

What Is the Headship of Christ?

"And not holding the Head, out from whom all the Body, being richly supplied and knit together by means of the joints and sinews, grows with the growth of God." Col. 2:19

The proper order of the universe

How wonderful that we could concentrate on the headship of Christ. We want to see and know Him experientially as our living Head. To begin with, we must see that the proper order of the whole universe is Christ. If Christ is not all, with all the saints holding Him as the Head and letting Him be the center, then everything is out of kilter. This is because Christ Himself is the meaning of everything, including our daily life and experiences. Our relationships with one another are just Christ Himself. He is the cohesive factor between us. So there is a desperate need for a clear trumpeting of this word throughout the whole earth, a clear playing of one tune and that tune is Christ - just the Lord Himself, with no deviation from Him.

The universe is moving in one direction, and that direction is toward our Christ as the Head of all rule and all authority. So we must see, with a spirit of wisdom and revelation, the headship of Christ. If Christ is truly the Head of His Body and also the Head of all rule and authority, then it behooves us to drop everything and to open ourselves deeply to the Lord for what Paul prayed - that we would have a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of this Person, to apprehend the deep significance of His headship and to experience Him as our Head.

The practical word in the New Testament concerning the Lord as the Head is Colossians 2:19: "And not holding the Head, out from whom all the Body, being richly supplied and knit together by means of the joints and sinews, grows with the growth of God." Here Paul is speaking in a negative context. There were some in Colosse who were not holding the Head but instead were preoccupied with religious things, such as worshipping of angels and practicing asceticism. They were puffed up by visions they claimed to have seen. They were distracting many of the believers from the simplicity of Christ. It is in this kind of context that Paul opens up to us something marvelous about our relationship with the Lord.

The meaning of holding the Head

The normal, proper way for all of us as believers to proceed in our daily life is to know experientially what it means to hold the Head, to seize and firmly grip Him. The word "holding" means not just a light touch in an occasional way, but a firm inner grip upon the Lord Himself as our Head. It means that apart from Him we can do nothing. We cannot exist apart from Him. He is our constant supply as Colossians 2:19 says: ". . . the Head, out from whom all the Body, being richly supplied . . . grows with the growth of God." So the issue of holding the Head is the rich supply of the Spirit. This rich supply comes to us over and over again. All that Christ is is being imparted into our mind, emotion, and will. He is imparting His life - His desires, His nature, His inclinations, His tendencies - into our being. We start loving Him, and we discover a hatred for sin. We love righteousness, and we hate unrighteousness. This is a reproduction of the inner life of the Lord Jesus right within the precincts of our body. Jesus Christ is reproduced and lived out again as a result of our holding the Head.

Our one obligation is to hold the Head. To hold the Head is to handle Him. First John 1:1 says, ". . . our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life." The apostles handled Christ in the flesh in His incarnation and human life. Then when He was in resurrection, they began to handle Him as the Spirit. To handle Him is to become familiar with the Lord by knowing that He is now alive and imparting Himself as the Spirit in resurrection. Then you may ask, how could I know Him as the Spirit? Tuning into a radio is a good example of learning to tune into the Spirit. If we do not believe there is music in the air, then we simply need to turn on the radio, and music will fill the room. We just need to have the right instrument, and by that means we are in contact with the world of music. So it is with the realm of the Spirit.

It is so simple. Christ lives as the Spirit in our spirit. In our regenerated human spirit, we have the same essence that matches God's essence. John 4:24 says, "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." If God is Spirit and we have a spirit, we have the same essence and substance so that we can have direct contact with God. However, if we just stay in our mind thinking about God, that is all we will know about God - thoughts about Him. But if we inwardly exercise ourselves to directly contact Him in our spirit by opening our mouth to praise Him and call upon His name, then we are exercising that part that matches what God is. Immediately we tune in to the realm of God Himself. We find out it is so simple.

It is in the realm of the Spirit that Christ is the Head. This is the realm where He is the Head. He is the Head as the life-giving Spirit. But we need to apprehend His kind of headship. Yes, Christ Himself is the Head of the church, but we need to understand how He is the Head. Many believers may claim that Christ is Head of the church, but the question is, how is He Head of the church? The answer to this question will determine whether or not He is indeed the Head practically.

There are several passages in the New Testament that speak of the Lord Himself as the Head of the church. Ephesians 2:20 tells us that Jesus Christ Himself is the chief cornerstone. And in Ephesians 2:14 the Lord Himself is our peace. Also, in Colossians 1:18 the Lord Himself is the Head of the Body, the church. The pronoun "Himself" is an emphatic expression in the original Greek language. By this the Spirit intends to convey to us that it is truly the Lord Himself who is the direct and immediate living Head of the church. It is as nothing less than Himself in a personal way that He is the Head of His Body, the church.

