

The Head of the Body, the Assembly' (2)

by H.J. Vine

Understanding Christ's headship is crucial for the church to maintain its relationship with Christ and avoid falling under worldly or religious influences.

Scripture: Ephesians 4:15, Ephesians 5:23, Colossians 1:18, Colossians 2:10, Colossians 2:19

Topics: "Christ's Headship", "Church Unity"

Description

H.J. Vine preaches on the importance of understanding our relationship to Christ as the Head of the church, emphasizing the dangers of worldly influences that undermine His headship. The sermon delves into the decline of assemblies, the significance of being loyal to Christ amidst religious systems, and the need to heed the Spirit's guidance for the assemblies. It highlights the unique role of believers as members of Christ's body, united by the Spirit, and the importance of holding fast to Christ as the Head amidst challenges and declension.

Transcript

What can be more important today, for those who truly belong to the church--to the assembly which is Christ's body, than the right understanding of their relationship to the One who is Head of that assembly? For this, the place that our Lord Jesus Christ has, as our living, exalted Head, must be known; otherwise, we shall be in danger of falling under the influence of worldly, religious bodies, which have no place for the Head of the assembly.

When the truth was first given in all its purity, at the beginning, there was not the same difficulty as exists now. Christ had quite recently ascended as Man to heaven. The disciples had seen Him go up. He sent the Spirit to them, on the ground of the eternal redemption He had secured for us by His death and resurrection. They were united to Him and to each other by that same Spirit; and, to them, Christ was "the Beginning, Firstborn from among the dead." Since that time, religious systems have grown up, bearing the name of Christian, which in practice displace Christ's headship--even if they do not deny it in words--whilst, at the same time, they speak of the one body, the one church. These systems create difficulties which were not present when "the faith" was given to the saints.

In the midst of them, the true believer is necessarily deeply exercised to be loyal to Christ, in every relationship in which he stands to Him; and he is not left without definite instruction in the Scriptures. He is forewarned that he might be forearmed for the fight of faith. Indeed, he is distinctly told in 2 Timothy 3:1, "In the last days difficult times shall come," and the truth is given to guide him rightly through them, so that

he might not be overcome by them; and, on the other hand, that he might overcome, as he keeps the faith, and remains faithful to Christ amidst that which is indifferent to His name; finding his delight in what that name means, along with others who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

1. The Assemblies

The downgrade of the assemblies is shown in the prophecy and symbols of Revelation 2-3; where, we are told, the seven lamps represent the assemblies. Christ is not spoken of as Head of the assemblies. He is seen in their midst as the Son of man judging them, for failure had come in. We do not read of failure in the assembly, the body of which Christ is Head; we do of the assemblies. Therefore it is said, "He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the assemblies." This formula is used seven times in the two chapters, and denotes a very serious and important breach, as similar expressions do in the Gospels. Those who have been the subjects of a real work of God's Spirit in them, and who consequently have ears to hear, are to heed now what is said to the assemblies. Truly converted souls have the ability to do this, and it is often indicated in the Word. They are contrasted with mere formalists who have ears but hear not (see Acts 28:26-27; Rom. 11:8; Matt. 13:9, 15-16, etc). They have the Spirit, for they have heard the gospel of God in faith, and have trusted in Christ.

They are not instructed to "hear the church," as ecclesiastics say; nor are they told to denominate themselves by the name of this assembly or that. They are to hear what the Spirit says to all the assemblies. Doubtless, those who are loyal to Christ will be found where His Name and His Word are honoured, until He comes again. Then it must not be overlooked, there are overcomers supposed in all the assemblies; and in both Thyatira and Sardis (representing ROMANISM and PROTESTANTISM) a remnant of real souls is seen; whilst all Philadelphia (meaning "LOVE OF THE BRETHREN") remains faithful, even if feeble, till the Lord returns. Those, however, who are addressed as having ears to hear must be viewed in a distinct way, that is, as to their attitude. A true soul in any of these assemblies would be capable of taking in what is said to the particular assembly in which he is. He that has an ear to hear, however, is viewed as capable of taking in what is said to all--in communion with God as to the state of all the assemblies. He is not only living by the Spirit, but also walking by the Spirit; for the attentive ear and obedience go together. Such see that the declension which began at Ephesus, when first love was left, goes on till such a sunken state is reached at last in Laodicea, that it will be entirely cast away by the Lord; nevertheless, those who hear are maintained by the Spirit in spite of the failure of the assemblies; and He enables them to enter into their proper portion in Christ, which He has made known in other scriptures. Abraham and others illustrate how God makes known His mind to such.

