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The Head of a Wife is Her Husband

11: 2-10

The head of a wife is her husband DIG: What does it mean to be “the head?” What is the difference between positional leadership and real leadership? How are men and women viewed as being equal? How is the husband supposed to lead? Why was it so important that the women who were praying and prophesying in public worship wear head-coverings?

REFLECT: What reasons did Paul give that the Corinthian women should wear head coverings in his day? Does the Bible teach that women should wear head coverings today? Why or why not? What was the real issue that Paul was concerned about? What is the difference between the marriage relationship and the responsibility placed upon the husband by God?

**The head of every man is Messiah,
and the head of a wife is her husband,
and the head of Messiah is God.**

There was no reason for believers to needlessly scoff at accepted cultural **traditions** that did not violate Scripture. **The Corinthian women** had every right to not wear **head coverings** in the worship service because of **their freedom in Messiah**; but by refusing to voluntarily yield **their** right for the sake of others, **they stumbled other immature believers and ruined their testimony with unbelievers in the community.**²⁹⁵ Thus, **they violated Paul’s basic principle: With all kinds of people, both Jews and Gentiles, I have become all kinds of things, so that in all kinds of circumstances I might save at least some of them (9:22b).**

Paul continued: Now I praise you because you have remembered everything I told you and observe the traditions just the way I passed them on to you (11:2). These opening words seem to flow easily from what has immediately proceeded (**to see link click Bq - The Danger of Overconfidence**). Having encouraged **the Corinthians** to imitate **his** imitation of **Messiah**, **Paul now praises them** for doing so with regard to **the traditions** with which **he himself** had **passed on to them**. But this is quite surprising because

although **he** commends **them** for **observing the traditions** that **he** had **passed on to them**, nevertheless, in the four chapters that follow there doesn't seem to be a single instance of **them** doing so. Indeed, in regard to the next matter (see [By - Issues Surrounding the Lord's Supper](#)), **they** are doing anything but! And according to the final sentence of the chapter: **As for the other matters, I will instruct you about them when I come (11:34)**, it seems as though there are still further concerns regarding these matters that this letter does not address. How are we to understand these opening words? This opening sentence most likely serves to introduce the many things that needed correcting regarding **their** gatherings for worship in **Chapters 11-14**. Even though **they remembered him in everything**, there were still some areas with regard to **the traditions** where **praise** was not in order. **They** may have been following **the traditions**, as it were, but not in the proper ways.²⁹⁶

As a prelude to **his** encouragement, **Paul** characteristically laid down a theological base. In this instance, it concerned **headship**. **Paul offered five reasons why women should wear head coverings in public worship**.

1. The first reason is the divine order (11:3-6): **Paul** began **his** reasoning by clearly stating a basic divine principle: **The head of every man is the Messiah (11:3a)**. **He** is uniquely **the Head of the Church** as its **Savior and Lord (Eph 1:22-23, 4:15; Col 1:18)**. **He** has **redeemed and bought it with His own blood (1 Cor 6:20; 1 Peter 1:18-19; Revelation 5:9)**. But in **His** divine **authority, Messiah is the head** of every human being, believer or unbeliever. **All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Matthew 28:18)**, **Yeshua** declared. Most of mankind has never **acknowledged Messiah's authority**, but **everything** has been put **in subjection under His feet (Hebrews 2:8)**, and one day **every knee will bow**, of those who are **in heaven**, and **on earth and under the earth - and every tongue will acknowledge that Yeshua the Messiah is ADONAI, to the glory of the Father (Philippians 2:10-11)**. **He** is in ultimate control of **everyone**, now and forever.²⁹⁷

And the head (Greek: *kephale*, meaning *prominence*) **of a wife is her husband (11:3b)**: All three, **the man (husband), the woman (wife) and Messiah**, equally, have a **head**, and are subject to that **head**, and acknowledge that **head**. **The man** has only **Messiah** as **his head**; **the woman** has another **head** in addition to **Messiah**, namely, **her husband** (if married). *Kephale* does not mean "source." Many recent interpreters who prefer this option seek to eliminate any hint of **the wife's** voluntary submission. No Greek Lexicon offers "source" as the meaning of *kephale*. To be "the head" of something simply means to occupy a position of authority, and there can be no **responsibility** without authority.²⁹⁸

