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Christ: The Head and King Of The Church

By Rev. Wm. C. Robinson, D.D.

Nothing is more characteristic of ecumenical theology than its emphasis on the fundamental place of Christ in the founding and life of His Body the Church. In the article on the Church in Kittel's Theological Word Studies in the New Testament, Professor K. L. Schmidt reverses Harnack and insists that the Church is integral to the concept of the Messiah and hence to Jesus who taught both. For Paul, the Church is set over against Christ as the bride in relation to the husband, and at the same time is one with Christ as His Body. These great thoughts are popularized in English by Principal F. N. Flew, **Jesus and His Church**. At the meeting of the Continuation Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order at Clarens, Switzerland, in 1939, scholars as wide apart as Presbyterians and Greek Orthodox vied with one another as to which could define the relation of the Church to Christ most closely. Since I have published the definition of the former (Prof. J. de Zwaan) in **Christ—The Hope of Glory**, I hereby append the definition offered by the latter, Prof. G. Florovsky:

"The One Church of God is not an earthly institution and not a human society, but a supernatural reality which is in process of growth towards the world to come in which it will be consummated. It is the sphere of action of the risen and ascended Lord, all its members being in Christ and being knit together by a spiritual or charismatic kinship, all their gifts and activities continuing the work of Christ by the virtue of the Holy Spirit, originating from Christ and being coordinated by Him to the final goal. Then the Church will appear in the age to come, as the one people of God, as one glorious body, as the New Jerusalem."

In the second half of the second volume of his *Dogmatik*, Barth presents Christ as the beginning of all God's ways toward men. The Father chose His only begotten Son to be the Messiah, and in Him chose the Church as His body, and individuals in the Body of Christ.

Professor Otto Piper of Princeton points out that the effect of worship does not depend on the quality of the sermon or the singing, but on the fact that the risen Lord has bound Himself to the institution of His worshipping Church.

In the American Theological Committee's volume, **The Nature of The Church**, the emphasis in

the statements of Principal Richard Davidson of Toronto and Professor F. W. Loetscher of Princeton is likewise on the Headship of Christ. The former says:

"The Church was brought into existence through Jesus Christ who willed a new Israel . . . The Church is the Body of Christ and lives by His Spirit dwelling in her members . . . The Church is one . . . in that all are members of the one Body of which Christ is the Head."

The latter says: "Christ is and ever will be the one and only Head and Lord of the Church. The relation between Him and the Church is of so vital and indeed so unique a character that without him the Church could never have come into being or have continued to exist. The Church is His body, drawing its very life from Him and in turn serving Him as the members of the body serve the governing head. By His efficacious grace He quickens with spiritual life men dead in trespasses and sins, and by His Word and sacrament He nourishes and enriches this new creation and transforms it into His own likeness."

In the light of this current recognition of the Headship of Christ, we earnestly ask the union committees of the US and the USA Churches to consider the place of this glorious truth in the history and testimony of the Southern Presbyterian Church.

The General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church was organized at Augusta, Georgia, December 4, 1861. Dr. Benjamin M. Palmer preached the opening sermon on the text: "And gave Him to be Head over all things to the Church; which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all." His theme was: The supreme domination to which Christ is exalted as the Head of the Church, and the glory of the Church in that relation as being at once His body and His Fullness.

The scriptural testimony to the Headship of Christ is abundant. God has placed Him at His own right hand far above every name that is named, has put all things under His feet, and has given Him to be Head over all things. Unto the Son of Man has been given domination and glory and a kingdom that all nations should serve Him. All authority in heaven and on earth is given to

the Risen Redeemer and He is Prince over the kings of the earth. The Messiah, who is the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, sits upon the throne of David and upon His kingdom to order it and establish it. Ten thousand times ten thousand give blessing and honor and glory unto Him that sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb.