With this vision we see that there is one destiny for this universe - Christ heading up all things in the heavens and on the earth (Eph. 1:10). This is what the Lord is doing in our experience. This is what the Lord is doing between us in our contacts with one another. He is doing one thing. He is heading us up in Himself. He is reducing us to Himself as the Head of the church. So we need to expose all the false notions that have influenced us concerning the headship of Christ. It is good for us to consider the negative side, to understand the various concepts and perceptions of what the headship of Christ has meant in the religious world. In other words, one of the first things that helps us to understand the headship of the Lord is to see what it is not. This will help us grasp what the headship of Christ really means.

Various Understandings of the Headship of Christ

Remote headship

The concept of a remote headship of Christ is related to the doctrine of the Trinity, specifically, how the relationship between Christ Himself and the Spirit is understood. This concept is expressed by E. A. Litton, an Anglican scholar in England in the nineteenth century. What he says is representative of the thought of many evangelical believers concerning the headship of Christ and how some perceive Him as the Head. In his book *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology* (p. 384), Dr. Litton conveys the thought that the Lord is a remote Head: "It is a common mode of speaking, and sanctioned by Scripture, to call Christ the Head of His mystical Body; but, however He may stand in that relation to the Church triumphant, that part of the Church which is in paradise, in strict accuracy He, as the Incarnate Son, is not the Head of the Church militant on earth. For He is no longer upon earth Himself, nor will be until He returns in His proper person; and in the meantime He has delegated the active administration of the Church militant to His divine Vicar, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity (John 14:6). It is, therefore, the Holy Spirit who is the active and operative Head of the Church upon earth."

These words summarize an understanding held by many concerning the headship of Christ, that is, that Christ Himself is remote from the church on earth. Yes, the Holy Spirit is here. But somehow in your realization, when you have the Holy Spirit you have something different from Christ. You are not really convinced that the Lord Himself is the Head. You know the Holy Spirit is a Person, yet in your understanding, the Personhood of the Spirit is different from Christ. Thus, you view Christ as a remote Head to His Body. Dr. Litton later tries to balance what he said by inserting a comment about the unity of the Persons in the Trinity, yet his words leave an impression upon the consciousness of believers that Christ

is a remote Head to His Body.

To polarize the Holy Spirit as the vicar of Christ for the church militant on earth and Christ Himself for the church triumphant in the heavens conveys into the spiritual consciousness of believers an uncertainty that is not found in the New Testament. The apostle Paul does not talk in that way. In Colossians 1:27 he says, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." And in Romans 8:10 he says, "If Christ is in you." And again, Christ Himself is our peace in Ephesians 2:14. Not only so, in 2 Corinthians 3:17 the Lord Himself is identified as the Spirit. Then in verse 18, Paul uses a compound title for the Lord - "The Lord the Spirit." Identifying the Lord as the Spirit is the New Testament's experiential way of conveying to our consciousness the immediate and direct headship of Christ in all His members. The way Christ is the Head is as a life-giving Spirit. Where the Spirit is, the Lord Himself is. He is not remote. He is filling us by transmitting Himself into us as the direct Head of the church (Eph. 1:22-23).

Intermediary headship

Another concept concerning the headship of Christ is intermediary headship. This is taught by the Roman Catholic Church and is related to the pope. This understanding of the headship of Christ is expressed by Karl Adam, a popular German professor and writer in the early twentieth century. His book *The Spirit of Catholicism* has been published in at least nineteen editions and in over ten languages. The book itself has the imprimatur of the Catholic Church and is purported to be an explanation of what the Catholic Church is.

Concerning the headship of Christ, Dr. Adam says, "Let us now consider more nearly the organisation of the Body of Christ, its unity in fulness and fulness in unity. . . . The pope as the Rock of the Church is the visible expression and the abiding guarantee of this unity. So, if we regard the matter thus, it becomes plain that the original nature of the Church, her fundamental determination as a unitary organism, achieves its purest expression in the papacy. In the papacy the community strives after and achieves the fullest consciousness of its essential and necessary unity. In the papacy it grasps and realizes itself as the one Kingdom of God, as the one Body of Christ on the earth. And so the Catholic never regards the pope as separated from this unity, as an independent factor, as a charismatic personality, as a personality possessed of supernatural powers like a Moses or an Elijah. The pope, as the visible head, is to him [the Catholic] the plain embodiment of the unity of the church, that real principle whereby redemption-needing mankind achieves its form as complete and perfect unity. In the pope his unity with his brethren becomes visible to the Catholic" (pp. 38-39).

This kind of understanding expressed by Dr. Adam is intermediary headship. It is a headship that is located practically in the pope. Thus, Christ Himself is replaced by the pope. This concept of headship has been taught by the Roman Catholic Church for centuries. It is imbedded in its creeds, councils, and theology. But the question is, does this represent the headship of Christ revealed in the Word of God? We must answer with a resounding, No!