Having seen the divinely marked out attitude of the individual hearer to the assemblies of Christendom, we may now turn to the other side, and see his corporate relationship to Christ and the members of His body, the assembly. As to the first, he is given by the Spirit God's mind; and as to the second, having the Spirit, he is set in the body in relation to Christ as Head, and to others as fellow members of the same body. In the first it is individual, but in the second corporate. Ruin in the assemblies is abundantly shown in Scripture, but not in the body. To speak of the ruin of the assembly as the body would be dishonouring to the Head; just as it would dishonour the Builder, the Son of Man, to say so of His assembly spoken of in Matthew 16. We need to be established in what is vital and abiding.

2. We are Members of His Body

It is not written, We ought to be members of Christ's body, but that "we are members." All those who have heard the gospel, and believed of Christ, have been sealed by the Spirit, and are fellow members of the one body. We are not told that such ought to have Christ as their Head, but that "He is the Head of the body, the assembly." In resurrection and ascension, having secured redemption by His blood, He is our one Head. Nor are we told that we ought to be in relation to Him as Head, for we are in that relationship, as members of His body. Neither are we told that we ought to be members of the same body as other true believers, for "all the members of that one body, being many, are one body . . . for by one Spirit are we all baptised into one body." "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free," said our Lord Jesus Christ; and it is as the truth is made good to us by the Spirit, we are freed from that which is contrary to it. The truth sanctifies.

Nearly every religious organization in Christendom speaks freely of the church; and the Papists especially contend zealously for the one body--the true church, as they say--or, the holy catholic church. When, however, you look for that which is absolutely essential to the existence of the body--when you look for the Head--for Christ the living, exalted Head of the assembly, you discover that these systems are so organized as to give no place to Him. If this discovery be correct--and who can deny it?--then it is quite evident that none of them are the body of which Christ is the Head; and if the Spirit has taught us the truth that we are members of His body, is it not grave inconsistency for us to be members of another body?

The Holy Spirit is here to glorify our Lord Jesus Christ, and any true revival or recovery is to Him; not to a better religious system than was known before, but to Christ; and even when real recovery is known and enjoyed, the same danger as existed in apostolic days is still present--the danger of "not holding fast the Head," of whose body we are members, because of subtle influences which are always at work to turn our hearts and minds away from Him--influences that are "not after Christ," as we are told.

The truth of which we speak was given by the Spirit through Paul. All who received the Spirit at Pentecost were baptized into one body then, but the truth was revealed after. Peter, the apostle to the Jews, does not speak of it either in the Acts or in his epistles; Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, unfolds it fully. Indeed, the administration of the truth of the mystery, which is so closely allied to it, we are told, was given to him "to complete the Word of God" (Col. 1:24-27). Previous to this ministry, those who had received the glad tidings were looked upon as a sect in the religious system of the Jews. It was at Ephesus, where Paul laboured so much, that we find the definite breach made. After reasoning for about three months in the Jewish synagogue, he "separated the disciples," and carried on in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:8-9). His epistle to them gives the truth of Christ and the assembly, and it is there we are told, "We are members of His body" (5:30).

This truth is always used in an inclusive sense, not exclusive. No member can say of another, "I have not need of you," for every member is necessary; and, if, in the completeness of it, Christ's body be His fullness (Ep. 1:23), each member is also necessary to Him. How great is the grace that has made this true! How it bows our hearts in humility before Him! and yet fills them with thanksgiving and praise. What honour! What dignity! Members of His body, which is "the fullness of Him who fills all in all." God grant that we may understand and appreciate this better. To this end we need to be edified. Gifts are given for "the edifying of the body of Christ"; and we are also to seek to build one another up in Christ as fellow-members, even if there be no distinct gift; as it is said of the body, "working in the measure of each one part, works for itself the increase of the body to its self-building up in love" (Eph. 4:16, N.Tr.). The ministry of the gifts is needed, we are told, "till we arrive at the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God"; and then, as members of the body, we are to hold the truth in love, and grow up to Christ,

the Head, in all things." There is one body, and one Spirit, and one Head; and though there are many members, they are all members of the same body.