This sole Headship and Kingship of Christ is eminently fitting in view of both His Person and His work. In Himself Christ is God and all the perfections of God are indispensable to the fulfillment of this amazing trust. Only He who created and sustains the universe is sufficient for this task. Moreover, He is the Second Person of the adorable Trinity, the revealer of the Father, and the heir of all things. "As therefore in Christ's divinity we discover the resources, so again in His personal distinction as the Son we trace the ultimate reason of this universal Headship." And "if the power to wield this empire vests in Him as God, no less does the form of that jurisdiction depend upon a true participation in the nature of those to whom He is the Head." "By His incarnation Christ virtually embraced all the grades of being lying between the extremes of the scale." For man as to his body is of the earth earthy, and as to his soul, celestial and God-like. Further by His perfect obedience of the law, Christ magnified the law and made it glorious. He was made under the law and was obedient unto death, wherefore God has highly exalted Him. In His work are blended the two methods of law and grace, by which God reveals His moral perfections. By His obedience Christ vindicates the law's injured majesty, while through His grace He brings out the tenderest affections of the Father as a God of love.

Dr. Palmer's noble testimony that day has not been wasted, but is incorporated into our Southern Presbyterian Book of Church Order and Confession. While we took over the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, USA, we soon modified the Book of Church Order in line with Palmer's magnificent emphasis on the sole **Headship of Christ**. In 1729 American Presbyterianism adopted the Westminster Confession, catechisms, and Form of Government. The old Westminster Form opens with a **Preface** setting forth Christ as the Head of the Church and the source of all her power and government. In reorganizing American Presbyterianism in 1788 this great and glorious **Preface** somehow dropped out. Its place was taken by a long chapter of Preliminary Principles justifying to eighteenth century secularism the propriety of requiring credal subscription.

The Southern Presbyterian founding fathers were a bit hard on these Preliminary Principles. They dropped them cold as "but a lame apology for being Presbyterians." Instead they recovered

the great **Preface** of the Westminster Divines and so made the stone which the USA builders had rejected to be the Head of the Southern Presbyterian corner. This **Preface** is now the first paragraph in our chapter II of the Book of Church Order. It is followed by another fine paragraph the drive of which comes from the Second Book Of Discipline of the Church of Scotland, a book written by Andrew Melville and approved by Parliament in 1592. From His throne of glory, Christ rules and teaches the Church, through His Word and Spirit by the ministry of men. The third paragraph of the same chapter is a great statement of the **aloneness** of Christ's Headship. It takes up that conviction which was the life of Presbyterianism in the killing times in Scotland. The simplest Scottish worshipper was certain that Christ was present in the worship of the Kirk because her worship was strictly according to the Word of Christ the King. No Roman Catholic was ever as certain of the presence of the flesh of Christ in the consecrated wafer as the Scottish kirkman was of the presence of the King in the worship of His own ordering. And this conviction led to the downfall of the walls of Rome and the building up of Scottish Presbyterianism upon the ruins of Papacy. Our paragraph (10) asserts that Christ as King has given to His Church His system of doctrine, government, discipline and worship all of which is either set down in Scripture or else can be deduced therefrom by good and necessary inference. And to which things He commands that nothing be added and naught be taken away. Holding this testimony, we are sure that Jesus Christ is present with His Church by His Word and Spirit.

Our Book carries this Headship of Christ into its conception of ecclesiastical power and discipline. Church Courts "can make no laws binding the conscience." Dr. Thomas Peck insisted that Christ alone makes the laws, and that the courts of the Church only make rules or regulations. This accords with the Confession that synods and councils may err, but that they may make "rules and directions." Our Book of Discipline follows Dr. Thornwell in strictly limiting an offense to that which is contrary to the Word of God. On the other hand the USA Church allows the disciplining of men for merely violating a "law" of the General Assembly, thus making two heads, two kings and two lawgivers for the Church: (1) Christ and (2) the General Assembly.

In the revision of our Confession of Faith, paragraph VI of Chapter XXV reads: "The Lord Jesus Christ is the only head of the Church and the claim of any man to be the vicar of Christ and the head of the Church, is without warrant in fact or in scripture, even anti-Christian, a usurpation dishonoring to the Lord Jesus Christ." We notice that this paragraph is softened in the proposed

Plan of Union, by the omission of the term, anti-Christian. Why the change? Some few years ago we saw a letter written on the stationery of the Stated Clerk of the USA Assembly. On this stationery the Stated Clerk had printed the claim that he was the "Executive Head" of the Presbyterian Church USA. Even with the softened form of this statement in the Plan of Union it would seem proper for the U.S.A. Stated Clerk to change the claim on his stationery.

