

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Lord of the Church

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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The truth that Christ is Lord of His church may sound somewhat benign to a casual listener in our generation, but the struggle for Christ's authority in the church has come to us through the ages on a sea of blood. Thankfully, literal bloodshed over the issue is no longer very common. But faithful Christians are still waging a fierce moral and intellectual battle for Christ's lordship over the church.

One of the major early catalysts in the Protestant Reformation was a book by Jan Hus, a Bohemian Christian who preceded Martin Luther by a full century. The book was *De Ecclesia (The Church)*, and one of Hus' most profound points was proclaimed in the title of his fourth chapter: "Christ the Only Head of the Church."

Hus wrote, "Neither is the pope the head nor are the cardinals the whole body of the [true] holy, universal, catholic church. For Christ alone is the head of that church." Pointing out that most church leaders in his era actually despised the lordship of Christ, Hus said, "To such a low pitch is the clergy come that they hate those who preach often and call Jesus Christ Lord."

Hus' candor cost him his life. He was declared a heretic and burnt at the stake in 1415.

More than a hundred years later, already at odds with the papal establishment, Martin Luther read *De Ecclesia*. After finishing the book, he wrote to a friend, "I have hitherto taught and held all the opinions of Jan Hus unawares; so did John Staupitz. In short, we are all Hussites without knowing it."

Emboldened by his reading of Hus, the reformer took up the fight for Christ's honor as true head of His church. Luther wrote, "I am persuaded that if at this time, St. Peter, in person, should preach all the articles of Holy Scripture, and only deny the pope's authority, power, and primacy, and say, that the pope is not the head of all Christendom, they would cause him to be hanged. Yea, if Christ himself were again on earth, and should preach, without all doubt the pope would crucify him again."

In many ways, the question, who is Lord of the church? was the over-arching issue of the Protestant Reformation from the start. (That's what Luther was tacitly acknowledging when he said "we are all Hussites.")

Of course, Roman Catholic canon law still insists that the pope is her supreme earthly head and the ruling vicar of Christ in that capacity.

But the historic Protestant commitment to Christ's lordship over the church has also subtly eroded, and that is a trend that deeply concerns me. It's an issue I have written much about over the years.

For example, some evangelical leaders aggressively teach that it is not even necessary to confess Jesus as Lord in order to be saved. That's what the so-called "lordship controversy" is about. It would be hard to imagine a more obvious attack against the lordship of Christ over His church, but "no-lordship theology" has thrived for years and seems to be gaining strength.

Evangelicals also gave birth to the "seeker-sensitive" movement wherein church services are tailored to please trend-savvy unbelievers. Novelties ranging from circus acts to slapstick are deliberately injected into corporate "worship" in order to keep worldly minds entertained. That is a practical denial of Christ's lordship over His church, relegating His Word and ordinances to secondary status while granting hedonistic fashions the right to determine even the order of worship.

Feminists want to redefine the idea of headship, eliminating the idea of authority from the concept altogether. That, too, is a frontal attack on Christ's lordship over His church.

Bible translators and paraphrasers who tamper with the true sense of God's Word; emergent church leaders who question the clarity of everything Christ has said; and above all, preachers who seem to talk about everything but Scripture — all of them do what they do in direct defiance of Christ's rightful authority over His church.

One thing would do more than anything else to answer every challenge to Christ's authority: the restoration of clear, powerful, expository preaching to its rightful place at the center of all the church's activities. If we truly believe Christ is Lord of the church, then the church needs to hear His voice. His Word must be proclaimed and its content taught accurately, systematically, and unrelentingly whenever the church comes together.

Jan Hus said the same thing. Declaring that the lordship of Christ over His church means emphatically "that the Christian ought to follow the commandments of Christ," Hus then cited Acts 10:42 ("[Christ] commanded us to preach to the people") and called on church leaders of his day to preach the Word of God at every opportunity — even though a papal bull was then in force, strictly limiting how and where the Scriptures could be proclaimed.

The church today is badly in need of reformation again. And Christ's lordship over His church is still the central truth we must recover, which requires the unleashing of His Word among His people again. We cannot merely float along with the latest evangelical trends and expect things to get better.

Like Jan Hus and Martin Luther, we need to fight for the honor and authority of Christ as Lord of His church.

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