

Session 2: Christ – The Living and Ruling Head of the Church

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2018 Fall Bible Conference

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Bible Text: Colossians 2:9-10
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Good morning, brethren, and as Pastor Sheffield indicated, last night we took up the identity of the church, the household of God which is the church of the living God, and the function of the church represented by the metaphors of pillar and ground of the truth. Well, this morning in the first hour we're moving forward with another critically important truth regarding the church of Jesus Christ. Our focus this morning in this hour will be on "Christ, the Living and Ruling Head of the Church," and Lord willing, some practical implications that are drawn out from such a truth.

We're going to begin in the Colossian letter as we approach this subject. In the Colossians letter, we learn of a man named Epaphras. His name appears in the opening chapter, verse 7, and the final chapter, verse 12, and in the epistle of Paul to Philemon, verse 23. Paul describes Epaphras as, "our beloved fellow bondservant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf." Now the probability is that Epaphras had been trained by Paul and sent by him to Colossae. In chapter 4 of verse 12 we read, "Epaphras, who is one of your number," and again the probability may be that he himself was a native of Colossae, the founder and I would say more than probable, almost certainly the pastor of the Colossian church. It is evident that he visited Paul in Rome for we read in Colossians 4:12, he "sends you his greetings," and it is evident from Philemon 23 that he shared Paul's imprisonment. Paul says there, "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you." And while with Paul, he apparently conveyed a report about the Colossian church and probably about nearby churches that are named in the last chapter, Laodicea and Hierapolis, Epaphras' report to Paul during Paul's first Roman imprisonment contains some very good news. Looking in Colossians 1:4, we read, "we," that's Paul and Timothy, "heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints." He heard that from Epaphras. Now if anybody heard that about our churches here in Rocky Mount in upstate New York, it would be good news, your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints.

Another aspect of the report that he conveyed to the apostle, chapter 1, verse 8, "and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit." Perhaps that love having reference to Paul and Timothy, brethren beyond the Colossian church. And then in chapter 2, verse 5, "For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see

your good discipline," his language used of disciplined soldiers, "rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ." Again, if other brethren in other places heard that about you, brethren, it would be a very good report. But there is a contrast coming. Epaphras' report also contained some troubling news and this would become the occasion of Paul's writing this letter. His report also contained some threatening news about what we could call generally an encroaching Christ plus heresy. A false message that diminished the centrality and the sufficiency of the Lord Jesus.

Now especially in chapter 2, verses 8 to 23, particular aspects of that Christ plus heresy are evidenced. In the interest of time, I'll not specify them but you can see them rather plainly in your own Bibles. Dr. Curtis Vaughan, of whom I spoke last night, one of the men upon whose shoulders I stand and stand in debt for his influence upon my life, Dr. Vaughan in his commentary on Colossians says of this heresy at its heart the system was a combination of Judaism and paganism but it wore the mask of Christianity. It did not deny Christ but it did dethrone him. It gave Christ a place but not the supreme place.

Now Epaphras cared about his brethren in Colossae and it seems in view of what had encroached upon the church, a part of his mission to Rome was to seek the apostle's help in answering this heresy and, again, the report of Epaphras to Paul occasioned Paul's writing of the letter to the Colossians which has as its major theme the supremacy of the Lord Jesus. By the double right of creation and redemption, the Lord Jesus is set forth in this letter in his unrivaled preeminence and his perfect, complete all sufficiency. Perhaps the summary of the letter is found in the second chapter, verses 9 and 10, "in Him," Paul wrote, "all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete." You do not need angelic intermediaries as is evidenced back or later in this chapter. You do not need bits and pieces of the old covenant ceremonial law. You do not need to ascetically abusively treat the body; that has no value against fleshly indulgence. No, in Christ you have been made complete and he is head over all rule and authority. It's Christ plus nothing.

Now generally speaking concerning the Colossian letter, chapters 1 and 2 contain the indicatives, that is, the facts about Christ's supremacy and sufficiency, including a very instructive statement of Paul's purpose in the ministry, chapter 1, verse 28, "that we may present every man complete in Christ." Chapters 3 and 4 contain the imperatives, the implications of the objective truths of the previous two chapters. Chapters 3 and 4 have as their foundation the dynamic of union with Christ driving the obedience of the people of God, not legalistically but willingly from the heart.