There are similar verses in the Bible saying that **wives** should **submit** and **be obedient** to **their husbands** (**First Peter 3:1a; Titus 2:5b; Colossians 3:18**). **The husband is head of the wife, as also Messiah is the head of the Church (Ephesians 5:22-23a; Colossians 3:19)**. Not only that, but the Bible teaches **a wife** that **her desire will be toward her husband, but he will rule over her (Genesis 3:16b)**. But these verses cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the corresponding verse: **Husbands, love your wives, just as the Messiah loved the Church, indeed, He gave Himself up on [her] behalf (Ephesians 5:25)**. And a part of God's divine order, that **children** should be submissive to **their parents (Ephesians 6:1)**, and (during **Paul's** day) **slaves** should be submissive to **their masters (Ephesians 6:5)**.

*Dear loving Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** for being so **loving**. Thank **You** that **Your** example of great **love** is the example **You** use for **the husband's love for his wife (Ephesians 5:25-26)**. Praise you that **Your love** is never selfish, never mean nor lazy - but **Your love** is always surrounded by **Your holiness** and faithfulness. In **holiness You** call us to be **holy** - yet **You** so willingly give those who **love You Your holiness**. As **Your Word** declares: **You are to be holy because I am holy (First Peter 1:16)**. In **Your holy Son's** name. Amen*



So, the critical question for **the husband** is, "How did **Messiah** love **the Church**?" Once again, the Bible gives us the answer: **For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve - and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45)**. There was no sacrifice too great for **her**. Therefore, **the husband** needs to listen to **his wife**, take **her** advice seriously, and respect **her**. So, **the husband** needs to think of **his wife** first, making sure that **her** needs are met by **servicing her** . . . washing **her** feet daily, as it were. There is no room for tyranny here, no such thing as bullying, lording over, or bossing. It is a gracious humility that honors **the physically weak one (First Peter 3:7)**.²⁹⁹ When **husbands** abuse **their** freedom in **Messiah**, **they** dishonor **their head, the Messiah**; when **wives** abuse **their** freedom in **Messiah**, **they** dishonor **their head, their husband**. This is what was

happening with the **head coverings** in the church at **Corinth**.

But this **servant** kind of a relationship seems a lot different from: **he shall rule over you (Genesis 3:16b)**, doesn't it? That sounds pretty harsh, not like **a servant** at all. Which is it? Does **he** come to **serve** or **rule**? If you think this is confusing, just look at the state of marital roles. It is one of the most confused areas in and out of **the Church** today. The main problem is the confusion between **the husband's relationship** with **his wife**, and **his responsibility** with what goes on in the marriage.

Let's look at **relationship** first. The Bible clearly teaches that **men** and **women** are equals socially, psychologically, and spiritually. In other words, **they** are equals in **their relationship** with each other. **God** created us as equals (**Genesis 1:27-28**), and we are to be one when married (**Genesis 2:24**). **We** are equally sinful (**Romans 3:23**), and equally saved (**John 1:12-13; Second Corinthians 5:17; First Peter 3:7**). **Husbands and wives** are to submit to **each other** sexually (**First Corinthians 7:2-5**) and socially (**Ephesians 5:21**). Furthermore, the Bible teaches that there shall be no sexual discrimination (**Galatians 3:28**). **Men** and **women** are equally dependent on **God** (**First Corinthians 11:11-12**), accepted equally as believers (**Acts 5:14**), and co-laborers for **Him** (**Romans 16:1, 3-6; Philippians 4:3**). So, in **their relationship**, **men** and **women** are equals. There is no doubt about that. But there is another area that we need to look at.

