SERMON OUTLINE: HONOURING OUR HEAD (1 Corinthians 11:2-16)

The most difficult passage in 1 Corinthians

Why?

- Difficult to interpret
- Difficult to apply

Provides us with a good test of our view of the Bible

Difficult…but not impossible to understand!

The overall main point is reasonably clear, even if some of the specifics are not

Be prepared to be stretched and to concentrate

Context-setting

The importance of literary context

i) What are the Corinthian Christians like?

"I have the right to do anything" (10:23)

"You are still worldly" (3:3)

ii) What might the setting of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 be?

Public worship (see 1 Corinthians 11:17-end of chp 14; also chp 10)

iii) What has Paul been doing so far in the second half of 1 Corinthians?

It's all about God's glory (10:31-11:1)

Still the same message in 11:2-16: don't misuse your freedom, but let your practice glorify God, especially in the way you edify and not stumble others.

iv) How might the Corinthian Christians be misusing their "freedom" in public worship?

The focus:
Men & women (husbands & wives)

Honour & shame (v.4-5, 6, 7, 13, 14)

"We're all the same! We can relate however we like! We're free!"

Yes… "but I want you to realise…" (v.2-3a)

To make his case….

1. The eternal truth: Honour your head (v.3)

An order God has ordained

3 parallel relationships, and the key thing is – there is a h_____

The big debate: what does "head" mean to the original hearers? (See appendix for more)

Head = source? Pre-eminent? Authority?

Context

Back to the main thing: in each of these relationships, there is a head to be honoured!

Pair #1: Christ is honoured
Pair #3: God the Father is honoured (through Christ. For eg. see John 14:10, 17:4)

So pair #2…

What this does not imply

The simple point: There is an order in each of these relationships, and in each of these relationships, we honour our head.

2. ….in culturally appropriate ways… (v.4-6)

Violation of principle

What might all that stuff about head coverings be about?

Togas/veils….

Hair….

Whatever it is, the larger point remains:

Not the coverings/hair in itself that is the problem, but what they communicate

The question to ask

3. …because this is grounded in the order of creation (v.7-12)

The woman as the "glory of man"?

Head and helper

The one whom he glories

"Woman for man"? Remember the background: Genesis 2!

Elevates her standing

Interdependence (v.11-12)

4. …and respects the norms God has built into this world. (v.13-16)

Some concluding reflections:

- The distinction between male and female really does matter
- How we relate to one another as male and female does matter
- We should not seek personal preferences, but the glory of God, in our public worship

Appendix: What does "head" (Greek *kephale*) mean? [only for those interested!]

In the world of biblical studies, much ink has been spelt over the meaning of the word "head". Literally, it means the top part of our body. But what is the meaning when used metaphorically? If I say you're the head of the class, or the head of the army, I mean you're the leader, the chief. You're the one in authority. But if I say that's the "head" of the river, then I mean that's the source from which the river flows. And so the big debate has been whether the Greek word translated "head" here means "authority" or "source". More recently, there has been a third option introduced – which is that of "pre-eminence" or "prominence", for the head is the most conspicuous part of the body. So which of these metaphorical senses would the original audience had understood it as?

This debate has become quite intense because many people see it as key to supporting their wider theological positions concerning what the Bible teaches about male-female relationship, with one side often insisting that if it meant "authority" for eg., it could never mean "source" (and vice versa). However, both sides have somewhat overstated their case. Occasionally, where this word *kephale* is used, there can be connotations of "source". In Ephesians 4:15, for example, we read "speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ." So in other words, Christ as the head here is acting as the source of our Christian growth. Now, having said that, having looked again at the evidence, despite the protests of those who argue for "source", I actually think the evidence is pretty clear – in the Bible, the word definitely and I might even say, typically also has connotations of authority. Ephesians 1:22 for example, is unambiguous: "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church." Or take Ephesians 5:23, where it says "Christ is the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church". To say head = source there makes little sense in the context. Even in the example for "source" given above (Ephesians 4:15), the wider context does not rule out the meaning of "authority", for in Ephesians 4:8, Christ is presented as the ascended, ruling Christ, who now becomes the source of nourishment for the body.

So in biblical usage, it seems to me that to say head = source is not defensible. At the same time, however, is "authority" the best word to use? Here, I find the work of Michelle Lee Barnewell quite persuasive. In chapter 8 of her book, *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian,* she examines how the metaphor of headship is used in the wider Greco-Roman literature/culture, and especially in Greek rhetoric, as well as in Ephesians 5. After presenting her evidence, she concludes that the use of the head metaphor frequently communicated the idea of pre-eminence/prominence. Furthermore, that idea often inescapably also implied leadership or authority (although Lee-Barnwell sometimes seem a little more reticent than I would to draw this conclusion). She also shows how Christ subverts the world's notion of authority, such that it is used in a loving and sacrificial way. Authority is seen through the lens of God's kingdom, rather than worldly rights.

As such, to say head = authority is acceptable as long as defined properly. I think, however, that "pre-eminence" is also acceptable and even preferable, as long as that link with leadership or authority is not completely downplayed. The term itself is multivalent (meaning it can communicate more than one meaning at a time), but the dimensions of pre-eminence and hence, leadership/authority seem to best fit 1 Corinthians 11:3.

Pr Brian