Now returning to chapter 1, I direct your attention to verses 13 and 14. Paul writes of how God granted us the status of sonship, that we might obtain the inheritance, and in verse 13 he writes, "For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." The mention of "His beloved Son" is then followed by the most developed Christological section of the letter, verses 15 to 23. The preeminence of Christ in creation is set forth in verses 15 through 17. This is followed in verses 18 to 23 by the preeminence of Christ in redemption. As to Christ's preeminence in redemption, the

apostle begins by asserting, note verse 18, his headship over the church and the sense is this in the context: Christ stands in the same relation to the body, the church, his spiritual creation, as he stands to the natural creation just written of in the previous three verses, thus in all things, in creation and in the church, in the natural order and in the spiritual order, the Lord Jesus has the preeminence. In the language of verse 18b, "first place in everything." First rank, the place of exaltation, the place of unrivaled supremacy.

Now by way of exposition, consider the opening assertion of Colossians 1:18, "He is also head of the body, the church," and we should understand that the antecedent to the pronoun "He" reaches back to verse 13, to "His beloved Son." That's who the "He" that opens verse 18 has reference to, "His beloved Son," and further the "He" that we meet at the beginning of verse 18 is in the emphatic position, having this sense that Christ alone, Christ and no other is the head of the church, and there may well be in this construction the inference here that in Colossae the false teachers were steadily advancing their message and themselves so as to practically and functionally become the head of the church. Well, whether that was the case in Colossae or not, we can pause here to issue a warning. In view of the emphasis bound up in the construction of the opening words of verse 18, beware of those who would usurp the crown rights of the Lord Jesus over the church. Whether the usurpers would be governments, the Romish pope, ambitious and autocratic pastors, disaffected factions within a given church or denominations with their boards and agencies, beware of any and all who would disregard the sovereignty, the supremacy, the authority, the rule of Christ over his church and supplant them with their own authority, their own desires, and their own ways.

Again verse 18 of Colossians 1, Paul writes, "He," to interpret based on the construction, "He alone and he and no other is also head of the body, the church." Now note also in the context, Paul is referring to this parallel sense between the preeminence of the Lord Jesus in creation, verses 15 through 17, and his preeminence that is now before us in verses 18 to 23, the sense being this: as he stands in relation to the natural creation, so he stands in relation to the spiritual creation, and the present tense is, "He is" also tells us of the continuing headship over the church. His headship has not been relinquished and whatever the appearances, he remains the church's head, a headship demonstrated in the life of the church by such as the following: the faithful preacher, not of men's opinions and preferences but of the whole counsel of the word of Christ, and doing so in dependence upon the quickening and illuminating power of the Spirit of Christ.

It is demonstrated by the response of what Paul calls the obedience of faith, to that word, that word of Christ preached in dependence upon the Spirit of Christ. It is evidenced in the leadership of a given church consisting of qualified men, given by the ascended Christ, Ephesians 4, as gifts to his church. That headship is demonstrated by the use when necessary of corrective discipline, the keys of the kingdom entrusted to the church by Christ himself, Matthew 16:18. It is demonstrated by vital corporate prayer, a matter we'll take up, God willing, tomorrow, in dependence upon that one who is now in the uncreated reality of heaven as we sit here, who is now our sympathizing, present, active, interceding, ministering high priest, Ephesians 8. We have a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle which the Lord pitched, not man. The headship of our Lord Jesus is

manifested in vital worship, revealed by truth, and worship from the heart dependent upon the merits of Jesus Christ, the righteous, who has declared the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth, words that if the plan holds, we'll come to in the next hour.

The headship of Christ in his church is evidenced by a regenerate church membership founded upon the faithful preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a church-wide culture of evangelism in which the message is the method. The Gospel is the power of God for salvation, not techniques, not programs, not cleverly devised strategies. The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, a message, a Gospel validated by one another love in the church, "By this all men will know you're my disciples if you have love for one another." That's the badge of our discipleship and the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the church.

"He is also head of the body, the church." Now the church is the body, Christ is the head. This is but one of several other metaphors found in the New Testament to convey aspects of the relationship between our living Savior and his blood-bought people who are brought together, who are called out of this fallen world and constitute new covenant spiritual houses that we call the church. Ephesians 5, one of those metaphors, the church is the bride of Christ, Christ is the bridegroom. Ephesians 2, the church is God's household, Christ is the cornerstone. 1 Corinthians 3, the church is the building, Christ the foundation. 1 Peter 5, the church is the flock, Christ is the chief shepherd. Here the church is the body, Christ is the head and we're going to now consider the meaning of this metaphor under two simple headings. 1. Christ is the church's living head. From him we get corporately our life; secondly, he is the church's ruling head, and that these two categories of headship are not novel inventions. Listen to the words of Matthew Henry, "He is the head of the body, the church. Not only a head of government and direction, he is that, he's the ruling head, but a head of vital influence as the head is in the natural body, for all grace and strength are derived from him."

