

“Head Over All Things for the Church”

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Ephesians 1:15-23

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all.

Sometimes, as we read our Bible, a sentence or phrase will suddenly stand out. It will grab our attention and make us pause to ask, “What exactly does that mean? What new insight does that phrase give us into the workings of God and the nature of our Christian faith?”

The passage that was read from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians is full of expressions like that. On almost every line there is a phrase that wants to stand up and shout, “Don’t just gloss over me without thinking. Look into me in more depth, because I could take you into some of the less explored but highly significant nuances of the Word of God.”

The particular phrase that stands out for me here is found in verses 22 and 23 of our passage. Paul declares, concerning Jesus Christ, that God has “put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all.” What does it mean to assert that Jesus Christ is *head over all things for the church*?

Paul is not saying here simply that Christ is the head of the church. Jesus Christ *is* the head of the church, which is his body composed of many members, and Paul explores that thought elsewhere in his letters. But that’s not exactly what he’s asserting about Christ in this passage. Nor is Paul reminding his readers that Jesus Christ is the head of every Christian. In First Corinthians 11:3 Paul states, “I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ,” and certainly every true believer in Jesus considers himself or herself to be under his headship. But in our passage from Ephesians Paul is saying something else about Jesus Christ when he calls him the “head over *all things* for the church.”

Let’s review that sentence. God has “put all things under [Jesus’] feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all.” Notice the repetition of the word *all* in this statement. The Greek word here is *panta*, “all things,” from the basic word *pas* or *pan*. We’re familiar with the word from such expressions as *pan-American*, all the Americas, or *panacea*, a cure for everything. This word occurs, in one form or another, seven times in the entire passage that was read, and four times in the statement I quoted from verses 22 and 23. Evidently Paul is very much concerned to connect Jesus Christ with the concept of “all things, everything.”

This means that in order to understand what Paul is saying we need to consider the meaning of “all things.” Now, we understand that sometimes “all things” doesn’t mean “all things whatever.” When Paul says, in Philippians 4:13, “I can *do all things* in him who strengthens me,” obviously he doesn’t mean he can lie, cheat, steal and so on with the help of Christ. We have to look at the context, where Paul is discussing the difficulties he has had to overcome in proclaiming the gospel. In that context, he says that by the strength of Christ he’s able to do all things necessary to minister, despite the obstacles placed in his path.

But in Ephesians the context of *all things* isn’t limited in the same way. Here, he’s speaking of *all things*, period — and especially of all powers or forces. The risen Christ, he says, has been enthroned with

the Father, “far above *all* rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named” (verses 20-21). That kind of *all* is a pretty big *all*.

We get more light on this kind of *all things* when we read the Letter to the Colossians, a companion letter to Ephesians. In Colossians, Paul makes a statement that builds on the thought in the passage from Ephesians. He says this about Jesus Christ:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:15-20).

Think about what Paul is asserting. *All things* were created in Christ, and *everything* holds together in Christ. Every authority was created “through him and for him.” We find the same thought in Hebrews 1:2-3, where the writer says that God “has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.”

So, what constitutes *all things*? “All things” must be, as Hebrews implies, the entire universe. Now, the universe is a big place, and a very old place. Cosmologists, or scientists who study the origin and extent of the *cosmos*, have tried various methods to estimate the age of the universe. Based on microwave background radiation measurements, one estimate places the age of the universe at a little less than fourteen billion years.

At that time — if we can call it “time,” because time and space came into existence then — the so-called “big bang” occurred. It wasn’t really a “bang,” or even a flash of light, because the original universe of plasma was expanding faster than the speed of light. Light couldn’t appear until later when the expansion slowed down — just as the Book of Genesis tells us when it says, “darkness was upon the face of the deep,” and then God said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:2-3). The Book of Hebrews states, “By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear” (Hebrews 11:3). The apostle Peter asserts that “by the word of God heavens existed long ago, and an earth [was] formed out of water and by means of water” (2 Peter 3:5). The Greek word for “water” is *hudor*, from which we get such words as *hydro-electric*, *hydraulics*, or *hydrogen*, the gas that is one of the two components of water or H₂O. I believe Peter is really talking about hydrogen, which cosmologists tell us was the first element created — just one proton and one electron — and which is still by far the most abundant element in the universe.

How did the biblical authors know these things that Western science has “discovered” only in the last few centuries? As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived . . . God has revealed to us through the Spirit.” And since then, scientists have only been catching up.

From the original event, whatever we call it, in which the universe of space, time and matter appeared, the cosmos has continued to expand and is still expanding. In fact, the most distant galaxies — and there are about forty *billion* observable galaxies — are moving away from us at a speed approaching the speed of light. In fact, the most distant parts of this cosmos are so far away that their light may never reach us. From our vantage point on Earth — a tiny speck far out on one arm of the galaxy we call the Milky Way — the most distant galaxies that can be observed are about 46 billion light-years away. So, looking from the Earth in all directions, the extent of the observable universe is about 93 billion light-years across.

