



CHURCH ESSENTIALS

We live in a time where there is massive confusion about the Church. Who, what, where, when why, and how? Just consider a few examples: Five people gathered around a television watching an online sermon – is that church? Blue Gatorade and potato chips – is that communion. Being baptized in the Jordan River on a trip to Israel after being baptized in your local church – is that legitimate?

Who is the Church? What is the Church to do? Where does the Church get her identity and tasks and mission from? When is the Church the Church? How do we make these decisions?

Christians have thought through these issues for two millenia. We are not the first generation to think about these things. But recent events bring us back to these questions over and over. After two years of a pandemic, with churches opening and closing, going online to provide services, these questions are just as legitimate as ever. Today, pragmatism rules. It's about what works.

Before the Church existed, God existed. And just like God created the world with the breath of his Word, so he formed the Church with the breath of his Word. For this reason, we begin our service with a call to worship. The Word of God creates and calls a people. Our first value as a church is to be Biblical because the Bible is the voice of God that preceded and created and forms the church.

And God has given us his rule over all things in Christ who is called the Head. As Paul says in Ephesians 1:22-23 and Colossians 1:18, he is the Head of his body, the Church.

Be Rooted in God's Story

Why does it matter that Christ is the Head of the Church? This might seem like a silly question, but a little history will help root us in the Story of Everything that God has been continuing to do since the beginning of time.

In the 1400s, a Bohemian born priest began to read the Scriptures and challenge the Church of his day. In 1401, Johannes Huseic began his ministry as a priest. We know him as John Huss. He quickly became a prominent priest, preaching in Prague, modern day Croatia, to a congregation that was just a little less than 3000. He had determined that he would not preach in Latin, the practice of the Church of the day, but in the language of the people. when he preached, he actually discussed the Bible, “desiring to hold, to believe, and to assert whatever is contained in them as long as I have breath in me”. Eventually, he was forbidden to preach. He was kicked out of the Catholic Church, but they couldn't get him out of the pulpit, so he just kept preaching in the same Chapel. He was enthralled by the works of John Wycliff, and saw the dangers of the Church of his day.



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The longer he preached, the more he depended upon the Bible, and he claimed that the Bible was the Church's final authority. The church authorities claimed that as long as Huss continued to preach, no one could be buried or receive communion. So Huss left the pulpit in 1412, and continued to write.

The most important writing that Huss ever wrote is called "The Church." Read publicly in Prague, his radical views stated that the church was made up of believers from all the ages, contradicting the teaching of the Church of his day that claimed that the true Church was only made up of the pope, cardinals, bishops, and priests, not the common person; and so all people should receive communion. Further, he taught that the Bible's authority was higher than the authority of the Church. Because the Bible is the Church's final authority, to disobey popes and bishops whose lives were morally corrupt is to obey Christ the head. The result of his teaching was that he was burned at the stake; and as he died he was heard singing Psalms and praying for another Reformer to come along and take up his cause.

John Huss's nickname was "The Goose" – that's what huss means. And Martin Luther, upon reading Huss, would claim that the reason the Church cooked The Goose at the stake was because of his claim that Christ was the head of the Church. Luther would say, "I was overwhelmed with astonishment. I could not understand for what cause they had hurt so great a man who explained the scriptures with so much gravity and skill." Huss's work would become the inspiration that would fuel the Reformation and drive Luther forward.

What we have received as a teaching came at the cost of death. Our history as Protestants is rooted in this reality – Christ is our Head.

So what does this mean for us practically?

Receive the Benefits of Christ

In Ephesians 1, Paul begins his letter by reminding us as Christians about all of the blessings we have received in Christ Jesus. We have been chosen, loved, redeemed, forgiven, adopted, sealed with the Spirit (vv. 3-14). For this reason, Paul thanks God for Christians and prays that we would understand the benefits of these blessings in our lives. The reason we can receive the benefits of Christ's work of salvation and understand them in our lives is because Christ has been raised from the dead and exalted over all things as Head of the Church.

How can we receive the benefits of salvation? Do I have to do something to receive them? Or has something been done for me so that I can receive them?

Paul tells us that we receive these benefits because of the Father's work in raising Christ and because Christ is the authority over all. Let's look at these two things.



