

## Four Questions about Headship and Head Coverings

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**Q: What does it mean that the husband is the head of his wife?**

A: I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" ([1 Cor.11:3](#)).

Verse 3 outlines a series of overlapping relationships: "The head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God." Anyone familiar with the scholarship on this issue knows that the little word "head" (*kephale*) has killed a lot of trees. Scholars, using their expertise in Greek and the latest computer software, have gone back and forth in articles and books arguing whether *kephale* means "authority over" or "source" (like the head of a river is its source). Others have argued that the word means "prominent," "preeminent" or "foremost." In the end, the context suggests that *kephale* in verse 3 must have *something* to do with authority. Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner are right:

Even if by "head" Paul means "more prominent/preeminent partner" or (less likely) "one through whom the other exists," his language and the flow of the argument seem to reflect an assumed hierarchy through which glory and shame

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flow upward from those with lower status to those above them. In this context the word almost certainly refers to one with authority over the other.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, we have other examples in Paul's writings where *kephale* must mean something like "authority over." In [Ephesians 1](#), Paul says that Christ has been seated at God's right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and all things have been placed under his feet, and he has been made head (*kephale*) over all things to the church ([Eph. 1:20–22](#)). The context demands that *kephale* refer to Christ's authority over the church, not merely that the church has its origin in Christ. Likewise, in [Ephesians 5](#) Paul says wives are to submit to their husbands, for the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church ([Eph. 5:22–23](#)). Citing the headship of the husband as a reason for the wife's submission makes little sense if headship implies only source or origin without any reference to male leadership. *Kephale*, in at least these two instances in Ephesians, must mean "authority over." And there are no grammatical or contextual reasons to think that Paul is using *kephale* in a different way in [1 Corinthians 11](#).

Therefore, we should understand [1 Corinthians 11:3](#) as saying that Christ has authority over mankind; the husband has authority over his wife (the Greek words for man and woman are the same for husband and wife); and God has authority over Christ. Thus, we have male and female—equal and interdependent ([1 Cor. 11:11–12](#))—relating to one another within a differentiated order.

In previous years, some complementarians made too much of the fact that Paul relates the husband-wife relationship to the headship of God over Christ. To be sure, there *is* an important point to be made from the God-Christ parallel in verse 3—namely, that headship does not imply ontological inferiority. To have authority over someone—to be head of another—is not inconsistent with equality of worth, honor, and essence. But even here we should be careful to note that there is an "economic" expression of the Son in view in verse 3 ("Christ"), not an immanent or ontological expression (e.g., "Son"). We should not use the Trinity "as our model" for the marriage relationship, both because it is not necessary for complementarianism to be true and because the metaphysical inner workings of the ineffable Trinity do not readily allow for easy lifestyle applications. In fact, it is striking how the New Testament often grounds ethical imperatives in the gospel (e.g., marriage as an outworking of Christ and the church), but never in the eternal "ordering" of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 509. For more on *kephale* see Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than 100 Disputed Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 201–11, 544–99.

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If we are talking about the economic Trinity—the activity of God and the work of the three persons in creation and redemption—we can certainly say that the Son acts from the Father, while the Father does not act from the Son. There is an eternal ordering (*taxis*) of the Trinity that finds expression in time. And yet the language of the eternal subordination of the Son is not the best language to describe this order, nor do we ever see in Nicene tradition that the persons of the Trinity are distinguished by a relationship of authority and submission. Traditionally, the way in which the persons of the Godhead have been distinguished—and technically, they are *distinct* (which suggests three *hypostases*) not *different* (which would suggest another *ousia*)—is not by roles or by eternal relations of authority and submission, but by paternity, filiation, and spiration. To put it another way, the Father is the Father (and not the Son or the Spirit), the Son is the Son (and not the Father or the Spirit), and the Spirit is the Spirit (and not the Father or the Son) by virtue of the Father's unbegottenness as Father, the Son's generation from the Father, and the Spirit's procession from the Father and the Son.

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All of that to say, we should be extremely cautious about making sweeping statements about the Trinity from verse 3. What we can say from verse 3—and this is all we really need to say—is that headship does not have to be harsh (for God is the head of Christ) and that to be under the headship of another does not have to be demeaning (for Christ is under the headship of God). As Calvin puts it, “Yet, inasmuch as he became a Mediator in order to bring us near to God, his Father, he is set beneath, not in that divine essence, which resides in him in all fullness, and in which he does not differ from his Father at all, but as to his making himself our Brother.”<sup>2</sup>

**Q: What is the covering, and should head coverings still be used?**

A: “Every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven” ([1 Cor. 11:5](#)).