Truly, there is no way to determine how large the universe really is! But it’s so large that cosmologists don’t measure it in miles. Instead they use light-years, or another unit called parsecs that equates to about three and one-quarter light-years, or more than nineteen trillion miles. Obviously, distances like that are so immense that they become as meaningless to you and me as the amount of the national debt!

Why am I going into this cosmological detail? Because when we hear the Scriptures telling us that *all things* have been created through Christ, or that God has made him the head over *all things*, or that Christ is “upholding the *universe* by his word of power,” this ought to affect how we think about God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I like to say that God has written *two* books. One is the Bible; the other is *the universe*. Since God is the author of both, they must be consistent. If we think that the Bible contradicts the findings of cosmology or other sciences, or if we suppose that science in some way contradicts what we’re told in the Scriptures, then we need to ask whether we’ve really understood what these two “books” are telling us. Looking for truth about God in the cosmos he’s created is itself a scriptural idea. In Romans 1, Paul says that there’s no excuse not to acknowledge God, because what can be known about him is plainly visible in the universe itself. “Ever since the creation of the world (*kosmos*) his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20). Paul is echoing the declaration of Psalm 19: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1).

What is your idea of God? Do you think of God as “a big angel in the sky,” hovering somewhere above the clouds and just waiting for you to tell him what you think he needs to do for you? I’m not saying that God doesn’t answer prayer. What I’m saying is that his purposes encompass all things — this entire, immense, incomprehensible universe. He has a plan and purpose not only for your life and mine, but also for this entire Earth, this galaxy, this galactic cluster — everything we can see, and beyond what we can see. And he has put this plan into effect through his Son, through whom he created this vast universe, and who has been raised from the dead and vindicated as the eternal Son who upholds and sustains *all things*.

As Paul says in Colossians, in Christ “all things hold together.” Shifting from the cosmological “macro” scale to the “micro” scale of subatomic particles, scientists don’t really understand the nature of the forces that hold the particles of an atom together, or where an electron “is” when it’s switching from one orbit to another around an atomic nucleus — the so-called “quantum leap.” The more scientists find out about the way the universe functions at both the cosmological and subatomic levels, the more the mystery deepens. Paul says that Christ is “the image of the invisible God.” Maybe, then, instead of thinking about God as that “big angel up in the sky,” we need to think about how God, in Christ, is holding all things together including everything around and within us. As Paul reminded the people of Athens, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Let’s come back, then, to that phrase that caught my attention in our passage from Ephesians: God has made Christ the “head over all things *for the church*.” Paul has connected Jesus Christ with *all things*, but in this phrase he also connects the church with *all things* through Christ. The same Christ who is the head of all things — the whole universe or cosmos — combines that role with his headship over the church. This means that *all things* are the concern of the church, under the headship of Christ. In fact, just as all things belong to Christ, all things belong to the church as well. In his letter to the Romans, Paul goes to great lengths to demonstrate that we, as Christians, are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, whom God called to bless all peoples (Genesis 12:1-3). As such, he says, we’re included in “the promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world,” that is, the *cosmos* (Romans 4:13). As members of Jesus Christ, you and I are the “owners” of *all things*.

What are the concerns of most churches and their leaders? I suppose most congregations are concerned with keeping up their facilities, having good worship (in whichever style they prefer), helping people to get connected with God so they can find inner peace and get their relationships straightened out, introducing people to Christ and supporting Christian missions around the world, and helping people in need in their local community. Those are all worthwhile things, but when we consider that Jesus Christ is “head over *all things* for the church” we might ask ourselves whether some legitimate areas of concern are missing in the priorities that most Christians, and the churches they belong to, have adopted.

For example, Hebrews declares that God created the cosmos through Christ, and that he upholds the universe by his word of power; Paul states that the existence of the universe itself reveals who God is. If this be so, then isn’t the proper and correct teaching of *science*, accurate knowledge about the universe, one of the church’s concerns? Should not the church be front and center in advocating a truly scientific

explanation for the origin of life? When Charles Darwin came up with the theory of evolution he didn't know about the immense volume of information encoded into the DNA of every living cell of every living being. His theory of the origin of different species by natural selection simply doesn't work, because a living cell of any species is far too complicated to be changed into the cell of another species simply by chance, by the passage of time, or by change in a creature's environment. Yet our public education system holds *religiously* to Darwin's unscientific idea, and permits no alternative view. Shouldn't the church be saying to our nation's educators, "Let's get this *religious mythology* out of the classroom and teach *real science* instead"?

