

“For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church”: What way is that?

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What does the word “head” mean? And what did it mean when the Apostle Paul wrote it in the first century? Twice in the New Testament epistles, the Apostle Paul uses the Greek word *kephale* (head) in reference to the relationship between husband and wife. In Ephesians 5: 23, the text says, “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church,” and in 1 Corinthians 11:3 we read “the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is the man.”

These verses have comprised a major part of the hermeneutical battle between egalitarians/feminists and complementarians/hierarchalists for a number of years. Those who argue for hierarchy in marriage argue that Paul intended *kephale* to signify that God wants the husband to hold some kind of authority over his wife. *Kephale* would then be translated as “authority over,” “leader,” or “ruler” of his wife². Indeed, this understanding is a difficult to avoid for those who speak a language in which “head” has the metaphorical meaning of “person-in-control.”

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² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “*Kephale* in 1 Corinthians 11:3,” *Interpretation* 47 (1993):56-57, Wayne Grudem, “Appendix I: Does *kephale* (“head”) mean ‘source’ or ‘authority over’ in Greek Literature? A survey of 2,336 examples,” pp 48-80 in *The Role Relationships of Men and Women: New Testament Teaching* (George W. Knight, ed: Revised Edition; Chicago: Moody Press, 1985). D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

Head does not literally mean “boss or authority” in English. Literally, it means the round part of your body comprised of your skull and face, at the top of your neck. The question we must ask is, did *kephale* have that same metaphorical meaning in first century Koine Greek?

Egalitarians, in contrast, argue instead for understanding *kephale* as “source” or “origin,” as in the headwaters of a river. This reading draws on the Creation account in Genesis 2, in which *ha’adam* (the human being created out of the dust in verse 7) is divided in two to build *’ishshah* (woman) and *’ish* (man). Thus, for egalitarians, the man is the “source” of the woman, but not her ruler.³

Writers, theologians, pastors, and lay people have debated this for years—but I propose a third alternative. I agree with Andrew C. Perriman that neither position (*kephale* as authority, or as source) is “quite satisfactory.”^{4 5} If *kephale* had the meaning of either authority or origin in ancient times, it was not used that way very often. Further, the arguments on both sides beg the question of why, whichever meaning Paul intended, he didn’t use the words for “ruler” or “source/origin” directly, since plenty exist in the Greek. If Paul meant to command a husband’s authority over his wife, he could have communicated this using the far more

³ Stephen Bedale, “The meaning of kefalh/ in the Pauline Epistles,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 5 (1954): 211-215; F. F Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1971), p. 103. Berkeley and Alvera Mickelsen, “What does *kephale* mean in the New Testament?” in *Women, Authority and the Bible* (Alvera Mickelsen, ed: Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 97-110.

⁴ Andrew C. Perriman, “The head of a woman: The meaning *kephale* in 1 Cor. 11:3,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1994):602.

⁵ In an unpublished article, Troy W. Martin offers a succinct summary of the arguments on both sides. “Performing the head role: Man is the head of woman.”

common and intuitive *archon* (ruler or power)⁶, *exousia* (authority), *despotes* or *oikudespotes* (used in the gospels to refer to the master of a household or landowner), or *kyrios* (lord). The Greek language includes many more words than English and precise word choice can be used to express nuances that English cannot.

Indeed, use of the word *kyrios*, the term used for Jesus throughout the New Testament, would have seemed completely natural if that was the role Paul intended for the husband. *Kyrios* was also the more common Greek term for the master of a household. So when people argue that the Bible says a husband is the head of the household, that is simply not true. First, it says that he is the head of the wife, not the household, and second, in the time that Paul wrote, the word *kyrios* would have perfectly and precisely communicated the idea of head of the household. But Paul, guided by the Holy Spirit, instead chose a different word. Why? Because Paul did not mean head of the household or authority of any kind, but something different.

⁶ Mickelsen.

What kind of *kephale* is Christ?

Theologian Richard Cervin asserts, "(Paul) does not mean 'authority over' as the traditionalists assert, nor does he mean 'source' as the egalitarians assert. I think he is merely employing a head-body metaphor."⁷ I agree. This metaphor is clear throughout Eph. 5:21-31, which begins with the injunction for the members of the Christian household to "submit themselves one to another in reverence for Christ," continues with the head-body metaphor throughout, and ends with a quotation from the Creation account, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and the two will become one flesh" (Gen 2:26).

Head plus body equals one flesh.

That *kephale* is "merely" part of a head-body metaphor, however, still raises the question of what role the head plays that is distinct from that of the body. Doesn't man's placement parallel to Christ still imply his superiority and privileged position?

Kephale is used in the context of man and woman in only two Pauline passages. However, Paul used it to refer to the relationship between Christ and the Church in several others. A look at those verses points, surprisingly, to a different meaning of *kephale* than is typically argued by either side in the hierarchy/equality debate.

⁷ Richard Cervin, "Does *kephale* mean 'source' or 'authority' in Greek literature? A rebuttal," *Trinity Journal* 10 NS (1989): 85-112.