He's the church's living head and that is our first consideration. The sense is that as the head Christ is the source of the church's life. He is the origin, the giver, the sustainer of its life. He causes it to grow and mature. The body, the church, is made alive by his presence and by union with him analogous to the members of our physical body sharing a common life with the head. And not to get too far into human anatomy and physiology but simply put, with regard to the relation of the head controlling the body, the brain coordinates the central nervous system. Now I'm not asserting that that's what Paul had upon his mind, but I believe that is correct physiology. The brain calls the shots through the central nervous system and thus we share a common life in our bodies with the head. Just as Christ is the cause of the being of all things in the natural created order, so he is the cause of the church's being and life. As all things in the natural creation live and are preserved through him and by him, so the church receives her life from Christ, has her life continually through him and is preserved by him by the agency of the Holy Spirit.

Now this sense, Christ as the church's living head, is expressly set forth in a passage I would ask you to turn to in your Bibles, Ephesians 4:15 and 16. Paul writes to the

Ephesians, "we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ." Now briefly put to that point in that text, what is signified is that the growth of the body has Christ as its goal, that is, together we as a church are growing to become more and more like the Lord Jesus and here in the context, by speaking to one another the truth in love instrumentally. Conformity to Christ is the goal, is the endgame of those constituent members of a given church related to Christ, the living head, by his Spirit.

But additionally, he is also the source of this growth. Note how verse 16 begins, "from whom," of whom, out of whom, however read, the original conveys the idea of origin, the idea of source, the idea of that from which something is derived. "From whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part." And again briefly put to this point, each member joined to the body in his or her place, in his or her role, rendering his or her distinctive contribution, and taking up the text, "causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." The point is this again briefly put: the growth of the body occurs as the constituent members of a given church render their ministries, their contributions, each one dependent upon the head, Christ, from whom this growth comes. Again, the language of Dr. Vaughan in his commentary on the Ephesian letter. He says, "The language of the verse is very compact and highly figurative." I would add it's also challenging. "It pictures the body of Christ, the church, as an organism," and now Dr. Vaughan quotes another, "in which each member contributes to the growth of the whole by receiving and passing on the life drawn from Christ, the head. In this way, the life and strength of the head flow into the body, permeating its every part. Drawing from Christ, the body affects its own growth. The thought is that each Christian is a point of supply for the body of Christ, a channel to receive and pass on life from Christ."

Well, I'm going to try to illustrate Dr. Vaughan's what I believe are very accurate comments. We might think illustratively of tributaries of water which flow into a larger body of water. You could identify some local river. Is the Neuse around here or is that farther south? Think of some local river and then think of the many small tributaries, creeks, mountain streams, smaller rivers that are all flowing into that river. I can think of the Hudson in upstate New York with its headwaters up in the Adirondacks and the tributaries large and small that feed into the Hudson. We were coming down Interstate 88 on Thursday and to change the imagery a bit, think of a watershed, a watershed being a span of geography which has its water draining into a common source. In upstate New York, the watershed for the Chesapeake Bay begins. There's a marker on Interstate 88 concerning the Chesapeake Bay watershed and that geography from there southward is marked by the flow of water draining into eventually the Chesapeake Bay.

The point is regarding tributaries, watersheds, and the flow of water into a common body of water, so it is with us in the church. Each member in vital union with Christ, each member of a covenanted body communing with Christ, each member seeking day by day, enabling grace to live for Christ, each is a vital tributary flowing into, supplying the larger body, the church, the Grace Reformed Baptist Church of Rocky Mount, each member a stream of life and power flowing into the one body, the church. Our dispersed individual lives form a kind of watershed which drains into the larger body, the church

through and by which the water of life flows. The life of each member not only bearing upon the attractive display of the truth, the church is the pillar of the truth, but also upon the life and the vitality and the energy and the efficacy and the power of a local church. That's in your hands. Our individual Christian lives, there is much more about them than each one of us existentially, individually. Beyond that, it's about Christ's church.

