

The Headship of Christ

by William MacDonald

The Headship of Christ is acknowledged when He is allowed to guide the local church, and reception policy is crucial in witnessing to the oneness of all Christians.

Scripture: Ephesians 1:22

Topics: "Church Unity", "Headship of Christ"

Description

William MacDonald emphasizes the headship of Christ over the church, asserting that believers must not accept any human leader as the head. He explains that true acknowledgment of Christ's headship involves allowing Him to guide the church's activities and decisions, which requires spiritual exercise and dependence on Him. MacDonald warns against the dangers of individuals who may claim to uphold Christ's headship while exercising dictatorial control within the church. He also discusses the importance of a local church's reception policy, stating that it should welcome all believers who are holy in life, not under discipline, and sound in doctrine, while maintaining the unity of the body of Christ.

Transcript

CHRIST THE HEAD

A second truth to which the local church should be a witness is that Christ is the Head of the body. How can believers testify to this fact today? Obviously they must accept no human leader as head of the Church. The most glaring violation of this is the head of a large religious system who claims to be the temporal head of the body of Christ. Most Christians today have seen the folly of such a pretension, yet in somewhat subtler forms the evil has infiltrated into almost all segments of Christendom.

The Headship of Christ is truly acknowledged when He is allowed to control the church's activities, to make its decisions, to superintend in every department. To many this will sound vague and impractical. How can the Lord in heaven guide a local church on earth? The answer is that He will never fail to make His will known to those who patiently wait on Him for it. True, this requires a great deal of spiritual exercise on the part of the believers. It would be much easier to take matters in their own hands, and make their own plans. But it should be remembered that New Testament principles can only be carried out with New Testament power, and those who are unwilling to tread the path of dependence, prayer, and patient waiting will never have the privilege of seeing the Great Head of the Church guiding the local church or assembly here on earth.

At this point it might be appropriate to emphasize that it is one thing to give lip-service to the Headship of Christ and quite another thing to acknowledge it practically. There are some who apparently would shed their blood for the truth of the Headship of Christ, and yet who deny it practically by being virtual dictators in the assembly. A man or a group of men may not have any official title or designation in a church and yet rule it ruthlessly. Diotrephes was such a man (3 John 9, 10). He loved to have the preeminence; he spoke against godly men like John with malicious words; he would not receive such men, and forbade those who would, casting them out of the church. This was a positive denial of Christ as Head.

Perhaps a word should be added concerning the headquarters of the church. The word headquarters speaks of the center of operations and of authority. The headquarters of the church are where the Head is; namely, in heaven. A local church cannot consistently recognize any controlling organization such as a synod, presbytery, or council where control is exercised over a single church or a group of churches. Each assembly stands directly responsible to the Head of the Church, and should be nothing and do nothing that would deny that truth.

RECEPTION POLICY

As pointed out previously, a third important truth in connection with the Church is that all believers are members of the body. It is the duty of the assembly to set forth this truth with accuracy and faithfulness. Nothing that it teaches or practices should deny the oneness of all Christians. If we inquire how the local church can witness to this, we shall find ourselves concerned with the policies it follows in receiving others into its fellowship. This subject is commonly known as reception policy, and the principles are clear.

1. THE GENERAL RULE

The general principle is that the local church or assembly should receive all those whom Christ has received. "Wherefore receive ye one another as Christ also received us to the glory of God" (Romans 15:7). The basis of true fellowship is the fact that a person has already been received into the body of Christ. The local church merely gives visible expression to that fact by welcoming him into its midst.

2. EXCEPTION TO THE RULE

However, this is not a rule without exception. There are three additional requirements which are implicit in the teachings of the New Testament. The person received must be holy in life (1 Corinthians 5:11; 10:21). It would obviously give a very inaccurate representation of the holy character of the church to receive a fornicator, a covetous man, an idolater, a railer, a drunkard or an extortioner.

Closely associated with this is the fact it would be quite improper to receive a person who was at the time under discipline by another local church (1 Corinthians 5:13). This would be a denial of the unity of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:4). Until an excommunicated person has been restored to fellowship with the Lord and with His people, he is counted as a heathen man and a publican (Matthew 18:17).

Finally, the person must be sound as to the doctrine of Christ (2 John 10). "If there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed", The question arises here as to what is included in the doctrine of Christ. The expression is not explained in this passage, but we would suggest that the doctrine of Christ includes the great truths concerning His Person and Work: namely, His deity, His virgin birth, His sinless life, His substitutionary death, His burial, resurrection and ascension, and His coming again.

