

What About Women In Ministry?

by Dan Trygg

The role of women in the church has been a hot topic in recent times. Some portions of Christendom have taken a very hard stand against allowing women to be involved as equals in the home, or in the church. Biblical arguments are amassed on either sides of the debate. How can we really determine what God's view of women is? How can we address the "difficult passages", which are often marshaled against allowing women equal roles as marriage partners, or as pastors and church leaders. I have a book on my bookshelf, titled *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* by Willard Swartley. The entire book is devoted to investigating these four "hot topics" of debate from the standpoint of hermeneutics, the study of interpretative principles. Swartley does not give his opinion on these topics, but mostly allows the proponents on the various sides of the issue present their cases. The lesson that comes out from a study of the book is that well-meaning, sincere believers can end up on either side of an issue, diametrically opposed to each other's conclusions, using the same Bible as the source of their arguments. However, the apostle Peter says in II Pet. 1:20,21, "No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but people moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." In other words, we cannot say that it does not matter what we believe. "To each his or her own" is not an option, as far as truth is concerned. There *is* one truth, one reality, one accurate interpretation. It is up to us to study carefully to make certain we are "rightly handling the word of truth..." (II Tim. 2:15).

God's Original Plan for Women

The first time we see women in the Biblical text is in Gen. 1:26-31. The word for "man" in the Hebrew is the generic word for mankind. This is evident even in vs. 27, "So God made man in His own image, in the image of God He created them, male and female he created them." It is clear from the passage that God made both sexes in His image. Both were given His likeness. Both were given dominion over all the animals, a dominion they apparently shared as equals. And together they were given the job of being fruitful, multiplying, filling the earth, something neither could do without the other. Finally, they were jointly told to "subdue" the earth, and to "rule" over the animal kingdom. There is no sense of division between the man and the woman, no hierarchy or domineering of one over the other. They are presented as an equal team with a joint calling, and equal opportunity.

What kind of Helper?

In Genesis 2:18, the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him" (NASB). This is the introduction to the Biblical account of God's creation of the woman. The King James Version uses the words "an help meet for him", the meaning of which has been obscured through our cultural history of literature and through our uninformed interpretations and assumptions. Today the common expression of "helpmate" reflects a further corruption of the original meaning. This term sets the creation of the woman, as our cultural presuppositions have expected, solidly *within* the context of domestic life and marriage as a starting point, instead of seeing marriage as an outgrowth of God's larger plan. The original Hebrew word that underlies our poor translations and interpretations conveys a

much stronger, richer idea than we have ever imagined. Following is a brief survey of the meaning and usage of this term.

The Hebrew word which has been translated as "helper" is 'ezer (עֵזֶר). It occurs a total of 21 times in the Old Testament. Its basic meaning is "help, support, helper". Its usage, however, reveals the important context of what kind of help that this word is referring to. We have come to think of it in terms of servant-help, help offered by someone "less-than" the one being helped, assistance or support given by someone subservient to the recipient. Nothing could be further from the truth. Here is a list of the references where this word occurs:

Gen. 2:18	Ps. 115:10
2:20	115:11
Ex. 18:4	121:1
Dt. 33:7	121:2
33:26	124:8
33:29	146:5
Ps. 20:2	Isa. 30:5
33:20	Ezk. 12:14
70:5	Dan. 11:34
89:19	Hos. 13:9
115:9	

As you examine these occurrences, you will find that one time it is used to show that the animals *could not* be a helper to the man (Gen. 2:20) in the way God was intending (Evidently, the service that domesticated animals could ever be able to perform was not in the same league as the help implied by the word 'ezer. She was not to be a "beast of burden".); two times the term is used of Israel's political/military allies (Isa. 30:5; Ezk. 12:14); seventeen times it is referring to God as our help (Certainly, He is not in a subservient role to man!); and in the Genesis account (2:18) it is used one time in reference to the role that God was intending for the woman to have in the man's life. As you can see by the weight of the common word usage, this is by no means a minimal, insignificant, servile type of relationship which God was intending. The woman was to provide resources and strength that the man did not have on his own. She would be giving to him *out of her strength*, implying abilities at least equal to, if not greater than, what the man possessed. They were to be allies together to accomplish a joint, or common purpose, outlined in Genesis 1:26-30.

In related forms, the same meaning becomes quite clear when one looks at the examples.

The verbal form of this word, 'azar (עָזַר), means "I help, I support". It occurs approximately eighty times in the Old Testament. Generally it refers to military assistance; of Divine assistance (usually of a military nature); and of personal assistance (non-military), which is usually a reference in the Psalms of God helping those in need, e.g., the poor (Ps. 72:12), or the fatherless (Ps. 10:14). The "helper" is obviously the one who has the greater power, assisting the persons with lesser strength or resources.

Even the feminine noun form, 'ezrah (עֲזָרָה), has a similar meaning and usage. This also refers to "help, support, assistance", either human or Divine. Of the twenty-six occurrences in the OT, ten times it is used of military or political allies, fifteen times it refers to help from God, and the other time it is recorded as being a man's name.

NOTE: The point to be made from this survey of these words is that *NOT ONE INSTANCE occurs in any of these forms where the help is depicted as coming from an inferior or subservient role, station, or personage*. Therefore to interpret the word 'ezer in Genesis 2:18 as describing some kind of servant role for womankind is *totally without basis* in the actual meanings or demonstrable usage of the word. Let me say it again, God's original plan for women was that they would be joint rulers of the created world that God had made. The woman was made to be different from the man, to be an ally with different strengths than what the man possessed, so that together they could fill the earth, subdue it, and rule over it.