Now again with regard to the matter of Christ as our living head, turn back to Colossians in chapter 2, verse 19, and the language here again points to this aspect of the relation of Christ, our head, to his body, the church, "and not holding fast to the head, from whom," there's the language of origin, there's the language of source and derivation, "from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God." A growth that comes from God in Christ who is the living head of his body. Again Dr. Vaughan, "Each believer is thought of as forming a vital connection to Christ, the head, thus joined to him. They all become the joints and ligaments by which the whole body, the church, is supplied with energy and life." The point: Christ is the church's living head, the source of its life, the source of its genuine vitality, strength and growth.

This being so, and it is so, I offer the following thoughts. We must, then, refuse the enticement to seek what has an appearance of life, something that may be exciting carnally, something that may stir up people carnally, something that may be attractive carnally, we must refuse the enticement to seek what seems to be life and growth from sources other than Christ, our living head. Psychologized, user-friendly, consumer-centered programs. Entertaining activities which may temporarily draw a crowd but send us to something or someone other than Christ who is our life and we begin to depend on them. From musical extravaganzas which marginalize preaching, from multimedia assisted worship, from youth programs, from elaborate facilities, from coffee bars in the lobby, athletic fields and teams, and I want to pause and say I'm not categorically saying that all of those things are morally evil, I am saying if we become dependent upon them, we've got a big problem. But with respect to such things, they can be like amphetamines, they produce a church high but they're masking spiritual barrenness. They're like sugar-packed junk food which produces a hyperglycemic high, like church narcotics, deluding us into thinking we're alive and our gathering for and participation in corporate prayer may be saying something very different.

The point is we must refuse anything that produces dependence upon sources other than upon Christ who is our life and further by implication, you and I as covenanted members of our given assemblies, must be consistently privately as well as corporately using the revealed means of grace by which a believer in a church draws near to, communes with and day by day seeks from Christ our living head fresh supplies of life and strength, diligent in the private means of grace, diligent in the public means of grace, diligent in believing fervent prayer, heart-engaged, truth-governed worship, sanctified Lord's Day sabbaths, fellowship with one another and, again, what is at stake is not just my own soul, what is at stake is the vitality and the strength and the life of the corporate church of which I am a constituent member. And further, brethren, by implication we must not in the language of Ephesians 4, grieve the Holy Spirit of God and the context there is pretty

plain as to how that's done. It's done by means of unresolved broken relationships which assail the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace, and when that is allowed to go on, the Holy Spirit reacts in a way analogous to a spouse's reaction when there is an unresolved wound in a marital relationship. The offended spouse does not seek a divorce but there is a restraint upon the freedom of expressions of affection and communication. There is a coldness and a distance and a drawing back until the matter is resolved. Analogously is the response of the Holy Spirit when there are unresolved and broken relationships that leave behind in the church the toxin of bitterness, analogous to what occurs in the husband/wife relation cooled by an offense, is what occurs in the church. The operations of the Holy Spirit are restrained when there has been an assault in terms of angry words and ways and broken relations. We do not want the withdrawal, we want his full and effectual presence, not the ebbing away of the help of his presence.

Well again in summary, we are to be committed to seeking life from Christ our living head, by his appointed means, committed not to disguise our declension or our death by all manner of man-devised schemes. It would be better if we dissolved our religious corporation and closed the doors than play games. We must be committed to depend upon Christ for our life and growth and if we're not going to do that, shut the doors and cease operations.

Now secondly, Christ is our ruling head. Christ is the head of the church in the sense of being the church's sovereign, being the church's governor, the church's ruler with all authority to direct. The head being the governing organ of the body and its members, denotes one, the metaphor head denotes one who is vested with the right to direct and command. It denotes the chief, the principal person to whom others, that's you and I, are subordinate. Head or headship signifies control and superintendence and indeed Christ is the ruling and governing head of the body to whom is owed whole glad-hearted obedience and submission. As the head is the control center, the command and control center of the body, so Christ the head is the authoritative controller of the church. As in the natural creation, all things move at the direction of the Lord Jesus, so the body, the church, is to move at his direction, his command is under his authority now. With reference to our text, Colossians 1:18, again I quote Dr. Vaughan, "To be the head of the church is to be its directing brain, its sovereign. It is he who guides and governs now."