To summarize then, we would conclude that a local church should receive into its fellowship all born-again believers who are holy in life, not under discipline by some other local church or assembly, and sound in doctrine.

3. OTHER PERTINENT RULES

But the Scriptures give us some other instructions as to the matter of reception. The local assembly should:

1. Receive him who is weak in the faith (Romans 14: 1). This refers to a Christian who is unduly scrupulous with regard to matters of moral indifference. The fact that he is a vegetarian, for instance, should not exclude him.
2. Receive without respect of persons (James 2 1-5). The Bible warns against showing special consideration to the rich, and despising the poor. This would apply too in the matter of race, social level, or culture. Discrimination is unchristian.
3. Receive on the basis of life, not light (Acts 9:26-38). Fellowship is not dependent on how much one knows, but rather on the Person whom he knows. Thus, Apollos was received in Ephesus, even though his knowledge was quite defective (Acts 18:24-28).
4. Receive on the basis of life, not of ordinance. Baptism is nowhere said to be the door into the local church. Though it is true that all believers should be baptized (Matthew 28:19), yet the moment we say that a person must be baptized in order to be received into fellowship, we have gone beyond the Word.
5. Receive on the basis of life, not service. Just because we might not agree with a Christian's sphere of service is no reason for denying him the fellowship of the local church. In Luke 9:53, we read that the Samaritans would not receive the Lord Jesus because His face was as though He would go to Jerusalem. They were motivated by sectarianism rather than by divine principles.
6. Receive a person in spite of what he may have been before he was saved. Paul had been a persecutor, but he was received without regard to his past history (Acts 9:27, 28). Onesimus had been a thief, but Paul exhorts Philemon to receive him (Philemon 12,15,17). When an assembly's doors are closed to converted drunkards, gamblers, or outcasts, it has lost its true character as an available center of worship for God's people.
7. Receive believers in the Lord with gladness (Philippians 2:29). In a very real sense, the way we treat the weakest member of His body, is the way we treat the Lord Himself. "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren. ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

4. HOW TO KNOW IF A PERSON IS SAVED

Now the question invariably arises, "How is an assembly to know whether a person is really saved and eligible for fellowship?. At least five possible approaches may be suggested. First, there is the use of letters of recommendation (Romans 16:1). A Christian travelling from one assembly to another can avoid considerable difficulty and embarrassment by carrying a letter from his home assembly, testifying to his faith and walk.

Then the testimony of two or three witnesses is acceptable (Matthew 18:16). If a person is known to two or more Christians in a local church, that church may receive him on their recommendation.

The testimony of only one person, but one who has the confidence of the assembly, can be taken. Paul commended Phebe to the saints at Rome (Romans 16: 1), and Epaphroditus to the church at Philippi (Philippians 2:28-30).

A man's own reputation as a servant of Christ is sufficient (2 Corinthians 3:1-2). Paul disclaimed the necessity of a letter of commendation to the church at Corinth because he was well-known to them as an

apostle of Jesus Christ.

There can be a careful inquiry and investigation by the assembly itself. By this is meant that an assembly, perhaps through the elders, may question a person as to his faith in Christ, etc., asking him to give a reason of the hope that is in him (1 Peter 3:15). They may then receive him after reasonable assurance that he belongs to Christ.

5. COMMON PROBLEMS

Before closing this section on reception, we should also consider three other questions which commonly arise in connection with this subject.

Does the church have any right to judge whether a man is saved or not? The answer is that this is not only a right but a sacred obligation. Since Christians are forbidden to have fellowship with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14, 17), it is obvious that they are required to use every reasonable means to discern the spiritual status of those who seek a place among the people of God.

Suppose an assembly receives a man and he subsequently teaches error in the church? Then his teaching should be publicly refuted from the Word of God (1 Timothy 5:20). A New Testament church can only function in the environment of an open Bible. It should have godly elders who can expose error and defend the faith (Titus 1:9).

Suppose a local church receives a person, and he either attends irregularly thereafter, or never comes back? In the first place it should be emphasized that fellowship means sharing or holding things in common. Those in fellowship should enter into the life of the assembly, bear their load of responsibility, and share the work involved. Generally speaking, if a person attends only one service a week, he is limited in fellowship. Reception into a local church is in reality a reception into the hearts and homes of the Christians making up the fellowship of that church. With regard to a person who is received but who never returns, the man himself is accountable. The assembly is responsible to present to him a faithful and spiritual representation of the Church. He is thereafter obligated to be obedient to the truth.

Obviously the subject of reception is a complicated one, and we have only been able to touch on some of its more important aspects. Recognizing the incompleteness of our coverage, we move on to the next major point.

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