

The World Is Not Enough: The Priority of the Church in Christ's Cosmic Headship

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Well enshrined in Reformed family lore is Abraham Kuyper's statement, "There is not a square inch in the whole of creation over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"¹ Which of Kuyper's theological kin would ever disown their forefather's affirmation of Christ's sovereign rule? After all, Kuyper simply echoed Scripture's basic ecclesiological principle, that Christ is "head over all things" (Eph. 1:22). And to be sure, the headship of Christ extends to the farthest reaches of creation, beyond our sight and imagination to worlds unseen. It is a vast sea that splashes upon the shores of millions of galaxies and envelops myriads upon myriads of angelic hosts. It is "too great and too marvelous" for us to comprehend (Ps. 131:1).

And yet this is not saying enough. The expansiveness of the Lord's supreme authority and power are concentrated upon one thing among "all things." All things are under his purview, but *one*

¹ The statement comes from a speech Kuyper gave in 1880, and it is cited by Roger Henderson, "Kuyper's Inch," *Pro Rege* (March 2008), 12–14. Henderson contends that the quote is better translated: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine.'" As Henderson notes, "creation" is not the same thing as "human existence." Also, the word generally rendered "square inch" is more literally translated, "thumb-width."

thing ascends over all his preferences. It is his body, the church. Ephesians 1:22 is a passage that helps to clarify this relationship between Christ's headship, the church, and all things.

The Meaning of Ephesians 1:22

"And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things for the church."²

Few synonyms for the word "power" in the Greek language remain after Paul has finished piling many of them upon one another to portray the majesty of our ascended Lord in Ephesians 1:15–23.³ Paul speaks of the "great might," which has raised Christ from the dead and seated him at the right hand of God.⁴ Although Paul begins with thanksgiving in verse 15, he slowly merges into a prayer on behalf of the Ephesians to know, increasingly, the hope of God's calling, the riches of God's glorious inheritance in his church, and, last of all, the "immeasurable greatness" of God's power, which is given to them for their benefit (v. 19). Unable to resist illustrating just how great this power is, Paul grounds his petition in the assertion that the power he wants them to know and appropriate is the very same power that raised Christ from the grave and exalted him to the right hand of God (vv. 19, 20): "That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand." The same power that raised and seated Christ at the right hand of God has raised and seated them with Christ as well (2:6). Their salvation is due not just to the greatness of God's grace. It is also due to the greatness of God's power, exhibited in the death, resurrection, and present exaltation of Christ. This power is at work in them and at work for them, because Christ is head.

² Translation mine.

³ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1990), 60.

⁴ Perhaps this explains why Paul chooses to emphasize the resurrection of Christ over the death of Christ. Although both the cross and the resurrection exhibit God's triumph over his enemies, Christ was crucified in "weakness" (2 Cor. 13:4; 1 Cor. 1:18–25).

The Authority of Christ as Head

Consistent with the predominant theme and tone in which it is enveloped, the title "head" appears in Ephesians 1:22 to underline the authority and power of Christ.⁵ He is not merely organically connected to the church, he is its master and Lord.⁶ Several factors support this. First of all, Paul's choice of vocabulary loudly proclaims Christ's exalted status and ruling might (v. 19: power, great might; v. 20: raised, seated, right hand, heavenly places; v. 21: above all rule, authority, power, dominion, every name; v. 22: all things, under his feet, head, over all things, him who fills all in all). In particular the prepositions of "over" and "under" graphically accent Christ's relationship to "all things" and their relationship to him as defined by rank.⁷ The fundamental theological point of Christ's being exalted to the "right hand" of God in majesty is, from beginning to end, about authority. This is true whether it pertains to his headship over "all things," or his headship over the church.

Secondly, when Paul states "And he put all things under his feet" (v. 22), he is quoting from Psalm 110:1 ("The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool,'") and alluding to Psalm 8, because he sees their fulfillment in Christ's session at the "right hand of God."⁸ As is true in the Old Testament, the phrase "right hand" signifies the supreme position of favor, honor, victory, and power held by Christ, and thus, "his sovereignty."⁹ This phraseology of "seated," "under his feet,"

⁵ Gregory W. Dawes, *The Body in Question: Metaphor and Meaning in the Interpretation of Ephesians 5:21–33* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 146. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 368–69. Geddes MacGregor, *Corpus Christi: The Nature of the Church according to the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 154. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard DeWitt (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1975), 378, 381. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 166–67.

⁶ MacGregor, *Corpus Christi*, 154.

⁷ The preposition ὑπέρ, with the accusative, means that which "surpasses over and above," or what "excels beyond." Arndt, "ὑπέρ," 839.

⁸ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1965), 233.

⁹ P. T. O'Brien, "The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity,"

and “footstool” expresses both Christ’s session and his headship. Although one is a title (“head”) and the other is a stage of Christ’s exaltation (“session”), they share a common universe of discourse, because they refer to the same reality. Christ is not merely exalted to the right hand. He is exalted to the right hand as *head*.¹⁰

Thus, the New Testament never uses “head” metaphorically to address Christ in his state of humiliation; only in his exaltation.¹¹ Christ has attained to something unique that he did not “have” before his resurrection. To be sure, he possesses all authority as Creator of all things, and fundamentally, by right of his full divinity as the eternal Son. But he is described as having been transformed into a new stage of exaltation wherein he is extolled as “inheriting” or being “given” the name that is above all names, the title that is above all titles, and “becoming a Son” (Phil. 2:9; Heb. 1:3–5).¹²

Among every “title” and “name” that is given to the exalted Lord is that of “head.” Moreover, when Scripture acclaims Christ as “head,” it does not mean to suggest his promotion merely to a title or place of honor. Christ has also obtained a position of power, from which he is actively exercising dominion over everything unto victory and God’s glory. Christ has been positioned at the right hand of God in order to execute his almighty power, and he is doing so on behalf of his Father. As the Scottish Presbyterian James Bannerman noted, with the title “head,” Christ is not simply seen as the church’s *founding* head, he is also designated as its present *presiding* in *The Church in the Bible and the World*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 109. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 62.

¹⁰ Others titles are used in association with Christ’s exaltation as head in his session: “Son of Man” (Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69; Acts 7:56), “Lord” (Matt. 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42; Acts 2:34), “prince and Savior” (Acts 5:31), “high priest” (Heb. 8:1; 10:12), the “author and perfector” of our faith (Heb. 12:2), and “Christ” (1 Pet. 3:22).

¹¹ The exceptions are: (1) literal references to Jesus’ physical head (e.g., Matt. 27:29, 37), and (2) metaphorical references to Jesus as the “head of the corner” (Ps. 118:22; Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; cf. Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:7).