Figurehead

To the consciousness of some believers, Christ is like a figurehead. He is Head in name only, without immediate and personal involvement. This can be likened to the Queen of England, who has nominal headship but no actual authority. However, this concept is the opposite of what the Lord said in Matthew 28:18-20: 18 "Then Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." According to these verses the Lord's headship is actual, with all authority being in Him; and it is direct, by He Himself being with us unto the end of the age.

A usurped headship

The literal translation of Colossians 1:18 should be, "And He Himself is the Head of the Body, the church." The pronoun Himself (αὐτοῦ) demands that stress be laid upon Christ Himself as the immediate and direct Head of the Body. It is emphatic; that is, there is no other Head, only Christ Himself. It does not leave room for anyone else. It means He Himself is the Head of the Body, the church.

Verse 18 continues, "He is the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead, that He Himself might have the first place in all things." As the Head, Christ has the first place in all things. That means I am not authorized to have any first place in my life. Whatever problem, whatever I pass through, however I feel about myself, however I relate to things, I am not authorized to have first place. I am not authorized to handle myself - to change myself, reform myself, determine to be different next time by myself. I am not the authorized one. The only One authorized to handle me, to change me, to transform me, is Christ. So I am learning to live a life of handling Him. I am learning to interact with Him, to give things to Him, to interrupt myself in the stream of anxiety, of thoughts, of things that take place within my being. I am learning to give Him the first place. I am learning how to let Him supply, how to let Him operate within and change me. We are not authorized to handle ourselves.

Even the Father, when He created the universe, did not handle anything apart from His Son. He created the whole universe in His Son, through His Son, and unto His Son (Col. 1:16). Apart from Christ not one thing came into being that has come into being (John 1:3). Not one thing was created apart from Him. The Father did not create anything apart from His Son. The Son is the Christ, the anointed One, the only authorized One. He is the uniquely appointed One in this universe to carry out God's purpose and will, down to the details. So He has the first place. For Him to have first place means that His headship is in action. This is the Christian life, and this is the church life - Christ has the preeminence, the first place.

A compound form of the Greek word for first place is used in a negative sense in 3 John 9: "I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not receive us." Diotrephes even cast the brothers out of the church. This person usurped the headship of Christ because he loved to be first among them. Whenever there is leadership in the church which is driven by loving to be first among others, that is a usurping of the headship of Christ. It could be a pastor, it could be an elder, it could be a worker, it could be anyone striving and controlling to have first place among the saints.

This usurping kind of headship can easily happen, even under a kind of pastoral, or shepherding, thought. Shepherds are ones that care, ones that even instruct, ones that lead others to the living fountain of life. Although there are shepherds, or pastors, in the Bible, there is not a pastoral system like what has developed through church history. In such a system certain ones are hired to do "the church work," rather than letting the life of God grow in all the saints and manifest itself in many shepherds. It is easy for any of us to be caught up into a system in which something usurps the headship of Christ.

The replaced headship

Colossians chapter 2 reveals many things that are replacements for and distractions from Christ. The headship of Christ was on the verge of being replaced in the church in Colosse. Some were not holding the Head; rather, they were holding on to religious and dogmatic practices. In verse 8 Paul says, "Beware that no one carries you off as spoil through his philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the elements of the world, and not according to Christ." Then in verses 16-17 he says, 16 "Let no one therefore judge you in eating and in drinking or in respect of a feast or of a new moon or of the Sabbath, 17 which are a shadow of the things to come, but the body is of Christ." To say that the body is of Christ means that the substance is of Christ.

In verse 18 Paul continues, "Let no one defraud you by judging you unworthy of your prize, in self-chosen lowliness and the worship of the angels, dwelling on the things which he has seen, vainly puffed up by his mind set on the flesh." Then in verse 20 he says, "If you died with Christ from the elements of the world, why, as living in the world, do you subject yourselves to ordinances?" The ordinances are these little dogmatic statements: "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle" (v. 21). In other words, the saints were being riveted to principles: "Do this. Do not do that. Handle this. Do not handle that. Take in some kind of

philosophy, some kind of tradition. Read this book, do that thing, practice this ritual." This all may seem good and helpful, but it is not according to Christ. Where is Christ? He has subtly been replaced. He has been pushed into a corner somewhere. He has been cheated from His all-sufficiency, His centrality, His Allness - from being all to all His people all the time. In the Christian world there are so many good things that have become substitutes for Christ Himself. This is a usurped and replaced headship of Christ.

