

Living in Eden, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16



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Transcript of Season 4. Episode 2.
1 Corinthians 11:3. Not “headship” but “unity”- the meaning of the joint-body imagery, by Bruce C. E. Fleming

Intro:

Welcome to **The Eden Podcast** where we think again about the Bible on women and men and we start with a correct understanding of what happened in the Garden of Eden back in the beginning.

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Chapter 2

The focus of this episode is:

1 Corinthians 11:3 Not “headship” but “unity” - the meaning of the joint-body imagery

The story goes, I was maybe 2 years old. My parents had taken me to a large store to go shopping. I was fascinated by all the pretty things in the aisles as I toddled along. For a moment my parents stepped into the next aisle to get something, but they were still keeping an eye on me. I came out of my reverie no longer looking at whatever had caught me eye.

Oh! I couldn't see my parents! They were lost!

Which one did I call for? Apparently, I didn't care which for I made up a completely new word I had never used before and started running down the aisle yelling, “Mommadaddy! Mommadaddy!”

I recognize that moment of disorientation a bit now as I pick up verse 3 of 1 Corinthians 11. There seems to be in it a made-up word, or a new kind of imagery that one doesn't encounter in everyday life. It is the one-flesh or joint-body imagery used by Paul as he tried to describe something for the church at Corinth for which they had no words.

A Church in a Seaport City

The city of Corinth was a port city, filled with sailors from many nations on shore leave. They came to town for provisions and a “good time.” It was a bustling center of activity.

There was a large market and the trappings of commerce. There were many pagan temples. And there was a Jewish synagogue. In this city, starting with people in the synagogue, Paul founded a church.

This happened on his second missionary journey. Paul had gone on ahead of his missionary team (Acts 18) and was alone when he first arrived in Corinth. While waiting for Timothy and the others, he set up business as a tentmaker along with two other tentmakers he met. These two were a Jewish married couple, recently expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius along with all the other Jews in Rome. Their names were Priscilla and Aquila.

Together with Paul they attended the synagogue in town. The locals in the synagogue invited Paul to lead them during teaching times because he was a well-trained Pharisee, a student of Gamaliel, the greatest Rabbi of that day.

From Paul, they heard the good news of salvation through grace by faith in Christ. Many Jews believed! Others, known as God-fearers, who were non-Jewish attendees at the synagogue, also believed. Soon a mixed group made up of Jews and non-Jews, were meeting together in Corinth.

The other members of Paul's ministry team finally arrived and took over many of his duties. This freed Paul to minister full-time. Perhaps the increased frequency of Paul's teaching grated on the hard-line Jewish legalists in the synagogue who had not yet believed in Christ. They actively opposed Paul.

After warning them of the consequences of their unbelief, Paul left them to their legalism and moved his lessons out of the synagogue and into the building next door. There, he kept on teaching. Sad to say, some of the new believers also tended toward legalism.

As time passed, more and more people spent their time next door where Paul was teaching. The church grew day by day. It was filled with Jews and non-Jews, some who had a deep knowledge of the Old Testament, and some who had none. Some had been believers longer and had progressed faster. Others were beginners in Christ. Eventually Paul moved on to other cities. After he left, he wrote the church with more advice.

Paul learned how they received his advice when visitors from Corinth brought him news (1 Co 1:11). He learned more about them through a letter he received from Corinth (1 Co 7:1). This news prompts Paul as he writes much of the letter we know as 1 Corinthians.

The letter is co-signed by Sosthenes, have you ever noticed this? Sosthenes likely was the converted former ruler of the synagogue at Corinth mentioned in Acts 18. This letter by Paul and Sosthenes is unlike any other in the New Testament, as point-by-point Paul responds to the news and questions received from his spiritual children in Christ in Corinth.

Dealing with the firestorm. Paul had a remarkable proposal from the legalistic faction in Corinth. They wanted to mix their harsh regulations with Paul's liberating new traditions. He will actually include the words of their quote in verses 4-6. You might want to place air quotes or actually write in the quotation marks around these three verses in the copy of the Bible you use. We'll get back to this quotation.

Before dealing with their proposal which was full of errors, Paul establishes a foundation of right thinking. He gives this using fact-filled words in 1 Corinthians 11:3.

He first gives the overarching statement of truth. Then he adds two subordinate illustrations.