The second area the Bible teaches us about is **responsibility**. **Even though men and women are equal in their relationship to one another, husbands are ultimately held responsible for what goes on in the marriage**. The Bible tells us that when **Abram** lied about Sarai being **his wife**, Pharaoh held **Abram** responsible (**Genesis 12:17-20**). Later, after **God** changed **their** names, **Abraham** and **Sarah** did the same thing again and Abimelech held **Abraham** responsible (**Genesis 20:9**). And it seems the apple didn't fall too far from the tree, as **Abraham's son Isaac** was held responsible for the lie about **Rebekah** (**Genesis 26:9**). Much later, **God** held **David** responsible for **his** sin with Bathsheba and sent the prophet Nathan to rebuke **him**. Here, **Adam** and **Eve** both ate of **the tree of knowledge of good and evil**; in fact, **Eve** led the way, but **God** held **Adam** responsible (**Genesis 3:9**). This principle is not only taught in the TaNaKh, but also in the B'rit Chadashah where **Paul** tells us that **through one man sin entered the world** (see the commentary on **Romans Bm - The Consequences of Adam**). **God** took **Adam** and placed him in the Garden of Eden in order to have him work it and guard it (**Genesis 2:15 ISV**). When Satan came against **Eve**, **Adam** stood there and said nothing. **He** didn't protect **his wife** or guard the Garden. **Responsibility** begs for accountability,

and **God** held **Adam** **responsible**.

Therefore, with this understanding, we come back to the original question: *how shall Adam rule over Eve?* **He rules over her** in the sense that with the big decisions in life, if **they** are still at an impasse, **he** is ultimately going to be held responsible for the decision. How **he** handles the situation, how **he** listens to **his wife** and takes **her** feelings and opinions into consideration are important. **She** needs to be heard. **Husbands** who do not listen to **their wives** are fools, because **Elohim** made **her a helper suitable for him (Genesis 2:18)**. If **the wife** does not feel like **she** is being heard or has any input in the marriage, it will crush **her** spirit and/or drive **her** away (physically and/or emotionally). **Husbands** and **wives** should make the big decisions together as a team, but if **they** cannot agree, **he** has to make the call because **he** is **responsible** before **God**.

When things go bad at work, nobody wants to be in charge when the boss walks in and says, "All right, who is in charge of this mess?" *And all eyes are on you*. It is much more comforting to be able to point at someone else, *anyone else*, and say, "Here's the one!" It is in that sense that **Adam** would **rule over Eve**. It is in that sense that **Eve** should **submit** and **be obedient** to **Adam**; not in **their relationship**, because in **their relationship** **they** are equals. But **Adam** was held **responsible** for what went on in **his** marriage. Decision making can be fun without **responsibility**. If it works, you get all the credit, and if it doesn't, just try something else. It just doesn't matter. But decision making with eternal consequences is quite different. **And the head of the Messiah is God (11:3c)**. **Yeshua** made nothing clearer than the fact that **He** submitted **Himself** to **His Father's will (John 4:34, 5:30, 6:38; First Corinthians 3:23, 15:24-28)**. **Messiah** has never been - before, during, or after **His** incarnation - inferior in any way to **the Father**. But during **His** incarnation, **He** willingly submitted **Himself** to **His Father's** will as an act of humble obedience in fulfilling **His** divine purpose.³⁰⁰

Paul begins **his** argument with **men (husbands)**. **Every man who prays or prophesies wearing something down over his head brings shame to his head - Messiah (11:4)**. **He** seems to be setting up **his** argument with **the women (wives)** by means of a hypothetical situation for **the men (husbands)** that would be equally **shameful** in **their** relationship to **their head (Messiah)** as **the wives** were doing to **theirs**. The words **pray** and **prophecy** make it certain that the problem has to do with public worship. One may **pray** in private, but not so with **prophecy**.³⁰¹

Generally speaking, among the Greeks, only slaves' **heads** were **covered**, and **the uncovered head** was a sign of freedom. The Romans, however, reversed this, and **Corinth**

was a Roman colony.³⁰² A statue from **Corinth** of a veiled Augustus - with his toga pulled **down over his head** offering a pagan sacrifice, offers an important clue. Thus, **Paul** is asserting how **shameful** it would be for a **man (husband)** to **pray** or **prophecy** in the worship service **wearing something** pulled **down over his head** like the pagans did. **He** will next make the case that it would be no less **shameful** for a **woman (wife)** to **pray** or **prophecy** with **her head uncovered**.³⁰³

It seems that **the Corinthian** slogan “**everything is permitted,**” had been applied to the worship service as well, and **the women** had expressed that belief by throwing off **their** distinguishing attire, **their head coverings**. **But Paul** said that **every woman who prays or prophecies with her head uncovered brings shame to her head**. **For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head (11:5-6)**. By not **covering her head** during public worship **she disgraced herself** and **her spiritual head, her husband**.