Other parts of our testimony to the Headship of Christ are much more seriously curtailed in the Plan of Reunion. The **Preface** of the Westminster Divines is cut beyond recognition. The sentence borrowed from the Second Book of old Scotia is mutilated by the insertion of an "and" which wholly changes the sense of the paragraph. In our Book, as in the old Scottish Book, a minister is speaking and acting with the authority of Christ only when he speaks and acts according to the Word and by the grace of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, in the Plan of Union it is asserted that "Christ rules the Church through His Word and Spirit AND by the ministry of men." This means that a Church officer, e.g. a Stated Clerk, would have Christ authority whether or not he was speaking or acting by the Word and the Spirit—a totally different thing.

We devoutly pray that before a Plan of Union is approved it will carry the glorious testimony of Benjamin Morgan Palmer much more effectively than does the present Plan of Union. Only so will it give effect to the solemn statement of paragraph 19: "The exercise of ecclesiastical power, whether joint or several, has the divine sanction, when in conformity with the statutes enacted by Christ, the Lawgiver, and when put forth by courts or by officers appointed thereunto in His Word."

A PRAYING MOTHER

Billy Sunday tells the story of a minister who was making calls. When he rang the bell of a certain home a little girl opened the door. He asked for her mother, and she asked, "Are you sick?" He said that he wasn't and she asked, "Are you hurt?" Again he said, "No." Then she asked if he knew of anyone sick or injured. When he replied that he did not, she said, "Then you can't see mamma, for she prays from nine to ten o'clock." It was then twenty minutes after nine, but he sat down and waited forty minutes to see her. At ten o'clock she came in with the light of glory on her face; and he knew why that home was so bright; he knew why her two sons were in the theological seminary and her girl was a missionary. "All hell cannot tear a boy or girl away from a mother like that," comments Mr. Sunday.

—The Christian Digest.

What Would The Lord Jesus Have You Say?

By Dr. C. O'N. Martindale*

Not long ago I read what was called by "good judges" a great sermon on a **very vital text** by a splendid Christian leader. It was really a notable message. Yet it had far more imported matter than belongs in it—fully half its length—put first. The last half put more of the heart of it in the foreview—because closer to the Text.

After carefully reading, I asked a lady of much wide reading and good Christian calibre and fine balanced judgment to read it, and voice what she thought of it, and she substantially and ingeniously replied: She would say "it was a fine rhetorical and homiletical effort, well-phrased, and strikingly framed to appeal to the modern man or woman, but she just wondered if Jesus would have preached in that fashion on that text and its meaning to any person or body of people anywhere!" What a comment! And how revealing of the inadequacy and unsatisfyingness of much of the so-called up-to-date preacher's and teacher's method of approach to and proposed exegesis of even the superlatively clear Scriptures passages that came from the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

When YOU Preach or Teach, be sure YOU Stick to and Tell The Truth In The Text You Use, and do not give a mere rehash of sundry human ideas or clutter any vagaries of **no value at all from a Gospel standpoint!** Be sure You Get the Exact Meaning (According to the Original Text) of the Scripture Words you make the Pivot of your Interpretation and Message (Sermon) to Christian and non-Christian!

Any preacher will find it worth while before he starts on any message based on any section of Holy Scripture—to ask **what would the Lord Jesus have me do as to this text? He gives His Holy Spirit as our helper to guide us into all Truth.** Do we want to **Know the Truth** and to **Tell The Truth** as well as to **Do the Truth**, and help our hearers to do likewise. Looking over my shoulder and following what I am writing, **Does God Approve or Disapprove What I am Saying This Text Means? Does He Own it, or does He Disown the Meaning I Put On the Text as untrue and unworthy of an Ambassador of our Lord Jesus Christ?** Maybe we'll preach and teach differently if we remember His Eyes are upon us, and His Ears Hear our Words; and Life or Death depends on our fidelity to His Word to men.

*Baton Rouge, La.