

“The Godhead is the head/source of Christ” and Trinitarian Orthodoxy: A Dialogue with Sam Williams.

I preserve the dialogue format of our June 2020 emails because I believe many of you share the concerns of Sam Williams, a college student in the Philippines.

Sam Williams:

“I am a woman who grew up exposed to complementarian teachings. These teachings became harmful for me, and led me to have a negative view on myself just because I am a woman. This view, although it boasted itself of being good, actually led to the exploitation of many women. I feared being taken advantage of purely because I was a woman and did not have the right to reject men’s ‘authority.’

Learning about how the Bible actually teaches equality was liberating for me. In fact, I have to thank you for this Dr. Payne, as it was your article, “The Bible Teaches Equal Standing of Man and Woman,” from CBE that opened my eyes to this amazing truth! It would not be an exaggeration to say that you helped free me from the chains of hierarchy complementarianism! When I first read it, I was still quite hesitant to accept it since I was so brainwashed by hierarchists. But without a doubt, reading that article was the first step I took towards accepting the egalitarian view.

I would also like to note that on Richard Cervin’s “A Study of the Abuse of One Greek Word: On the Significance of *Kephalē* (“Head”),” he criticizes your interpretation of “head” as meaning “source.” In fact, he actually thinks that anyone who interprets the word as either “source” or “authority” are “empirically wrong.”

He states, “In pre-biblical Greek (archaic, classical, early Hellenistic), the word *kephalē* is hardly ever used as a personal metaphor at all, and does not mean ‘source’ or ‘ruler’ or ‘authority over.’ Furthermore, any claim that these are ‘common’ meanings or implications for *kephalē* during these periods is empirically wrong. Also, the argument that *kephalē* later took on its connotation of authority from the noun *kephalaion* (‘sum, total, chief’) is false.”

He also mentions in his conclusion, “What then does *kephalē* mean? The answer is easy: the literal head. What then of the connotations and metaphorical extensions of *kephalē*? How does one explain them (references to tops of mountains, trees, waves; sources or mouths of rivers; and so forth)? The most comprehensive explanation, as Chadwick has also pointed out, is that *kephalē*, as the topmost part of the body, was extended to refer to the tops of things (hence, ‘top’ or ‘summit’ of mountains, etc.), or the ends of things (hence, ‘source’ or ‘mouth’ of rivers). This is in full accord with my explanation in section 3 above, which I arrived at independently of Chadwick.”

Dr. Payne, I do not know if you have read Mr. Cervin’s article from *Priscilla Papers* Vol. 30 No. 2. But would it be okay if I heard your response to this? Oh and I’m not necessarily asking you to read it, I just wanted to know what you have to say from the points I mentioned above.

I find the conclusions by Mr. Cervin deeply concerning, as it would mean that several parts of Scripture does suggest a hierarchy between men and women. I hope to hear from you soon.

Phil Payne:

Thank you for your email. I trust you will find that your questions about the metaphorical use of “head” in Greek are clearly answered in my chapter on “What About Headship” in *Mutual by Design: A Better Model of Christian Marriage*, ed. Elizabeth Beyer (Minneapolis: CBE International, 2017). You may download it free from www.pbpayne.com under Publications: Articles. For more detail, I attach a paper I read at the Evangelical Theological Society’s annual meeting in 2017: “Head as source, not leader” and its handout.

It is incorrect to say that “Richard Cervin... thinks that anyone who interprets the word as either ‘source’ or ‘authority’ are “empirically wrong.” What he says, as you quote below, is “any claim that these are ‘common’ meanings or implications for κεφαλή (*kephalē*) during these periods is empirically wrong.” If by “common” he means something like, less than a reasonably high percentage of occurrences of the word “head,” his statement is justifiable, because “head” in Greek is normally used of a physical head. But if he means that there were no commonly-cited metaphorical uses of “head” meaning “source,” he is mistaken. Probably the most commonly cited metaphorical use of “head” in Greek literature is “Zeus the head, Zeus the middle, Zeus from whom all things are created.” Cervin himself in “Does Κεφαλή Mean ‘Source’ or ‘Authority Over’ in Greek Literature? A Rebuttal” in *Trinity Journal* 10 NS (1989) 85–112 at 90 writes, “In context, it is clear the Herodotus is discussing the ‘source’ (πηγαί) of the Taurus.” On p. 99 Cervin writes regarding the use of “head” to mean “source” in T. Reuben 2.2, “There is nothing in this text which is remotely political, social, or military, and so the translation ‘leader,’ which Grudem advocates, is not justified. In fact, the notion of ‘source’ is much more appropriate to the context, the seven spirits being the ‘source’ of rebellion.” Regarding Philo, *On Rewards and Punishments* 125, Cervin on p. 101 writes, “It is fairly clear that ‘head’ here is the source of life.” Cervin concludes on p. 112, “Can denote ‘source’? The answer is *yes*.”