¹² Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 98–114, 117–19.

head—its “source of life and influence, of ordinance and blessing, of law and authority, of word and doctrine.”¹³ Scripture says Christ is, not *was*, the head of the church. Thus, the “first unambiguous” use of “head” in the book of Ephesians appears in 1:22 and refers to Christ’s status of supreme authority and power.¹⁴ There is only one kind of “mere and absolute power” and it belongs to Christ the head, which he has reserved for himself, and he will not transfer to any other.¹⁵

The Scope of Christ’s Authority as Head

Paul escalates his thought by pointing to the utter expansiveness of Christ’s exalted status as it relates to all dimensions and all realities of space and time.

First, Paul extols the unparalleled *height* of Christ’s exaltation in comparison to every conceivable province and entity. He is raised and seated at God’s right hand “in the heavenly places” (v. 20), “far above” all rule, authority, power, and dominion, and every title that can be given (v. 21). With regard to “all things” he is either “over” them or they are “under” him (v. 22). Even if it is not apparent to the human eye, there is nothing that is not subject to Christ’s sovereign control (Heb. 2:8; cf. Ps. 8:6).

Paul also stresses the *extent* of Christ’s exaltation in time and space. In verse 21, he lauds Christ for his exaltation “not only in the present age,” but also “in the one to come.” His reign has begun, because the “fullness of time” is already under way (Eph. 1:10; Gal. 4:4), and that rule will continue for all time (1 Cor. 15:24).

Paul also acclaims the *realm* of Christ’s exaltation, namely “all things.” He is above “all” rule, authority, power, and dominion, and “every” title that can be given. God has placed “all things” under his feet and he is head over “all things” for the church. He is the one

¹³ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 2 vols. (1868; repr., New York: Westminster Publishing House, 2002), 1:194.

¹⁴ Dawes, *The Body in Question*, 138. As O’Brien observes, to understand “head” here as “source” would be “inappropriate, indeed inexplicable.” Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 146.

¹⁵ Second Helvetic Confession 18.

who fills “all things.” Christ rises above every known reality, and his exaltation is without restriction either as to time or sphere.¹⁶

Throughout Paul’s letters and preaching, the idea of authority has particular reference to cosmic spiritual powers.¹⁷ Since Christ is ensconced above *every* power, this implicitly subsumes both good and evil authorities (Heb. 2:8, 9; Eph. 6:10). Yet, Paul is probably saying something even more specific in Ephesians. Christ’s reception of “every title that can be given” (v. 21) is akin to his receiving “the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9). Paul’s point is that Christ’s name is above the name of any (false) god that can be spoken and worshiped. His entitlement is due to the reality of his awesome power, which he can, and does exert over all things, including all false gods and real enemies.¹⁸ Later in Ephesians 3:10 Paul states that God has made known his wisdom through the church to the presumably hostile “rulers and authorities.” In Ephesians 6:12, Paul also reminds the believer that our struggle is not against “flesh and blood,” but rather against “the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places,” by which he refers to angelic powers.¹⁹ Similarly, part of Paul’s point in Ephesians 1:22 is that these adversarial authorities are not merely *inferior* to Christ, they are *in subjection* to Christ.²⁰ God shows us “the scope of the victory” that his Son has won by listing these defeated cosmic powers.²¹

¹⁶ Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (1930; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 12.

¹⁷ 1 Cor. 15:24; Rom. 8:38ff.; cf. 5:34; Eph. 1:12ff.; Phil. 2:9; Col. 1:20; 2:10, 15; cf. also Eph. 4:8ff. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 89.

¹⁸ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 65.

¹⁹ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 388. Some modern exegetes contend that Paul’s list of rulers and powers refer to human, political powers and institutions; and not to the invisible realms. This is simply the self-inflicted burden of mythologizing that they choose to bear and impose. But this explanation does not seek to explain the text, but to explain away that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood” (Eph. 6:12). Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 64.

²⁰ Ernest Best, *Ephesians: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 180.

²¹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 62.

The Purpose of Christ’s Authority as Head

“Head” designates Christ’s rule over “all things” and his relationship to the church (Eph. 1:10; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:10, 19).²² There is a “strong disjunction” between these two spheres of rule, and Paul draws them into a relationship of priority in Ephesians 1:22.²³ Christ maintains a decided preference for his church in all of his working in and design for all things. “Christ’s supremacy over all things is for, or on behalf of, the church.”²⁴ Paul overlaps the headship of Christ over all things and the church for the express purpose of showing the church the consequences of Christ’s cosmic rule on her behalf.²⁵ His headship over the cosmos is subordinated to God’s purpose in Christ for the church.²⁶ That is, “Christ’s headship over the universe is for the benefit of his people who gather around him in fellowship.”²⁷ However, we must ask whether the grammar of Ephesians 1:22 lends itself to this interpretation.

The interpretive problem in this passage is in trying to unravel the knotted relationship between the different words in the phrase: “and gave him as head over all things to the church” (*κοι καὶ οὐρανὸς κεφαλὴν ὑπὲρ πόντο τῆς ἐκκλησίας*). The grammatical elements seem straightforward. God is the understood subject in verse 17 and in the inflected Greek verb. “Him,” that is, Christ, is the direct object. “The church” is the indirect object. “Head” is the

²² Christ already rules over all things by virtue of his creating “all things” (Col. 1:15–20). Ridderbos states, “Both in virtue of creation and in virtue of the restoration of the lost coherence of all things in him he forms the great point of integration for all that is in heaven and on earth.” And, “This superiority, which has been conferred on Christ by God in his exaltation (Eph. 1:20), is closely bound up with the significance with respect to “all things” that he had already at the creation of the world (Col. 1:15ff.), and which, in accordance with the divine good pleasure regarding the fullness of the times, has taken effect anew (Eph. 1:9, 10).” Ridderbos, *Paul*, 89, 387, 388.

²³ Dawes, *The Body in Question*, 141.

²⁴ O’Brien, *Church*, 109–10.

²⁵ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 387–88.

²⁶ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 70.

²⁷ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 147.

predicate accusative.²⁸ Yet how should the words “the church” ($\tauῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ$) be translated? With its dative construction it would ordinarily be translated “to the church,” as it often is (ESV, KJV, ASV, NASB). Such a translation also best corresponds to the way Paul ordinarily uses δίδομι in Ephesians, namely, “to give” (Eph. 1:17, 22; 3:2, 7, 8, 16; 4:7, 8, 11, 27, 29; 6:19), rather than “to appoint,” “to install,” or “to make.”²⁹ In that case, the phrase would be rendered: “God has given Christ, who is head over all things, to the church.”

