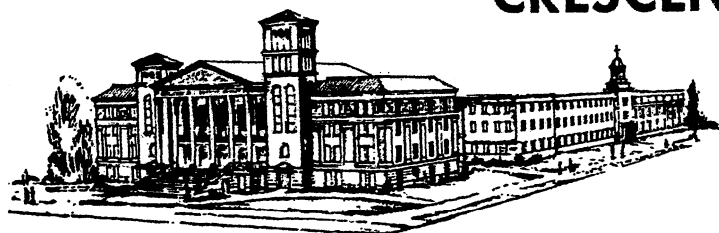


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH



SERMONS

"CHRIST: THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH"

Sunday Morning, August 27, 1961
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural reference: Colossians 1:9-21

Soon after I accepted the call to my first pastorate, I had to face a question of basic importance. It was the question of ultimate authority. I found myself asking: "To what or to whom does the church appeal? By what reality is the church controlled? When it comes to matters of basic policy, who has 'the last say'?" Now I had some knowledge of theoretical and practical answers to this question. I knew that in terms of the abstract ideal, Baptist Churches looked to the New Testament as the sole source of faith and practice. I also knew that as an organizational form each local congregation was autonomous; that is, it was a democratic fellowship in which the majority ruled. Then, too, I knew that in practice certain groups or even powerful individuals - be they laymen or ministers - were decisive in the formulation of church policies. All this was "floating around in my mind," so to speak, and as a beginning minister I needed to establish some clear understanding of this fundamental issue. Nor is this need limited to young ministers. In these difficult and provocative days, all church members need to rethink this matter of church authority and remind ourselves of that which we must not forget. Thus, it is out of this pilgrimage and to this relevant issue that I wish to speak this morning. Let us answer the question: "What is the ultimate authority of the church?"

As I began my search for this answer, I quickly realized that the question of authority was inseparably bound up with the larger matter of the nature of the church. Only by understanding what the church was and was to do could I be in a position to determine her authority. So at once my quest was broadened and intensified.

My study in this area led me to discover three characteristics of the church that laid the foundation for an answer to the question of authority. The first characteristic had to do with the nature and purpose of the church. The answer lay in Paul's image of "the body of Christ." Now he uses other analogies, like "the bride of Christ" (Ephesians 5:26-52) and "the temple of God" (I Corinthians 3:17), but in terms of frequency and centrality he reserves special significance for this concept of "the body." It appears all through his writings (Romans 12:5; I Corinthians 10:16; 12:27; Colossians 1:18,22,24; 2:19; 3:15; Ephesians 1:22-23; 2:16; 3:6; 4:15; 5:23,30), and by common consent is the definitive phrase for the apostle. What does it mean? This, I think: the church is the concrete manifestation of Christ in the world. It is the instrument in which Christ is present and through which He works. To understand the significance of this, one has to remember the characteristic outlook of Hebrew thought. They looked on existence as a unity of body and spirit. Man was not composed of two separate entities like body and soul. He was a living unity, a body animated by a spirit. The two were different but not totally distinct. They were dependent - each on the other. The body

without the spirit was a lifeless object; the spirit without the body was inoperative for existence. Paul, as a Hebrew, could not conceive of any type of existence that did not involve some bodily form. Even in the after life we would be given "spiritual bodies" that our personalities might be effective (I Corinthians 15). Thus the body is that instrument through which the spirit is operative, and this involves the church. For just as Christ worked through His physical organism when He lived upon this earth, now He works through His church, which is His body. This is the staggering equation: what the physical body was to the incarnate Christ, the church is to the risen Christ. To put it in its simplest form, the church is to her locale what Christ would be if He lived there in the flesh. Through the church Christ continues His redemptive ministry. He who once clothed Himself in flesh and "dwelt among us" (John 1:14) now clothes Himself in the church to effect His purpose. He is present in the church today as he was once bodily present in the man Jesus of Nazareth. This concept of the church which is so exalted and significant is not limited to Paul's writings alone. In the book of Acts, where the Damascus Road experience is described, Jesus says: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (9:4) Here Christ identifies Himself with the Church; He is present in His church and to persecute her is to persecute Him. Or one finds the same truth in the book of Revelation, when the Seer visualizes "one like the son of man in the midst of seven golden lampstands" (Revelation 1:12-13). The lamps stood for the church, the son of man for Christ; what he is saying is that if you want to find Christ in this world, look in the church! Here is the reality and power of the risen Christ - present and at work in the midst of His church.

