

THE HEAD OF THE BODY, THE CHURCH

Colossians 1v18

Back in 1973, in my very first week in Christian ministry as the new pastor of a Baptist Church, I visited the mid-week Christian Endeavour meeting. The leader began introducing me to the dozen or so children present, but to my horror he started by saying: *“Now boys and girls, who is the most important person in the church?”* I groaned. This wasn't how I wanted it to start. One little girl shot up her hand and this was her response: *“Please sir, it's Jesus!”* I laughed with sheer relief while the leader looked embarrassed and muttered *“Well, yes, yes...!”* I felt something of the pleasure of God in the moment. *“From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise”*

Yes, Jesus is the most important person in the church. **He is the head of the body, the church.** Jesus is more important than the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury or Terry Virgo; more important than individuals with a miracle ministry, or those who plant a church, or apostolic teams or pastors who have led the same church for 30 years. The church doesn't belong to any of these people. It doesn't belong to the reigning monarch. It doesn't belong to elders, deacons or committees. It belongs to Christ. He said: *“I will build my church.”*

I'm lingering on this because – *when Jesus really is the Head of a church, what a difference it makes!* What a contrast from church where the spotlight is on a man or a doctrine or a style of worship or the number of members. This is what I want to explore with you this morning. I will do this by thinking about this expression - **he is the head of the body, the church.**

1. When Jesus is Head of the church - we are alive!

The guillotine bears witness to the fact that there is no life for the body without the head. As a boy I was fascinated by some of the sideshows at the Town Moor in Newcastle. One of them was the headless lady. There she sat with tubes coming out of her neck, living and breathing. But it was a trick. It was fake. Separate the head from the body and life is impossible.

Jesus is the source of our life as a church. In ch. 2v18f Paul actually speaks about the serious condition of those who have, *“lost connection with the Head.”* Severed from Christ there is no spiritual life. It's possible to have a full church programme – meetings and youth work. It's possible to look successful because of good management and high energy. But that is no different from successful secular groups. Genuine New Testament church life is very different. It involves every-day awareness that everything flows from Jesus.

He is the head of the body, the church. It was Jesus who poured out the Holy Spirit upon the apostles launching the church; and we still need Jesus, by His Spirit, to go on filling and energising us. This is not an optional extra for “charismatic” style churches. Without the Spirit we cease to be a church *at all.*

2. When Jesus is Head of the church - we are healthy

Of course with head injuries a body can be alive but the person comatose. The head is the home of the brain; of mind and intelligence. When a brain is functioning properly it is the command control centre of the whole body. It is from there that that instructions go out to the various parts of your body. When the body responds obediently it's a healthy sign. Some here remember Mohammed Ali at the height of his career as heavyweight boxing champion of the world; the self-proclaimed "Greatest." His fists and his feet responded at lightening speed to instructions from his mind. *"Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee!"*

Jesus is **the head of the body, the church**. From Him flows a constant stream of practical wisdom. We are His arms and legs and hands on earth. When we live in simple obedience to His instructions we bring His presence to the world around us. I recall talking to a pastor whose wife had died recently. One day he had been standing in his hallway weeping and saying *"O Lord, put your arms around me."* There was ring at the door and when he opened it one of his church members entered and gave him a huge hug saying, *"I just sensed God wanted me to call and give you a hug."* He had obeyed directions from the head and became Christ's arms to that grieving man.

But when the limbs cease to obey the mind's instructions and behave erratically it is *not* a healthy sign. This is why Parkinson's disease is such a distressing illness. Because of this Mohammed Ali is now only able to shuffle slowly with help. When a church ceases to live with Jesus as Lord, it gradually loses its co-ordination, strength and mobility.

3. When Jesus is Head of the church - we grow

Healthy bodies grow. We want to see this church grow numerically, so that we are able to start new churches around the county. Over the past 30 years 'Church Growth' has even become something of a "science" – analysing what works and what doesn't work if you want to see you church grow. Many of the insights are helpful. But it is possible to stimulate growth in the body artificially – Dwain Chambers has come clean about this. It is possible for exceptional growth to be unhealthy and dangerous – just look at 'The Guinness Book of Records'.

The kind of church growth we want comes from Jesus, the head. Ch. 2v19 speaks of *"the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow."* (See also Ephesians 4v15f) I understand it is from the pituitary glands, housed in a small cavity located in the base of the skull, that the growth hormone comes. This hormone is closely related to the health and growth of the body's connective tissue, cartilage and bone. **He is the head of the body, the church**. But when Paul speaks of growth it is not primarily in terms of numerical strength but increasing maturity and likeness to Christ. The apostle Peter wrote about this too: *"Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."* (2 Peter 3v18) This leads us on to our next point:

4. When Jesus is Head of the church - we are authentic

We are who we claim to be! The world around us sees Jesus in us. There are now a variety of sophisticated ways to confirm your identity. In the old police dramas it was about fingerprints but the discovery of DNA has changed all that. Nevertheless the most immediate and visible means of identity is still your face. There is even new face recognition technology in case you try to alter your appearance. On my passport and my driving licence it is a head-and-shoulders photograph that you will find. When I pass through Immigration Control at a foreign airport they look at my photo and then up at my face to confirm my identity. A photo of my elbow wouldn't be much use.