However, there is much to be said for an alternative translation, “for the church” as the NIV renders it.³⁰ First, grammarians recognize the legitimacy of translating δίδομι as “make,” “appoint,” or “install” in this passage.³¹ Secondly, a survey of Paul’s use of “give” (δίδωμι) in his other letters reveals that occasionally Paul wishes to convey the idea that the gift is given for the advantage of the recipient.³² Paul does this by employing prepositional phrases, in-

²⁸ A further challenge is discerning the syntactical relationship between “head” ($\kεφολῆν$) and “over all things” ($ὑπὲρ πούρο$), which are grammatically parallel. The issue is whether “over all things” is in an appositional or attributive relationship to “head.” See the discussion in Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 287–89.

²⁹ Ibid., 289. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 66.

³⁰ Grammarians entitle this use the “dative of advantage.” Moulton and Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), 240. F. Blaß and A. DeBrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 101.

It has also been styled as the “dative of interest.” Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples* (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), 20. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 538.

³¹ Bauer, “δίδωμι,” 193. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 423.

James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1979), 33. H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 84–85.

³² Paul uses δίδωμι in: Rom. 4:20; 5:5; 11:8; 12:3, 6, 19; 14:12; 15:5, 15; 1 Cor. 1:4; 3:5, 10; 7:25; 9:12; 11:15; 12:7, 8, 24; 14:7, 8, 9; 15:38, 57; 2 Cor.

stead of using the dative, yet this sense is latent in his thought. For example, in 2 Corinthians 10:8 Paul says that, “the Lord gave [authority] for building you up.” In Galatians 1:4 Paul writes that Christ “gave himself for our sins to deliver us.” The idea is even more pronounced in 1 Timothy 2:6, “who gave himself as a ransom for all,” and Titus 2:14, “who gave himself for us to redeem us.” The verb “to give” is used in these verses to convey the purpose or the *tēlos* of the gift. This idea seems to be similarly present in Ephesians 1:22. Thirdly, using δίδωμι in this way is consistent with the flow of Paul’s thought in the passage, particularly in a striking parallel between verse 19 and verse 22. In verse 19 Paul stated that the power of God revealed in Christ is given to and *for* us who believe, and in verse 22 Paul states that the cosmic headship revealed in Christ is given to and *for* us who believe. These reasons and precedents, as well as the flow of the context, would encourage us to understand the phrase in question to mean that God “made him head over all things for the church,” because Paul is emphasizing the priority of the church in Christ’s headship.

All of Paul’s statements with respect to Christ’s headship in this passage come to their climactic and emphatic expression with the last words of the clause, “for the church,” which in turn function as a hinge to lead us into the further descriptions to follow.³³ These ascriptions accentuate even further Paul’s focus on the universal authority of Christ that is exercised on behalf of his treasured possession, the church. Although Christ is head over all things, the church alone is his “body” and his “fullness.”³⁴ For example, Paul generally 1:22; 5:5, 12, 18; 6:3; 8:1, 5, 10, 16; 9:9; 10:8; 12:7; 13:10; Gal. 1:4; 2:9; 3:21, 22; 4:15; Col. 1:25; 1 Thess. 4:2, 8; 2 Thess. 1:8; 2:16; 3:9, 16; 1 Tim. 2:6; 4:14; 5:14; 2 Tim. 1:7, 9, 16, 18; 2 Tim. 2:7, 25; Titus 2:14.

³³ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 145.

³⁴ Lincoln *Ephesians*, 72, 80. Dawes, *The Body in Question*, 141. Heinrich Schlier enlarges the metaphor to meld the world into the church as part of Christ’s body (“κεφαλὴ,” *TDNT*, 3:681). The idea of seeing the universe as an enormous “body” is present in Platonism, Stoicism, and Gnosticism, but such thinking is foreign to Paul’s thought in this passage. Schlier and Käsemann’s belief that Paul has employed language from Gnosticism’s Redeemer myth has been widely criticized, if not discredited. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 70. Best, *Ephesians*, 191, n. 48.

uses the respective metaphors of "head" and "body" for distinctive purposes. While the title "head" conveys Christ's authority over all things and the church (Eph. 1:10; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:10, 19), "body" suggests the inseparable union and communion between Christ and his church, and the union its members have with one another (Rom. 12:4; 1 Cor. 12:12–20, 22–25; Eph. 4:12, 16). This metaphor of the church as the body of Christ is not simply one metaphor among many. It is rather "a dominant concept," perhaps even "the greatest metaphor" in the New Testament.³⁵ And it is served to assure the church of the inseparable, eternal, and intimate bond that God has established between Christ and his church.

Also, Christ's headship reaches outward as he "fills all things" in heaven and earth with his mighty presence (Jer. 23:24). But the church is his "fullness" (Eph. 1:23; cf. Eph. 3:19; 4:7–8; Col. 2:10).³⁶ Although he fills all things, only the church is his fullness in the special sense. It is "the domain filled and ever increasingly to be filled by him" (cf. Eph. 1:23; 3:19; 4:13; Col. 2:10).³⁷ There are two types of "filling"—each reflecting the difference between Christ's headship over "all things" on the one hand and of the church on the other—the first bespeaks power and containment, the second, benefits and gifts. The church should be far from being overawed by any other power, as though she did not possess in Christ everything necessary for her perfecting. On the other hand, Paul urges the church to seek its fullness in the fullness of its head.³⁸ The church must place her confidence in Christ, because the universe is his and he alone "fills all things."³⁹ The church is "the church of him who is the head over all things. It has, therefore, also so far as its own existence and conduct are concerned, to see all that is in heaven and on earth from the vantage point of the all-embracing sovereignty of its head."⁴⁰ The center of gravity for the people of God is no longer on earth, nor is her potency to be measured in comparison

to earthly powers. Instead her epicenter and power are seated in heavenly glory at the right hand of majesty, with everything at his disposal.⁴¹

Even if these considerations are not sufficiently weighty in the eyes of some to translate ἐδοκεν as "appointed," "installed," or "made," they do demonstrate that Paul's grammar should not be overstated in order to constrict Paul's thought. Even scholars who would prefer to translate διδούι as "give" concede that Paul is placing emphasis on the priority of the church in relation to all things, and interpret Ephesians 1:22 accordingly:

- "Christ's dominion over the cosmos is for the benefit of his believers."⁴²
- "God has given Christ as head over all things for the church. His supremacy over the cosmos is seen to be for the benefit of his people."⁴³
- "All these statements about his lordship over the cosmos are subordinated to a statement about God's purpose for Christ in regard to the Church."⁴⁴
- "The writer has taken a confessional formulation about Christ's cosmic lordship, and subordinated it to his interest in the Church's welfare."⁴⁵
- "All the supremacy and power God has given to Christ he has given to be used on behalf of the Church."⁴⁶
- "The church appears, then, to be the focus for and medium of Christ's presence and rule in the cosmos."⁴⁷

We would conclude, then, that Paul's words were meant to encourage believers, as they looked in faith to the head of the church,

⁴¹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 62.

