

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

Preach the Word: Because It Exalts Christ in His Church

Scripture: Ephesians 1:22; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18

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The headship of Christ over His church is surely one of the most assaulted and least understood doctrines in church history, including today. The doctrine itself has sailed down to us on a sea of blood, with the issue becoming a major point of conflict between the Reformers and the Roman Catholic Church. Catholics insist the pope is the head of the church, and the Roman Church anathematizes those who deny that claim. Many Reformers, particularly the Scottish Covenanters, lost their lives defending the belief that only Christ is head of the church.

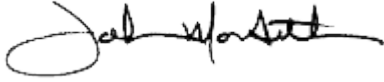
Yet today, even the Protestant landscape is dotted with pastors who act as though they are the heads of their churches. Their mutiny against the true head of the church is seen most clearly in their deliberate de-emphasis of His Word among their congregations. By sidelining the Scriptures, they are, in essence, silencing the voice of God in the church. After all, to take the Bible out of the church is to revolt against the church's one rightful head. Conversely, to bring the Word of Christ to His people is to facilitate and exalt the headship of Christ over His church.

John Huss was one of the earliest Reformers who lost his life over this issue. On July 6, 1415, he was taken from his cell and dressed in priestly garments, of which he was then stripped one by one. He was tied to a stake and asked one last time to recant. When he refused, he was burned alive. His dying prayer was this: "Lord Jesus, it is for thee that I patiently endure this cruel death. I pray thee to have mercy on my enemies." [1]Cited in Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, eds., *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 369–71. He literally died for the headship of Jesus Christ over the church.

Why did the Roman Catholic Church object to Huss's teachings? There were basically three issues that Rome opposed. First, Huss taught that the church is made up of all predestined believers. That was in direct opposition to the Catholic view at the time, which was that the true church was embodied in the priesthood, and that the common people only *communed* with the church through the rite of communion. Second, Huss believed that the authority of the Bible is higher than the authority of the church. And third, along that same line, he taught that Jesus Christ Himself is the head of the church, not the pope or the priests. So it was an issue of authority. Huss said that Christ and His Word are sovereign in the church. Rome disagreed. And Huss was killed.

A hundred years later, Martin Luther came across a volume of sermons by John Huss. In reflecting on those sermons, Luther wrote: "I was overwhelmed with astonishment. I could not understand for what cause they had burnt so great a man, who explained the Scriptures with so much gravity and skill." [2]Ibid. Both Huss's teaching and his life, particularly his unwillingness to compromise in the face of death, would become significant motivations for Luther and other later Reformers. Like Huss, they too would fight for the headship of Christ over His church. This was a key issue in the Reformation. And it is still a key issue today.

So who is the head of the church? It's certainly not me. I'm not the head of my church. I cringe at entrepreneurial ministry. As undershepherds, pastors are responsible to serve the Chief Shepherd, not usurp His preeminence. When we preach the Word of God, we establish its authority over the mind and the soul, and thereby exalt the headship of Christ over His church. But to disregard Scripture is to disregard its author. And doing that is nothing short of treachery.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

(Adapted from [*The Master's Plan for the Church*](#).)

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