3. The Headship of Christ

We have before us our Lord Jesus Christ as the Head of the body, the assembly; but for the proper elucidation of this, it is necessary to briefly point out His headship in other relations also; for we need not only "the knowledge of God's will," but also to be filled with it "in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so as to walk worthily of the Lord unto all well-pleasing."

As the One who is to reign, and thus represent God in supreme authority, our Lord Jesus Christ is KING. He will be above all kings, as well as over all nations, when He comes to reign, for He is "the PRINCE of the kings of the earth." He is never spoken of as the King of the assembly. He who is the "KING of kings" is its Head. He is also LORD as well as King. As such all dominion is His, as well as the kingdom. He is "LORD of all"; and when the time comes for Him to reign and rule in splendour and glory, we are told He will be manifested in this twofold character; for "the blessed and only Potentate shall show the KING of kings and LORD of lords."

Now when we speak of His headship we have quite another line of thought before us. As King and Lord, Jesus represents God in authority; as Head He represents that of which He is the Head. Some seven times Scripture speaks of Him as Head of a building, and this explains what we have just said. As the "rejected stone" He has become "the Head of the corner"; and those who come to Him during the period of His rejection are spoken of as "a building," "Jesus Christ Himself being the corner-stone" (Eph. 2:20, N.Tr.). The chief place is His; though, in grace, He takes it as belonging to the building, as Head, and that representatively, as we have said. What a precious building it must be in God's sight to be adorned and honoured by such a Head!

Again, when the Apostle would regulate the behaviour of saints according to the divine order, he reminds them that "Christ is the Head of every man" (1 Cor. 11:3). It is not that all men hold Christ as Head: we know they do not. There are those, however, who do; and they are set in relation to Him in this way--every one of them! That is the thought, and it is to affect each individual in his behaviour in the house of God. The Head of Christ is God. He alone could be in such an intimate and immediate relation to Him. So the woman's head is the man. One is not without the other in the Lord, but the man is the head; and Christ is the Head of every man.

Then there are high intelligences of great dignity both in the unseen and the seen--powers and rulers of great honour and estate in the heavens and upon the earth. They too are set in very definite relation to our Lord Jesus Christ, for we read, He is "the Head of all principality and power" (Col. 2:10). Exalted and glorious is the place which belongs to our Saviour and Lord in this connection; but, in Ephesians 1:22, we are told of greater glory still, in which He is supreme, as the representative Head; and yet, wonderful to relate, divine grace delights to associate the assembly with Him in that illustrious exaltation. It is thus stated, "And gave Him to be Head over all things to the assembly, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." This does not speak of His being Head of the body, but of His being over "all things" as Head. It will enable us, however, to appreciate with more intelligence the great honour which belongs to the assembly, as having such an One for its Head. He who is Head of the corner, Head of every man, Head of all principality and power, Head over all things, is, in an unique and more blessed sense, the Head of the body, the assembly.

Before speaking of Him in this last relation, it should be pointed out, though the body is spoken of in Romans 12 and in 1 Corinthians 10 and 12, yet Christ, as Head of the body, is not so spoken of in those chapters. In the first it is the "one body in Christ" (v. 5). In the second it is what the "one loaf" represents as to those who partake of it at the Lord's table--"Because we, being many, are one loaf, one body; for we all partake of that one loaf" (v. 16, N.Tr.). In the third the necessity of every member is emphasized (vv. 21-22), for by "one Spirit we have all been baptized into one body"; therefore it is simply said to the saints at Corinth, "Ye are Christ's body, and members in particular" (v. 27). They were not the body, though they were truly of it; but, as we have said, the whole body is set in vital relation to Christ as its Head. We may now proceed to consider this.

4. Our Glorious Head

Our Lord Jesus Christ was not the Head of the assembly before He became a man. That ought to be clear to every believer. Nor could He be so until He had secured eternal redemption for us by His death, and risen in triumph over the grave. Having done this, He ascended on high; where, as Man, "He is the Head of the body, the assembly, who is the Beginning, Firstborn from among the dead, that He might have the first place in all things." The assembly has its "beginning" in the risen Head.

There are four scriptures which speak of Him in this way--Ephesians 4:15; Colossians 2:1; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18. We will follow them in this order, for the first two are intimately connected, although each has its own setting and special teaching. In the first growth up to the Head is spoken of; in the second ministry from the Head; whilst both speak of all the body being united or connected together from Him; and also of its increase. The third scripture speaks of His being Head of the assembly as a husband is of the wife; and the last of the pre-eminent dignity of our glorious Head.