³I want you to know that the head of *every* man is Christ
the head of a wife is a husband,
the head of Christ is God.

The church at Corinth had compiled a letter to Paul spelling out specific questions and points of dispute among them. He responded to each one in turn starting at the beginning of 1 Corinthians chapter 7:

¹Now for the matters you wrote about...

To the Jews. When, in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul addresses the issue of regulations concerning the covering of a woman's head, he begins by addressing the converted Jews at Corinth in verses 3-9. Were the Jewish legalists at Corinth concerned with "men" and "women" and the covering of their physical "heads"? Paul takes their words and uses them to make his own points.

First, he reminds his Jewish readers, who are monotheists, of the importance of *unity*. Three times he points to independent elements that together make up one *unit*. The image he uses is that of the parts of the body that, united, make up one whole body:

- Believers-and-Christ united in one spiritual body
- A wife-and-husband united in one flesh
- Son-and-Father united in the Godhead.

Second, he states his main idea in the first line of verse 3, and then adds two subordinate parallel images to illustrate it. In his reference to the parts that make up the body Paul challenges the reader to answer the question, Just *who* is "every man"?

"Every *man*" is every *believer* – every man and every woman who is a Christian. This image is parallel to the one Paul uses in Ephesians 5:23: "Christ is the head of *the church*."

1 Corinthians 11:3: Christ is the head of **every man**

Ephesians 5:23b: Christ is the head of **the church**

An extraordinary response. Paul begins his response to those who did not hold to the tradition he had taught the Corinthians with some word play. Usually a "play on words" has an *extra* element in it that draws attention to the fact that something extraordinary is being said, even though ordinary words may be used.

Here is an example:

“I am going out into the refrigerator.”

This phrase uses simple words, in a *seemingly* straightforward way. Refrigerators keep things cold. At first glance, the sentence seems to mean that someone is about to go into a refrigerator.

But no one literally climbs into a refrigerator! So that literal sense of these words must be ruled out immediately. It is nonsense.

There is an indicator that a “play on words” is being made. It is the word “out” – “I am going *out* into the refrigerator.”

Those who live in wintry climates know that when someone *goes out* in the winter, they go outside where the temperature is as cold as it is inside a refrigerator. The person who said, “I am going out into the refrigerator,” used a “play on words” to mean “I am going outside, into the cold.” There was never any intention of climbing into a real refrigerator.

In 11:3, just as “going *out* into the refrigerator” has an extra word that indicates to the reader that something out of the ordinary is meant, there is an extra word in verse 3 in the phrase: “the head of every man is Christ.” The extra word is: “*every*.”

³I want you to know the head of *every* man is Christ

The word “every” indicates that Paul is making a “play on words.” The word play occurs in the very next word, man, which is used by Paul in a special way.

³I want you to know the head of every *man* is Christ

Paul could have used his image of multiple units forming a unity by writing, “the head of every *person* is Christ.” But Paul uses the word “man” in a special way to make a more precise point.

By first saying *every* man, Paul leaves no room for exceptions. *Every* member of the body of Christ is set free from all extraneous regulations. Then, by using the word, “man,” Paul highlights the issue of gender in the body of Christ. Is a woman to be included in the scope of meaning of the words “every *man*”?

Those in the World War II Generation often used the English word “man” generically. To them, “man” could mean “person” and often included women.

When the Liberation Generation of the 1960s and 1970s came along, the generic use of the word “man” began to fall out of use. People made an effort to be more precise in their use of words to denote gender. This process is ongoing.

In Paul's time a situation existed that was similar to how the World War II generation used the word "man." In his day most people read the Old Testament in the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. In that version it was common to use the Greek word "man" to mean "person" and not just "men."

We get an insight into this in Romans 4:6. This was pointed out in an extraordinary home meeting we were a part of in a suburb of Strasbourg, France. Of the 30 or so young adults in the room, 16 had their Greek New Testaments with them.

Just before quoting from King David's words in the Psalms, in Romans 4:6, Paul first paraphrases David's comments. In his paraphrase, Paul uses the Greek word *anthropos*, the word that could be used for "mankind" or "humanity," including both males and females.

Then, in the very next verses of Roman 4, in verses 7-8, he quotes Psalm 32:1-2 following the Septuagint version. In rendering David's comments the Septuagint used the Greek word *andros*, the word most commonly used to mean a "male" or "a man." Paul understood that the word "man" in the Septuagint also stood for "person."

