and graces, abilities and responsibilities, is to be done as a good gift to others, as an outcome of what we have received in the good gift of Jesus. Oswald Chambers favoring the phrase “becoming broken bread and poured out wine”⁸ for characterizing the Christian life. This eucharistic, self-giving life of love is the foundation for all Christian relationships, and should be our most basic understanding of marital love.

Mutual self-giving as our witness to the world

It is true that Jesus is coming again, and will come in great glory and honor, when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord (Phil. 2:10–11). His second coming will be as triumphant King, not suffering Servant. Yet his life on earth was one of servanthood, and his clear teaching for his disciples in every age is that we are to be like him in *that* way, as servants washing one another’s feet (John 13:14). The only kind of hierarchy Jesus teaches is an inversion in which the first shall be last and the last shall be first (Matt. 20:27), the kind of hierarchy in which a little child leads everyone else (Matt. 18:1–4). There are simply no exceptions to this in Jesus’ teaching. For Jesus, leadership is a matter of laying down one’s life for others (John 10:15; 21:17–19).

In light of this ethos, questions over who is the head and who is the tail in a marriage are striking in their irrelevance. Christian husbands and wives are called to die daily for each other in the name of the Crucified One. This relationship of mutual self-giving will be the witness (*marturia*) to a watching world, that the gospel is true (John

17:20–21). Children growing up in a family in which both parents practice this kind of “broken bread and poured out wine” love, will grow up seeing the Gospel embodied in their own parents.

The sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with their mother, asking (through her!) for special seats of power, authority, and privilege in the coming Kingdom. “You don’t know what you are asking,” replied Jesus. “Lord, shouldn’t the men sit on your right hand and your left while the women sit over there?” we ask. “You don’t know what you are asking” replies Jesus. For the more closely we identify with Jesus the Head of the Church, the more we are called to martyrdom, to a life of broken bread and poured out wine in which we take up our cross so that others might live. These daily “small martyrdoms” are the living out of our vocation as Christians, as “little Christs” who “walk as Jesus walked” (1 John 1:6).

The problem with James and John Zebedee (and their mother) was that they were asking the wrong question. They wanted to know how to have more power for themselves in God’s name, when the real question is how to give more power to others in God’s name. That is the same

problem in all attempts to use language about God to empower and privilege husbands by subordinating and subjugating wives.

Marriage, of all relationships, is the one most keenly aligned with a spirituality of martyrdom, of baptismal, eucharistic love. It is the life of a self-giving covenant between a man and a woman that gives birth to light in a dark, violent world. In marriage we are called daily to lay down our lives in a mutual dance of kenotic love. It is a circle dance, a head over heels surrender in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Mutual hospitality

The language of love is the language of surrender. It is about vulnerability, about yielding, about giving up. To love is to give up and leave behind the old life of control and self-interest. Anyone who has truly loved, knows better than to think he or she can control or dominate the beloved. The two are mutually exclusive.

We cannot get away from the central fact of love, of Jesus’ refusal to engage in any kind of coercion and his unwillingness to discount or marginalize anyone, including women. We have projected onto the God who is Love, our worst darkness, insecurities, and fears, our own lust for power. In this blasphemous projection we delude ourselves into thinking that Christian marriage should emulate this kind of fearful submission and control. We have done this to the God who is essentially hospitable.

Henri Nouwen describes God’s hospitable love in his classic, *Reaching Out*.⁹ Hospitality is the sacred space we create for one another (he calls all others “strangers” to honor the mystery of their otherness) so that the other can become more alive, more whole, more true. Hospitality is about honoring the other. It is about empowering, protecting, and respecting the life of the other. Hospitable love in marriage is always a circular dance of self-giving love, a mutual kenosis—a mutual self-emptying.¹⁰ Nouwen helps us to

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understand that the first and best way to think of marriage, is as a kind of mutual hospitality.¹¹ His theology of hospitality is in no small part due to his theology of the coequal Trinity.¹²

One shining example of a godly couple who love in this way is that of Joseph and Mary of Nazareth. Joseph repeatedly surrenders his own dreams and plans, his own will, to help Mary answer her divine call. Joseph defies customs in his hometown, moves to new communities, takes on new jobs, protects and provides for Mary and Jesus, and loves them wholeheartedly. Joseph respects Mary's spirituality, her experience of God, her call, and her gifts. Joseph offers to his wife eucharistic love. For both Mary and Joseph, the will of God and the call of God are the final authority. God is the head of their marriage. As they each sincerely seek the face of God, they come to the same conclusions in decisions affecting their family.