First, we see Him exalted above all heavens, in view of filling all things; from thence He gave gifts for the edifying of the body; then, from Himself, the whole body is fitted together. In the most complete sense all things are to be filled by Christ, and the body is being formed for Him who is to do it; increasing meanwhile and building itself up in love, until it reaches "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." How important then is the ministry of Himself to this end. The more we learn of His grace and glory, as those who belong to the assembly, the more will our growth "up to Him" be furthered.

To hold fast the Head (Col. 2:19) is of the utmost importance. There is no failure with Him; and it is as true now as it was in the apostle's day--from Him "all the body" is ministered to. The natural mind may try to reason this away, and say it ought to be ministered to; but that shows unbelief, and it is the outcome of walking by sight. God says all the body IS ministered to from Him, and united together by joints and bands, and increases with the increase of God. His word is enough for faith. Moreover, no one who truly knows the Lord would question His faithfulness, or raise a question as to the perfection of His present work. In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and our completeness is in Him. So great is He, the fullness resides in Him in all its infinite plenitude. This being so, we are not surprised (when we know this) to read, "And ye are complete in Him, who is the Head of all principality and authority." God's fullness--plēroōma--is in Christ: we are become full--perplēroōmenoi--in Him, in the same glorious Person, our blessed Saviour and Lord! He is enough for God, and He is enough for us.

"Thou, O Christ, art all we want;

More than all in Thee we find."

In Ephesians 5, where our relations to Him are given under the figures of the body and the bride, where both unity and union are so intimately connected, we learn that Christ is Head of the assembly as "a husband is head of the wife" (v. 23). How beautiful and intimate is this relationship. He loved the assembly and gave Himself for it. The assembly is not told to love Him. He loves!! It is this all-sacrificing love of His which wins her love. He loves! He has proved it by giving Himself for us! It is for us to rejoice in, and to adore Him for it. The more unworthy we feel ourselves to be, the more wonderful to us is that love; and now He is our Head as a husband. What surpassing grace! The right appreciation of this produces the lovely "subjection" to Him, which is due to the glorious Head of the assembly, to Him who is our Lord. He undertakes all direction and supply; and it is the assembly's happy and honoured place to respond in a suitable way. She belongs to Him, and He "nourishes and cherishes" the assembly, as His own body; and will present her to Himself all glorious in a coming day; having no spot or wrinkle, but holy and blameless; and His love for her will know no change and no end.

Finally, Colossians 1:15-18 tells us of His unparalleled glory, of the grace and majesty of Him who is the assembly's glorious Head. As we have seen, He took that place consequent upon His death and resurrection; but we are told who He is, that came in such deep love to make us His own--He is THE SON OF THE FATHER'S LOVE, the delight and the object of His heart; and, coming as a Man into the Creation, He has in it the chief place--first in all dignity and honour--"THE FIRSTBORN OF ALL CREATION"; for who could take a place before Him? He must have the first place, "because by Him all things were created." No creature could come before the Creator, however great his dignity. All the thrones, the lordships, the principalities, and the authorities, whether invisible or visible, in the heavens or upon the earth--all are "BY HIM AND FOR HIM." He is before all and they all subsist together by Him. In glory, pre-eminence is His; in time, precedence is His; in dependence, all things subsist together by Him. Seen here on earth as the heavenly Man, He has made the invisible God Himself fully known, for He is "THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD." He could thus perfectly represent Him, for He is God. No one else but God could do so. And now as the risen Man, alive for evermore, such an one as He, and no one less, is THE GLORIOUS HEAD of the body, the assembly. We may well be found rejoicing in Him, holding fast the Head.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has many glories and dignities, as this passage shows; but immediately after the Spirit has spoken of Him as the Beginning in resurrection, the Head of the body, the assembly, just as though it were the top-stone of all He takes as man--the masterpiece of divine wisdom, grace, and power, He adds, "that He might have

THE FIRST PLACE IN ALL THINGS" (N.Tr.).

How divinely suitable is the Spirit's use of the word "first" as to the Lord in these verses. In the wide creation--"Firstborn"; in the new creation also--"Firstborn"; and in all things the "First place." How worthily He adorns every sphere in which pre-eminence is His. Eternal glory to His holy Name.

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