Sin, Competition, Domination -- Effects of the Curse

The next place we see womankind has to do with the effects of the fall. In Gen. 3:16, as a consequence of the sin which she had participated in, God informed the woman, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." (The KJV inserts the word "yet" between these two sentences, which leads the reader to think that the desire for the husband is supposed to be understood in relation to the pain in childbirth. There is nothing underlying this connection in the Hebrew.) The word for "desire" next occurs in the following chapter, where God is warning Cain about the overpowering influence of sin, "...sin is crouching at the door, and its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Gen. 4:7). Incidentally, not only is the word "desire" identical to that in 3:16, but the word "master" in 4:7 is the same as "rule over" in 3:16. The usage of these exact same terms in the very next chapter cannot be minimized. They are meant to be a clear explanation and illustration of what those terms in 3:16 truly meant. Undoubtedly, this was purposeful on God's part, so that we could not obscure or misunderstand the import of what happened to human relations when sin entered the world, and we could never "normalize" or "domesticate" the meaning of these words. There can be no question that the description in 4:7 is that of an ambush. Sin is crouching at the door, it is hiding, biding its time, setting a trap, ready to jump out and overpower Cain. The phrase, "its desire is for you" clearly indicates a desire to control, dominate, or take captive. The woman's desire in 3:16 is not a domestic, wifely desire to be a stay-at-home submissive woman. It is a desire to overpower, dominate or control the husband. The phrase, "but he shall rule over you" indicates what has been true throughout human history. Men, because they are physically stronger, have tended to dominate and rule over women. Nevertheless, because of the women's "desire" for their husbands, a desire to control them, womankind has often manipulated men to their will by intrigue, deception or flirtation. The point is that what God is telling the woman is

not a pretty picture. Her desire to "be like God" (3:5,6) has unleashed an evil force of competition and domination that would plague womankind throughout human history.

It is important also to see that God is not telling the woman that this is His solution to the sin problem. Nor does He curse the woman, saying "I will pit you against your husband, and he will dominate you." No. God is not evil, and tempts no one to evil (Jas. 1:13). This is not a solution for sin. Rather this is the reality of what sin will do. This is not the curse of God on womankind. This is the curse of sin on the woman and her relationship with her husband, which came into being because of their choice to disobey God. This is a radical departure from God's original plan for the man and the woman, and it is never presented as either a just punishment which the woman must bear for the remainder of this fallen, evil age, ...nor as some kind of redemptive solution, as though by the humbling of womankind under the domineering fist of the husband she could somehow be restored or made holy. No. It is just presented as the facts. This is the curse. This is the bad stuff that has been released by disobedience. In fact, in this very first encounter with God after the fall, the Lord mentions the first indication of His plan for redemption, ...and it will come through the seed of the woman. Both the man and woman understood that prophetic hope, for the man called the woman's name "Eve", which meant "life", because she was the mother of all living ones to follow, and through her would come the hope of restoration (3:15,20).

Overcoming the Curse

When Jesus began His ministry, He spoke of proclaiming release to prisoners, and of setting free the downtrodden (Lk. 4:18). He came to defeat the power of sin, and to redeem us from its degrading and enslaving effects. Ought we not suppose that this would include the effects of sin on human relations in the "battle of the sexes" that began at the fall? Jesus' own life is a testimony of that purpose. God brought Him into this world by a virgin birth, ...using a woman, but not a man. He was prompted to do His first miracle by a woman (Jn. 2:1-11). He allowed women to accompany Him as His followers, even allowing a woman to sit at His feet as a disciple (Lk. 8:1-3; 10:38-42). Women were the first witnesses of His resurrection, even though they lived at a time when the testimony of a woman was not even credible in a court of law. Jesus was a liberator of women, who sought to restore them to a rightful place as joint heirs of the grace of life (cf. I Pet. 3:7).

This was not lost on the disciples, who followed Jesus' example in this area. They allowed women to join them in the upper room, as they waited for the promise of the Father (Acts 1:12-14). Peter acknowledged that the coming of the Holy Spirit was for both men and women (Acts 2:14-18). The apostle Paul clearly states that there is no distinction, ...neither race, social status, nor gender is of any difference. All who believe in Jesus are Christ's offspring, "sons of God through faith" (yes, even the women -- meaning that they have the same legal rights as male heirs would), heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:23-29.). He also utilized many women in his ministry (Phil. 4:2,3; Rom. 16:1-4,6,7,12,15). Some are called "deacon", "leader", and even "apostle", though these titles are obscured in our English translations.

***Kephalē* -- Head, but Not Boss**

The value of good scholarship is inestimable if we wish to faithfully discover, present and apply the correct meaning of the original writings of the Bible as the basis for understanding

and living out God's truth in modern times. A clear example of this need for careful study methods could be illustrated by our common understanding of the New Testament Greek word for "head", i.e., kephalē (κεφαλή). Unfortunately, **we have fallen into the error of reading the definition of what "head" means to us from *our* cultural background into the text of the NT.** As a result, we have grossly misunderstood many of those passages where this word occurs. Furthermore, we have done this for such a long period of time that many of our common reference resources for the meaning of Greek words have been compromised. In my personal experience, I had bought into the more widely accepted cultural interpretation of this word for years. It was only by being exposed to the observations made by a seminary professor¹ that I was prompted to look into the matter more closely. Eventually, through the results of a careful inductive study of the word usage of kephalē as a translational equivalent for the Hebrew word for "head", i.e., ro'sh (רֹאשׁ), I became convinced of a more accurate definition of this word. The significance of this one misunderstanding runs very deep, and the implications are far-reaching. They affect not only the interpretation of particular texts, but they also have significant impact on our understanding of the authority structures that have been handed down to us. These are models of authority that have been uncritically accepted and promoted by us as being "God's established order", though it is becoming increasingly obvious that instead of causing domestic and ecclesiastical harmony, these structures often are the cause of emotional and spiritual dysfunction. They promote irresponsibility and immaturity for all parties involved. They stand in the way of finding full personhood and mature intimacy with God. The truth is that, to our own detriment, we have *not* been promoting the teachings of the New Testament, but rather the cultural traditions of Western European-American society.