Looking at another area of concern, Paul states that God has placed Jesus Christ "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion" (Ephesians 1:21). In Philippians, he writes that because of Jesus' obedience on the cross, "therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11). The word *every* here is that same Greek word meaning *all things*. When we hear such expressions as *authority*, *dominion*, or *bowing the knee* (that is, pledging allegiance), we're carried into the area of government and politics. If Christ, in the Great Commission, told his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18), that means that earthly authorities are only parodies or distorted copies of the real authority, the real head. Should not the church be calling our local and national leaders to account for their actions that run contrary to the purposes of God? Our call to worship this morning was from Psalm 149:

*Let the faithful exult in glory;
let them sing for joy on their couches.
Let the high praises of God be in their throats
and two-edged swords in their hands,
to wreak vengeance on the nations
and chastisement on the peoples,
to bind their kings with chains
and their nobles with fetters of iron,
to execute on them the judgment written!
This is glory for all his faithful ones. Praise the LORD! (Psalm 149:5-9)*

When the early Christians proclaimed "Jesus Christ is Lord," they were applying to Jesus the same title that was claimed by the Roman Emperor. It didn't take Caesar long to recognize that the Christian faith was a challenge to his claim to absolute power. And the same is true today; a church that serves the "head over all things" is going to challenge any government's attempt to assert totalitarian control over the lives of its citizens.

And here's another area of concern we don't often think about in connection with the church. If, as Paul says, "all things hold together" in Christ, then things that don't seem to "hold together" are going contrary to the purposes of God. I'm thinking especially of the area of the arts and culture. Music or art that's chaotic, incoherent, highly discordant, or negative is going against the structure of the universe. All things are held together and function according to certain principles, whether or not we understand them at the present stage of scientific knowledge. There was a painter, Jackson Pollock, who painted pictures by swinging dripping cans of paint over the canvas to make a random image. His paintings were a statement that the cosmos is meaningless. But, as Francis Schaeffer pointed out, Pollock would never have flown to an exhibition of his paintings in an airplane created by the same method! In a universe that's *held together* by the power of God in Christ, the idea that there's no meaning and that "anything goes" is a denial of reality. Is it the church's concern to expose the false worldview of artists, musicians, filmmakers or others who, through what they produce, are propagating the idea that there's no plan or purpose to human life? Should not the church be encouraging artists, musicians and film makers in their efforts to create works that reflect the Christian view of an orderly, purposeful universe?

Carry that thought, by the way, into the realm of sexuality. The human body was obviously designed for a certain type of activity, and not the kind that some groups want to engage in or promote. Isn't it time

for the church to say, “Hey, folks, let’s be *real*— the universe isn’t like that, it’s held together in a definite way, and that way is reflected in the way our bodies are made.”

Finally, Paul has another area of concern that carries him into the realm of *all things*. In Ephesians 4, he declares, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is *above all and through all and in all*” (Ephesians 4:4-6). That’s the same word, *panta* or “all things,” that’s used in the passage with which we began. Because Jesus Christ is “head over all things for the church,” the churches need to be unified in purpose and mission. We don’t have to believe exactly the same, as long as we acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the only “way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). We don’t have to worship the same way, or have the same form of government. But if we’re faithful to Christ we do have to come together and work together. There’s no excuse for one Christian body to claim, “We’re the only true church; God works only through us.” It is sad when a congregation and its leaders behave as if they’re the only church in town. Attending such a church, you seldom or never hear about other churches in the community and what they’re doing to serve the same Lord, the “head over all things for the church.” Should not every group of Christians in a community like ours be reaching out to other groups and saying, “What can we do *together* to be faithful to the Creator of all things?”

I just want to end with some specific recommendations about what you and I can do — or which we can do through cooperation with other Christians — to express the church’s concern for *all things*.

1. We can attend the meetings of local governing bodies to monitor the areas they’re discussing. We can be prepared to voice a needed corrective to any view that appears to ignore God’s orderly design of his universe. This doesn’t mean quoting Bible verses; it only means expressing common sense when policies and priorities seem to lack it.

2. We can do the same with respect to our elected representatives at the state or national level.

3. Along those lines, we can be sure to vote for candidates for public office whose views most nearly harmonize with Christ’s upholding of *all things*. We can support those candidates with our contributions.

4. We can voice a Christian perspective on public issues through letters to the editor, or posts on Facebook or other media. Again, we don’t have to quote from the Bible; we can make our point by citing God’s other book, the universe — the “book of reality.”

5. We can support media that express a positive and Christian worldview, and which call into question the false viewpoint of those who ignore Christ’s headship over *all things*. For example, we can go to movies, or buy DVDs, that mirror Biblical values.

6. We can encourage and support younger family members who are making a career choice to enter a field — whether science and technology, government, the arts or whatever — through which they have an opportunity to bring a Christian influence to bear in their field of expertise.

I’m making an effort to do some of these things because, as a Christian, I take seriously the idea that God has made Jesus Christ the “head over *all things* for the church,” not just those things we typically include in the realm of “religious” concern. As Solomon prayed at the dedication of the Temple, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!” The work of Christ isn’t limited to the little “house” we’ve built for our church, or for our personal interests. No areas of life and knowledge are beyond our concern, because we understand that Jesus Christ is “upholding the universe by his word of power.”

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