Coming back to the Head for the growth of God

God's desire is to bring us all back experientially to Christ Himself, our only Head. This simply means that we learn how to cultivate and live a life in the Spirit. We learn how to make contact with the Head, how to open our wretched being to Him just the way we are, under the power of the blood that cleanses us from all sin. We learn to let God operate in us. We learn to let God do it Himself. We learn to let the Head Himself supply us. We learn to let Christ Himself be the One to impart that rich supply. And out of the rich supply there is a knitting together. There is a Body-consciousness that comes when we touch Christ. If you are really handling Him, you can be seen, you can be marked out. You love the church. You love the saints. You love the knitting together. Colossians 2:19 says, ". . . holding the Head, out from whom all the Body, being richly supplied and knit together by means of the joints and sinews, grows with the growth of God." So the evidence of being supplied by the Head is this organic reality of the church.

By holding the Head we grow with the growth of God. This is not the growth coming from self-improvement, your own energy, biding time, waiting for a better day, hoping your problems will end, or expecting something out of yourself. All these things are just activities in our mind. But when we hold the Head, we tell Him, "Lord, I am passing through this so that I can be rich with You. I have been pushed beyond my limits just so I would touch You and draw from You. I have been pushed beyond my capacity so that I might learn how to live one moment at a time taking from You, contacting You." Then we grow with the genuine growth, the growth of God. This growth comes out of our interaction with the Lord rather than what we think up in our mind.

No substitutes for Christ

It is by our interacting with the Lord that He has a way on this earth. Brothers and sisters, if the Lord does not gain us and we are short of growth, His headship is suspended. His headship comes in practically when we hold Him as the Head, without any substitutes. Tell the Lord, "Lord, I do not want any substitutes." Our wishing that this thing would go away, wishing that we did not have this thorn in the flesh, wishing for a better day - that they would change, she would change, he would change, that I would have a better job, a better situation - these are all substitutes for Christ. Do we realize it? Living in that realm is living in a substitute for this real Person. Paul was not living in the realm of substitutes. He had learned to interact with the Lord so that he could say, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." and "Christ shall be magnified in my body."

If we can be renewed little by little, bit by bit, if we let His life swallow up all these areas, then the Lord will have a footing in this universe whereby He will head up all things. So we have to expose all the different understandings of headship that replace Christ. This is on the negative side. But it is good to expose them in order that we might see the Lord Himself.

The Reality of the Headship of Christ

Christ becoming first place

Colossians 1:18 says, "And He is the Head of the Body, the church that He Himself might have the first place in all things." There is a word in the original Greek that is not brought out in this translation. It should read, "that He Himself might become first place in all things." We know the two "becames" of Christ. He became flesh in His incarnation (John 1:14), and He became a life-giving Spirit in resurrection (1 Cor. 15:45). But there is another sense in which the Greek word become (*givnomai*) is used. It means something is still in the process of happening. God made Christ the Head of the church in order that He Himself might

become first place in all things. It is not just in order that He might be first place. The Holy Spirit conveys another thought here. It is that He might become first place. Christ's resurrection from the dead and all that He has accomplished to be the Head of the church is with a purpose in view - that He would become first place in all things.

Now in our experience Christ is becoming first place. When we open up and say, "Amen, Lord Jesus," in a new area of our life that He has never touched, then He becomes first place in that area. So one of the "all things" gets swallowed up, and He keeps becoming first place. He keeps becoming preeminent. A thousand little first places in our experiences will one day tip the scale, and He will come back to be admired in all His saints (2 Thess. 1:10). All the hidden life that has been going on in our daily living - calling "Jesus," touching Him, gaining Him, experiencing Him - one day is going to blaze out. Colossians 3:4 tells us, "When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory."

So we have something to do with giving Christ the first place. Isn't that sobering? Doesn't that renew your mind about your life and your problems? Just consider - He can become the first place by our giving Him that ground. He Himself becomes the first place. It is He Himself, not a pope or other substitute, not someone who has usurped the headship of Christ. The headship is not a principle. It is not just some do's and don'ts. The headship is the Lord Himself. It is Himself. Marvelous!

Ephesians 2:14 says, "For He Himself is our peace." Here again it is the Lord Himself. The peace between us is a manifestation of His direct headship. This is how He is the Head. Peace is not just a good feeling. The peace here is the Lord Himself. It is He Himself who is our peace. And the joy we feel in the church is the issue of peace (Rom. 14:17). There is joy in the church because the Lord is here. He is the direct Head. He is the immediate Head of His Body, the church.

This means that you cannot reproduce churches on this earth by rubber-stamping this or that group of believers. It does not work that way. Christ Himself is the Head. So in every place there must be saints who are in touch with Him, saints who have direct contact with Him. The church life is not a "how to" thing. It is not how to arrange the chairs, how to have the meetings, how to have elders, how to have deacons, how to do this, and how to do that. That is not the church. That is just a framework. The content of the church is Christ Himself. When He Himself is living in us and living out from us, then He has an expression of Himself in that locality. So to spread the church on this earth is not to reproduce a pattern. It is to convey and impart a Person and to stay in touch with this Person. This is the direct headship.

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