The crux of the problem centers in a very elementary phenomenon of language. It is a commonly recognized fact that **often words do not have just one definition. Instead, they have a range of meanings.** In other words, if you were to look up a word in a good dictionary, you would usually find listed several options that could legitimately be accurate meanings of that particular word in various contexts. From that list of possibilities, and the examples of word usages given as illustrations of them, you must determine what the word means in the particular setting under examination. This is further complicated by the differentiation of literal meanings from metaphorical, or figurative, applications of the word. These metaphorical meanings are strongly determined by the world view, cultural values, and literature of that society. Oftentimes in translation work one finds that although the primary, or literal, meaning may be the same from one language to another, the metaphorical possibilities allowed in one may *not* be allowed in another.

What am I getting at? Simply stated, **the Greek word for "head" does not have the same range of meanings as our English word does.** Therefore, if we read into the New Testament occurrences of kephalē those English meanings that are not true options in Greek, we are misunderstanding, distorting, and even misrepresenting what the New Testament is really saying in those passages.

What does kephalē mean? The Greek lexicon compiled by Liddell, Scott, Jones, and McKenzie covers classical and koinē (meaning "common" -- the style of Greek that the New Testament was written in) Greek from 1000 B.C. to 600 A.D. It is the most comprehensive lexicon on the market for English students of Greek. Under the entry for kephalē, **in addition to the primary literal meaning, "head", it lists some twenty-five other possible figurative meanings** for the word

which these men observed being used in the ancient Greek literature they surveyed. **Some of the more common ones include:**

- (a.) the top or extremity of something, e.g., the "head" of a column or wall;
- (b.) the source, origin, mouth, or starting point of something, e.g., the "head" of a river;
- (c.) the crown, completion, summation or consummation of something; and,
- (d.) sometimes "head" stands for the whole person, similar to our English idea of doing a "head count".

Another key metaphorical definition which they list is

- (e.) "source of life, enabler, one who brings to completion".

This last definition is crucial to our discussion below.

The point at issue here is that there is one figurative meaning that the English word "head" has in our culture which is conspicuously absent from what the research of Liddell, Scott, Jones and McKenzie concluded about the figurative meanings of kephalē in Greek. In English usage, the word "head" can refer to one who is "leader", "chief", "in authority over", "of superior rank", or "boss". These meanings are foreign to the Greek word. **Kephalē does *not* mean "boss" or "authority".**

Obviously, this has tremendous implications for our interpretations of NT passages where kephalē occurs. Many commentators have wrongly imported our English meanings to these passages, thus distorting and obscuring the intended teaching of these texts.

This distortion has, in fact, virtually reversed the message, so that what modern interpreters of these passages take to be the correct understanding is actually *exactly the opposite* of what was understood by the original recipients of the text.

A critical example of this would be Eph. 5:23, where the husband is described as being head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church.² A careful look at the context will reveal that "headship" is further defined in this passage by such concepts as "being the Savior of the Body" (vs. 23), having "loved the Church and gave Himself for her" (vs. 25), and by "nourishing" and "cherishing" (vs. 29). These word pictures are more in line with the flavor of the actual Greek word kephalē, meaning "source of life, enabler, one who brings to completion" than the English idea of "being boss over".

Unfortunately, much of what is taught as "biblical roles in marriage" springs more from our pagan, cultural world view than from the actual meaning of the biblical passages cited as support.

To make matters worse, some of the most common commentators and Greek reference tools have been compromised in this area. They have not been thorough enough in their scholarship, or have relied on faulty source material. Thus, this particular misunderstanding has been popularized throughout many of the more commonly available research tools, allowing this error to go largely unnoticed by the majority of pastors and teachers. For example, one of the more popular one-volume Greek lexicons, one compiled by Walter Bauer, falls into this error. The frustration of this is that if a pastor hears of this "different"

definition of kephalē that I am writing about ("different" in the sense that it is not what he has heard before), he will go to his library and pick up his lexicon to check this against a reference source. He will most likely have Bauer's lexicon, since it is much smaller, more concise, and *affordable* than Liddell, Scott, Jones, and McKenzie's much larger, and more comprehensive work. Thus, what he will find will reinforce the error, and will make what I am claiming to be true look suspect. (Note that Bauer cites no references to substantiate the definition of "authority over" except to refer to the NT passages in question. This is unacceptable methodology. It really "begs the question" and establishes nothing.) It is incumbent upon a genuine student of truth to search a little farther.

Well, if there are two respected lexicons which disagree on this subject, how am I to decide on which to believe? Fortunately, in this case there is a very clear, and reasonably simple method of determining that kephalē does not mean "boss", "chief", or "authority over". You see, the Hebrew word, ro'sh, has approximately the same range of meanings as our English word does. It occurs about 600 times in the OT. Sometime during the period from 250 to 150 B.C., Jewish Hebrew-Greek scholars translated the Hebrew OT into Greek. This translation has been called the Septuagint (LXX) translation, named for the rumored seventy scholars who were involved in the work. As we examine how they translated this word, ro'sh, into the Greek, we are able to gain some significant insight into what these men perceived the range of meaning that kephalē carried. Most of the time (400+), ro'sh refers to the physical head. In each of these occurrences, the translators chose kephalē as the natural Greek term to translate the Hebrew. In approximately 180 occasions, however, ro'sh was employed to indicate someone as the "chief" or "leader". In these passages, the translators virtually always chose one of fourteen other Greek terms to convey the meaning.³ All of these other Greek words *are* clearly about leadership, the predominate choice being the word archōn (ἄρχων - 109 times), meaning ruler, leader, authority. Kephalē was employed in four instances where a head-tail metaphor was being translated. Clearly in these instances any other word choice would have obscured the obvious word picture of the metaphor. Aside from these, kephalē was used only eight other times. Of these, the contexts allow for the meanings of "top" and "crown" to apply to the person. They were arguably not contexts strictly communicating the idea of authority. It could be that the LXX translators felt that kephalē was the better choice here, because it conveyed these *other* nuances of meaning which they felt more accurately represented the actual meaning of the Hebrew. In other words, the translators chose to use kephalē because they interpreted the meaning of these passages as *not* being about authority, and therefore chose the more precise word to translate the meaning. In light of this, when you examine the overall pattern of word usage, **there seems to have been a definite avoidance on the part of the Septuagint translators toward using kephalē to convey this idea of authority.** The sharp contrast in its employment as *the* favorite word choice to translate ro'sh, to suddenly being virtually abandoned by the same translators in this particularly narrow scope of meaning, can only be explained by recognizing that **they must have felt that kephalē simply did not communicate the authority concept.**⁴ Therefore, they opted to use other words that did clearly communicate this idea.

