

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The New Testament Concept of “Head”

by Dan Trygg

“For the husband is head of the wife, as Christ also is head of the church, Himself Savior/Preserver/Deliverer of the body... ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up on behalf of her, ²⁶ so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with a personal-word, ²⁷ that He might stand-her-alongside Himself in honor/esteem/glory/splendor the church, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. ²⁸ So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; ²⁹ for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church...” Ephesians 5:23,25-30

“...holding fast to the head, out from whom all the body, through the connecting-tissues and ligaments being supplied and knitted-together, grows the growth of God.” Colossians 2:19

It is important to remember, when we approach the Bible, that we are removed by 2,000 years of church history, drastically different cultural norms, and very different historical circumstances from the world of the scriptures. **In order for us to correctly understand any passage of the Bible, we must do our best to try to get back into the original setting, circumstances, cultural worldview, language and mind of the writers**, as they were led by the Spirit to record God’s message for *their* time that we are to learn from. **One of the obstacles to overcome is interpretations that have become “accepted as true”, but may be faulty.** It is important for each of us to develop good Bible study techniques, and evaluative skills, so that we can discern what is true from what is not.

A significant example of this problem has to do with our translation of the NT Greek word for “head” (*kephalē*). **Scholars have unwittingly imposed meanings from our cultural metaphorical usage of the word “head” onto the passages in the NT, which are inconsistent with the meaning of the original Greek word.** We are guilty of “eisegesis”, or “reading in” meaning into the text that is not properly there. **As Bible students, we are to be careful to “exegete” the text, ...interpret accurately what the text says, not adding or ignoring the intended meaning of the writer.** I have been over this material many, many times over the past 50 years. I have wrestled with the vocabulary, read the articles of debate on this subject, and I am settled in my own conclusion. (BTW, in preparation for this, I read an article that surveyed much of the debate over the past 70 years! -- <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/meta-study-debate-over-meaning-head-kephale-pauls-writings/>).

What am I talking about? The NT Greek word for “head” (*kephalē*) does *not* mean “boss” or “authority”. To read those ideas into passages of the NT is to introduce ideas foreign to the author’s intended meaning. As a result, we can make a passage that was meant to say one thing, communicate something entirely different, distorting or even contradicting the author’s point. **We also miss out on the point, or word picture, that the writer was trying to express!**

So, what does the NT Greek word for “head” mean? If you were to look the word up in a lexicon (dictionary), you would find a whole list of meanings (just like when you look in an English dictionary). The first definition is the literal one, referring to the physical head on a body of a person or animal. Then, there is a list of “metaphorical” definitions. These are when the word is used in a figure of speech to stand for, or symbolize something else. *Kephalē* is used to refer to the **top or extremity** of something as in the “head” of a column or wall; the **source, origin, or starting point** as in the “head” of a river; the **crown, completion, or summation** of something, as in the “heading-up” of all things in Christ; sometimes “head” can refer to **a whole person**, as in a “head count”; and, it can also refer to someone who is a **source of life or strength, an originator, an enabler, or one who helps someone else come to completion.** One of the most respected Greek lexicons of classical and “koinē” Greek, compiled by Liddell, Scott, Jones and McKenzie, lists 25 metaphorical definitions for *kephalē*. But there is one figurative meaning that is common for our English word “head” that is conspicuously absent from their lexicon. In their research, they did **NOT** find that *kephalē* meant “authority, leader, or boss”. This is very significant, since this is the meaning often read into passages like Ephesians 5:23. **The Greek word for “head” does NOT mean “boss” or “authority”.**

If you were to take a gander at that article cited above, you will find that there *is* disagreement. There are scholars who disagree, and even lexicons that disagree. **How can we determine who is right?** First of all, it can’t just come down to the *number* of sources, because this misunderstanding has been broadly taught in our religious and cultural circles for many years. In fact, this understanding of “boss” or “authority” came from the pagan culture, and was imposed upon the teaching of the NT. **What convinced me was a comparison of the Hebrew OT word for “head” and the Greek Septuagint translation of the OT.** The Hebrew word for “head” has almost exactly the same range of meaning as our English word does, ...including that it can mean “boss” or “authority”. The Hebrew word is *ro’sh*. It occurs some 600 times in the OT. About 250 BC, some Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew OT into Greek for Jews who were living in Egypt. **They systematically chose *kephalē* as the equivalent for *ro’sh* throughout, ...except for**

about 180 times where it was clear that *ro'sh* meant “boss, leader or authority”. In most of those passages the translators used *other* Greek words that specifically meant “ruler” or “authority”. This consistent avoidance for using *kephalē* in contexts like this, and choosing a different word for “authority”, plainly indicates that the translators clearly knew that *kephalē* did not carry this meaning. I have looked at this, and it was quite apparent, and consistent.