This, then, is the basic nature of the church as defined by the New Testament. It is not a human organization to commemorate the sacrifice of a dead hero; it is a living organism through which divine power is operative on this earth. And her purpose is to do what Christ would do if He were physically present.

The second point has to do with the origin of the church. It is important to note that a group of men did not get together and decide to found the church. Rather, God acted in Christ, and on the basis of this invited men to participate in life. In the much disputed passage of Matthew 16, it is clear that the initiative is on the divine side. The mystery of Christ's identity was not revealed by flesh and blood, but the Father who was in heaven. Peter responded in faith, and Jesus said that out of such men - possessed by the knowledge of God - he would create His earthly instrument. Thus, it is manifestly obvious that the church was not a human idea or invention. To the church these words of Jesus are relevant: "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you."

The third aspect is the power of the church. Just as her nature and origin are rooted in Christ, so is her special spiritual energy. Jesus promised the power of the Holy Spirit before He commissioned the church (Acts 1:4), and He constantly reminded her of her absolute dependence on Him: "I am the vine, ye are the branches," he said; "Apart from Me ye can do nothing" (John 15:1,5). The church has always had to acknowledge this central fact; that she had no inherent dynamic by which to accomplish her goals. Only in the strength Christ gives can she go forward.

When he gave a series of lectures at the Seminary in 1956, Dr. Ted Adams told of a church in New England that had an illuminated cross on its spire. It revolved every night so that all the community could see. One night the power line to the city broke, and the whole community was plunged into darkness. To everybody's amazement, the cross stayed on and kept revolving. Only then did they discover that an independent generator had been installed and that the cross was not dependent on the usual resources. And so with the church - she does not operate off

the same circuit as the world. Her energy is generated from beyond through the Christ "who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:23).

From this description of the church the matter of authority can be inferred. If her nature is to be the instrument of Christ, if she is originated by Christ, if her power comes from Him, then it follows logically that Christ is her authority. She is surrounded and engulfed by Christ - He is the foundation on which she is built, the means by which she operates, the goal toward which she moves. Thus she must be guided by His will. This is exactly what Paul means by enlarging his analogy and calling Christ "the Head of the body" (Colossians 1:18). The reference here is obvious. The head is that part of the body that controls all else. It is the seat of the intelligence and the will. Here is the nerve center which guides and directs every action. Paul is saying that Christ is to the church what the brain is to the body. He controls and directs her. Therefore the injunction to the church is this: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philemon 2:5).

In the light of this kind of authority, we must redefine our concept of local church autonomy. Quite often, I am afraid, this has been used as an excuse for unchristian individualism. Very clearly no church can be absolutely autonomous in the New Testament sense. We can be free from ecclesiastical control and the domination of other bodies, but we are not free to do as we please. In the strictest sense, a church is Christonomous and not autonomous. She is not controlled by a majority vote of her own opinions and ideas; she must be controlled by Christ. Therefore, I would say the freedom of the church is not to choose her path; it is to decide for or against the path Christ has set. And on this decision hangs the very essence of the church. There is an old Latin phrase which reads: "Where there is Christ, there is the church." This is true, as is its converse: "Where Christ is not, there is not church." Whenever a part of the body ceases to be directed by the mind, it is paralyzed and becomes useless. And so with a church that ceases to be ruled by Christ. In that moment her total reality disintegrates: her nature, her origin, her power - all is gone. When she departs from Christ, that which makes her a church is gone. She may continue as an organization for a long time; there may be budgets and programs and fellowship and recreation - but the church is no longer there, for Christ, who is the Essence of the church, no longer controls.

Thus the authority of Christ is not one characteristic among many; it is the reality of the church. If it is present, there is the church. If not, all you have is a human organization that will someday pass away. The decisions of a church then are not merely concerned with what to do; they are ultimately questions of being. The real question is the one made famous by Hamlet: "to be or not to be."

That, my friend, is the question!