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First, we receive the benefits of Christ because he has been raised from the dead. Because Christ died for our sins, received the punishment for sin, and was raised again to newness of life, God has put his stamp of approval on Christ's life and ministry. By raising him from the dead, God was saying, in effect, "I approve of everything my Son has done." God's pleasure with his Son, his delight in his life, his teaching, his miracles, his death, is all confirmed by God raising him from the dead.

This power that raised Christ from the dead now becomes the power that works in us. God's approval of Christ's work is now applied to all who trust in Christ. By connecting your life to Christ by trusting in Christ's life and death, it means that God applies his stamp of approval from Christ's life to yours. This is the first thing that it means that Christ is Head. By faith, we are saying Jesus is my representative. He stands in my place.

In this sense, being the head isn't about power and authority that makes people less, but lifts people up. This is what Christ's power came to do: to overthrow sin and death, to defeat the abusive power of the enemy, and lift up those who were slaves in sin and death. This means that authority isn't about being great, but about serving. For this reason, so much of the debate about authority in the church and the home is so misguided. People start by thinking that authority in the church is about power. For many people they think that if a woman doesn't have this power and authority in the home and church, it means she's less. This is absolutely worldly thinking. Authority in the Christian Church is not at all about a power to control. It is authority to lay down your life, to sacrifice. It has nothing to do with being better or greater than someone. It has to do with displaying service and highlighting glory. It is less like an authoritarian structure and more like a male figure skater who uses his strength to showcase the beauty and glory of his female skating partner. While she is put in vulnerable positions, he uses his strength not to harm but to glorify her and showcase her elegance and beauty. So we need to get these notions that if someone doesn't have power that they must be less and not equal. It is the abuse of power that makes us think that people aren't equal, not the right use of authority. Christ doesn't receive all authority so that we would be less, but that we would become more. We are humbled so that we might be exalted.

The second thing that Christ's Headship means is that he will rule over the universe for our good. This second point actually underscores the first. God's stamp of approval on Christ's life, ministry, and death by his resurrection means that God has given him all things to rule over. Now vv. 22 and 23 are incredibly complex to translate, but sometimes the complicated things obscure what is simple and clear: God raised Christ, gave him as Head, and has put him over all things for the benefit of his body, the Church.

Practically, what this means is that Jesus rules over history. Nothing is happening outside of Christ's control. Everything that is going on is purifying Christ's bride for himself. In every way, history is not out of control. It is under the sovereign hand of God and the rule of Christ. And the reason Christ rules over all things is so that you and I would grow up into him, becoming like



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him, loving him. That means nothing in your life or my life is being wasted. Nothing is happening that Christ has not already determined will work more humility, love, patience, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control in you.

For the church in Ephesus, this would have been good news. And this would have been wonderful news in the first century. Living in the Roman Empire with all of its gods and turbulent politics and religious pluralism and sexual deviances could feel overwhelming to a little band of Christians. But knowing that Christ rules and reigns and is working out everything in human history for our good means that we can receive the good and the bad from the hand of God because all things are being worked according to the counsel of his will.

Christ as head means that he rules for our good. He is working out all things for our benefit. So it is crazy that churches fight about power and control. It is sinful that we argue and accuse one another. We submit one to another. And when there is godly submission, leadership flourishes. Churches flourish. But when someone tries to take power and use it in a way that God has not designed it to, the breaker on the panel goes. Things go wrong. And those are warnings to us to pay careful attention – have we submitted to Christ and to his Word?

In the Bohemian Church of Jan Huss's day, only the bread was available to the layperson. Because they weren't part of the Church, they could not receive the wine as well. But Huss's reaction against this abuse of authority meant that all of Christ was available for all the people who belonged to God. And Huss's actions had a profound affect. The people of Moravia rose up and reacted with Jan Huss and rejected the abusive authority of the Church. They rejected councils and popes who did not serve Christ. And the result was a missionary movement called "The Moravian Movement" that sent hundreds and thousands of missionaries out, resulting in people like John Wesley and George Whitefield taking the gospel to North America and seeing many profess Christ and his Lordship.

Christ is the Head of the Church. And when he is received as Head, all of his blessings flow to the weakest, lowest, poorest one who trusts in him. And he lifts up those who are downcast, raises the fallen, strengthens weak hands, calms the anxious heart. Why? Because He reigns. And when he reigns, all things will be put under his feet and all who trust in him will be lifted up.