⁴² O'Brien, *Church*, 105. Robertson, 1206.

³⁵ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 391.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 389. See Jer. 23:24.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 391.

Jesus Christ. With confidence they could know that his transcendent authority over every power and authority was focused supremely on his glorious purposes in and for the church. She alone is his body with a special role in God's design for the world. Nothing else possesses a higher role and significance for the purposes of God.⁴⁸ Contemplated from eternity in the mind of God as the object of his all-wise plan, the church is uniquely "the *very means* by which her glorious head accomplishes His purposes in the world."⁴⁹ His headship over all things suberves his sovereign and wise purposes for the church. She is the medium of Christ's presence and rule in the cosmos, and she is the community in which the consummation of Christ's rule is anticipated. She need not fear the adequacy of her power to accomplish the vocation in which her head has entrusted her. All things are his and at his disposal—this is the hope and strength of her faith and mission. He rules the kingdoms of men and angels. Christ is head over all things, filling all things, and directing all things in the supremacy of his headship; and he does so for his church, which is his body.⁵⁰ She stands at the pinnacle and climax of redemptive history (1 Cor. 10:11) and as the guardian of the long-hidden mystery that the gospel was meant not just for the children of Israel, but for all the world (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:3, 6, 9; Col. 2:6). It is in the church that God will unite all things as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1:10).

Christ's headship—cosmic in scope, yet churchly in priority—merely recapitulates what the Old Testament teaches about God's sovereign rule over all things. God reigns over all nations, the heavens and the earth, and all authorities and dominions, for the sake of his treasured possession, Israel (Deut. 7:6). God mustered all creation and creatures to deliver his people—whether by a stagnated Sun or a divided sea, by raining fire and sulfur, by restraining lions or unleashing locusts, flies, and gnats.⁵¹ Even the spiritual princi-

palties and angelic hosts serve God's greater designs for his special servants like Job and Daniel.⁵² All the nations, all creation, and all spiritual dominions bow to God's greater agenda in order to bless, exalt, enrich, discipline, punish, curse, and exile Israel, and to glorify his name through Israel. And now these same purposes are operative in Christ's headship over all things for the church.

The Doctrine of Christ's Headship in Reformed Theology

The biblical truth of the headship of Christ was key to the Reformers in their systematizing of a coherent ecclesiology, and it continues to receive its due in the Reformed family as the "first principle" and the "keystone" of Reformed and Presbyterian ecclesiology.⁵³ In a very real sense, the Reformation was an attempt to recover the headship of Christ in the church.⁵⁴ For the pre-Reformers John Wyclif and John Hus, the headship of Christ was the key doctrine they championed in their respective volumes on the church.⁵⁵ For Martin Luther's ecclesiology, it was what he "most stressed."⁵⁶ For John Calvin, it was first and central among the primary elements of his polity, and without it the church would be deprived

⁵² Job 1:6; Dan. 10:13.

⁵³ W. D. J. McKay, "George Gillespie and the Westminster Assembly: The Defence of Presbyterianism," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 13 (1995): 56. Peter A. Lilback, "Presbyterian Polity," in *Pressing toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 71. William Childs Robinson, "The Headship of Christ," *Christianity Today*, 1:15 (April 29, 1957), 6–7, 27. Second Helvetic Confession 17:4, 8. Heidelberg Catechism 49. First Scotch Confession of Faith 16; Westminster Confession of Faith 25.1.

⁵⁴ MacGregor, *Corpus Christi*, 248.

⁵⁵ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 280. John Hus, *De Ecclesia: The Church*, trans. David S. Schaff (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1915).

⁵⁶ "First, it is of fundamental significance that Luther most stressed that Christ is Head of the church." Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 279.

⁴⁸ O'Brien, *Church*, 110, 113.

⁴⁹ James H. Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 4 vols. (1875, repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 4:210.

⁵⁰ O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 151.

⁵¹ Josh. 10:12, 13; Ex. 15; Gen. 19:24; Dan. 6; Ex. 10:12–13; 8:16–17,

of all its importance.⁵⁷ For Francis Turretin it supplied the answer to Rome that there was only one head of the church, and there was room for no other.⁵⁸ For John Owen, it was the fountain of every “sanctifying grace” and “all spiritual life” in the church.⁵⁹ For the Kentucky Presbyterian Stuart Robinson, it embodied the eternal purpose of God for Christ’s “mediatorial body.”⁶⁰ For the Scot James Bannerman, it was the “cardinal doctrine,” which “lies at the foundation” of Presbyterianism.⁶¹ For James H. Thornwell, it was the “all-sufficient” explanation that the church was adequately organized and equipped to discharge all that was demanded of her.⁶² For R. B. Kuiper, no other aspect of Christ’s relationship to the church loomed larger.⁶³ For all these men, the headship of Christ applied first and foremost to the church, indicating its pride of place in the plan of God.

It is true that Reformed theologians have routinely highlighted the doctrine of Christ’s headship because of their disagreements with Roman Catholicism.⁶⁴ But that controversy represents only

⁵⁷ John H. Leith, *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 147. MacGregor, *Corpus Christi*, 53–54.

⁵⁸ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vol., trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 18.12.22; 18.5.6, 18.16.3, 10, 13, 24, 25.

⁵⁹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Goold, 16 vols. (1850–1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 6:286–87, 586.

⁶⁰ Stuart Robinson, *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel* (1858; repr., Willow Grove, PA: Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2009), 38, 39. Cf. MacGregor, *Corpus Christi*, 20, 44.

⁶¹ Bannerman, *Church of Christ*, 1:195, 200.

⁶² Thornewell, *Writings*, 4:192.

⁶³ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 91. Interestingly, it appears as the fourteenth of fifty-three chapters.

⁶⁴ Bannerman, *Church of Christ*, 1:203–5. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 581. MacGregor, *Corpus Christi*, 230. Owen, *Works*, 14:365. Thomas E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1892), 104, 161. Thomas Witherow, *The Apostolic Church: Which Is It?* (1856; repr., Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1983), 54–57. As Calvin aptly

one implication of Christ’s headship and authority.⁶⁵ It is more responsible to observe how the headship of Christ has been a rich doctrinal fountain from which the Reformers and their theological descendants have drawn many appropriate principles with regard to the unity of the church; the sufficiency of Scripture; the spiritual nature of church power; the limitation of church power; the church’s government, ordinances, constitution, actions, office-bearers, authority, and power; and Christ’s spiritual influence and grace.⁶⁶ In all of these expositions, the Reformed tradition has given decided weight and priority to the implications of Christ’s headship for his church. Furthermore, the head-body relationship has also been crucial to the Reformer’s view of the church, and this connection of Christ to his church, has similarly remained “central in any doctrine of the Church in the Reformed tradition.”⁶⁷ One need only

expressed it; “Scripture often mentions Christ the universal Head, but no where mentions the Pope.” John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 1:110. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 4 vol. (1700; repr., Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), 2:107.