As a result of this word study, we may conclude that **the concept of "headship" meaning "boss", e.g., the husband is the "head of the home" in a chain-of-command type of system, is *not* a New Testament concept. It is drawn, rather, from what were commonly accepted authority structures from our cultural tradition.** In fact, the servant leadership model of the Kingdom of God confronts the abuse of power that is often engendered by such human systems of authority (Mk. 10:42-45; Lk. 22:24-26). Much of the Church has fallen unknowingly into the trap of allowing our cultural background to define for us the meanings of

the terms that are from a very different time and culture. In order to rightly understand what God's Word is telling us about authority and leadership in the home, we must study the terms in their original context. We must allow the Scriptures as they were originally given to challenge *our* thinking, wherever our understanding is amiss, not adjust our teaching of the Scriptures to fit comfortably with what our expectations of truth might be.

Dealing With The Problem Passages

There are some passages which are often referred to as "proof texts" to demonstrate that women should not be in ministry. I have dealt the issue of "head" in Eph. 5, and have included a further discussion of "headship" passages in the endnotes. Two other passages which definitely need to be addressed in a study such as this are I Cor. 14:34-38 and I Timothy 2:9-15.

Before addressing each of these separately, allow me to state again two fundamental principles of good interpretation, which are widely accepted by scholars and need to be applied in these passages.

(1.) "Difficult or questionable passages must always be interpreted in light of the clear statements made by the author in other portions of his work."; and,

(2.) "Difficult or questionable passages must always be carefully interpreted in light of their context, both the literary context preceding and following the passage in question, but also in light of what is known of the historical context as it may relate to the subject matter of the passage."

Since both of these so-called "problem passages" were penned by the apostle Paul, do we have any clear statements which he has made which may give us some understanding of his thinking on the matter of the place of women, especially as it may relate to women in ministry. Well, yes, we do, and we have detailed some of these before. The clearest statement regarding Paul's view of women would be Gal. 3:28, where he unequivocally states that "there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free person; there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." One could not ask for a clearer statement of equality to be penned. This is further buttressed by the context, which has to do with the inheritance rights of believers. If there is no difference regarding the inheritance rights, meaning that women will be treated exactly the same as men in regard to all that Christ has made available, then, unless there were very clear and specific statements made to limit this broad open-ended statement, we are forced to assume that Paul thought women ought to be treated like men, with regard to respect, rights, and privileges, ...and that in fact they are given that treatment in the kingdom of God.

I Corinthians 14:34-36 -- "Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church."
NASB

I have come across several credible explanations of this passage which explain how Paul *cannot* be saying what appears on face value in the English translation. The most obvious

contradiction to any interpretation that would argue for absolute silence of women in church meetings would be that Paul had just been giving them instruction as to their appearance *when* they "pray or prophesy" in church gatherings (I Cor. 11:2-16). Obviously, if they were not permitted to speak at all, then there would be no need for such instructions. Whatever Paul meant by "they are not permitted to speak" in I Cor. 14:34, it cannot have meant that they were to speak at all.

Secondly, are we to believe that Phoebe, a "deacon" and "protectress" that the Romans were instructed to "help... in whatever she may have need of" (Rom 16:1,2), never spoke during meetings? ...or Junias, "outstanding among the apostles" (Rom. 16:7)? ...or the four virgin daughters of Phillip, who were prophetesses (Acts 21:9)? What about the "daughters" and "maidservants" of Peter's message in Acts 2:17,18 (a reference to Joel 2:28-30)? We know that women were among those waiting in prayer in the upper room (1:14), is it not reasonable to assume that they were still there on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit fell on the group? Could it be that Peter was reminded of Joel 2 precisely *because* both men and women were filled with the Spirit and were speaking in tongues, declaring the great things of God? Two times in the prophecy cited, men and women are specifically mentioned side by side, and it is said that "they will prophesy". Is that not part of what the crowds that gathered were witnessing that required some explanation?

Thirdly, I believe the answer to this "difficult passage" is quite simple. It is easily clarified by a closer look at the immediate context, and the specific form of the word translated as "to speak" in the original Greek. The context is concerned with giving guidance to the meeting of believers, such that everyone is encouraged to come with something to share (vs. 26), but that the sharing should be done in an orderly manner (vs. 40), so that all could be edified and encouraged (vs. 26). Paul specifically addressed the tendency of those who desired to speak with tongues, and those who gave prophetic words, to speak out of turn, as they received their utterances. When receiving these manifestations of the Spirit, it would be easy to just give voice to their inspiration in ways that were disruptive or disorderly. Paul's concern that all receive an opportunity to share, and that no gift dominate the gathering, especially if it could not benefit all, gave rise to the guidelines he set down. It also provides the context for the comment about women speaking in the gathering. It appears that the problem which Paul addresses was a disruptive practice, not some theological prohibition. The next verse clues us in on what this was, "if they wish to find out something, let them ask their own husbands at home". It would seem that the problem was that these women were asking questions of their husbands during the meeting, and it was causing confusion and disorder. The verbal form, translated as "to speak", is a present tense infinitive, which implies ongoing or repetitive action. If Paul had wanted to communicate an absolute statement that women were not "to speak" at all, he would have used an aorist verb tense, which would have emphasized not even "to speak" at any point in time. The use of the present form, along with the follow-up comment in verse 35 indicates that these women were not speaking just once, they were accustomed to speak in the meeting. Paul says that is "shameful" or "improper". Simply stated, it is impolite. The same would be true if the men were doing this. The problem, however, was with the women.