One of the interesting facets here is the assumption **Paul** makes that both **men** and **women** would **pray** and **prophecy** in public worship. But what seems obvious in **verses 4-6** is that **Corinthian women** were engaging in public worship without a proper **head covering** - the sort of **head covering** that was normally appropriate in mixed company.³⁰⁴

Greek **women** were usually **covered** in social life, except in **their** homes. **Uncovering the head** in public had sexual implications, giving nonverbal clues that **they** were “available.” However, respectable **women** did nothing to draw attention to **themselves**. **A head covering** constituted a warning. It signified that the wearer was a respectable **woman** and that no **man** (married or not) should approach **her** without risking repercussions. **Women** were not to be ogled at as sex objects during public worship. **Paul’s** primary interest in this passage was to prevent this from happening and **he** argued that **women’s heads** should be **covered**.³⁰⁵

2. The second reason was creation (11:7-9): **The man**, on the other hand, **should not have his head covered, because he is the image and glory of God**. **Paul** supported **his** conclusion from Scripture (**Genesis 2:7** and **21-23**). In the case of **the women (wives)** it would be just the opposite. Strictly speaking, according to the creation account (see the commentary on **Genesis Ax - Then the LORD God Made a Woman from the Rib He had Taken Out of the Man**), **the wife’s glory and image** is derived from, and complementary to, that of **her husband (11:7)**. **Adam** was created in **God’s image**, and as such, if **men (husbands)** covered their heads in any way, it would be a denial of **his**

being **in God's image** and **glory**. It would be improper, even wrong, for **men** to **cover their heads**. The reverse cannot be said. **For man was not made from woman, but woman from man; and indeed, man was not created for the sake of the woman but woman for the sake of the man (11:8-9).**

3. The third reason was divine order (11:10): The reason a woman (wife) ought to **have authority** (Greek: *exousia*) **over her head (11:10a NIV)**. Some translations have the phrase, **a sign**, but it is not in the Greek text. In the context here, *exousia* means *to have authority over her own head*. That is, **she** is to exercise control over **her head** so as not to expose **it** to indignity. It seems clear that **Paul** is playing with the word **head** here, using it in more than one sense, referring both to **her husband** as **head** and to **the woman's** own physical **head**. Instead of **shaving her head**, **she** needed to wear **a head covering** according to **the traditions** of that time.³⁰⁶

Paul addressed the final phrase **because of the angels (11:10)**, as a matter that needed no further explanation whatsoever. The simple manner in which this final phrase was added indicates that no new point is being introduced into the discussion. The brief mention of **the angels** caps all that preceded it.³⁰⁷ **Because the angels** implies that **God's** holy **angels** are known to participate in worship (**Isaiah 6:1-4; Luke 2:14; Revelation 5:11-12 and 7:11-12**), so **the Corinthian** worship shouldn't offend **them**. Such an offense would in fact occur, however, if **women (wives)** **prayed** and **prophesied** with **uncovered heads**.

In sum, **Paul's** message to the first century **Corinthian** church was that **the man (husband)** stands **uncovered** in public worship because **he** reflects **the glory of God; the woman (wife)** must be **covered** because **she** is **the glory of man (her husband)**. We should not take away from this that **women** should wear **a head covering** in public worship today. **Paul** was not laying down an unalterable command that would be in effect for every age. **The Corinthians** had **their traditions** in the First Century and we have ours. **Women** today have the freedom in **Messiah** to choose to wear a **head covering** in public worship or not. The application of these verses for us is that everyone, **men and women, husbands and wives**, should dress appropriately, especially in public worship, **so as not to stumble other weak believers or ruin their testimony with unbelievers.**