⁶⁵ Gallican Confession 30; Second Helvetic Confession 17.2, 6, 7, 11, 12; Heidelberg Catechism 50; Belgic Confession 29, 31; First Scotch Confession of Faith 16; Westminster Larger Catechism 64; Westminster Confession of Faith 8.1; 25.6.

⁶⁶ Thomas E. Peck, “The Spirit of Presbyterianism,” *Memorial Volume of the Semi-Centennial of the Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina* (Columbia: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1884), 31. Peck, “General Principles Touching the Worship of God,” in *Miscellanies of Rev. Thomas E. Peck*, ed. T. C. Johnson (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1895), 1:78. MacGregor, *Corpus Christi*, 110. Edmund P. Clowney, “Distinctive Emphases in Presbyterian Church Polity,” in *Pressing toward the Mark*, 107. Geerhardus Vos, *The Kingdom of God and the Church* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 103. Geerhardus Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus: The Modern Debate about the Messianic Consciousness*, ed. Johannes G. Vos (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 60. Herman Ridderbos, *When the Time Had Fully Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 22–23. Herwi Rikhof, *The Concept of Church: A Methodological Inquiry into the Use of Metaphors in Ecclesiology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1981), 232.

⁶⁷ MacGregor, *Corpus Christi*, 227.

think of the significance of the “body” metaphor for the Reformer’s defense of the “communion of the saints” and the “priesthood of all believers.”⁶⁸

Christ’s Priority of Redeeming His Church in the World

The Church as the Redeemed

One way to illustrate the priority of the church with respect to Christ in relation to that of the world is to consider the biblical doctrine of redemption. The eternal Son took on human nature so that he might “give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45).⁶⁹ Christ has secured this redemption for his people by receiving the curse of their sin, giving himself up unto death (Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:12, 15; Gal. 3:13). With only a few exceptions, the language of “ransom” and “redemption” (*λυτρόν*, *ἀπολύτρωσις*, *ἱγροπό[co]*) is reserved in Scripture for God’s elect, those whose salvation has been purchased by the riches of God’s grace in Christ, so that they might become a people for “his own possession” (Titus 2:14).⁷⁰ The idea of payment is the reason for the existence of the entire *λυτρόν* word group and the concept is soteric to the core.⁷¹ Christ has thus delivered them from their bondage under the law and their former sinful ways, and has won their justification and

⁶⁸ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.6.9, 10. Calvin, *Tracts*, 1.213–14; 3.202–3.

⁶⁹ The teaching of Jesus assumes the kingdom of God is fundamentally about salvation when he stipulated that people will not enter the kingdom unless they repent and believe (Mark 1:14–15; Matt. 4:17). David F. Wells, *The Person of Christ* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1984), 24–25. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1948), 385.

⁷⁰ The exceptions for the nonliteral use of “ransom” and “redemption” are Eph. 5:16 and Col. 4:5, both of which teach we should “make the best use” of our time. In the Old Testament, the Mosaic covenant provided for the redemption of property, like land and animals (Ex. 34:20; Lev. 25:19).

⁷¹ Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1955), 12. As cited in Carolyn J. Lexington, “The Meaning of the New Testament Ransom Language: Evidence for the Limited Atonement,” (unpublished paper, 1988), 2.

their adoption as sons (1 Pet. 1:18; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Gal. 4:5; Rom. 3:24). The New Testament authors purposely employed the “ransom” and “redemption” vocabulary in order to express the personal effectiveness of Christ’s death and not to express some form of abstract deliverance. Furthermore, the consummation of this salvation for believers is their anticipated “day of redemption” when they will experience a final deliverance from this world and receive an inheritance in the world to come (Luke 21:28; Eph. 1:14; 4:30). On that day, all who trust in Christ will receive the fullness of their adoption with the final redemption of their bodies (Rom. 8:23). So how can this language of individual redemption be related to the world?

The World as the Created Suborder

The vocabulary for “world” (*κόσμος*, *עולם*) is used in Scripture to designate one of two things.⁷² The first use refers to the created suborder, that is, all creatures and all of creation. Some fellow evangelical writers speak of “God’s redeeming purposes toward creation” and contend that the gospel, as something holistic, conveys a “saving, reconciling grace” to creation. The church’s duty is to bring “all creation back to its proper relationship to God’s law,” and the kingdom of God is the “renewal of the whole world through the entrance of supernatural forces. As things are brought back under Christ’s rule and authority, they are restored to health, beauty, and freedom.”⁷³

⁷² For examples of Paul’s use, see Rom. 1:18; 5:12; 1 Cor. 4:9; 14:10; Eph. 1:4; Col. 1:6; 1 Tim. 6:7; for John, see John 1:9, 10; 3:19; 4:14; 8:26; 9:5; 10:36; 11:27; 13:1; 16:21; 17:5, 24; 18:37; 21:25; 1 John 2:2, 4:1, 3, 9; 2 John 7. Vos, *Eschatology*, 14.

⁷³ George Marsden, “Introduction: Reformed and American,” in *Dutch Reformed Theology*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 9. Tim Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 2nd ed. (Pittsburgh, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997), 52–53. See Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor... and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), 31–48. Cornelius Plantenga, Jr., *Engaging God, World* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 2002). See the “Introduction” in David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

It is true that the kingdom of God is not only oriented to the redemption of God's people, but to the self-assertion of God in all his works, taking in the world and all of creation "in the wide perspective of the realization of all God's rights and promises."⁷⁴ Moreover, the kingdom of God is the power of the age to come "breaking into the world" through Christ and his mighty works, and it entails "the renewal of the world through the introduction of supernatural forces."⁷⁵ It is also appropriate to associate closely the vindication of God's glory with the renewal of creation. Since God is the creator of heaven and earth, the "proportions" of the kingdom must be universal.⁷⁶ Until the "whole creation" ceases its "groaning," it remains as a blemish against the honor that is due its Creator. Not unlike "the sons of God," the creation also longs for redemption from its bondage and liberation from Satan's rule, which extends to all corners of the subjected world (Rom. 8:18–25). The rule of God has in view the "regeneration of this cosmos."⁷⁷ The kingdom is not only concerned with the consummation of its own subjects, but it also comprehends the "consummation of all things."⁷⁸ God's kingdom will comprehend not only the reassertion of God's people, but God's reassertion over the world and the whole of his creation.⁷⁹ This is the goal of all history, the universal acknowledgment of God's sovereignty, the triumph of righteousness, and the establishment of peace and salvation in the world.⁸⁰ But there are several problems with applying the soteric vocabulary of "redemption" to the world.

