

“Jesus: Head and Savior”

¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. ²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation^[g] under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

What is the nature of the church? Most Christians don't think much about the church. They are glad to be part of one. Maybe they know a little about the differences between denominations, but beyond that it seems unimportant. Throughout the history of the church there have been many attempts to summarize the Bible's teaching about what the church is. From looking at the Greek word for church in the NT to looking at the various metaphors used in the Bible to talk about the church, there has been a lot of work done trying to define what the church is. There is the invisible church and the visible church. In addition to that there are local churches. We can add to this all the different types of churches. It can seem a bit confusing. Our text this morning will not answer all of these questions, but to one very important question it gives the authoritative answer. Who is in charge of the church?

As we continue looking at chapter 1 of Colossians concerning the identity of Jesus, Paul proclaimed Jesus as the head and savior of the church. Jesus is the head, the authority in all things, but especially among his redeemed and called out people. We owe him our ultimate allegiance. All pastors and leaders are to submit themselves to Christ and his Word in all matters. Every local church may have its unique style and to varying degrees independence from other churches. However we should all be striving to give ourselves completely to the Savior who purchased the church with his own blood. Jesus is our hope for salvation and he is the true head of the church. As we turn our attention to Colossians 1:18-23, we want to recall who the Son of God is and why this is so important for us as Christians.

“Jesus is the head of the church.” (v. 18-19) *“And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,”*

Jesus is the ruler of the world. His infinite lordship is seen in the creation of all things. Naturally since Jesus is the ruler of the world, he is the ruler of all human institutions. There is no government that doesn't have to answer to the Triune God for their decisions. All power and those that wield it have

been given their position by God and he will be vindicated in the righteous actions of those in power or when God himself brings justice to this world in the end.

In verse 18, Paul says that Jesus is the head of the church. In one way, this proclamation seems redundant. Paul has already told us that all creation and the powers within creation are under the Son of God. What makes Jesus' headship of the church something remarkable? One way to think about this is that the church is not like other earthly powers or institutions. The church comes from the works of God in a special way. Think back to the Exodus. God worked to redeem a people for his own possession. The people of Israel crossed the Red Sea. God's presence dwelt with and guided them. Ultimately, the people of Israel entered into the promised land. God's covenant people were called out from bondage so they could live with him and he with them. However, there was a problem with the sacrifices given to Israel. The sacrifice of bulls and goats could not really cover the sins of human beings. The repeated sacrifices of Israel called the participants to put their faith in God's promise of salvation. It was the LORD that they trusted not the sacrifices themselves. Moreover, the people of God needed a better head. The Kings of the OT were not faithful.

In verse 18, Paul says that the beloved Son (Col 1:3) is the head of the body, the church. This is a special relationship. It is different from his rule over all things. His rule of the world is part of his very nature. The headship or rule of the church is more intimate. Jesus sealed his headship over the church with his own blood.

Like in the use of the word "firstborn" in verse 15, Paul is emphasizing Jesus' preeminence over the church by calling him "the firstborn from the dead." The eternal Son's role in creation was to make everything. The eternal Son became a man and died and was resurrected. Through his death and resurrection, he overcame death. The curse of sin has been broken. So whether in the first creation or in the church, the eternal Son rules over all things. There is a deep intimacy with the Son and the church. All of creation, even the parts tainted by sin, is under his authority. In creation, the Son brings to the world all the power and authority of God. In the resurrection and in the church, the Son brings to the church the presence of God. Jesus is preeminent over the church. The incarnation does not change his status or his power. The eternal Son did humble himself to become part of his creation, but his identity did not change. The fullness of God was pleased to dwell in him. This means that nothing has changed from verse 15 to verse 18. We are still talking about the same Son who created the world and rules it. He also rules the church as preeminent head by his death and resurrection. How does his death and resurrection do this? Well verse 20 gives us the reason.

"Jesus is the savior of the world." (v. 20-22) *"and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him."*

Jesus made peace through his death on the cross. What a truly amazing statement. Sin had taken hold of this world and enslaved mankind. Sin brought death and led to decay and grief entering the world. I mentioned the Exodus earlier. The people of Israel being led out of bondage and suffering to freedom and living in the presence of God is the same thing that the Son does for the church. Sinful humanity needed to be set free from bondage to sin, but there was no way to deal with the presence of sin in the

world. Sin brought enslavement, but it also brought death and judgment. Sin entered the world through disobedience and rebellion to the command of God. There was enmity between God and man because of sin. Something had to be done to make peace between God and man. The Son did what needed to be done by dying on the cross in the place of sinful man. This is what verse 20 calls reconciliation. The enmity between God and man has been dealt with. There was no compromise. God did not sit down at the bargaining table with sinful mankind to make a deal. God's standard was 100% obedience. It was complete devotion. Man could not come to the table to ask God for anything. Jesus' death brought reconciliation between heaven and earth. I want you to see something about the nature of this death. It is powerful. It does not merely create the opportunity for reconciliation between heaven and earth. It accomplishes it. Just like the earlier claims about the authority and power of the eternal Son, verse 20 says that the Son reconciles all things. Peace with God is not only possible, but it is guaranteed.