Jesus is **the head of the body, the church**. When people come among us, if we are a genuine church, they should see Jesus in us. They should find Jesus at the centre of our worship, and our teaching. But it is not just about being church on Sundays. It is also about catching a glimpse of Jesus in us at other times in other ways – whenever we are together. e.g. at the Sports centre, a barbeque, at Jazz or at Quiz evenings and group socials. When others see Jesus in us then we are the real deal. When members of our church family are in need this is a great opportunity for others to see Jesus in us. At this time we have several members who are very ill; their families should see Jesus in us in the way we reach out to them. When we reach out in love to those outside the church they see Jesus in us. And finally:-

5. When Jesus is Head of the church – we get good leadership

In a school you know what they mean when someone says *“He or she is the Head!”* It means they are in charge. They are in a place of authority in the school. They are in a position of leadership. So, who is in charge of the church? Who leads in this church? Is it the elders? No and yes!

Jesus is in charge. **He is the head of the body, the church**. He is the one in authority. He is Lord of the church. But as such Christ delegates authority to those who serve as leaders in the church. He is the Chief Shepherd but he appoints under-shepherds. We believe in leadership. It is a calling and a gift for some. It brings with it a weight of responsibility. It also involves accountability. In this church the elders do lead – in partnership and with the support of others. But we are also accountable, to you, to a team who oversee us – and most of all, to God. *“Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.”* (Heb. 13v17)

God does delegate authority to those who lead in the church. But authority is not authoritarianism. Peter writes to church elders about this: *“Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”* (1 Peter 5v2-4)

John Wilthew. March 2009

THE HEAD OF THE BODY, THE CHURCH

Colossians 1v18

MESSAGE SUMMARY

Please read Colossians 1v1-20 and use this summary prior to your discussion.

Jesus is the most important person in the church. When Jesus really is Head of the church, what a difference it makes!

1. When Jesus is Head of the church – we are alive! The guillotine bears witness to the fact that there is no life for the body without the head. Jesus is the source of our life as a church. We must not become disconnected from the Head. (2v18f) Jesus is the giver of the Holy Spirit; without the Spirit we cease to be a church at all.

2. When Jesus is Head of the church – we are healthy. The head is the home of the brain. It is the command control centre and instructions go out from there to the various parts of the body. When the body responds obediently it is a healthy sign. From Jesus flows a constant stream of practical wisdom to His arms, legs and hands on earth. But when they cease to obey or behave erratically it is not a healthy sign.

3. When Jesus is Head of the church – we grow. It is possible to grow artificially. Healthy church growth comes from Jesus, the head. (Colossians 2v19; Ephesians 4v15f) From the pituitary glands, housed in a cavity in the base of the skull, comes the growth hormone. This is closely related to the health and growth of the body's connective tissue, cartilage and bone. Church growth is not primarily about numerical strength but about increasing maturity and likeness to Christ. (2 Peter 3v18)

4. When Jesus is Head of the church – we are authentic. When you pass through Immigration Control they look at your head-and-shoulders photo, then at your face to confirm your identity. As others come among us, if we are a genuine church, they should see Jesus in us. We are then the real deal.

5. When Jesus is Head of the church – we get good leadership. The "Head" is in a position of authority in a school. So, who is in charge in a church? Jesus is Lord of the church and as such He delegates authority to those who serve as leaders in the church. He is the Chief Shepherd but he appoints under-shepherds. We believe in leadership. It is a calling and a gift for some. It brings with it a weight of responsibility and involves accountability. But authority is not authoritarianism. (1 Peter 5v2-4)

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Here are six questions, one under each sub heading of the Sunday message. As ever, you don't have to use all, or any of these questions, if you have other questions arising from the message or the text you want to talk about.

1. What might be good evidence that the Holy Spirit is active among us, and therefore we are connected to Jesus, the Head?
2. Recall any occasion when you have benefited from someone being Christ's hands etc. Or recall an occasion when you have sensed Jesus leading you to do or say something – and this proved to be much-needed or very timely for another person.
3. What kind of growth do you think Jesus wants to see in us as a group, and as a church?
4. What opportunities do we have at this time to let others see Jesus in us?
5. How can those who serve by leading in the church exercise their authority in a Christ-like way? What dangers must they avoid? How can the church help them in this?

Why not pray together that Jesus be glorified in every area of our life and activity as a group and as a church? You could name special events coming up soon and specific people who have needs (health, financial etc) at this time.