With regard to the world as the created suborder, the Bible does not speak of it as something that is in the process of being

redeemed. For example, Romans 8:21 states that "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage" (*καὶ ἡ κτίσις ελευθεροῦται στοῖχοι ἀπὸ τῆς δουλείας*). But the context of Romans 8 teaches that the liberation of the created order will take place along with the revealing ("apocalypse") of the sons of God, that is, at their glorification (vv. 19, 23). This renewal of creation will happen when it undergoes a purging by fire, and when the new heavens and the new earth are ushered in at the close of this age (2 Pet. 3:12, 13). This will take place, not as a process, but on the "day of the Lord" (2 Pet. 3:10). Secondly, this will take place, not through human efforts to preserve or "save the planet," but by the mighty hand of God, who alone will accomplish this rebirth of the heavens and the earth with fire, just as he once deluged the creation with water (2 Pet. 3:6, 7). How are we to understand a form of redemption that bypasses the cross and is accomplished by and through our good works?⁸¹ Typically we associate the vocabulary of atonement, repentance, faith, and forgiveness with redemption, but how do we construe the church as a "co-redemeer?"⁸² We must be careful of rhetorical excess and consider the query of our forefather, B. B. Warfield, who asked in wonder whether we really think that we can understand "redemption" and "Redeemer" to refer to whatever benefit we happen to think it means—no matter how loose or superfluous that meaning is.⁸³

This World as the Fallen Moral Order

The second use of the word "world" in Scripture refers to the sinful moral order of "this age." As a rule, the Greek idioms for "this age" (*οὗ αἰώνος οὐτος*) and "this world" (*οὗ κόσμος οὐτος*) are "apt to call up evil associations."⁸⁴ These phrases refer to all that exists

⁷⁴ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), 231. Ridderbos, *Coming Kingdom*, 6. Vos, *Kingdom and Church*, 102.

⁷⁵ Ridderbos, *Coming Kingdom*, 46–47.

⁷⁶ Wells, *Person of Christ*, 24–25, 27.

⁷⁷ Ridderbos, *Coming Kingdom*, 56.

⁷⁸ Ridderbos, *Coming Kingdom*, 23.

⁷⁹ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), 20.

⁸⁰ Calvin P. Van Reken, "Christians in This World: Pilgrims or Settlers?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 43 (2008): 242.

⁸¹ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), 49. Van Reken, "Christians in This World," 242.

⁸² B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 346.

⁸³ Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (1930; repr. Phillipsburg, NJ: 1986).

"as an evil-complexioned ... system opposed to God, and therefore doomed to pass away."⁸⁵ For example, the "god of this world [age]" or the "ruler of this world" is Satan, as it lies presently under his power (2 Cor. 4:4; John 12:31; 1 John 5:19). Consequently, the church's relationship to this world is to be marked by sober caution and watchfulness, conscious of the reality of open hostility between the two. The church of Christ is admonished repeatedly not to love the world (1 John 2:15; 2 Tim. 4:10), not to take up friendship with it (1 John 2:15), and not to become conformed to its pattern (Rom. 12:1; Eph. 2:2). The church must always be careful about the world's lurking temptations (Matt. 18:7), its desires and possessions (1 John 2:16), its cares (Matt. 13:22), its folly and wisdom (1 Cor. 3:19), its philosophy, human traditions, and elemental spirits (Col. 2:8), its "god" (2 Cor. 4:4), its principles (Gal. 4:3, 9), its deceit (Eph. 4:14), its pollution (James 1:27), its corruption (2 Pet. 1:4)—all of which are "passing away along with its desires" (1 John 2:17). Appropriately, when Orthodox Presbyterian brothers or sisters profess their faith, they are asked to affirm Christ as Lord and to "forsake the world" (Directory for the Public Worship of God, 4.B.2.[4]). For it is from this present evil age that Jesus has delivered us (Gal. 1:4).

The church and the world are in direct and antithetical conflict with one another.⁸⁶ The church and the world have competing allegiances and are wedded to separate ages (1 John 3:13; 1 Pet. 4:4, 12; Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 7:13). To become a friend of this world is to become an enemy with God (James 4:4). The church wages war against principalities and powers in heavenly places and this world, which are "already vanquished," but they have "not yet become harmless."⁸⁷ And the church should not be surprised by this hostility (1 John 3:13; John 16:13; 1 Pet. 4:12–14).

⁸⁵ Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986), 12. Notable exceptions are passages like 1 Tim. 6:17 and Titus 2:12, which "are more neutral from an ethical point of view." Vos, 13.

⁸⁶ Vos, *Eschatology*, 17.

⁸⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 94, 98, 149.

⁸⁷ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 392.

The reason the world hates the church is because the world first hated Christ (John 15:18–20). This is a matter of fundamental identity. Christians are of the seed of the woman, not of the serpent (Gen. 3:15), and are citizens of the city of God, not just the city of man. Christians are *in* the world, but not *of* the world (John 17:11, 14; 15:19). The church does not belong to this world any more than Christ did (John 8:23; 17:14). We are a people in exile, pilgrims and sojourners who are passing through (1 Pet. 1:17; 2:11; Heb. 11:13). For the church understands that it has become an "inhabitant and participant" of the world above and the world to come.⁸⁸ The "fa-therland is not here and now."⁸⁹ It is essential to appreciate the vital temporal element in this second conception of the "world" as it is expressed in Scripture.⁹⁰ Inherent in the phrase "this age" (Rom. 12:2) is the "belief in a fixed nature and a temporal duration of the present order of things."⁹¹ The "things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). A contemporary reader of Scripture must resist imputing too much *spatial*, and not enough *temporal*, thought into the terminology of "world." Nowhere else in all of Paul's thought is this explicitly expressed with greater clarity than it is in Ephesians 1:21, where he says, "not only in this age but also in the one to come."⁹² This is a sterling example of the "two-age" structure of Paul's eschatology.

Thus, "this world," in its moral complexion, that is, fallen and in opposition to God, ought to be viewed as something that will pass away and simply cannot be redeemed. It is evil and transitory.⁹³

⁸⁸ Vos, *Eschatology*, 47.

⁸⁹ C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 8.

⁹⁰ As to this meaning, the terms "world" and "age" are virtually interchangeable in the New Testament, and translations have treated them accordingly.

⁹¹ Vos, *Eschatology*, 17.

⁹² Vos, *Eschatology*, 12. As Vos notes, this contrast is also implicit in Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 1:20; 2:6, 8, 3:18; 2 Cor. 4:4; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 2:2; 1 Tim. 6:17; Titus 2:12.