Jesus made reconciliation between God and man. It is definite. This means that everyone who will trust in Jesus is guaranteed peace with God. The question is not what you have to do to be reconciled to God. Everything that needs to be done is done. In fact, if there was something left in your hands to do to be reconciled to God you would fall short. Verse 21 gives insight into our nature before we are reconciled to God and why it is impossible to do anything to make ourselves right with God. Paul says that we were once alienated and hostile in our minds. We were caught up in doing evil deeds. Jesus' reconciling death brings salvation down to man. The reconciliation has a purpose. Jesus died for us so that before God we could be presented holy and blameless. To be holy and blameless before God is impossible for sinful man. Again and again we have to look at what Jesus really did on the cross. His death makes us holy and blameless, but as we see from verse 23 there is an ongoing process of being made holy. The salvation that Jesus brings to man is perfect and complete. When we enter into salvation by grace through faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are made holy and blameless. That moment of salvation is not the end of the work of God. We were reconciled for the purpose of being set apart for God's special use. In other places in the Scriptures, Christians are called God's ambassadors (2 Cor 5:21). They are called to do good works (Eph 2:10). They are to proclaim the gospel to the nations (Matt 28:19-20). They are called to be a special priesthood before God to show the world who God is (1 Peter 2:9-10).

“Abide in Christ.” (v. 23) *“if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.”*

Paul in writing these things to the Colossian church wanted to give them a grounding in what it meant to be part of the kingdom of the beloved Son. He is also declaring what he thinks is the center of the faith they have in the Son. As such, he is not trying to scare the church. Verse 23 sounds like a warning. To put it in reverse order, “If you don't stay faithful to the gospel you will not have the reconciliation that Christ has made between heaven and earth. Paul is making a strong statement here. He says, “If indeed you continue in the faith...”, but I do not believe that Paul's point is to put fear or doubt into the heart of the Colossian church. After all he has been declaring the complete sovereign headship of the Son. The point is that there is deep assurance of our salvation when we are bearing fruit. Holy and blameless and above reproach before God seems like a reality when we are living faithfully. However, it feels like an impossibility when we are living for ourselves. Paul is going to deal with some of the challenges that the

church is facing in the coming chapters. One of the chief concerns of this letter is the rise of false teaching. False teaching is not an easy topic because just about any view can be made to sound like the Bible's teaching. You just need a few proof texts. Last week I said that most people don't want to get too deeply involved in theology. When people can convince themselves and others of things so completely (even when they are wrong) it makes the entire task of theology seem empty. After all, can't you just make up whatever you think? This is the rub. According to Paul, we can't just make the Scriptures say whatever we want them to say. There is such a thing as right theology. Paul says, "if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel."

If we depart from the faith to such a degree that we are not talking about the same religion anymore, we can't really even think of ourselves as Christians. I believe you are familiar with the idea of theological triage. There are essential things that we must not compromise on no matter what: such as the Trinity, the virgin birth, Jesus' death and resurrection, the inspiration of the Bible, and justification by grace through faith. There are some things that we can have debate on and still remain in close fellowship such as the order of end times events. In any case, we are to love one another and correct one another in a spirit of gentleness because we might be the ones in error next time. While false teaching is a serious threat to the health and confession of the church so is faithful living.

Martin Luther famously said that when we face times of doubt look to your baptism as proof that you are saved. His point was that salvation is a work of grace so in the moments that shine brightly of God's grace in your life you can see that you have truly been united with Christ. The objective and final nature of salvation means you should not doubt that you have it once you have been united to Christ by faith. There is so much truth in his teaching, and it is a great comfort to think of salvation that way. However, the Scripture sometimes gives warnings to those who give confession of faith, but in the end fall away. Paul's assurance that you will be saved in the end is tied to faithful confession and faithful living. The truth is that those who are united to Christ will not be separated from him. On the other hand, sinful living and denying the faith should offer you no comfort. Pay attention to what Paul is saying. There is great salvation in Jesus. Those who abide in Christ have great hope. If you are abiding in Christ, you have great hope. If you are wavering or feel weak, turn from those works and look to Christ because there is great salvation to be found in him. Remember that the Lord draws near to the weak people of this world. He draws near to the grieving and to the poor and oppressed peoples. In Christ, the firstborn from the dead, we have hope for a new life. We need to be bearing fruit in keeping with repentance, but when we are straying from Christ, the answer is to return to him again.

Finally, let me add one more word about the nature of the church. If you have been in church for a little while, you know that there can be a lot of hurt associated with the church. A disordered and abusive church situation can affect us in various ways. It is important for us to do two things: 1. Remember that the church when it hurts people is not loving or serving its true head. 2. We cannot hide from the sin or try to bury it. The church is not our salvation nor our hope. Christ is our hope. The church is a vital part of the Christian life. We have duties as Christians that are directly tied to the church, but our allegiance is to the head of the church. Whatever local church we belong to doesn't undermine where our true loyalty lies. Everything we are is bound up in the Savior who died and was resurrected to reconcile us to God. If the church is unfaithful to Christ, we remember the gospel and call the church back. This can be messy and may even lead to us losing our positions and some friends, but the ultimate goal for the church and for our lives is to be stable and steadfast to the end.