A key to understanding Paul's use of *kephale* lies in the use of a related word in Eph. 1:9-10:

For [God] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite ["bring together", NIV] all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (RSV) (emphasis added).

(The word translated "unite," *anakephalaio*, is literally, "to head up." The word is alternatively translated as, "to sum up," "to unite," or "bring several things together in one." See the *kephale* in *anakephalaio*?)

Paul used *kephale* in the sense of a body part in a head-body metaphor. His reference to the body is present in all the verses referring to Christ as *kephale*. The head performs not as a ruler but as an agent who creates unity, growth, and completion. Notice what the head does in each of these passages:

Colossians 1:17-18: "He is before all things, and in him **all things hold together**, and he is the head (*kephale*) of the body, the church..."
(*The head holds all things together.*)

Col. 2: 19 (Paul is speaking of someone who pursued "idle notions"): "He has lost connection with the head (*kephale*), from whom the whole body, **supported and held together** by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow."
(*The head holds all things together, promotes growth.*)

Ephesians 4:15 (Paul tells us that in Christ we are no longer infants, blown here and there): "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head (*kephale*), that is, Christ. From him the whole

body, **joined and held together** by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

(Head hold all things together, promotes growth in love, enables each part to do its work.)

Ephesians 1:22 “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

Ephesians 1:22 is particularly helpful in understanding the difference between *kephale* as ruler versus as one who unites or causes the body to grow. In this verse, Christ is one with the church, which is his body and his fullness. The things that are subjected (*hypotasso* in the active voice) to Christ are under His **feet** (certainly at the extreme end of the body), not His head. Thus Christ as head does not subjugate, dominate, or rule the body, but reigns in unity with it.

One more passage, Colossians 2:9-10, Paul sets Christ as *kephale* in juxtaposition to the worldly forces of *archon* (rule), and *exousia* (authority): “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head (*kephale*) [of] every rule (*arches*) and authority (*exousias*)....” The reference to Christ as *kephale* cannot be read as another word for ruler or authority: Along with philosophy, empty deceit, and human tradition, the passage makes it clear that none of these “elemental spirits of the universe” is in harmony with Christ (verse 8).

Literary Context

For the hierarchalists, translating *kephale* as “authority over” in Eph. 5: 23 seems to follow from the immediately-surrounding injunctions that wives submit themselves (*hypotasso* in the middle voice) to their husbands (Eph. 5:22, 24). They read the passage as commanding, “Women, be subject to your husband, because he is your ruler.” That is not what the text says, however, and this interpretation rips the verse from its context. In order to understand this sentence fragment (which is what Eph. 5:22 is in the original language), you must read the entire chapter, both before and after this verse. In the long following passage (Eph. 5:25-31), *kephale* is clearly used in a head-body metaphor enjoining the husband to imitate Christ, not in ruling his wife, but in serving and caring for her:

23 For the husband is the **head** of the wife just as Christ is the head of the Church, He is Himself the savior⁸ of the **body**.... 25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up on behalf of it, 26 in order that he might sanctify it, cleansing it with the washing of water by the word, 27 so as to present the church to himself glorious, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind, but in order that it might be holy and without blemish. 28 So ought also husbands to love their wives as their own **bodies**. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hates his

⁸ Referring to Jesus as “Savior” is language borrowed from the Greco-Roman honor system. A savior was someone who provided a great service to another, often at the cost of his own life. David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

own **flesh**, but he nourishes and cherishes it, as also Christ the church, 30

because we are members of his **body**. 31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and the two will become **one flesh**" (my translation).

In addition to confusion of the meaning of *kephale*, part of the problem in understanding this passage stems from the tendency for translators to separate verse 22 (literally, "wives to your own husbands as to the Lord") from verse 21 ("being submitted to one another out of reverence for Christ,"). The verb, "submit yourself," is found only once, in verse 21 and not at all in verse 22, and is directed to the entire Christian community (see Ephesians 5:15-20). Read in this larger context, Paul now can be seen as directing all Christians to submit themselves to one another (voluntarily "esteeming others as better than yourselves," Philippians 2:3); wives to their own husbands, not because he is her ruler, but because his role as head is to give himself up for her, to nourish and care for her, and to love her as his own body.

Leading further credibility to the interpretation of *kephale* as one who serves rather than be served is seen in the following verses (Eph. 6:1-9). Paul's directive on how the Christian family "submits itself" to each other continues, including children/fathers and slaves/masters. In each pairing, **the dominant agent (father/master) is directed to give up the power and prerogatives of his status in order to serve his children and slaves**, just as the husband sacrifices himself for his wife.

Conclusion

A careful reading of the verses referring to Christ as *kephale* reveals the word to mean neither “authority over” nor “source,” but rather suggests a power that unites, nurtures, and serves. Its use in a head-body metaphor encourages both husband and wife to work together to return to the creation ideal of “one flesh” unity, a unity in which the human union of marriage parallels the heavenly union of Christ and the Church.