Sam Williams:

I will take my time to read the attached documents, of which I am extremely grateful. On another note, I have read some claims from CBMW that the women mentioned in the Bible depicted to be in positions of leadership in Bible did not really have leadership over men but over fellow women. What can you say about this?

I am sorry for bothering you again. I am simply filled with worries.

Phil Payne:

My book, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (list \$32.99, available for \$19.99 from <https://www.linguistsoftware.com/orders/orders.htm>) gives detailed refutation of the claim women in leadership in the Bible did not have leadership over men. In Romans 16, Paul gives specific church leadership descriptions to ten people he names. Seven of those are women. The

context gives no indication that of those seven had leadership only over fellow women, not men. In 16:1–2 Paul identifies Phoebe “who is deacon of the church of Cenchreae” (not “deaconess of the women of the church of Cenchreae”) and commands the entire church, which would have applied most directly to the church leadership, “help her in whatever matter she may require from you for she has been a leader (προστάτις *prostatis*) of many, including myself also.” *Prostatēs* (προστάτης) was the Greek word for the president of a synagogue or other society. This word combines *pro*, “to stand in rank before” and *histēmi* “to stand.” The meaning of every occurrence of each word combining these two elements in the New Testament that could naturally fit Romans 16:2 refers to leadership. This includes the usage shortly before in Romans 12:8, “The one in leadership (ὁ προϊστάμενος), govern diligently.” C. K. Barret, *The first Epistle to the Romans* (HNTC; BNTC; New York/Evanston/London: Harper & Row, 1957) 283 writes, “The Greek noun here (προστάτις) is often equivalent to the Latin *patrona*, but Phoebe cannot have stood in this relation to Paul (since he was born free, Acts xxii. 28).” The translation “benefactor” is also unsatisfactory. Every other NT reference to “benefactor” or to any of its cognates (Acts 4:9; 10:38; 1 Timothy 6:2) is based on a different word, εὐεργέτης, that combines “good” and “works.” Benefactors typically preferred to have attention drawn to their good works than their rank over others. Jesus refers specifically to this custom in Luke 22:25, “those in authority (οἱ ἐξουσιάζοντες) over the Gentiles are called benefactors (εὐεργέται).” Even Charles Ryrie, *The Role of Women in the Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 140 and 88, who teaches that woman’s role in church is “not a leading one,” acknowledges that προστάτις “includes some kind of leadership.” Since Paul identifies himself as one of people for whom she has been a leader (probably in submitting to her leadership when in her church), her leadership was not restricted to women.

In Romans 16:1–16, Paul greets by name ten people he identifies as colleagues in Christian ministry. Seven of the ten are women: Phoebe, “deacon of the church of Cenchreae” (16:1) and “leader of many, including myself” (16:2); Junia, “outstanding among the apostles” (16:7; cf. Eldon J. Epp, *Junia, The First Woman Apostle* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005]); Prisca, “my fellow worker in Christ Jesus” (16:3; cf. Phil 4:3); and Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis “worked hard in the Lord” (16:6, 12). First Corinthians 16:16 urges believers “to be subject to every fellow laborer.” First Thessalonians 5:12 identifies “those who labor among you” as “those who are over you (προϊστάμενος) in the Lord.” It cannot be stressed enough that Paul is not simply listing these women as *believers*, but as *ministry leaders*. Paul greets many believers in this passage, but describes as ministry leaders only ten people, and seven of those are women. The three men are Aquila, Andronicus, and Urbanus. The first two are listed with their wives, highlighting their shared authority. Paul’s naming such a high proportion of women leaders in an open society is unparalleled in the entire history of ancient Greek literature and suggests a level of female leadership in the early church exceptional for its culture.

Sam Williams:

I was finally able to sit down and read the files you have sent. So far, I’ve read the “ETS Head as source.pdf” and I have some questions. I’ll go into a bit of Christology, I hope you don’t mind.