In the succeeding verses in Romans 4, Paul never elaborates on his interchange of the words for "man" and "person." He never explains it or excuses it to his readers. He doesn't need to, because it was acceptable to interchange these words in Greek.

In 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul could use "every *man*" in Greek to stand for "every *person* – male or female" and not worry about being misunderstood. Writing "every man" he made a gentle play on words to make a point: Do some of you want to focus only on what a *man* is free to do in Christ? Not I. I will focus on *every* man in Christ because I want you to focus on what every *person* – male or female – is free to do in Christ!

There are some people who are perhaps unaware of the Septuagint's easy use of the Greek word *andros* to stand for people. At any rate, those who assume that Paul is speaking only of "males" here start their interpretation of the whole passage with a false impression. Incorrect interpretations have resulted from this.

"The body." The United States Marine Corps by its very name means the "body" (*corps*) of Marines. Every Marine, and all Marines, make up the one "body" of the Marine Corps.

Each and every new believer is incorporated into the body of Christ. This "body" image is Paul's way of expressing how, together, all believers and Christ are united into one spiritual body. Paul speaks of the "body of Christ," because Jesus is in this body, and so are all believers.

In verse 3, Paul makes figurative use of the word "head" to evoke the image of a joint-body:

³I want you to know

the head in *one* joint-body is *every* man united with Christ;

the head in *one* joint-joint body is a wife united with a husband,

the head in *one* joint-joint body is Christ united with God.

First, Paul uses the image of a joint-body to illustrate the church, the *spiritual* body, which is made up of Christ united with all believers, regardless of gender. Then he gives two subordinate images of joint-bodies to help to illustrate the first. These have to do with marriage and the trinity. A husband and wife are “*one flesh*” (Genesis 2:24). Together, they form one joint-body. God and Christ are one (see Deuteronomy 6:4). Together they form one joint-body in the Godhead.

Picture the image of the unity of believers and Christ. Picture the union of a man and a woman who form one flesh in marriage. Then picture the unity of the Godhead, which is one entity but is made up of three Persons.

Verse 3 is Paul’s compact explanation of these truths. All believers – men *and* women – are united with Christ in one body. They are just as much *one* in Christ, as a husband and wife are *one flesh*, and Christ and the Father are *one God*.

Literal or figurative? It is best first to take a word literally. If the literal sense makes no sense, then a figurative sense must be intended. The literal meaning of believers being joined in one body with Christ is not possible. Therefore a figurative meaning has to be sought.

When trying to determine the meaning of the figurative sense of a word, it is best to start with the simplest level of abstraction. In this case, the first level of abstraction works well – the “head” is one part of a body.

If *this* meaning had made *no* sense, then it would have been necessary to move to a *more* abstract level to find the meaning of the word “head.” But it is not necessary.

As was discussed on Ephesians 5, this can be illustrated by picturing the body of an ant. It has a three-part joint-body. No one part by itself is the body.

A dog has two parts to its body, the head and the rest. In much the same way, the human body has two parts that form one body. They are the head and the trunk, or torso. Neither part can exist by itself.

As the whole prospers, each part prospers. In Paul’s spiritual joint-body imagery, Christ is the “head” of the body, and all believers together form the “other part.” The whole *joint-body* united is of ultimate importance.

These illustrations are examples of “concrete-relational thinking.” The Western world does not favor this way of thinking. It tends to use philosophical categories of thought. Perhaps this is why it is popular in the West to interpret verse 3 in a non concrete-relational way. There, great attention is focused on various *abstract* meanings of the word “head.”

Some suggest “head” means “source.” Others propose that “head” means “authority” or “priority” in some way. But, since the simplest level of abstraction makes perfectly good

sense in this case, it is not necessary to occupy oneself with other more abstract possibilities.

I was born and raised in the West, so I first was attracted to the more abstract and philosophical interpretations of the word “head.” Only after working in Africa and learning to speak an African language, did I begin to see that Paul’s head/torso metaphor functions on the concrete-relational level.

What did Paul want his readers to remember? That we all are united with Christ just as are the parts of the human body. We are one in Christ, for eternity and for our ministry here and now.

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There is also a Study Guide on this episode for use in personal study or in small groups and more. You can find it in the blog posts on Tru316.com or write me at Bruce@Tru316.com. And thanks for joining me on **The Eden Podcast!**

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