Finally, note that the same verb "let them be silent" is used in verse 28 for tongue speakers, and in verse 30 for prophetic speakers, if they have something to share but the situation does not warrant it. It is not an absolute statement. It is not saying that they should never speak again. It simply means that they should refrain from speaking in *that* circumstance, where their

words would be disruptive or inappropriate. Paul is *not* picking on women here. He is simply dealing with the problem of disruptive behavior.

I Timothy 2:9-15 -- "Likewise, *I want* women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments,¹⁰ but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness.¹¹ A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness.¹² But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.¹³ For it was Adam who was first created, *and then* Eve.¹⁴ And *it was not* Adam *who* was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.¹⁵ But *women* will be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint."

NASB

They say that the first three principles of good Bible interpretation are context, context and context. We have already seen the broad context of belief which Paul had, regarding the equality of women (Gal. 3:28), as well as the number of women mentioned in the NT as doing the work of ministering to other people. They were prophetesses, as well as women apostles and deacons. Can we not suppose that women received all the other gifts of the Spirit, as well? We know that, in II Tim. 2:2, Paul admonished Timothy to entrust the things which he learned from Paul to faithful people (the generic word for "humankind"), implying both men and women. These people, then, were to teach others what they had learned from Timothy. Women, therefore, were a vibrant part of the ministering outreach of the gospel, in the time of the early church. They were also actively engaged in the discipling work of teaching others what they had also received.

In the local historical context of Ephesus, however, there was a different problem than what Paul dealt with in Corinth, and in most other cities. In Ephesus, where Timothy was stationed (1:3), the temple of Diana, the world renowned center of worship of the goddess of fertility, was located. While in the upper classes of Roman and Greek society, women often enjoyed some measure of freedom, most of the remainder of the pagan world was very male dominant. Women had virtually no rights, no voice, and were treated pretty much as possessions. In the cult of Diana, however, women were exalted as priestesses, and were respected above men as more spiritually attuned to the goddess. In that locale, women had the position of power in the area of spiritual authority, but usually a subservient role in matters regarding civil and social rights. It is clear, from I Tim. 2:9,10 that Paul is dealing with women of wealth, as well, which often was accompanied by a certain air of prestige or even superiority. These women often had considerable influence, and were used to having their way. Paul had to deal with the "leading women" of cities on more than one occasion on his travels (Acts 13:50; 17:4,12).

In the immediate textual context, Paul's theme can be traced back to I Tim. 1:3-7. There, Paul exhorts Timothy not to permit "certain *men*... to teach strange doctrines, or to pay attention to myths...", etc. "For some *men*... have turned aside to fruitless discussions, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions". The word "men" is italicized, because it is not in the original Greek. It is simply "instruct some not to teach strange doctrines" and "some... have turned aside". This is because the apostle was intending to address the women of Ephesus, in addition to the men, as being of this same mindset. From the beginning of the letter, he was anticipating confronting their attitude and behavior. After stating this issue, Paul went on

to describe how God had entrusted him with the gospel (vss. 11,12), and how Timothy was to “fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience” (vss. 18,19). He begins chapter 2 with a call to pray, followed by a brief statement of key gospel truths. Paul then reminds us that he was appointed by God to be a herald of the gospel, and a representative-apostle as a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. After that, he deals with men, exhorting them to pray, not argue about doctrine (vs. 8). Then, he turns his attention to address the problems of the Ephesian women.

To sum up, what we can gather from the context is that these are women of wealth, who are used to being in charge and having their way. They want to be considered as teachers of the Law, even though they don’t really know what they are talking about.

With that background, let us take a closer look at what Paul says in 2:9-15. In vss. 9 and 10, he confronts their dress and wealth. He instructs them not to adorn themselves with the costly garments and fancy hairstyles of the rich, but to be modest and discreet, showing their faith and character by their good works, not their clothing. Then he admonishes these neophytes to quietly receive instruction with complete submissiveness. Why does he feel the need to say this? Because the opposite was true. These women were competing for the role of teacher, always wanting to add their own opinion or thoughts, which were usually misguided and misinformed. Verse 12 is a stronger confrontation of their inappropriate desire to advance themselves over others. Paul does not permit a woman to teach or put herself forward over a man, but to remain quiet. In other words, Paul will not be bullied by these women, and he is exhorting Timothy not to permit them to run the show, either. The word translated as “exercise authority over” only occurs here in the NT. What it means is to “advance oneself in an inappropriate manner”. It was often used of the courtesans in noblemen’s courts, who would get their way by flirtatious teasing, or even in exchange for sexual favors! We don’t know exactly what was going on, but as priestesses of Diana, these women would certainly not have been unfamiliar with such manipulative tactics. Paul says, “No!” Interestingly, the main verb is in verse 11, “let them learn”. How are they to learn? “In all quietness and submission.” Verse 12 is a contrast, “but to teach or place-oneself-over a man, I do not permit, but to be in quietness.” (Can you see the repetition of “quietness”, apparently these women had difficulty listening without interrupting.)

At this point comes the comment about Adam and Eve. Our understanding of Paul’s *use* of this OT example is of huge importance. Is he harking back to a theological truth to buttress his argument, making a statement about all women everywhere, or, is he appealing to the example of how Eve in her innocence was deceived, using this as an exhortation for these women to become equipped to be more discerning. It is not entirely clear, although Paul *does not* use a word that would be a strong logical connector. The citation of this OT story could be understood as a mere example, not as an appeal to a universal theological truth. Paul’s reasoning is, if Eve was deceived while in her innocence, how much more do these women need to get grounded in a correct understanding of the scriptures, since they have been schooled in erroneous beliefs? Like Eve, they were impetuous and eager to take the lead before really being soundly prepared. If they were not careful, their leadership could lead to disaster as did hers. This is not a universal statement, but a warning to the ill-prepared.