Some argue that the head covering in [1 Corinthians 11:5](#) is long hair. After all, doesn't verse 15 tell us that “her hair is given to her for a covering”? Long hair, though, is almost

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*Culture gives us the symbols of masculinity and femininity, while nature dictates that men should embrace their manhood and women embrace their womanhood.*

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Men, Women, and Order in the Church: Three Sermons by John Calvin*, trans. Seth Skolnitsky (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1992), 16.

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certainly not the covering itself. Verse 15 does not have to mean that long hair is given *instead* of a covering; it can mean simply that hair is given as a covering. The argument from verse 14 into 15 suggests that long hair is not the covering required in worship but is indicative of the fact that a covering *is* required (see also verse 6 where an uncovered head is not identical to, but is as disgraceful as, a shaved head). Roman women in late antiquity were to be marked above all else by *pudicitia* (Latin for “modesty”), and for a mature woman to wear her hair unveiled was one of the chief signs of sexual immodesty.<sup>3</sup>

So what was the covering? One educated guess is that it was some type of shawl. More than likely, it was not a veil as we see in many Muslim countries, because face coverings were not common in Greco-Roman culture. The covering Paul has in mind was possibly a small wrap-around, scarf-like garment that could be placed on the head when praying and prophesying.

Should women still cover their heads while praying and prophesying? If that is your conviction, I would never tell you to go against your conscience, but I think Paul allows us to employ our own cultural cues of manhood and womanhood. It is impossible to know precisely what the head coverings were like. Being largely ignorant of the practice, any attempt at exact obedience would be more symbolic than actual.

## **Q: What “head” does the woman dishonor?**

A: “Every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven” ([1 Cor. 11:5](#)).

One of the difficulties in this section is that the word “head” is used throughout the passage with different, sometimes multiple, meanings. Thus, “every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head” ([1 Cor. 11:4](#)) means that every man who covers his physical head dishonors his spiritual head, that is, Christ ([1 Cor. 11:3](#)). And what about the woman? She too dishonors her spiritual head when her physical head is uncovered. The head she dishonors is, by extension, Christ, but most immediately her husband. The wife’s actions reflect on her husband, because she is his glory ([1 Cor. 11:7](#); cf. [Prov. 31:23](#)).

The problem in Corinth likely involved men and women. We can see how a licentious, uncovered wife would bring shame to her husband. But men may have also been to blame. In the early Roman imperial period, men often used the dress and look of their

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<sup>3</sup> See Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 41–42.

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wives in an effort to seek status for themselves.<sup>4</sup> While it is unlikely that husbands wanted their wives to participate in worship unveiled, it's likely that men were seeking glory from their wives as much as some women may have been in danger of bringing shame to their husbands.

**Q: What does Paul mean by “authority”?**

A: “That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels” ([1 Cor. 11:10](#)).

Most English translations speak of a “sign” or “symbol” of authority. Even though there is no word for “sign” or “symbol” in the Greek of [1 Corinthians 11:10](#), most commentators are agreed that Paul is not saying that the woman should have authority over her own head. That conclusion does not easily follow from the rest of Paul's argument. Instead, we are right to think that the head covering is the sign or symbol of authority.

But what kind of authority? Traditionally, interpreters understood verse 10 to be talking about a sign of the husband's authority over his wife. More recently, however, many argue that the head covering is a sign of the authority the wife has to pray or prophesy. I don't think the two interpretations are all that different. In both views, the wife must have a sign on her head that she has not thrown off her husband's authority if she is to pray or prophesy. In other words, the head covering functions as a sign of submission to her husband *and* as a sign that she is therefore able to pray or prophesy in the assembly.

Although Paul appeals to the created order in this passage, he stops short of explicitly grounding head coverings in God's original design. Because of the created order of the sexes, according to [1 Corinthians 11:10](#), the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head. But notice that Paul doesn't give specific details as to the type of covering the woman should wear. Clearly he has in mind a head covering for the Corinthians, but what the creation order supports is not a certain kind of shawl but a symbol of authority. That's the key. When women pray and prophesy in the assembly, they must do so with some sign that signifies their authority to do so. In other words, something must tell the congregation, “This woman speaking in public is not throwing off her role as the glory of man. She is still in submission to her husband (if she has one), and therefore has authority to speak.” Maybe this symbol is a wedding ring, or the way she dresses, or taking her husband's last name (in some cultures), or a well-known demeanor of gentleness and respect.

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This article is adapted from *Men and Women in the Church: A Short, Biblical, Practical Introduction* by Kevin DeYoung.

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