

**PREFACE**

It may be with a sigh of relief that we now view in our rear view mirror the lengthy discussion of “things sacrificed to idols” in Chapters Eight to Ten. It has been a long, rewarding, but at times tortuous journey through a passage that has taught us about the importance of our witness, and the priority of protecting and nurturing the faith-walk of others over our inherent rights in Christ.

Now, as we approach this new topic in the first sixteen verses of Chapter Eleven with the same fear and trepidation we are becoming accustomed to in our study of this letter, we observe Paul again using a discussion of a pragmatic situation to make his point about a spiritual reality.

If the subject of proper deportment in public worship for both sexes—but especially women—was an issue in the Corinth church, it would have to be categorized as a potentially explosive issue today. I can imagine even just the *reading* of the first half of this chapter in some churches today would spark a physical uprising. In others—such as those in which the “pastor” is a homosexual woman—it surely will have been forcibly removed from the canon forthwith.

Any passage containing such phrases as

- man is the head of a woman (v3)
- But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head (v5)
- For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God (v7)
- but the woman is the glory of man (v7)
- man does not originate from woman, but woman from man (v8)
- for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake (v9), etc.

is going to be at least challenging, open to a multitude of interpretations, if not downright controversial—even inflammatory. Thus we will, in this study, tread cautiously, respectfully, but with unblinking courage. We cannot limit our study to only those passages that we readily understand and heartily affirm; we cannot shy away from those passages that cause us to squirm with discomfort during the process of discovering the truth. So let us soldier on to discover what God has to say to us in every portion of His word.

**Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-6.**

v2

*Now I praise you because you always remember me and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.*

As he introduces this new topic, Paul does what most of us do from time to time: he extends a gracious, encouraging “atta-boy” to soften the bite of what follows. He praises them for not forgetting what he has taught them; if we were of a cynical nature, we could point out that they *had to* remember his teaching to be so critical of it! But I wouldn’t presume to place that thought in the apostle’s mind. There is no indication that he is being ironic or sarcastic.

The word translated “traditions” (*paradoseis*) needs a little clarification, since when we hear that word we can often have in mind age-old, locked-in habits of behavior that may have lost all meaning or relevance. But that is not what Paul means here. “Traditions” refers to the transmission of precepts—as David Garland puts it, “historical facts related to the gospel story and doctrine drawn from them.” In other words, by citing “traditions” he is not saying, “This is the way we do things here,” but “This is the truth we believe.” In his letter to the Thessalonians Paul was more explicit about the meaning of this word.

### **Read 2 Thessalonians 2:15. (NASB or ESV)**

The NIVs “teachings” is perhaps a more descriptive (and helpful) translation. Thus he opens his next topic by graciously commending the Corinthians for remembering and holding to what he has taught them.

v3

*But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.*

Let’s address a couple of details before we wade into the meat of this verse. First, the “But” with which this verse begins in all but the early NIV almost certainly keys off v2. That is, *I commend you for this, but now I must straighten you out on something else*. Nonetheless it is a softer approach than how he opened Chapter Ten (“I do not want you to be unaware...”) and the even stronger wording used ten times in this letter, “Do you not know?”

Second, the masculine term *aner* (an’-ayer) and the feminine term *gyne* (goo-nay’) may be translated either man and woman or husband and wife. Most of our translations stick with the more generic man/woman, but the ESV slips back and forth repeatedly between the two for the woman (woman/wife), and once for the man (“her husband”) in this verse. The generic man/woman is probably best here, but we can also agree that some (but not entirely) of what is in mind here is the relative positions within a married couple. Yet more than that—and more important to Paul—are the relative positions between Christ and man(kind).

Before one can digest v3 one must determine how Paul is using the word translated “head” (*kephale*), which is used in the extended passage in more than one way. How is it used here? We are no longer surprised to learn that there are varying opinions on this from reputable scholars. The essential challenge is that so few of the positions can be fit comfortably into all three clauses: “Christ is the head of every man,” “the man is the head of a woman,” and “God is the head of Christ.” For example, let’s take one of the more common interpretations for “head” in v3: the head as “source”—that is, source of life, or origin (as Fee).

We can understand that man is the source of a woman when we think back to the Garden narrative. This position is reinforced with what Paul writes in vv8-9.

For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the man’s sake.

This clearly refers back to the narrative regarding the creation of the first woman.

**Read Genesis 2:18, 21-23.**

We can also understand that Christ is the source of man, for, as Christians, our “life” is in Him. The apostle John so eloquently credits Christ “the Word” as the creator of *all* things.

**Read John 1:1-4.**

Add to this the powerful truth of Colossians that even after creation, all things “hold together” in Him.

**Read Colossians 1:16-17.**

But this position for the meaning of *kephale* in v3 skews sideways a little when we consider God to be the source or origin of Christ, for Christ did not *emerge out of* Father God as Eve did from Adam, neither was he granted eternal life by the Father, as we were in Christ. All members of the Trinity are eternal and self-existent, and none had what we would term a “beginning.”

In my opinion the position that makes the best sense is that by “head” Paul means, as A. C. Perriman states it, “that which is most prominent, foremost, uppermost, preeminent.”

We need to be precise when we define Paul’s use of “head” (*kephale*) in this way. To be preeminent—i.e., the most prominent—does not necessarily denote ultimate authority or leadership, although it may by extension.

It also does not denote “source,” and it is not linked to ideas of obedience or submission. It simply means to “occupy the position at the top or front.” J. Delobel notes that “in each of these relationships there is one who has the priority as head, and one who comes in second place...but second place does not connote inferiority, since both man and Christ have a head.” Let us see, then, how this would apply to the three clauses in v3.

### ***Christ is the head of every man***

This is easy. If we return to Colossians and continue from the passage we read before, we see it right away.

### **Read Colossians 1:17-18.**

### ***the man is the head of a woman***

In God’s sovereign economy every individual has someone who is superior to him. In this church, for example, my immediate superior is the Pastor; I answer to him; he is my “boss.” Along with him would be the elder board. But they, too, have a superior: Christ Jesus, the Head of the church. They answer to Him. As we delve further into this passage we will flesh out the relationship between man and woman, husband and wife, but for right now let me cite David Garland.

*Garland:* Paul’s primary intent, then, is not to assert the supremacy of man and the subordination of woman. Instead, it is to establish that each has a head and that “what one does or doesn’t put on one’s physical head either honors or dishonors one’s spiritual head” (Blomberg) [vv4-7]. It establishes the need for loyalty to the head.

*Perriman:* The point seems to be...that the behavior of the woman reflects upon the man who as her head is representative of her, the prominent partner in the relationship, or that the woman’s status and value is summed in the man.

### ***God is the head of Christ***

The Son of God, second member of the Triune Godhead, is co-equal with God the Father. Both are God; both are self-existent and eternal, dwelling outside of time as we know it. Nonetheless, the Son is the *second* member of the Godhead and the Father is the first. And Christ Jesus, especially as the *incarnate* Son, declared Himself to be subordinate to the Father.

### **Read John 14:28.**

Even in the day of judgment, as Paul writes later in this letter, this order remains in place:

### **Read 1 Corinthians 15:22-28.**

As we used to say in the sixties and seventies, this is pretty heavy stuff, and it cannot all be addressed in the first few verses. So stay tuned.