Finally, to balance out this rebuke, Paul reminds them of God’s promise that through the seed of the woman would come the defeat of the serpent and the salvation of humankind (Gen. 3:15). In the Greek, Paul’s statement is “but she will be saved through the childbearing, if ever they might remain in faith and in love and in holiness with soundmindedness; the word is faithful.” Note, the change from a singular subject (“she”) to a plural one (“they”). Note, too, that

the Greek does not say that “they will be saved through the bearing of children”. That is a misnomer and a very poor translation. What of women who have no children? No. She (“womankind”, or “Eve”) will be saved through “the childbearing”. What does that mean? The way of salvation came through a woman, ...through the birth of her Savior-Son. She is not the Savior. He is. Paul is speaking figuratively, not literally. She will be saved through Jesus’ death on the cross. But let us not forget that God chose to forever undo the deception of Eve that led Adam to choose to sin, by bringing the birth of the Savior through a woman, so that we could choose to trust in Him and find salvation.

Bottom line, I think I Timothy 2:9-15 does not exclude women from leadership, at all. In fact, it emphasizes that women need to be clearly taught so that they can become healthy and effective leaders. Paul recognized that women are going to be leaders and teachers. He corrected the abuse of power that these women were practicing, but made no universal prohibition that women should never teach men, only that women needed to recognize their need to be well equipped before being teachers.⁵ We have the example of Priscilla and Aquila to show a powerful example of a woman who effectively clarified the misperceptions of Apollos, so that he became a mighty teacher of the word (Acts 18:2,18-28). Remember that Paul himself had lived with them for a couple of years, and knew very well of their ministry.

Conclusion

There has been a great disservice done to marriages, families, churches, and especially to the women themselves in the Church of Jesus Christ. Women have been oppressed and robbed of the great strengths and abilities which God has incorporated within them because of the poor teaching on this entire subject within the Church of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, we are to a large degree, the products of our culture. It is difficult to gain the perspective to see beyond our cultural norms. Sadly, we, who are called to be “the pillar and support of the truth” (I Tim. 3:15), have been guilty of perpetuating a lie. This false teaching has oppressed women and has stripped them of their honor and dignity as “strong ones”, “helpers” whom the Creator fitted with great resources and abilities for the benefit of all. We have not treated them as “joint heirs of the grace of life” (I Pet. 3:7), in spite of what the Scriptures have instructed us for centuries. We have turned a deaf ear to their cries or their frustrations, and a blind eye to their gifts, abilities and faithful service which belied our erroneous doctrines of restriction and repression. While that is sadly true, it is now incumbent upon those who follow Jesus to *lead the assault* on this demonic structure of lies and abuse. We must “show them honor”, and we must search the Scriptures to uproot any and every false notion in our worldview. Jesus said that the Spirit had anointed Him to “preach good news to the afflicted... to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to the downtrodden” (Lk. 4:18; Isa. 61:1). Does not the Holy Spirit have the same heart today? Shall we not begin by tearing down the strongholds of Satanic deception that has held *half of the human race* in bondage and oppression for centuries? It seems as though the Lord is exposing the Enemy's lies in our day. Let us rally to the point of attack and raze this prison wall of lies, brick by brick, in the name and banner of Him who is the Truth, Jesus the Christ.

“...and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free... and those who the Son sets free shall be free indeed.”
(Jn. 8:32,36)

Endnotes

¹I am deeply indebted to Drs. Berkeley and Alvera Mickelson, former professors at Bethel Seminary, St. Paul, MN, for much of the primary research they did in this area. They compiled a series of unpublished notes, entitled *Biblical Teachings About Men-Women Relationships*. Pages 8-14 provided much of the foundational information concerning *kephalē* and *ro'sh* in this section. Additional information on this subject could be obtained by contacting Christians for Biblical Equality, 122 West Franklin Ave, Suite 218, Minneapolis, MN 55404-2451, Ph. (612) 872-6898, E-mail <cbe@cbeinternational.org>, Website www.cbeinternational.org.

²Interestingly, Paul does not even say "*the* head" in these verses. There is no "the" in the Greek text. A proper translation would emphasize the functional aspect of this role: "(a) man/husband is (a) head of the woman/wife like Christ is (a) head of the Church". Greek has no "a" or "an". Usually, when the definite article ("the") is not used, unless the immediate context has previously specified that a noun is definite (and is obviously referring to the same object or person), or unless it is a name of a specific person, or unless there is some other grammatical structure indicating otherwise, it would be understood as indefinite. When translated into English, we would add the indefinite article, "a" or "an", to make it more understandable to us. **Nowhere does the NT describe a man as "the" head of his wife.** By contrast, in I Cor. 11:3, Christ *is* described as "the" head of every man (the definite article is there), while the man is a head of a woman, and God is a head of the Christ (no definite article is in these phrases). The fact that Paul uses the definite article ("the") in the first phrase, but then omits it in the next two phrases, would indicate that he is purposefully making a distinction.

What would be the distinction caused by leaving this noun indefinite, instead of definite?

First, by not making it definite, **Paul is not making the husband equal to "*the* head" of the wife, as though this were a position** that the husband (or "man", the context does not clearly limit this to a family setting, but to male/female interrelationships, in general) necessarily and exclusively holds.

Secondly, the indefinite structure more strongly emphasizes that this is written as a metaphorical comparison. A metaphor is a figure of speech where you describe something as literally being something else, in order to suggest or illustrate an analogy or comparison between the two objects, e.g., "Bill is a cunning wolf". It is like a simile, except that a simile uses "as" or "like" when making the comparison, e.g., "Bill is like a cunning wolf". To say that "the husband is a head of the wife" is a metaphorical statement. It is not in the more fully expressed form of a simile, though the comparative idea of "as" or "like" is nevertheless implied, even if not directly stated. The point of a metaphor is to make the analogy or comparison suggested by the image. If the reader will recognize this, then the question becomes "What is the relationship described by this word picture? What does it mean to function as a 'head' of someone?" In Eph. 5, this is more fully clarified by using Christ's "head relationship to the church" as a standard of comparison.

Thirdly, the grammatical structure allows there to be more than one possible head. The husband is "a head", which would imply that there could be other people who function as "a head" in the life of the woman. If we think in terms of "source, origin, or one who enables another to grow and come to completion", there is no difficulty in recognizing that there may be several people in someone's life who function in this way, e.g., parents, a schoolteacher, friend, mentor, or Christ. In this way, even God Himself could be described as "a head" of the Christ.