So, if the NT Greek word does *NOT* mean “boss, leader or authority”, what *does* it mean in these passages?

Let's begin with 1 Peter 2:7, “the stone which the builders rejected came to be *the head of the corner*” (cf. Matt. 21:42; Mk. 12:10; Lk. 20:17; Acts 4:11). This is a reference to Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 28:16. It is clear from these passages that **this is a foundation cornerstone, out from which the rest of the house would be oriented and constructed, plumb and square. In this sense, it is a starting point, a beginning, a source out from which the rest of the building will be assembled.** There is no sense of “authority over” or “boss”, though there is the reality that this stone is placed *first*, and the rest are arranged in relation to it. **Jesus was the Cornerstone out-from which the church is being built. It started with Him. He is the Source, the Originator, and God is assembling us, as living stones, in relation to Him.**

In Colossians 1:18, “He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that in everything He Himself might come to be being-first.” **First of all, we have the word-picture of the head to the body. In Greek thought, the body grew out from the head.** Think of it, when a baby is born, usually the head is disproportionately large for the body the child possesses, especially when compared with adult proportions. But, look at the context here, beginning from vs. 13. “We have been transferred to the kingdom of God's Son, out from whom we have redemption. He is the firstborn of all creation (pre-eminent – this is a title – cf. Psa. 89:27; Jer.31:9), for by Him all things were created, ...whether thrones, dominions, rulers, or authorities, all things were created by Him and for Him, ...and He is before all things, and all things in Him stand-together...” **Certainly, the main idea of the entire context is that Jesus is the Source or Originator of all things, ...including our salvation.**

In Colossians 2:10, “In Him y'all are having-been-filled, who is the head of every ruler and authority.” The first phrase helps us interpret how “head” is to be understood. **He is the Source, the Originator and Empowerer. AND, ...we have been filled with His ability and purpose.** As we continue down the context, Paul lists a number of things Christ has already done for us – “in Him you have been circumcised, ...in the removal of the body of the flesh, ...co-buried with Him..., in whom y'all were co-raised with Him through faith, ...He made y'all alive together with Him, forgiving to us all our transgressions, erasing every accusation that could be made against us, nailing it to the cross, stripping away the power of demonic rulers and authorities, triumphing over them in Him.” **These are all things He has accomplished for us. He is the Source, the Originator and Empowerer of a new life, a new identity and a new status in the universe.** Therefore, Paul admonishes us, do not allow anyone to act as our judge regarding religious rituals, for they are mere shadows of what Christ has now fulfilled. And don't let anyone pull rank over you, claiming superior knowledge because of supposed “visions” he or she has seen, or lead you off into self-abasement or worshipping angels, “...and not holding fast to the head, out from whom the whole body, being-supplied and knitted-together by means of the connecting tissues and ligaments, grows the growth of God” (Col. 2:19). **Note the language. We are to “hold fast to the head (Christ) out from whom, ...being supplied and knitted together through our connections to one another..., the body grows the growth that comes from God. Head = Source, Empowerer, Completer.**

“When God raised Christ from the dead, He seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above every ruler, authority, power or dominion. He arranged all things under Jesus' feet, and gave HIM, ...the head above-and-beyond all things..., to the church, which is His body, the fullness (full-measure or fulfillment) of the One filling-up all things in every way” - Ephesians 1:20-23. The message is two-fold: (1.) Jesus is much greater than anything else; and (2.) God gave Him to the church to be the Source, Empowerer and Fulfiler of His purpose. The point is that, because Christ is our Life and inworking Power, God can do amazing things with us.

As we continue in Ephesians, we come to 4:15, the center of this book, where Paul is describing the incredible plan for the body of Christ, and our place as individual parts of that body. **“But, truthing in love we are to grow all things into HIM, who is the head, Christ, out from whom all the body, being-fitted-together and knitted-together through every connection of supply, according to the in-working in measure of each individual part, produces the growth of the body for the building-up of itself in love.”** We are to grow *into* Him, and *out from* Him, we are to minister to one another through the inworking power that He supplies. **Clearly, “head” means Source, Empowerer and Completer, in that not only does He supply the power, but also the prompting to serve in love, as well.**

So, when we come to Ephesians 5:23, the word “head” means what it means in all of these other places, ...a man is to be an empowerer and completer, doing what he can to help his wife grow. He is to deliver her from the diminishing messages and pressures of this world, love her, give himself on her behalf, and speak encouragement into her life, so that she would embrace her calling to become all that Christ has called and empowered her to become. His goal should be to stand her alongside himself “in glory”. That word means “honored, distinguished, esteemed and glorious”. A man who loves his wife loves himself, and reveals Jesus through their relationship.