I think that the most persuasive evidence here (for me) that head does not mean “authority over” is how the early Christians (who understood the language perhaps much better than anyone in modern times) denied that this was the case. Interpreting it as “authority over” would also be saying that the Son is subordinate to the Father, which would be heresy.

I can see that, compared to “authority over,” “source” is indeed the more likely meaning. Ambrosiaster makes a clear explanation of how head as “source” is understood in this passage: “*God is the head of Christ because he **begat** him; Christ is the head of the man because he **created** him, and the man is the head of the woman because she was taken **from** his side.*” However, I still feel hesitant as I am afraid I might be committing blasphemy because of its implications to Christology. Perhaps it is due to the influence of Dr. William Craig’s teachings on me, but if I may quote him:

“This doctrine of the generation of the Logos from the Father cannot, despite assurances to the contrary, but diminish the status of the Son because He becomes an effect contingent upon the Father. Even if this eternal procession takes place necessarily and apart from the Father’s will, the Son is less than the Father because the Father alone exists a se, whereas the Son exists through another (ab alio).”

He also says,

“Basil asserts, “That which is from such a Cause is not inferior to that which has no Cause; for it would share the glory of the Unoriginate, because it is from the Unoriginate” (Ibid.) This claim is unconvincing, however, for to be dependent upon the Unoriginate for one’s existence is to lack a ground of being in oneself alone, which is surely less great than being able to exist on one’s own. Such derivative being is, as Brian Leftow says, the same way in which created things exist.[6] Despite its protestations to the contrary, Nicene orthodoxy does not seem to have completely exorcised the spirit of subordinationism introduced into Christology by the Greek Apologists. Protestants bring all doctrinal statements, even Conciliar creeds, before the bar of Scripture. Nothing in Scripture warrants us in thinking that Christ is begotten of the Father in his divine nature.”

[Both quotations are taken from <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/christian-doctrines/is-god-the-son-begotten-in-his-divine-nature/> if you want to check it out]

Based on the texts above, it seems to me as well that even the meaning “source” implies some form of inferiority of the Son as compared to the Father.

My knowledge on this is shallow at best, so I would like to apologize in advance, but I have read that Jesus being “begotten” is only mentioned once in the Bible, which is in John 3:16. “Begotten” means “only” based on its usage in the OT. Again, I am no scholar and my knowledge on this is mediocre at best. But I don’t see much support for the idea that Jesus was derived from the Father. Like Dr. Craig, I believe that all three persons of the Trinity are all equal and underived.

I think that in order to push through with head meaning “source” without committing some form of blasphemy, there must first be an adequate explanation how the Son being begotten (as in derived) from the Father would not lead to the Son being inferior to the Father. If this is successful, then I think it would be totally acceptable to hold Ambrosiaster’s interpretation of this text.

On another note however, Dr. Payne... Is it possible that using the meaning “source,” the verse is saying that God is the head of Christ because he was sent from the *side* (to denote equality) of the Father, so that it could be said that Christ “came” from the Father? In short, can “source” be understood that Christ is from the Father's side (as in equal and non-derivative), who was sent by the Father to save mankind? Perhaps I am merely talking nonsense now, as I feel like I came to a standstill. Are “source” and “authority over” really the only options we have in understanding the meaning of head? It just seems to me that both leads to some form of blasphemy. Perhaps you have an explanation for this in the other files you sent which I have not read yet. In that case, I would like to apologize.

I also have another theory that perhaps the point here was not to dishonor one another. Perhaps Paul saw the patriarchal ideas of people, and thus gave instructions based on that. In their culture, he knew that a woman wearing her hair down would dishonor not only her but also dishonor man (who were viewed as above women and therefore has some sort of responsibility over them). And a man with long hair would then in turn dishonor himself and Christ, and dishonoring Christ would be dishonoring God. Although this patriarchal thinking was not necessarily something Paul supported (we know this as he calls for mutual submission to one another and teaches that women can minister and teach), he knew that this was how the people of Corinth thought (and that it wouldn’t be easy for them to abandon these ideas, but that they would learn eventually in the future) and so he warned them against dishonoring others through their actions, according to their thinking. (I think this is similar to the passage where mature believers were instructed not to pressure newer believers, who still thought that it was wrong to eat meat, to eat meat, as this would lead them to violating their conscience. Of course it was not wrong to eat it since Jesus declared all foods as clean, but they were instructed to give up their rights in order not to offend less mature Christians.)