⁹³ Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996), 12.

Moreover, it is the people enslaved to this world who need to be redeemed, even rescued. When the New Testament speaks of redemption, this is what it speaks to most often—lost sinners who have been ransomed by what Christ accomplished on the cross and in his resurrection. This message is the noble priority of the head of the church and the Great Commission of his body. This explains the urgency of spreading this gospel message in the fleeting hours of daylight (John 9:4).

Common Grace: "I am not praying for the world"

Yet, God kindly cares for all things in his creation. According to his general providence, he feeds humankind and all creatures, and they “live and move and have their being” in his generous care (Acts 14:15; 17:26). He even extends his kindness to those who do not love him nor thank him (Matt. 5:43–47; Luke 6:35). God’s goodness is showered upon the world, both as a created suborder and as a fallen moral order. God loves the world. That the Father would send his eternal Son into the world proves it (John 3:16).

And as the gospel is freely offered, “many are called” to receive the Word of life, because God takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Matt. 22:14; Ezek. 33:11). So also, Christians are to love their neighbors, like the “good Samaritan” (Luke 10:29–37). They are even to love their enemies, like the heavenly Father (Matt. 5:44, 48).

But common grace does not erase the antithesis between the church and the world. God’s general love, or common grace, for the world does not compare to his saving love, or the special grace he shows to his church. It is not a matter of “either-or,” rather it is a matter of priority. When it comes to the church, God’s love is special and predestinating, not general; his calling is effectual, not general; his providence is particularly gracious, not common. On the eve of his passion, when Christ prayed, “I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me” (John 17:9), he was praying for the “people of his own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9); those for whom he would soon intercede on the cross and for whom he presently intercedes at the right hand of majesty (Heb.

7:25). He was praying for that “holy nation” he would gather by his Spirit out of all the nations of the world and bring into his Father’s house. He was praying about those for whom he would give his flesh and blood (John 6:51; 1 Pet. 1:19), his saving love (Eph. 5:25), his cleansing (Eph. 5:26), his Spirit (Acts 2:38), his promises (2 Pet. 1:4; Gal. 3:16), and eternal life (John 6:54). These gifts do not belong to the world at large. They are for Christ’s body. Jesus was not praying for the world, but for those chosen ones in the world, upon whom his eternal love was fixed. In the expansiveness of “all things,” and in the “fullness of time,” God would bless the church in a way that transcends his ordinary benevolence in the world. Similarly, although all in the church are commanded to love their neighbors, and even their enemies, they are also commanded to maintain a decided loyalty, like the head of the church, to brothers and sisters in the family of God: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10).

Christ’s Priority of Building His Church in the World

Kingdom Building: "I will build my church"

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church was born in a religious climate in which many in the Northern Presbyterian Church wanted to recast the church’s doctrine and missions. Among them was one of Presbyterianism’s most famous missionaries, who complained that the church needed to jettison its message about sin, conversion, and Christ’s divinity, atoning death, and resurrection, and replace it with giving attention to medicine, agriculture, education, engineering, human suffering, and social injustice—drawing inspiration for these from the ethics of Christ. It was thought this would bring about human happiness and social progress.⁹⁴ Seventy-five years later, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church finds herself hearing similar voices. However, now they do not exclusively rise from the

⁹⁴ D. G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: The Committee on Christian Education and The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995), 30, 72.

liberal camp. Nor is the pressure merely to adjust our doctrine to the times, but to rethink missions, again.⁹⁵

Decades ago, John Murray sounded a warning: “A great deal is being said today about the mission of the church, and the accent falls to such an extent upon mission that the function of the church is defined in terms of mission.”⁹⁶ Murray foresaw the danger of reading the mission of the church back into her identity and nature. The origin, nature, identity, and even the functions of the church are, by nature, God centered and God oriented. The mission of the church is, by nature, people oriented. That missions belong to the church is indisputable, and to “discount or underestimate the responsibility of the church in its mission” is a total misunderstanding of Scripture.⁹⁷ But if the church begins to define herself in terms of her tasks and mission, this will significantly distort her self-understanding and potentially displace her primary function, the worship of God. Edmund Clowney saw the same dangers in the emerging ecclesiology of the ecumenical movement:

“The new ecclesiology is developed in categories of process. The church is not to be understood in terms of ‘being’ but of ‘becoming.’ Rather than defining the *existence* or *nature* of the church, the new approach seeks to describe the *function* and *ministry* of the church.”⁹⁸ In our day the ontology of the church is similarly in danger of becoming eclipsed by the mission of the church. And despite the encouraging signs of a renewed interest in ecclesiology in these past few decades, the spate of this movement’s volumes reveal shaky ontological foundations, which are warped by presupposed trajectories of mission.

Christ said, “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). He not only

builds the church, he indwells it as the new spiritual temple (1 Cor. 3:16, 17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21; 1 Pet. 2:5).⁹⁹ This edifice is “entirely determined by Christ and his work of redemption.”¹⁰⁰ He is building it both *extensively* and *intensively*. In the context of the world, the church progressively expands geographically and in quantity, as others are brought into her midst through the proclamation of the gospel. This is the church’s “Great Commission,” to disciple the nations. Moreover, the church is called to progress intensively as it is constantly in the process of being renewed and transformed (Rom. 12:2). This, too, is the church’s “Great Commission,” to teach principles to obey all that Christ has commanded (Matt. 28:20). All of the gifts of the Spirit, both those for the proclamation of the Word and those exercised by the members of the church, are used “for building up the body” of the church for her unity, love, faith, strength, purity, and reformation (Eph. 4:12, 16). The first rule of the gifts in the church is that they are exercised for the benefit of other believers, so that the church may be built up (1 Cor. 14:4, 5, 17). As each member of the body does his or her part, the church grows “so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:16). As Ridderbos notes, “It is thus the intensive ‘fullness,’ the adulthood and maturity of the church, toward which the entire process of upbuilding is directed.”¹⁰¹ Inasmuch as this leads to the glory of Christ, the head of the church, this goal is an end in itself. This intensive process of renewal and sanctification is foremost in the purposes of Christ for his church. He gave himself for his bride so that he might present her to himself in splendor—sanctified, cleansed, washed, holy, without blemish, and beautifully adorned (Eph. 5:25–27; Rev. 19:7; 21:2, 9). The most exalted reason for the church’s existence is to exalt her head.

The issue is not whether the church must choose between her mission to the world, on the one hand, and her call to be inwardly transformed and strengthened so that she can stand against the world, on the other. It is not an either-or matter. It is a matter

⁹⁵ *Re-Thinking Missions* was a jointly published venture by seven Protestant denominations, including the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., which encouraged an entirely new agenda in missions aligned with modernism. Hart and Mueether, *Fighting*, 27.