While the amount of biblical material about the Holy Family is limited, it is sufficiently developed to serve as a paradigm for love in Christian marriage. One wonders if Jesus' extraordinary respect for and inclusion of women in his ministry, had its roots in his family of origin as he observed the loving relationship between Joseph and Mary.

Gifted to serve one another

Another reason for a baptismal, eucharistic, kenotic theology of leadership in Christian marriage, is that spiritual gifts form the basis for Christian service in Christian community, including the smallest unit of community, which is the family. The Holy Spirit gives gifts to men and women alike, with no distinction based on gender (Acts 2:17-18; 1 Cor. 12:1-11). Gifts of leadership, administration, teaching, and prophecy are given to both men and women. In the Old and New Testaments there are many examples of women with gifts of leadership, administration, prophecy, teaching, and wisdom.¹³ We also see such gifting in women in the church throughout history.¹⁴

In a Christian marriage, leadership is a function of spiritual gifting and natural abilities, as well as the needs of a given situation. There is a natural flexibility to this style of leadership, a partnership between a husband and wife who both honor Jesus as Head. In this approach to leadership the question is never about "who is on top" but rather, how each can serve the other and the rest of the community using his or her God-given gifts. The goal is mutual empowerment to the glory of God.

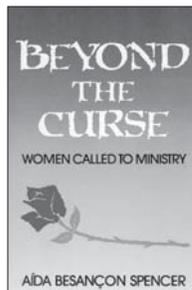
St. Paul's language about the equal honor, dignity, and worth of every part of the body is not gender specific (1 Cor. 12:25-26). The placement of his teaching on spiritual gifts immediately follows his teaching on Holy Communion. The use of all the gifts is to be done in a spirit of agape love (1 Cor. 13).

Conclusion

Whatever we might say about headship in Christian marriage, the indisputable teaching and example of Jesus, and the broader context of the teaching of the epistles about the meaning of discipleship, is one of self-giving love. This love is baptismal, eucharistic, kenotic, surrendered, hospitable, holy. The overflow of such love

is the advance of the reign of God, and the world watches and wonders at this kind of love, for it offers hope and healing to millions of people. Circling and dancing, husbands and wives give of themselves to one another, imaging the God who is head over heels in love with us all.

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Notes

1. Aida Besançon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1989).
2. "A Service of Christian Marriage," *United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 868.
3. For more on *perichoresis* see Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 72, 98, 228, 270-78, 296, 298, 363.
4. Despite temporary expressions of subordination in the economic Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit are in essence co-equal, co-existent, and co-eternal. Subordinationism within the Trinity has been repeatedly denounced as heresy. For more about the relationship of Trinitarian equality and gender relationships, see Gilbert Bilezikian, "Historical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40,1 (March 1997): 57-68.
5. For a detailed treatment of these texts see John Temple Bristow, *What Paul Really Said About Women* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988); Richard Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1992); Aida Besançon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1989); Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1983); and Ben Witherington III, *Women and the Genesis of Christianity* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1990).
6. At this juncture it is vital to note that the abuse of this understanding of Christian submission can lead to domestic violence. The eucharistic ethos in marriage is meant to be mutual between a Christian husband and Christian wife (Eph. 5:21). To demand that a Christian spouse submit to abuse in the name of eucharistic love is a perversion of eucharistic love. See Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R. Beck, eds., *Women, Abuse and*

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the Bible: How Scripture Can Be Used to Hurt or Heal (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996); Catherine Clark Kroeger and Nancy Nason-Clark, *No Place for Abuse: Biblical and Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2001); Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune, eds., *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

7. To live a eucharistic life is to incarnate in our daily lives the love of Christ who gave himself for us. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 41–42. See also Nowen's beautiful exposition of the eucharistic life in *With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994). For a fine introduction to an evangelical appreciation for eucharistic spirituality, see Robert Webber, "How the Eucharist Nourishes Spirituality," *Ancient Future Worship*, <http://www.churchmart.com/webber/200405h.html>.

8. Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1935), 33, 41, 46, 56, 136, 197, 274, 320.

9. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (New York: Doubleday, 1985).

10. *Kenosis* is the self-emptying love of Christ, described most notably in the "Kenotic Hymn" of Philippians 2:5–11.

11. Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 79–100. Social ethicist Christine Pohl offers an evangelical perspective on the importance of reclaiming hospitality as the core ethos for Christian life in *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999).

12. See Nouwen's deeply moving meditation on Rublev's icon of the Trinity in *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1987), 19–27.

13. For example Deborah, Hulda, Phoebe, Priscilla, the four daughters of Philip, and others.

14. For a fine study see Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1987).

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