This sense of Christ as our ruling head is plainly revealed back in Ephesians 1:22-23. Paul writes there, "And He put all things in subjection under His feet." We have a summary of the universal dominion of Christ whereby, verse 21, all powers, all kinds of rulers, beings in history and the age to come, are under and subordinate to him. The head that was once crowned with thorns now wears the diadem of universal dominion. The text goes on, "and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." The truth is this simply put, as a dimension of our Savior's universal dominion, and that's the larger point in the text read, as a dimension of his universal dominion, Christ is head of the church, his body. The language of enthronement, Ephesians 1:20; of subjection under his feet, verse 22; head over all things, verse 22. Conveyed plainly, this element of rule, authority or government. Likewise if we turn to Ephesians 5:22-24, "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For

the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ," in what sense is Christ the head, the church is subject? The deduction is ruling head. "As the church is subject to Christ so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything." Again, the language of headship but in here, in this case, the language of subjection conveying plainly the sense of leading, ruling and directing. Ruling headship is the place the Lord Jesus has in his church.

In his ruling headship like his living headship ought to be responded to and in the following ways at least. His ruling headship ought to be responded to, first, by a corporate attitude of indiscriminate submission for the rule of Christ. A corporate resolution, a corporate willingness to respond to the will of our head no matter the application of his truth, no matter how different or out of step it may make us look, even in the eyes of contemporary professing Christianity. It may well be that if we have this corporate disposition, that we will follow the lead and the direction of our ruling head wherever it takes us. It can make us appear, as Paul appeared, a spectacle to the world, fools for Christ's sake. Now we don't want to be a spectacle to the world just for the sense of being bizarre but if following our governing and ruling head results in our being a spectacle to the world, then so be it.

The resolve to respond to all of the claims of our ruling head may set us up even in the ecclesiastical culture in which we live to be ridiculed or perhaps more likely just to be dismissed, "That little church down the street." When you consider matters such as the regulative principle in our application, we worship God on his terms. When you consider what some number of us believe about the musical appointment of worship in the new covenant, congregational singing, when you consider what is our persuasion regarding the moral law of God, the fourth commandment included, when you consider what I trust is your persuasion or your practice concerning corporate prayer life and perhaps we could add other considerations, the potential is our church's could be viewed as objects of reproach and the question is in view of our understanding and persuasion of Christ our ruling head, are we willing to bear that, again not for the sake of just being different, that could be an exercise in arrogance, but rather are we willing to bear such in the pursuit of submission to our understanding of the will of our ruling head, we could ask it this way: how big of a fool will we allow ourselves to be for the sake of submission to our ruling head? Or have we set limits? Have we set boundaries beyond which his authority will not be honored? Private property signs, as it were, no trespassing signs? Our response to the truth of Christ as our ruling head is to be a unanimous heart of submission, submission to his directives, to his prohibitions, to his will and his ways.

Further and secondly and quickly, corporate resolution, to understand our ruling head's legislation, and that's an ongoing pursuit. We will not arrive at the point where we say, "Okay, we've got it. We understand it fully and clearly now." It is an ongoing pursuit. Yes, our King has granted light and a measure of understanding but we must never become arrogant, complacent, satisfied, believing that we have a corner on the market of truth, believing we know it all. We need increasing light so as to grasp further dimensions of truth, to grasp it with more clarity, more fullness, and with more fitness of responding.

Then there must be corporate follow-through, the follow-through of actual obedience corporately. Yes, a submissive heart. Yes, more understanding. But we mock that heart and that understanding if there's not the follow-through of actual obedience. And brethren, we have a corporate need if Christ is our ruling head, for Christ-given qualified elders who possess more than a seminary degree, rather men who have internalized the qualifications that are so plainly set out in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, men who are Christ-given qualified elders who possess and maintain an acute ongoing awareness that they shepherd the flock of God of which Christ is the chief shepherd. I'm not talking about bullies in the office, autocratic ambitious men, we're talking about men who know they're accountable, men who are humble, men who are qualified, men who have a felt-sense that they are accountable stewards with the trust committed to them for which they shall give an account to the chief shepherd. The ruling head is the chief shepherd and the leadership of qualified men of God given as gifts to the church is to reflect him and his ways.

Charles Hodge wrote and with these two quotations I conclude, "The sense in which Christ is the head of the church is that he is the source of its life, living head, its supreme ruler, the ruling head." Lightfoot writes in regard to Colossians 1:18, "The inspiring, ruling, guiding, sustaining power that is Christ, the mainspring of its activity, the center of its unity and the seat of its life, the living head, the ruling head."

Let us pray.