Maybe it was all to avoid chaos and dishonoring one another. Perhaps “head” was referring to neither “source” or “authority over” but to the literal head, rather, the hairstyle the people had. The head of the woman would reflect the man and so on and so forth. This was maybe not exactly a reflection of what the Bible affirms, but a reflection of the thinking of that time. Then again, I might just be spewing nonsense in an attempt to find an answer to this troubling question. And I am very much open to people telling and explaining to me that I am wrong.

I’m afraid that this has gotten too lengthy. To conclude this email, I would like to a few more questions, Mr. Payne. Does the difficulty in interpreting “head” in this passage, in any way at all, threatens the egalitarian position? I know that the egalitarian view has a lot more arguments besides this part of Scripture, but I was wondering if this single passage would have a huge impact that may negatively affect the egalitarian view?

I'm sorry for bothering you with this. I do not have anyone I could have a discussion with about these texts, and so I have been carried away with this chance I got. I hope you will forgive me if you find me annoying and disturbing you.

Thank you again and God bless.

Your sister in Christ,

Sam

Phil Payne:

Thank you for your perceptive and sincere comments. Like you (and unlike my good friend Kevin Giles, whose theology is more strongly influenced by creeds and the Church Fathers than mine, since divine revelation is paramount to me, and divine revelation in Scripture was explained by Jesus Christ to trump tradition), I have never felt comfortable with the "eternal generation" theory. I find no clear support for it in Scripture. William Lane Craig's concerns seem valid to me.

When Greek uses "head" to mean "source" it is typically used to refer to the location from which something comes. Rivers come from their source springs. Muscles come from the bones to which they are attached. In Greek mythology, Athena was born from Zeus's head (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athena>). So to say that the source of Jesus is "the Godhead" (note that Paul here says "the head of Christ is the Godhead [ὁ Θεός]" not "the father") most naturally means that Jesus came from the Godhead to become incarnate for our salvation. Similarly, the previous statement "the man is the head/source of woman" refers to woman being formed by God from Adam's rib. So, it, too, refers to source in the sense of location. The first "source" statement in 1 Corinthians 11:3, "the head/source of every man is the Christ" echoes 1 Corinthians 8:6, formatted as follows, namely in poetic structure, in the NA²⁸ the Greek says literally:

yet for us one God the father

from whom all things and unto whom we [in the sense of "for whom we exist"]

and one Lord Jesus Christ

through whom all things and we through him [in the sense of "we exist through him"]

In 8:6a God the Father is the source "from whom all things [exist]." "From whom" something comes into being indicates "source" in the sense of "by means of," namely that God created all things. In contrast 8:6b states that this is executed "through" the Lord Jesus Christ "through whom" we continue to exist. Together these prepositions convey joint creative activity, and both can convey a spatial aspect as well, "from the Father" and "through the Son." "And we through him" focuses on people and indicates that we continue to exist through Christ.

Furthermore, since the 1 Corinthians 11 goes on to stress "source" as location in v. 8 "woman is from man" and v. 12 "for as the woman is from the man, so also the man is through the woman," it is perfectly natural to understand "Christ is from the Godhead" also in a spatial sense. Note that the final clause of 11:12, "and all this is from the Godhead [ὁ Θεός]" most naturally refers to

“the Godhead” not specifically to the Father only for several reasons. There is no mention of the Father here. “The God” is used predominantly in the second half of 1 Corinthians to identify the Godhead. Most of all, to interpret “the God” here as excluding Christ would contradict both 1 Corinthians 8:6 and 11:3.

Note that if 11:3c refers to the Godhead [ὁ θεός], there is no need to assume ellipsis of “from the side of” to preserve Trinitarian orthodoxy. It treats Christ as God of very God, as far from blasphemy as any interpretation could be. It also means that there is no need to excuse Paul’s language as an accommodation to his patriarchal culture. This understanding has the advantage that it does not interpret “head” with a meaning that is not well established, and it makes natural sense throughout this whole passage, both of the physical references to “head” and the metaphorical sense that best fits the context.

Sam Williams:

Today, I am a nervous and new egalitarian. In fact, I think it’s only been about a month (or weeks?) since I’ve officially adopted the egalitarian view. I still have some emotional doubts and “what if” questions, but I know these are merely due to the traces of the teachings I got used to.

Now, I am happy and unafraid to answer questions about the Lord to anyone who asks, be it male or female.