I have often heard the objection that no organization can have more than one head. Just as in nature, God did not create animals with more than one head, because it would cause confusion and be counter-productive, so in a home there can only be one head. Of course, this is a cultural understanding of "head" as "boss" or "final authority". I find that it is interesting that this does not even square with the usage of the term in the OT. It was quite possible to have multiple "heads" in the nation of Israel. In Exodus 6:14, for example, the literal Hebrew says, "these are the heads (pl.) of the house (sing.) of their father". Isn't it interesting that most translations have interpreted that in light of our authority structure? The NASB, for example translates it as "these are the heads of their father's households", assuming that their leadership would only be recognized by those descended from them, physically. Why? Could it not be that there was a council approach to leadership, with a plurality of elders ("heads"), instead of a hierarchical style, i.e., one with a flow chart power structure that only allows for one "head", one king or ultimate authority? The language would support more of a plurality approach. Furthermore, in Exodus 18:25 "Moses chose able men out from all Israel, and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens." As a result, each Israelite would have four "heads" to be accountable to, the leader of his group of ten, that of his group of fifty, that of his group of hundreds, and that of his group of thousands. So, it is quite clear from the Biblical language that having multiple "heads" was not at all either a contradictory, or unusual concept, even in a hierarchical system. How much more if "headship" is a functional role, and not a position?

Fourth, as mentioned above, by allowing this to be indefinite, and open-ended, **it forces the reader to consider "head" in terms of function, not position.** This is a figurative statement regarding *how* the husband is to relate to his wife. It is not meant as a statement regarding position, or as an assigning of rank in an authority structure.

³This phenomenon is acknowledged in a footnote to the "κεφαλή" article in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. III, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1968). Although no conclusion is drawn by Heinrich Schlier, the author of the article, he does quote an observation by Georg Bertram in the note at the bottom of page 675, "Though κεφαλή is almost exclusively used for ראש (Heb. - ro'sh), in many passages in the LXX ראש (ro'sh) is rendered differently, esp. by ἀρχή (meaning "beginning, first, or ruler, ruling power, authority"), ἄρχων (ruler, official, authority), ἀρχηγός (leader, pioneer, founder), ἡγεῖσθαι (to lead the way, to take the lead, to be chief, to preside, govern, rule), προηγῖσθαι (to lead the way, to outdo, to vie with), χιλιάρχος (tribune, officer of high rank) and κορυφή (the head, crown of the head, top, highest; metaphorically, the best, choicest, most noble or excellent)." (The parenthetical information was added by me to assist the reader.)

It is interesting to note that virtually all of these options are Greek words meaning "authority". The LXX translators consistently avoided using κεφαλή in these contexts, choosing instead, from these other Greek options, words that would better suit the flavor of rank and authority in these passages.

⁴Another ramification of our misunderstanding of the word "head" in the NT is that we miss out on the meaning of other passages where the word is used metaphorically. We jump to the conclusion that it is speaking of "authority" and "power", when in fact it is meant to communicate something entirely different. Let us take a closer look at some of the other NT examples where this occurs:

(a.) In Mt. 21:42; Mk. 12:10; 20:17; Acts 4:11; I Pet. 2:7 we have the following comparison, where Christ is likened to "...the stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner". Obviously, the word picture has to do with the construction of a building. The "head of the corner" has nothing to do with being a "boss" or "having authority" over other building blocks. That would be nonsensical, since these are inanimate objects being described. In what sense, then, is one stone said to be "head" of the corner? Scholars agree that this idiom is descriptive of the cornerstone, i.e., the foundational stone from which everything else in the building is measured for plumbness or squareness. It is actually one of the first stones set in place, and all others are arranged in respect to it. In that sense it is "first", in placement, and a "source", in that all other stones are designated from it.

(b.) In I Cor. 11:3,4,5, Paul writes that "the head of every man is the Christ, and [a/the] head of woman is the man; and [a/the] head of Christ is the God". Is this usage about authority, or is the apostle attempting to communicate something else? Which of the definitions which we know were consistent with the Greek word "kephalē" could fit here and make sense? How would the context support a different option than the traditional "authority-based" interpretation?

This is, admittedly, a difficult passage, since it is not at all clear what exactly Paul is talking about here. One of the more traditional interpretations, regarding the usage of a veil, is without a clear representation in the original language. The word translated as "veil" is literally "having down from" the head, which could be referring to a hairstyle. The best explanation I have seen has to do with a problem that arose in Corinth, because women were understanding that in Christ they were equal-heirs with men, and were cutting their hair and wearing clothes which made them look like men. Paul is addressing this issue, and encouraging women to wear hair that flowed down from the head, or to shave their heads (an offensive practice where they were, since adultresses, courtesans and slave women in Corinth were shorn in this fashion), so there would be no confusion between the sexes. This would seem to be the underlying meaning of the comment that men should not wear their hair long. It was certainly *not* a shame for a man to have long hair. In the OT, a Nazarite was someone who was dedicated to God for a period of time. They signified this by not eating of the fruit of the vine, and by not cutting their hair during the time of their separation to God (Num. 6). In several cases, a man was a Nazarite from birth, and was never to cut his hair (e.g., Samson [Jdg. 13:7; 16:1-27], Samuel [I Sam. 1:11], and probably John the Baptist in the NT [Lk. 1:15; cf. Mt. 3:4]). Since this was prescribed by God, there certainly could not be anything wrong with a man "having" long hair. We find, however, that Samson, at least, wore his hair in a net, or web. Why? Not because it was wrong to let it hang loose, but probably because long flowing hair would be a liability to a man who may need to physically defend himself. Neither does nature indicate that having long hair is a bad thing (look at the example of the lion and lioness), but what nature does teach is that there are differences between males and females, and when long hair begins to obscure the sexual identity of the person something is obscured that is supposed to remain visible. Paul's

comments seem to indicate that there is a concern over obscuring the differences between men and women. He purposely states that man is the image and glory of God, and that woman is the glory of man. Instead of understanding the "down from the head" as a veil which covers or obscures the beauty of the woman, it could be that Paul's conclusion in verse 10 is saying exactly the opposite, i.e., "for this cause a woman ought to have (to wear) authority upon the head", meaning she ought to powerfully be all that God intended her to be. She ought to wear the power as a co-heir and co-recipient of power and commission along with the man. Her power is in her difference. She ought not to minimize that, but to authoritatively and boldly be the helper God made her to be. The angels are watching to see what men and women can teach them of God's wisdom, love and grace (Eph. 3:9,10; I Pet. 1:12). Does it not make sense that they ought to walk in the dignity and power of His original creation, a power and dignity that celebrates their unique differences?

