

# 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 – Major Questions

## 2. Who is the head of a woman – every man or only her husband?

The Greek word *gune* can refer to either “woman” or “wife,” depending on the context. Similarly, the Greek word *aner* can refer to either “man” or “husband.” Both words are used repeatedly in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. Sometimes in this chapter it seems like Paul is speaking about men and women in general, and sometimes it seems like he is speaking about husbands and wives. In any given verse, it is very difficult to be 100% sure in which sense he is using these words.

The translation choice in verse 3 is particularly crucial for understanding male/female relationships. If you translate the words in verse 3 as “man” and “woman,” this can be used to teach that all men have some level of authority over all women and that all women must submit in some way to all men. Conversely, if verse 3 is speaking of husbands and wives, this verse merely reinforces the teaching of Ephesians 5:23 that the husband is head of the wife. It says nothing about the generic headship of men over women. Which is correct?

For the following four reasons, it seems most likely that Paul has husbands and wives in view in this verse rather than all men and women:

- 1) This verse is incredibly similar to Ephesians 5:23, which is clearly referring to husbands and wives.
  - Both verses use the same Greek words for man/husband, woman/wife, and head.
  - Both base the nature of the human relationship on the headship of Christ.
  - The context of Ephesians 5:23 is clearly about marriage, while it is not clear if the context of 1 Corinthians 11 is about all men and women or just marriage.
  - A basic principle of interpretation is to use clear passage to interpret unclear ones. Following this principle, it seems likely that 1 Corinthians 11:3 is teaching the same thing as Ephesians 5:23 – husbands are the head of their wives.
  
- 2) The metaphor of “head” and “body” implies that in each headship relationship, you should expect a person to have just one head, not many.
  - Just as each physical body only has one head, so also a person in a headship relationship can only have one head.
  - In the headship relationship between “every man” and Christ, each man has one head – Jesus.
  - In the headship relationship between Christ and God the Father, Jesus has one head - God.
  - Similarly, in the relationship between a woman and man (or wife and husband) you would expect the woman to have only one head. Every man is not her head, only one man – her husband.
  
- 3) Careful reading of this verse shows that it is about the relationship between husbands and wives.
  - If we assume for a moment that the words should be translated as man and woman, a very literal translation of 1 Cor 11:3 says this:

“And I want you to know that of every man the head is Christ, and the head of a woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God.”
  - When speaking of the relationship between men and Christ, Paul clearly states that he is talking about “every man.”
  - But when speaking of the relationship between men and women, Paul speaks only of the headship of “the man” over “a woman.”

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- Since Paul did not say that the head of a woman is “every man,” but only “the man” (singular), it seems clear that Paul did not expect a woman to submit to the headship of every man, but only to one particular man – “the man.”
- Therefore, he must be talking about a wife’s particular relationship with the one man who is her head – her husband.

4) Other passages require that wives submit only to their own husbands, and not to every man.

- Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. (Eph 5:22 ESV)
- Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, (1Pet 3:1 ESV)

Conclusion: 1 Corinthians 11:3 should not be used to teach that men in general have headship over women in general. It is specifically talking about husbands and wives and should only be applied in that limited sense.