⁹⁶ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:245.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 1:245.

⁹⁸ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Doctrine of the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 9. Emphasis his.

⁹⁹ Thus, the idea of the church as an edifice is not that far removed from the church as the body of Christ. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 431.

¹⁰⁰ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 431.

¹⁰¹ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 435.

of priority. If she loses her God-centered, Christ-glorifying center, she will be of no use to the world at all. The transformation and renewal that the church is principally called to, is the reformation of herself (Rom. 12:1, 2). And she is called to perform this task with a wary eye for the ongoing temptation to become transformed by the world. From beginning to end, the church as the visible kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ “is not of this world” (John 18:36).

And yet there is increasing pressure for the church to incorporate concerns for peace and justice, social malaise and injustices, poverty, and so on into her corporate mission. Surely most of these voices are rooted in sincere compassion and the desire for Christians to live out the mandate to be salt and light, and to love our neighbor. But some of this movement may operate from an overly realized eschatology. That is to say, some agendas seem to take the typical Reformed schema of “creation, fall, redemption, consummation,” and abbreviate it to just “creation, fall, redemption.” This is an attempt, wittingly or not, to bring forward into “this age” what belongs to the one to come. It is seeking to bring the “shalom” of heaven to earth.¹⁰² It is a perennial struggle to ward off the “modern philosophies,” which constantly seek “to convince us that the good of man is to be found on this earth” and that “earth can be made into heaven.”¹⁰³ Ed Clowney saw this in ecumenical ecclesiology, which pushed for a “solidarity of the church with the world” and said that the church has no “escape hatch” into heaven, but must take part in the work of man and the “creation of the future.”¹⁰⁴ There was a time when “kingdom building” was a parochial phrase—belonging exclusively to the dialect of liberal theology. Now it is spoken within the camp. The emphasis of Scripture is that we *enter, seek, announce,*

¹⁰² William D. Dennison, “Dutch Neo-Calvinism and the Roots for Transformation: An Introductory Essay,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (1999): 271–91. Dennison splits the neo-Calvinists into two camps, the “creation order” neo-Calvinists (e.g., Herman Dooyeweerd, D. H. Th. Vollenhoven), and the “shalom neo-Calvinists” (e.g., Nicholas Wolterstorff).

¹⁰³ C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” 7–8. Also see Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 156.

¹⁰⁴ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Doctrine of the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 5.

receive, come into, inherit, are given, are brought into, testify about, pray for, and by faith belong to the kingdom. But nowhere does Scripture say that we are to create it or usher it in.¹⁰⁵

Priority of the Word. “One thing is necessary”

As the church sets out to fulfill the Great Commission, it must discipline itself to retain proper priorities. It must make a priority of itself as an institution and the message of redemption entrusted to it by its head. Should Christians be actively concerned with the human wreckage of cultures, which are immersed in fraud, robbery, wife burning, witchcraft, foot binding, marital unfaithfulness, teenage promiscuity, pervasive pornography, injustices, rape, murder, theft, misogyny, pedophilia, and other forms of perversion?¹⁰⁶ Of course. But, as John Piper has stated, he thinks Jonathan Edwards “would have considered it astonishing how many Americans say they care about social justice and culture issues, but don’t seem to have the slightest concern for the hundreds of unreached people groups who do not have a known church-planting effort in their midst.”¹⁰⁷ The church’s greatest expression of compassion for the world is to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. Individual Christians must not lose sight of their responsibility to show compassion for their neighbors and to be salt and light in the world, especially in times of crisis and natural disasters.¹⁰⁸ But the church must not lose sight of her God-given calling to disciple the nations.

Like Mary, the church must constantly remind itself that “one thing is necessary,” and it is the “good portion” that “will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42). But the temptation is great for the church to become like Martha, and to be “anxious and troubled about many things” (Luke 10:41). They can be noble things, but they are not the *best* things. Like the apostles, we must recognize

¹⁰⁵ DeYoung and Kluck, *Why We Love the Church*, 49.

¹⁰⁶ John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 99.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰⁸ In response to Hurricane Katrina, members of the OPC contributed close to \$240,000 and many volunteered to assist in relief efforts in the hurricane’s aftermath.

that it “is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables,” as crucial as such serving is (Acts 6:2; John 13:14). Rather, the church must devote itself “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). As important as it is to have compassion on people and to provide food for those in need, the church’s message is that of her Savior: “Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life” (John 6:27). Because Christ’s flesh is “true food” and his blood is “true drink,” the one who partakes of that food “will live forever” (John 6:54, 55). The church’s good deeds must always accompany her proclamation of the good news. But they must never overtake it. What does it mean when a denomination’s diaconal budget surpasses its budget for Home Missions and Foreign Missions *combined?*¹⁰⁹

As Machen wrote, “the responsibility of the church in the new age is the same as its responsibility in every age. It is to testify that this world is lost in sin ... that there is a mysterious holy living God ... that he has revealed himself in his Word and offered us communion with himself through Jesus Christ the Lord ... that this salvation is full and free, and that whosoever possesses it has for himself ... a treasure compared with which all the kingdoms of the earth—nay, all the wonders of the starry heavens—are as the dust of the street.”¹¹⁰ The church that prioritizes the preaching of the gospel over transforming culture will always be accused of “ghettoizing the gospel” or of neglecting a “holistic gospel.” The world will always regard the church’s commitment to the message of the cross and to the medium of preaching as “folly” (1 Cor. 1:18, 23). The world will never appreciate the church’s priorities. What this world regards as issues of peace and justice, as important as they are, are nothing compared to the reality of our sinful state before the justice of God, and the peace of God, which is granted only to those who stand before him in Christ.

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church will always face the temptation to fill up the gaps left by the negligence of other institutions

and the cruelty of this world, but it must resist that urge and adhere to the identity, function, and mission assigned to it by its head, and exercise her mission with the right sense of priority.¹¹¹ As the church, we must resist the world’s temptations, because we are not of the world. But we may *not* abandon the world in its need, because we are in the world as its salt and light. And to meet the greatest of the world’s needs, the head has entrusted to the church the good news of redemption and the hope of the world to come. It is not an either-or. It is a matter of priority. To be sure, there is nothing in all the world, over which Christ, the head of all things, does not cry, “Mine!” But for him, the world is not enough. So out of it he has ransomed his church, which is his body. And to her he says, “You are mine, forever!”

¹⁰⁹ This has now occurred in the Christian Reformed Church. See Van Reken, “Pilgrims or Settlers?” 234–56.

¹¹⁰ J. Gresham Machen, “The Responsibility of the Church in Our New Age,” *Presbyterian Guardian*, 36, no. 1 (January 1967), 13.

¹¹¹ Murray, *Writings*, 1:239.