Getting back to the usage of the word "head", however, the apostle Paul gives us the clearest clue as to the meaning of "head" in this passage in verse 7. He writes, "For the man was not out from the woman, but the woman out from the man". The preposition, translated as "out from", clearly refers to the idea of the man being the "source or origin" of the woman, a fact clearly portrayed by the Genesis story of God taking a rib from Adam's side, from which He formed a woman. So, the usage of "head" as "source or origin" is supported from the passage. Would this fit with the other usages of "head"? Is Christ the "source" of man, or is God the "source" of Christ? Certainly. Man was the source of woman at the original creation. Lest men should want to exalt themselves over womankind by virtue of this fact, however, Paul immediately points out that every man who has come into the world since that original creation has come "out from" a woman (vss. 11,12). God designed things so that man could not exist without woman, nor woman without man, an example of equality which includes both the priority of origination, but is balanced by mutuality.

(c.) The next passage for our consideration is Eph. 1:22, where Paul writes, "He has put all things under His feet and has made Him head over all things for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." Of the common definition choices for *kephalē* given by Liddell, Scott, Jones and McKenzie, either the option of Jesus being the "extremity, top, cap", or the "consummation, summation" would fit. The preposition, translated as "over" can also mean "beyond" or "more than". Thus, the verse could be declaring that God had brought all things under Jesus' feet, and gave Him, the summation beyond all things, to the church, or "gave Him, the cap over all things to the church". In either case, the word picture for "head" is descriptive of who Jesus is, but does not include the concept of authority. In the context, in vs. 10, the apostle used a variant form, *anakephalaioō*, from the same root as *kephalē*. There it has been translated as "the summing up of all things in Christ". Would it not seem reasonable to see that vs. 22 is building upon this statement, telling us that God has given Him who is the summation of all things to the church?

(d.) In Eph. 4:12, where Paul describes interactive Body-life as "speaking the truth in love, we will grow up all things into Him who is the head, even Christ, out from whom the body ...causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." The preposition "out from" would indicate that Jesus is the source from which the body draws its strength and life. "Head" here would mean "source, origin, enabler, one who brings to completion".

(e.) In Eph. 5:23, "For the husband is head of the wife as Christ also is head of the church, Himself the savior of the body", the context further clarifies that "headship" here is a serving role. Note that in his further description, Paul says that husbands are to "love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her." Being "head" of the wife is a role where the man is to give himself up on behalf of his wife. Notice the focus of the following verses. They are all about serving the woman, helping her to become all that God created her to be. There is absolutely *no* authoritative language in the passage at all. The verbs used to describe the man's service to the woman are "love ...and give himself up for her", "he might sanctify her (set her apart as special)", "cleansing her by the washing of water (reference to the Spirit? -- cf. Jn. 7:37-39) with the word" (Not Bible verses, the Greek here is *rhēma*, referring to personal communication. Men, the Bible is telling us to do the same thing wives have been asking from their husbands for years, "Talk to me!"), "love [your] wives as [your] own bodies", "nourishing and cherishing" her. Why? What is the purpose of this "headship role"? "...in order that He might present to himself [his wife] in all her glory". When you take all these word pictures, verbs and descriptions together, it is very clear that "head" here has to mean "source, origin, enabler, one who brings to completion". There is no justification for an hierarchical, "boss"-type of interpretation, at all, yet, so often that is the way the passage is being taught.

(f.) In Col. 1:18, "And He is the head of the Body, the church, and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything", can you see the "source, origin" language? In the previous two verses, the apostle declares that Jesus is the creator of all things, "both in the heavens and upon the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities -- all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together..." There is a strong "source" idea coming into the verse in question. Why not see Paul's statement as Jesus is the "source" of the Body,

the church? There is no reason to interpret this from an authority point of view. Furthermore, in the context that follows there is no mention of a "boss"-type of role, either.

(g.) In Col. 2:10, "And He is the head over all rule and authority", there is no preposition in the Greek which would justify the translation "over". The structure is a simple genitive clause, "the head *of* all rule and authority". Here, again, the word "source, origin, one- who-brings-to-completion" makes perfect sense. This makes the first part of the verse even more clear, "and you are in Him having-been- fulfilled/made-complete, who is the head/source/completer of every rule and authority". If Jesus is the "head", or "source", or "one-who- enables-and-completes" these authorities and rulers, then He who has made us to be "filled-full" (i.e., "complete" in the sense of having great potential) will be able to empower and lead us to fulfill that potential which He has placed inside of us. It is clear that the "authority motif" does not fit the context. The point is not that Jesus has control over every ruler and authority, but that He is the source of their ability.

(h.) Finally, in Col. 2:19, "and not holding fast to the head, out from whom the entire body ...grows with a growth which is from God", the "out from" language would indicate that the apostle was emphasizing Jesus' role as the "source, or origin", from which spiritual life comes, and also the "enabler, completer" who oversees and encourages growth through personal words and watchful care.

⁵ For further information about I Timothy 2:9-15, I would strongly recommend the book, I Suffer Not A Woman by Catherine Clark Kroeger and Richard Clark Kroeger, published by Baker Books, 1992. It is an excellent resource. The authors did extensive research with the primary sources, and supply a wealth of background information, as well as a thorough presentation of the arguments on this passage.

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